

FEAR-COMFORT-PRIVATIZATION

Anna: "People are sensing that a global life-changing event is just ahead. The governments of the world have been bunkering up for decades. What do they know? Why is nobody telling you to prepare? Obviously, to avoid a mass panic. What is your plan? Will your family be victims, or survivors in one of our shelters?" is written on the website of The Vivos Group, a Californian based Real Estate Company specialized on the sale of shareholdings in Underground shelters across America. The Vivos ideology rises an interesting questions. Is safety a common good and who is responsible for it? The company's slogan makes it unmistakably clear. It's not the state protecting it's people. Moreover the governments are accused for bunkering up and hiding information. With this (quite populist) turn, Vivos picks up on a sensitive topic in times of a growing scepticism towards governments. In Siri Peyer's and your text for the exhibition catalogue "[ReCoco-Life under Representational Regimes](#)" you describe an emerging form of conspirational knowledge and paranoid way of reading information. Vivos is merchandising the feeling of general unease, while promoting all kinds of "possible scenarios" like natural disasters, a revival of the cold war, terrorism or an economic crash. Today, what you describe as "post-democratic times" is a perfect matrix for corporations like "Vivos", following Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, representing a form of radical Neoliberalism, mostly popular in America. Joshua, you live in Israel, where a possible threat is not so far from reality. How do you feel about shelters? As I know you sleep in one...

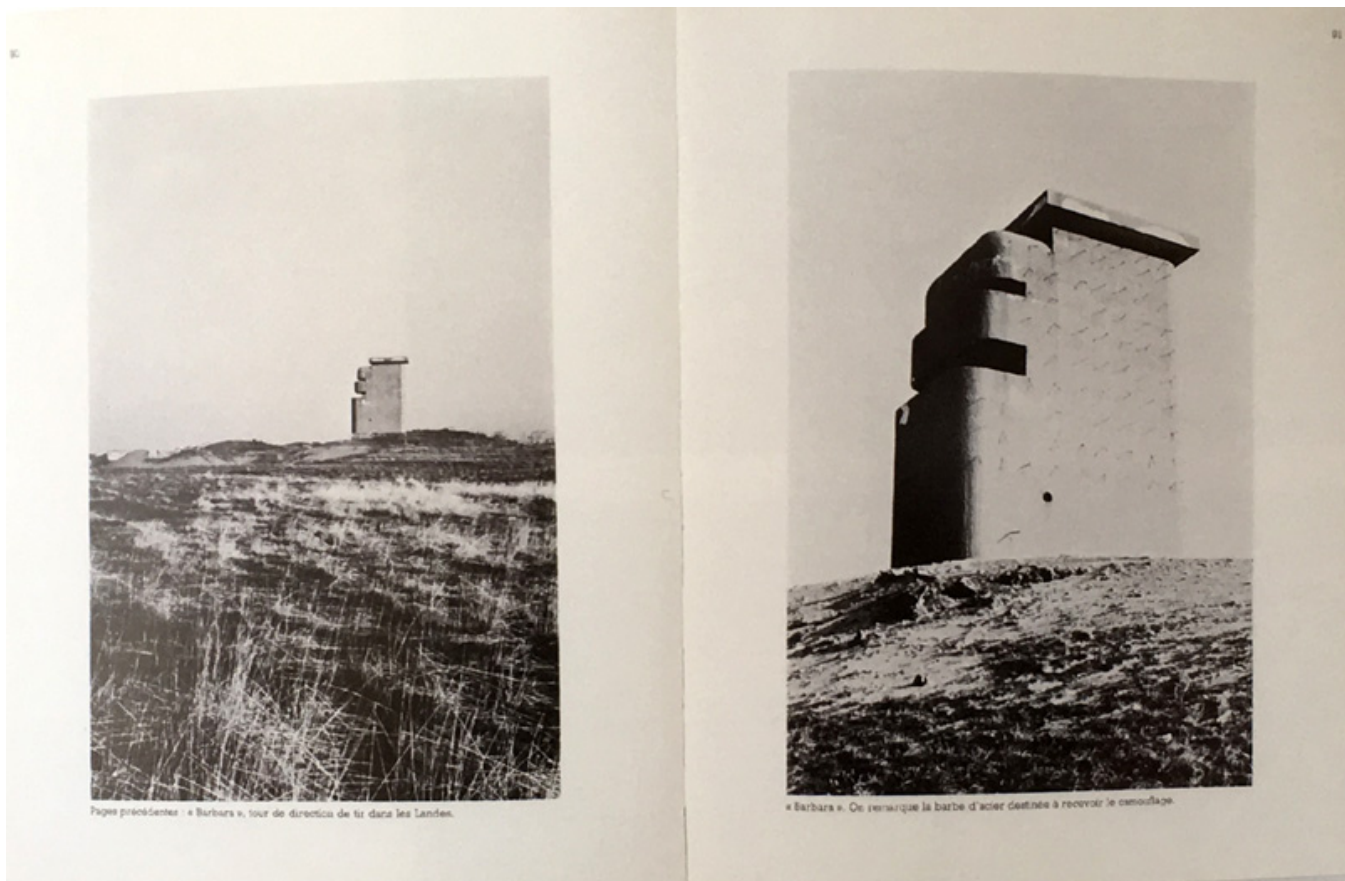


- **Joshua:** Wow. Where should I begin? I mean, yes. What was central for the show ReCoCo, in which your work had an important role, is the contemporary distrust in social institutions that is sometimes promoted by the state itself (think of the way privatization is something, that

the state itself initiates. No one else actually has the power to execute privatization. The state says “don’t trust the public sector – corporations will do a better job). In a more general way we were dealing in this cycle of exhibitions with representation as a crisis that we have to work with. So threats and their absence (their absence, as you quote Vivos, is only a proof for a government cover-up), generate a market in which fear is traded.

Anna: Moreover, Vivos is not only trading with the fear of an actual treat itself, their shelters are meant for the long-term survival of a particularly chosen group of people after the catastrophe has already happened. What means, the project it not only about selling safety, it relates also to the idea of a utopian and artificial form of living.

Joshua: But the interesting thing with Vivos, as you describe it, is that no matter what we fear (earthquake, epidemic, nuclear war), the thing we fear the most is society. That’s what the Vivos shareholding scheme is actually saying: we don’t want to live in a society with other people. Different people. Now for me this really relates to what I see as a key characteristic of shelter construction in Israel. By that it has everything to do with real-estate, gated communities etc. This is of course not limited to Israel, but there you see how it operates within a fear-comfort-privatization complex. To give a historical example, in the US during the cold war, parallel to a huge process of suburbanization (backed by the private car and the infrastructure it demands, together with a mortgage system with its social engineering of personal household debt), prefabricated nuclear bomb-shelters were put in people’s back yards. When you get out of the shelter after the apocalypse of the nuclear war, you would still have to pay the mortgage. Once these shelters were supposedly not needed any longer and were taken out. The pit they were in was filled with something else - a swimming pool. So the swimming pool in the back yard is preserving the space left by the nuclear shelters absence. This makes me think of a bizarre connection between Paul Virilio’s typology of bunkers archaeology of the Nazi “Atlantic Wall” on the beaches of Normandy and David Hockney’s 1960s Pop Los Angeles swimming pools.



Anna: Actually, this summer I was swimming inside one of the "Atlantic Wall" bunkers. Through the process of eruption, the bunker was swept into the ocean. Half flooded already, it became a perfect shelter for mussels, shrimps and fishes.

Joshua: In a way the suburb already did what Vivos is aiming for – creating a society-less living conditions. This makes it the opposite of the city, which has all the problems of society, but also the opposite of the small town, with its idea of community.

Anna: "Society-less living condition" is an interesting term. What is also important to say is that all these suburb backyard shelters were mainly built for a white middle class society. The urban developments during cold war are strongly connected to the history of class and racial segregation in America.

What interested me, when I read about Vivos, was the idea of selection. While the company is promoting a modern form of Noah's Ark, they declare the group of Vivos members as "chosen". All members are selected after a rigorous screening process according to skills, profession and personality. Which means, the economic interests of the Real-estate company merge with an ideology of exclusion. Vivos is using a strategy that reminds me of the famous Nespresso Club, an exemplary story of economic success, based on the idea of exclusiveness. In case of Vivos, what one can buy, is not only a safe place, but a membership in an exclusive club. Through the form of a competition the customer gets even more, a certification of being more worth than others.



Joshua: Now, going back to Tel Aviv and to the conditions there I can say this. Historically, the Tel Aviv-Jaffa real estate story is no different than the Zionist one: it is a textbook example for the way space is narrated under colonization processes of appropriation by dispossession. In its more recent manifestations, the branding of Tel Aviv as the White City is a good example. Interestingly enough, the real estate tale of the White City of Tel Aviv (which UNESCO officially endorsed, naming it world heritage site in 2003) begins with a museum exhibition which took place in 1984 under the title "The White City". In it, a story was told of German-educated Jewish refugees finding themselves in British ruled Palestine in the 1930s. With no real Zionist sentiment but with great ambition, they set out to make modernity as their cultural identity manifest. This became the prevailing story for the spatial character of the city center. At the heart of this White City is Rothschild Boulevard. Yet, "The White City" museum show only proposed a story. In a very much Israeli turn of events, it was a war that enabled this story to activate reality. The unsuccessful targeting of the center of Tel Aviv by Iraqi Scud missiles during the Gulf War in 1991 opened up the speculation market of real estate to the option of following the branding scheme of the White City. The potentials that disaster

capitalism saw for itself conjoined with the promise of the urban centers of Israel being bombed were met by George H. W. Bush's New World Order doctrine. Throughout the 1990s, privatization and financialization were brought to Israel through the barrel of a gun. As this gun was targeting Palestinians, it was also shooting down the welfare state. Parallel to two waves of suicide bombings in Tel Aviv-Jaffa in the mid 1990s and early 2000s, the city increasingly endorsed neoliberal policies of surveillance and privatization. This was part of the genocide of the welfare state and the installation of a neoliberal political order. In reality what we call the White City is no more than a financial district located downtown with high-rise office buildings for corporations, law firms, and banks, together with restaurants and hotels to serve them. The contractors of these buildings get their permits for excessive building through their compliance to city demands to renovate, or better yet, mummify, the early twentieth-century buildings designed by Jewish refugees, some Bauhaus graduates, that they now simply use as entrances to their towers.

In the early 1990s, the Tel Aviv city council mapped the buildings in the historical center for renovations, issued preservation regulations, and opened a restoration department within its department of construction and building rights. Since the towers in downtown and the activities they host rely on speculations of disaster capitalism, their spatial and operational future is now tied with the possibility of a war between Israel and Iran. As they need to imagine the war, and bank on it, it seems that they are the only ones supporting this war—to answer to their constant need of destruction for the sake of growth. Being that no other technology can bring these high-rise buildings down in order for the real estate process of so-called renewal to take place, speculative capital in Israel has reached its conceptual limit—for the sake of its own expansion it can now only envision an aerial assault on its headquarters, or better still, a nuclear bomb.



Anna: This reminds me somehow about Stanley Kubick's, "Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb", a brilliant black comedy about nuclear war in times of cold war. At that time it was the demonstration of political power that has outreached its limits and lost any relation to responsibility and consequences.

As you describe it here, it seems that today the financial sector has displaced the role of the governments during cold war. The absurdity of the situation is not less.

For example, in Albania Enver Hoxha's bunkers are spread all over the country. They are so massive, that a regular deconstruction is extremely expensive. But in order to rise the value of building grounds, the bunkers have to be removed. What companies do, is to pay construction workers illegally to get rid of the bunker. For an amount of extra money, the low paid workers put rubber wheels and explosives into the bunkers and transform them into bombs. It's forbidden by law but that is the cheapest solution. In a paradoxical way the former shelters, now become bombs themselves. As you can imagine these jobs are extremely dangerous.

But how about your situation?

Joshua: To be more concrete regarding how this manifests itself in living spaces, I can give the example of our bedroom. My wife Elisheva and I are sleeping in a bunker. I mean, we live in an apartment, but part of its construction demanded from us - complying with current state regulations - that a panic room be constructed in the apartment. This is actually a fortified room with extra concrete and its own air system in case people have to lock themselves in it for a long time. In

Hebrew it is called Mamad (an acronym which stands for Secured Apartment Space). In an atmosphere of constant threat and fear, this is presented to you as a comfortable solution while in reality this is a privatization of security and safety. No longer are bomb shelters being built for the public. Not even for residents of a building to share in the basement. Now, through de-taxing the square meters of the fortified room (Mamad), construction companies have made this a standard in Israeli apartments, and the ones paying for the extra costs it entails are home-owners. So you see how a fear-comfort-privatization complex is constructed into an actual space, plasticized into material reality, built into our lives.

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