

# Night Watchman

JAMES TRAINOR ON JAN TICHY

**DIMONA: IT IS A BEAUTIFUL NAME** for something that long refused to exist. Built secretly in Israel's Negev Desert in 1956, the Dimona nuclear facility was initially the stuff of rumor. Even US intelligence agencies didn't uncover its purpose until the 1960s, and for decades it was absent from any publicly available photographs or maps. To this day, the Israeli government will neither confirm nor deny that it is an atomic-weapons factory, preferring an official policy of "nuclear ambiguity." It was this paradoxical pinpoint uncertainty, the structure's quantum mechanical status of something simultaneously there and not there, that led Czech-born Israeli artist Jan Tichy to scour the Internet and other sources for images of the non-site in order to construct a paper model of it. This he placed in his installation *Dimona*, 2006, a pitch-black room with a narrow beam of light slowly passing over the model like a scanner, revealing one section at a time but never allowing a view of the whole.

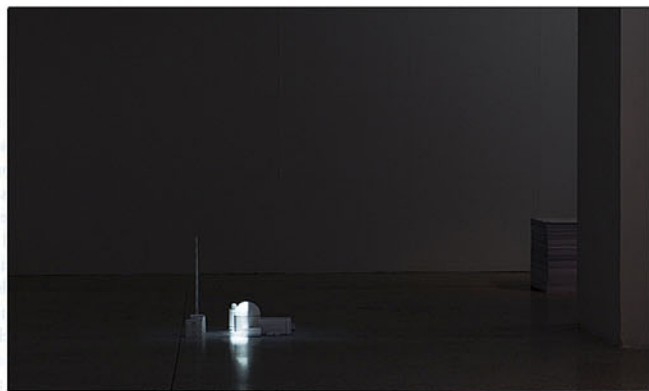
Indeed, Tichy's entire project rests on this oscillation between site and non-site, known and unknown, seen and unseen. Growing up in cold-war Prague, Tichy learned the lesson of the proxy: He made paper models of skyscrapers, castles, even hot-air balloons, the cut-fold-and-paste kits of monuments and places reconstituting things of which he could have no direct

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experience himself. But he also mastered another lesson: how to lead a double life. The son of a man who was a nuclear physicist by day and an opponent of the Communist regime by night, Tichy learned to develop a public face and a private one, as part of a family of insiders that secretly remained moral and political outsiders. With this came the early realization that things are rarely as they seem, that apparently concrete structures can be paper-thin, as flimsy as any Potemkin village (or the Czech regime, which crumpled and dissolved without a shot during the Velvet Revolution).

When he immigrated to Tel Aviv in the mid-'90s (having discovered only in his late teens that he was Jewish), then studied at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, Tichy took this sense of double identity with him. The artist began engaging an array of sites that, like Dimona, have an ambiguous existence. His brooding, shadowy sculpture and light installations model such entities as Facility 1391, a secret high-security prison dubbed the Israeli Guantánamo, and the Dahaniya/Yasser Arafat International Airport in Gaza, whose terminal, control tower, and runways have been repeatedly bombed, demolished, and rebuilt in a Sisyphean cycle of erasure and reconstitution. But unlike a Thomas Demand or a James Casebere, Tichy avoids the polemical charge of specific sites (and the narrow political readings this might invite) in favor of fostering a pervasive sense of unease, a twilight perception of hazy spaces and realms.

Not coincidentally, then, Tichy is attracted to the nocturnal—to what it conceals and perhaps divulges. Working in the studio until the wee hours, he got to know Tel Aviv by wandering home through its sleeping streets, his senses becoming attuned to its nighttime textures and narratives. He also began to notice that the airspace above the dormant Israeli metropolis was alive with bats. What began as a hobby became an amateur chiropterological study. Over a period of years, the artist photographed and catalogued the nightly acrobatics of Tel Aviv's hidden inhabitants. Like the bats themselves, Tichy was fairly blind, shooting into the dark sky and guessing at the trajectories of his quarry, never sure of capture until an image—floodlit and unearthly—resolved itself. But perhaps the most remarkable sight to appear in *Bats*, 2002–2007, presented as a series of eighty slides, is that of the creatures bombing the newly restored Bauhaus quarter of the city with a relentless spattering of guano. They ignominiously stain the brilliant



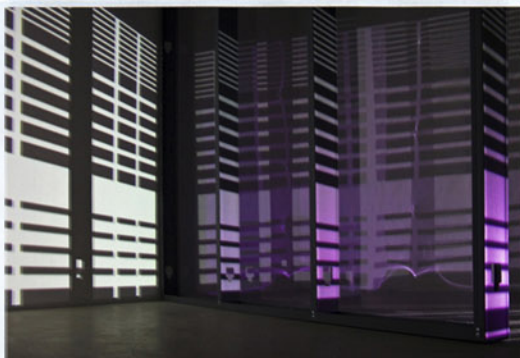
Jan Tichy, *Dimona*, 2006, paper, posters, text, video. Installation view, Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago, 2009.

stucco walls of the White City—as the modernist core of Tel Aviv is called—the largest and densest concentration of Bauhaus-style architecture in the world, built when German-Jewish architects fled to the city in the 1930s and began to reimagine it in idealistic, Zionist-utopian terms. Tichy's *Bats* is a paean to the somewhat tarnished aspirations of that ideal dream metropolis, an ode to its inverse echo—the darkness that engulfs and undergirds even the most pristine cities.

As exiles go, of course, the Bauhaus brain drain was also a windfall for the US. While Harvard got Walter Gropius, Chicago got László Moholy-Nagy and Mies van der Rohe—bitter rivals, the former founding the Institute of Design and the latter helming the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). Three years ago, Tichy left Tel Aviv to teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and his recent work has plunged into the conflicted legacies of modernist space that pervade his gritty new adoptive city: first with four installations at the Art Institute's Sullivan Galleries in the former Carson Pirie Scott department-store building, as part of the group show "Learning Modern" in September 2009, and one month later in a miniretrospective mounted by the Richard Gray Gallery on the gutted twenty-fourth floor of the iconic John Hancock Center.

For *Delineations*, 2009, in the Sullivan Galleries, Tichy, in collaboration with Helen Maria Nugent, built four room-size boxes. Like souped-up versions of El Lissitzky's radical exhibition displays of the 1920s, each of these spaces was activated by a different set of animated light projections. In one dark chamber, dots became lines, lines broadened into planes, and flat planes became complex folds as the beams of light were





From top: Jan Tichy, *Bats*, 2002–2007, one of eighty 35-mm slides from a two-channel slide projection, dimensions variable. Jan Tichy in collaboration with Helen Maria Nugent, *Delineations* (detail), 2009, five-channel video projection, acrylic screens, dimensions variable.

refracted into magenta parallelograms by transparent panes of Plexiglas (a material nod to Moholy-Nagy, Tichy's hero in the local clash of modernist titans). In another room, animations slowly cycled through series of oscillating ledger-book grids and gradually corrupted rectilinear patterns—deceptively simple abstractions that suggested a continuum of architectural reference points, from the finicky proportions of Adolf Loos, to Miesian steel skeletons, to soul-crushing public housing, to drab multistory parking garages. At the same time, the work's site in Louis Sullivan's famous Scott building marks the intersection of State and Madison streets—the 0,0 point for Chicago's gridiron plan, the great axis and grand meridian of the American heartland. Here, at this singular point, the grid and the box converge: As Tichy recently remarked, "The Scott department store was a giant box for selling more boxes," and these industrially standardized parameters of structure and container determined the scale of the commodities held within.

*Delineations* seems to restage these strictures of industrial production and the utopian projections that haunt them.

But it was in his aerie high above the streets, in the John Hancock Center, that Tichy seemed to have at last come home. Given the entire eerily vacant floor to work with (an imploding economy and a glut of office space making pop-up space possible), the artist blacked out all the windows, submerging the hastily stripped offices in a perpetual stygian night. If Warhol let the nighttime light of the Empire State Building determine the median exposure level in his epic *Empire* (1964)—beginning with the blinding glare of the setting sun and ending in complete darkness—in Tichy's high-rise netherworld, blackness became the baseline. Unmoored from day or night and the wintry workaday world far below, the passage of time was measured only in the circadian rhythms of each installation.

*Installation No. 4 (Towers)*, 2008, offered a new twist on the term "black site." Set at the far end of a large but nearly pitch-black expanse of office space, with no sound but the ambient thrum of the building and its strained creaking in the January gusts, two scale models of towers stood like sentinels. They could have been reconstructions of anything—microwave beacons, water towers, oil rigs—but their vaguely familiar structural typology seemed without discernible purpose. (Why were there two? Why was one smaller than the other?) This *mise-en-scène* gradually revealed itself within the surrounding gloom. An animated digital projection first defined a band of light between the two towers, then grew and brightened to describe a rectangular field. Initially bathed in this harsh white light, as if being clinically scrutinized from some fixed point in the sky, this unnatural and fleeting dawn cycled down into a cold lunar dusk. The gloaming quickly gave way to a still darker disk of shadow, cast by neither tower but by some larger unseen object, which slowly bled outward like an oil spill, engulfing the towers and plunging the scene back into eclipse. Indeed, one observer, an Iraqi native, insisted that these were the unforgiving extremes of light and dark-

ness of the Mesopotamian desert; in any case, one need only recall Colin Powell's UN Security Council presentation of evidentiary satellite imagery—depicting either a weather-balloon facility or a WMD laboratory in Iraq—to realize that seeing and knowing are two very distinct things.

*Installation No. 8 (Hancock)*, 2009, was the counterweight to *Towers*, a digital light projection commissioned for the site that turned a segment of the Hancock's signature steel X cross-bracings—awkward, massive diagonal beams—into something ethereal, almost vertigo-inducing. In a small office, a triangle of light began to emerge in the corner behind a load-bearing diagonal that ran through the space from floor to ceiling. This expanding geometric plane suggested both recessional space and a sudden illuminated rupture in the skyscraper's skin, simultaneously articulating the steel beam itself as a powerful sculptural element. A precise scrim of bright light then began to rise along the bracing column, making it appear to levitate and detach itself from the titanic masses it bore. The effect made possible, even somehow inevitable, a sleight-of-hand congruence between the Light and Space perceptual conundrums of James Turrell and the heavyweight earthbound geometries of Tony Smith.

Chicago, like Tel Aviv, was also once called the White City—a moniker it earned with the construction of the lustrous site of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, six hundred acres of plaster of paris that imagined this midwestern metropolis as a City Beautiful rising from the ashes of the Chicago Fire of 1871. Cities never remain pristine, though, and Tichy revels in their accumulated residues and opacities. Last summer, in the collective pedagogical spirit of Moholy-Nagy, Tichy collaborated with his students to turn Mies's iconic Crown Hall at IIT into a giant steel and glass light box, projecting animations and films onto the glass from within. For a single night they succeeded in marrying the two adversaries in the sanctuary of Mies's former stronghold, invoking the shadows—the exiled aspirations, the hidden narratives, the literal obliterations—that modernist visions had been built on. It was a little joke, embedded in a gesture of creative reconciliation—one of many ironies that arise when you swap one penumbral city for another. □

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