

The Fact of the Fiction

Eva Díaz

It is astonishing how a reader's identification with the setting of a novel can transport her beyond the often-mundane sites in which the act of reading takes place. Aboard the cross-town bus there is that bookworm, jammed elbows to ribs amid cranky straphangers and parcels and strollers, who very nearly misses her stop while eagerly turning the pages of a paperback set on a faraway planet. At home unanswered emails pile up along with dirty laundry—and that sink full of dishes isn't washing itself!—but a book describing just about any other place in the world is a sure diversion from those nagging tasks.

Immersion in a good story can be so complete and its absence (say, on a long trip) so vexing, that the hunt for appealing new reading material is a preoccupation as consuming as any book itself. As private as reading can feel (and, of course, reading requires solitary contemplation even when it transpires in public settings), any novel conjures not merely a diagetic space within its pages. Also at play are the external spaces of the acquisition and collection of books, and the sites of social communication that circulate around books: of readers browsing library stacks or bookstore displays; of conversations in which recommendations are exchanged (“Ooh if you liked *Dahlgren* you should *really* check out John Crowley's work...”); and, of course, of the screen time we all put in online, keying terms into search boxes, then scrolling through algorithmically generated results and suggestions for further reading.

In her recent series “Priming,” photographer Orit Raff merges these features of reading: exploring how the captivation of the diagesis can transcend the physical reality of a reader's surroundings, while investigating how conversations between readers, and the relationality between fictional works, create spaces beyond the site of “active” reading. Raff does this by reaching into the pages of selected historical and contemporary novels to painstakingly recreate key locations in these stories, in much the same way a production designer would stage a set for a movie. At the same time, in the twelve photographs displayed in the current exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Raff moves the viewer laterally between stories, with each photograph functioning like a way station on a journey through associations among the works. In combining these aspects—the

productive and the connotative—Raff’s show is like a carefully edited reading list in which tantalizing details of coming attractions are bestowed upon the viewer, while “sets” from familiar stories are presented for visual consideration. Raff’s decision to illustrate certain locations in the novels is enticement to gallery goers not only to discover or explore again the books she has selected, but to rethink the relationship between real places and their fictional counterparts, between sites of consumption of and discussion about fiction. In so doing, she adds the art gallery in which viewers see her work to the spaces of discursive communication about books.

Just as fiction constructs spaces with no material existence other than the word, Raff’s works are entirely computer generated and, until they are outputted to a printer, consist entirely of pixels on a screen. As the artist explains:

The images are all 3D renderings, built completely on the computer, like animation frames for a movie... the photorealism is crucial for me. The images are done after I do long research on the period the story takes place, where it takes place, [the] architectural style, the design of furniture, [and the] building techniques. I then collect references (photos, Google Earth, architectural plans and sketches) and bring detailed plans to the studio that builds it all on the computer, like sculpture and painting... I work with an architect, interior designer, 3D animation studio, etc... The crew uses architecture programs like 3D Max and Autocad, animation programs like Z Brush, Photoshop, lighting software, and so on. I treat each frame like a set, choosing the angle of the camera but of course there is no physical set, no physical stain or trace, and no camera.¹

Raff’s use of a 3D rendering process is important and it is worth probing what “render” signifies in this context, coming as it does from the French *rendre*, “to give back.” Render has a range of meanings in English: to give what is due, to translate, to cause to become and even to melt down fat. In the context of visual art, a rendering re-presents something in the form of a drawing or painting. It is rooted in the notion of “giving back” to nature (which is experienced in three dimensions) an accurate two-dimensional representation, especially by using tools of perspectival representation that translate objects between two and three dimensions. Render is not a term often associated with photography, a medium understood to be a near-instantaneous indexical imprint of nature, unlike the accretive and constructive process of drawing or painting. Yet, as Raff’s description indicates, with the rise of digital technologies a new kind of rendering is possible in which there is no film or camera, a kind of representation taking place in front of a computer screen, with or without a photographic output. “Screen time” is a space where many writers spend

most of their hours as they construct their discursively based illusions; in her use of screen time to produce her work, Raff has cycled the in-the-field reportage of the photograph back into the intimate space where novels get written. Constructing each section of the surface of her images colored pixel by colored pixel, Raff's works are more akin to richly modeled paintings than traditionally conceived photographs.

Though 3D rendering processes have proceeded apace of remarkable technological advances in digital representation, camera-less photography itself is not new. The main technique for producing a photographic image without a camera has been the photogram, which captures the silhouettes of objects placed on a photosensitive paper. It could be argued that another technique of camera-less production is the photomontage, in which various source images (some originally photographic) have been cut out of their original contexts and juxtaposed into new scenarios without being reprocessed or resynthesized through a camera. Raff's construction of her images should be understood within the genealogy of these camera-less processes: she sources images of architecture, pictures of objects and photographic perspectives to collage a new patchwork stitched together without a single camera's final perspective. One can think of this application of camera-less photography in two ways. The first is literal: Raff refers us to the traces, imprints and indexes of early photograms that were seen as more "accurate" because of their physical adjacency to their source. The second way is figurative: she creates camera-less scenes, much like photomontages, which demonstrate that photographing or literally bringing the camera's eye into the fictions of the novel is an unachievable task. Though any published book possesses an indisputable physicality in its paper and binding (or, in the age of the Kindle, in its arrangements of words on a screen), Raff's work translates the words on the page into spatialized forms and makes visible spaces previously available only through textual means. As she has stated, she intends in her process "to make words physical."² Yet her materializations of words create impossible spaces, traversable only by the eye, existing in no indexically confirmable realm.

In each of Raff's photographs she makes evident a particular slice of the source novel's fictional world. The images are 65×80 cm, except for one that is 140×110 cm. All are smaller than life size; as objects on the wall, they appear like picture windows framing the "shot" that Raff has constructed. The photographs are empty of the story's characters, and at the reduced scale they can seem like dollhouses or crime-scene models. Shown together as a series, Raff's works impel a particular kind of curiosity—to go back to novels to understand how the prose sketches plausible yet wholly imagined architectures on the page. The creative control Raff exercises in fabricating these locations is immense, taking as she does the few phrases or key passages from the novels that describe a space

and then building out the entire set from the vivid but sometimes scant details that the authors employ.

There are likely few viewers to the current exhibition who will have read all the novels Raff portrays: *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, 1856; *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, 1898; *Jealousy* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1957; *My Michael* by Amos Oz, 1968; *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, 1992; *Blindness* by José Saramago, 1995; *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* by Marisha Pessl, 2006; *The End of Mr. Y* by Scarlett Thomas, 2006; *Visitation* by Jenny Erpenbeck, 2008; *The Glass Room* by Simon Mawer, 2009; *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen, 2010; and *The Map and the Territory* by Michel Houellebecq, 2010. Because of the number and diversity of the titles, many viewers will be encountering photographs of fictional spaces for which they may have no direct experience of the textual source to draw upon. Perhaps, as was the case for me, one will initially concentrate on the photographs portraying locations from books one has read, to then tease out the logic of the selection of the books and of the settings within the books. *Madame Bovary*, the oldest of the books Raff represents, will likely be among the most familiar to viewers of the novels (it was for me), and thus a good focal point for considering Raff's project.

Raff's image for *Madame Bovary* portrays what initially seems to be an upscale boudoir, replete with furniture upholstered in gold-hued brocade, walls papered with a delicate floral pattern and windows and bed hung with heavy drapes in rich red tones. The mahogany furniture sits atop an elaborate patterned rug and oil paintings of landscapes and floral still lives line the walls. The large sleigh bed is unmade and pillows are strewn about the floor. Near the large window on the far side of the room is a dressing table. Beyond the translucent inner curtains of this window one can see a balcony overlooking a building of some size across a street; this room is in a city and appears to be some stories above street level. Back within the room, set upon a round table beyond the foot of the bed, is a tray holding a pair of champagne flutes and an apple, indicating that this is probably a hotel room; the room's decor, though seen in an untidy state, is somewhat devoid of lived-in details in the manner characteristic of temporary lodgings. Only the incongruous furry pink slippers at the foot of the bed and the hat on the dressing table present the viewer with possessions specific to any one resident. These signs of a feminine presence are not joined by any other suggestions of permanent habitation.

Madame Bovary is a tale of a woman living beyond her financial means, her love life constrained by the codes of rural, provincial morality. The room, given the urban setting beyond the window, must therefore be the site of Emma Bovary's sexual assignations with one of her lovers, the young law student Léon from Rouen. The champagne glasses and

tousled sheets are clues that the space is one of romance and sexual intimacy—few objects like champagne flutes form so great a trope of “the lovers’ tryst.” Like all other “Priming” images, Raff’s work contains no people, so the viewer can scrutinize the setting without fear of catching a stray glance from the story’s characters. Given that many discussions of fiction writing focus on characterization, plotting and narrative, Raff’s emphasis on setting is a pointed move. The depopulated nature of the works in Raff’s series give the photographs an enigmatic and stagey quality, as though the participants in the narrative have been called away from the setting and props when a director called “cut.”

Of the countless locations Flaubert describes in *Madame Bovary*, Raff’s selection of this opulent hotel room in Rouen condenses the main themes of the novel: Emma Bovary’s reckless sexual dalliances and her overweening aspiration to improve her class situation. In the novel, the lovers adore the “dear old room” while simultaneously forgiving, in the haughty manner characteristic of Emma’s worldview, its “rather faded splendors.” The room unites them: “They were so completely wrapt up in each other, so oblivious of the outer world, that it seemed like being in their own house, and they dreamed they would continue to live there always, eternal bridegroom and eternal bride, world without end.” Yet within a few pages of Flaubert’s vivid, though selective description of the contents of the room, where the lovers meet each Thursday, he quickly moves his characters’ bliss towards estrangement and separation, hastened by Emma’s mounting debts. In faithfully reconstructing the Hotel de Boulogne, down to the two “big pink shells” on the chimney-piece, Raff has chosen the site of Emma’s last ecstasy before the novel turns inexorably towards tragedy.

Raff likewise selects a transitional space in the narrative arc of Saramago’s *Blindness*. In this image she focuses on a pivotal location in the story: the abandoned asylum returned to use as a quarantine zone cum prison for those afflicted with the mysterious epidemic of blindness that is the plot’s conceit. Like the protagonist of *Blindness*, a woman feigning illness to remain close to her stricken husband, viewers of Raff’s image are witness to the dire circumstances in which the sightless townspeople find themselves. Raff’s photograph of the weedy brick structure, like the *Madame Bovary* image, contains subtle but unmistakable signs of the absent characters. In the case of the *Blindness* image, Raff’s work pictures the rope used as a guideline to assist the entrance of the newly blind into the asylum, a rope receding eerily towards the door of the compound in which order and decency break down after a lawless band of inmates exploits the other victims of the disease. The rope stretching into the distance is therefore a highly fraught object within the story, a symbol of the helplessness of the central characters and of the power of others, including the viewer’s, over their predicament.

There are perhaps no power relations so asymmetrical as that of the photographer to the sightless subject—recollect the famous 1916 Paul Strand work of a woman who wears a large, hand-lettered tag proclaiming her “BLIND,” an image in which the viewer’s inspection of the woman feels invasive yet unavoidable. Blindness presents a peculiar problem for photography beyond the ethics of capturing images of the sightless; blindness is itself a kind of visualization that substitutes imagination for the optical transcription of reality that a photograph requires. Just as a flash of visibility was once the necessary condition for the production of a photograph, blindness is the limit horizon of its reception.

As Raff’s work moves beyond the camera’s confirmation of external reality to the spaces of the computer-rendered digital painting, exploring this dynamic of blindness and visibility can help us understand the project as a whole. Taking a final example from Raff’s series to illustrate this point, consider her construction of the West Indian plantation from Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*. Raff is assisted in this task by the unnamed narrator’s obsessive interest in the surrounding architecture; the novel’s text is in fact accompanied by a diagram of the house floor plan, annotated with the locations of nearby landmarks. *La Jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet’s original French title, has a double meaning: it refers to the emotion—a suspicion about rivals—as well as to the louvered windows common in tropical climates (thus named because they allow one to see out without being seen). Raff’s work portrays the expansive wraparound veranda whose detailed description, practically down to the cosine of the sun’s shadows on the terracotta porch tiles, opens the novel.

Raff’s image is created from the perspective of someone standing within the porch near the foreground railing. The front door of the house is closed, but the shutters are flung open, revealing the slats of the jalousie blinds and a dark interior. These blinds act like an aperture for which the events of the novel are framed, reduced and inspected. Is the narrator, who is quite possibly but never definitively stated to be the jealous husband within the story, lurking behind these shutters? If so, then viewers inhabit the uncomfortable perspective of being scrutinized by this voyeur.

Because Raff’s scenes are unpopulated, viewers experience more than a tinge of voyeuristic pleasure when studying her images, examining spaces of fantasy previously lacking visual embodiment. In *Jealousy*, Raff has returned the responsibility of the gaze to the viewer: the knowledge that in seeing we are implicated in the power dynamics of what we see unfolding before us. Raff has described her role in this series as akin to that of a photojournalist, delivering visual intelligence from the realm of the fictional. Her use of the word “photojournalist” seems particularly important; sometimes the kind of witnessing lumped under the photojournalism heading gets a (justifiably) bad rap, particularly when it functions as a kind of salacious reportage of other people’s problems;

journalists are sometimes faulted for missing the big picture in their quest for topicality. It seems that in “Priming,” the relationships between art photography, the photo essay and journalism are at question. Raff is proposing that we consider spaces that exist outside of history yet portray alternative, fictional histories. Raff seems drawn to these spaces because they represent tensions about society that photography might not be able to represent in its own time: the sequestered zones of illness and quarantine, the spaces of the illicit affairs of the spendthrift bourgeoisie, or the sites of colonialization in which geographic isolation triggers an obsessive interest in the microcosmic detail. Raff’s digital constructions play with the relationship between fictive spaces conjured imaginatively and material realities understood perceptually and create a third space between index as truth and fiction as fantasy. For, as we move among her works, the meticulous nature of Raff’s interpretations of these spaces allows us not only to project ourselves into them in the public setting of the gallery, but also to explore the interrelated mechanisms of visual representation and the creative imagination expressed in the printed word.

¹ Email conversation with the artist, 2 June 2013.

² *Ibid.*