La Rotonda: Structure Base, 2017, installation detail, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

Palladio and the Missing Wholeness

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Hadas Ophrat (b. 1950) presents at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art's large gallery a multidisciplinary art project based on his research into the Villa Capra known as “La Rotonda,” designed by the Italian archited Andrea Palladio[1]. The Villa Capra, inspired a multitude of imitations around the world, and Ophrat traveled to these places in order to research them. Video documentation of these journeys is on view in the exhibition. Located just outside Vicenza in northern Italy, it is currently the residence of Count Ludovico Valmarana.[2] This historical museal-architectural site is also open to visitors twice a week. The villa is a clear example of Palladio‘s High Renaissance style, influenced by classical architecture as described in the writings of the Roman Marcus Vitruvius Pollio in the first century BCE.

Villa Capra is a symmetrical building, a square plan with four façades. The name “La Rotonda” refers to the central circular hall with its dome. The oculus, intended to be open to the sky, was ultimately completed with a copula. The façades are all designed symmetrically, with a number of classical elements such as gables, columns, and cornices, proportioned with mathematical precision according to Palladio‘s rules of architecture, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome and the Parthenon in Athens. Ophrat reproduces the bottom part of the Villa Capra stairs as an empty stage, referencing the outline of the whole building‘s perfect form. The historical and theoretical implications of the museum gallery as a white cube enrich the project with an additional layer of symbolic meaning. In the ensuing mutual

[1] In this context it is noteworthy that Ophrat has a master‘s degree in architecture and town planning from the Technion in Haifa.

[2] See chronology of the villa in this publication, p. 6.

[3] Hadas Ophrat, *Too Much Reality: On the Art of Performance* (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2012), 23 (Hebrew).

[4] The circle is a reference to a number of artworks that portray the artist's ability to draw a circle by one stroke as the ultimate test of skill – such as works by Giotto, harbinger of the Renaissance; Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (ca. 1665–1669); or Tamar Getter's series of drawings *Tel Hai Courtyard* (1974–1978), which make direct reference to Giotto's skill.

Andrea Palladio, Villa Capra, section

reflections, the museum gallery serves as a large stage on which the stage-like structure is presented. Visitors are invited to enter the structure in small groups. Within the round room at the heart of this structure, a video art screening (a collaboration between Ophrat and Jonathan Shohet Gluzberg) simulates a combined view of the Villa Capra's interiors and of the landscape surrounding it. It is, in fact, a meta-landscape that, combining interior and exterior views and echoing the multiple reflections in the reiterated reproduction of the original building and its projecting porticos, presents the viewer with fragmented and overlapping sequences of space and time. In his book *Too Much Reality: On the Art of Performance* (2012), Ophrat writes:

> Time is matter,
> Time is a mental limitation.
> Time's molecular structure is exposed.
> Time runs out, or at least creates in you a sense of continuous urgency.
> Not true that it runs out.
> Time is duration. It may make you indifferent.
> Time contains an awareness of death.
> There is no such thing as time.[3]

Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing of the Vitruvian Man is a clear example of the paradox of Renaissance structures. On the one hand, it is derived from human proportions, but, at the same time, it ignores the essence of man as a flawed, mortal, imperfect creature in utter contrast to the utopian, eternal geometric ideal it portrays. This idea is expressed by a 2014 work by Ophrat titled *The Perfect Circle*, which presents a conflict between a crutch and a circle.[4] Villa Capra's doors were designed by Palladio in perfect symmetry, in keeping with the geometric ideal of beauty. They allow the villa's inhabitants control of the space around them, and thus embody their eternal possession of it. However, the unique design of the family villa has given preference to formalism and the perfection of outward appearances over consideration of the inhabitants needs. A slightly different landscape is visible from each of the four façades, heightening the differences between natural and artificial and between the constant and ephemeral.

What does it mean to live in such an iconic villa, either in the original building or in its numerous versions around the world – in England, Poland, the United States, or on top of Mount Gerizim near the city of Nablus in the Palestinian Authority? Documentary films and interviews with people who live or work in these buildings present an inquiry into the circumstances in which reproductions of the building were built; into the boundaries between the private and public spheres; into daily activities in the house; and into its maintenance and preservation efforts. The anthropological-inquiry practices adopted by the artist, the discussion of the history of the building, and his research into the site's conflicting functions – as private abode and museal heritage site – all give expression to Ophrat's longstanding engagement with the conceptual complexity of the memorialization mechanism, which conserves an ideal image of a place while sucking all vitality out of it.

According to Tracy Eve Winton, Villa Capra "provides a stage on which the humanist ideal of self-deification could be acted out."[5] In an exhibition he presented over twenty years ago at the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery in Tel Aviv, Ophrat reproduced another stage-like structure – a prayer podium at the sixteenth-century Abuhav Synagogue in Safed. Mordechai Omer, the exhibition's curator, interpreted it as an act of secular pilgrimage, a pithy expression of a ritual and social function through a structure meant to convey a sense of sanctity and mystery while taking into account human proportions and the daily requirements of religious ritual.[6]

Bimah, 1993–1994, installation view, The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv

[5] Tracy Eve Winton, "The Satyric Scene: Palladio's Villa Rotonda," in: Marcia Feuerstein and Gray Read (eds.), *Architecture as a Performing Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 118.

[6] Mordechai Omer, *Hadas Ophrat: Post-Utopian Platforms and Paths of a Secular Pilgrim*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv: The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, 1994), 2–3.