Temples and Templates
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Six young men drinking sodas sit on the rear metal bumper of a truck, another one stands to the side. Emblazoned on the rear panels of the semi are the words "Transfer Master Products Inc., Postville Iowa." The casually dressed youths seem to be relaxed, perhaps taking a break from work or, as the title of the photograph suggests, just *Sitting/Waiting*. Some of them appear in another image as they congregate before a dilapidated store, a few lounging on the stoop, others leaning on their bicycles. A large U.S. flag hangs prominently from an old-fashioned light post in the right foreground of the picture. These are two photographs in Andrea Robbins' and Max Becher's project Postville (2004), which consists of a series of color pictures taken in the rural town of Postville, Iowa. They are comprised primarily of typical shots of everyday life in a small town: people involved in banal activities such as playing baseball or paint ball, walking down a sidewalk, shopping at a mini-mart, going to a post-office, fishing, mowing the lawn, getting gas, attending a garage sale.

The scenes appear to depict a typical middle America rural community. However, out of this ordinary backdrop leap several telling details which move the mise-en scene into another dimension—one which foregrounds the characters as standing out from their environment. Uncanny effects are produced as the familiar is suddenly made strange: all the heads are covered, either with a baseball hat, a protective paintball head gear, or a bicycle helmet, but also with a skull-cap (yarmulke); and men wear old-fashioned black trousers and white shirts. In many of the pictures, a white tassle (tzitzit) can be discerned dangling from the waist. Both the yarmulke and the tzitzit are customarily worn by Orthodox Jews to signify their religious faith. With a couple exceptions, (*Garage Sale* and *Park Picnic*),women and young girls (*Walking around the Block*) are not featured in these portraits. Clearly, the residents of Postville as shown by Robbins and Becher are not people that viewers can be expecting to emerge from the mid-West amber fields of grain. Rather, they are traditionally identified as occupying urban spaces, in particular cities such as New York which has a large Hasidic Jewish population. As Robbins/Becher's accompanying text explains, Postville became home to a large number of Hasidim in the late nineteen-eighties. Many of these newly arrived residents work in a local Kosher meat processing factory. The disorientation, produced by the juxtaposition of Hasidim and small town America, functions like a picture-puzzle just as in many double drawings where either an ugly old witch or a beautiful woman is revealed depending on the perspective of the spectator. In this instance it depends whether one identifies with the foreground or the background—if one focuses on the former, i.e., the people, then it is the rural and almost pastoral setting that seems out of place; if it is the latter, then it is the Jews who don't belong. Whatever the case may be, the juxtaposition perplexes and calls into question both foreground and background, figure and ground; and raises the question of why should one seem any more out of place than the other? Both parts of the photograph present a truism, but the two truisms, when placed together, cancel each other out. For, neither the image of the orthodox Jews nor that of baseball is more real or false, and any reading must include both together in order to produce meaning. The images from Postville interrupt two narratives: that of the midwestern small town and that of the Orthodox Jewish Hasidim. The photographs thus function as anecdotes from everyday life, which produce a counter history to the dominant narrative in place. They are difficult to assimilate into the larger flow of history.[1]

On the one hand the homogeneity of rural life is thus problematized — and although Robbins/ Becher focus on members of a Jewish community they could have easily isolated another ethnic group. On the other hand, the cliché of the insularity and entrenchment of traditionally closed religious sects is pried apart by the evidence of their dispersal and voluntary migration. The particular Hasidim pictured here are part of the Lubavitch sect which, among other things, is marked by its geographical mobility. However, despite their peripatetic existence they maintain closed and insular or blinkered societies, based primarily on principle of exclusion. To that extent it is remarkable the degree of closeness and intimacy of the shots that Robbins/ Becher manage to achieve with their camera. For the photographs are not the standard clichéd images that the Hasidim usually allow to promote their religion — those in which they pose performing their highly ritualized existence, rather the Robbins/Becher's images resonate in their very banality. For, what appears in Postville are views which capture them in everyday life in rural Iowa; ones in which they are negotiating one the one hand, their rigid identity marked by their strict dress code, and on the other a certain flexibility when it is convenient. Thus, for example, they dually observe contemporary safety codes and laws by sporting bicycle helmets, while at the same time underneath wearing a yarmulke thereby adhering to the religious dictum cover the head. Similarly, in *Garage Sale,* we see an exchange between a Hasidic woman and a non-Jewish customer — an interaction, which, in neighborhoods such as Brooklyn's Crown Heights or Borough Park would be surprising. Or, when young boys engage in the sport of paintball, shots such as *Getting Armed* detail their interest in acquiring the equipment to play the game. Pictured thus, the Hasidim are also in their everyday existence negotiating the space of foreground and background — the practicality of maintaining an anti-modern existence in the twenty-first century.

Postville resonates with earlier work by Robbins/Becher which also focuses on dislocated cultures and places. For example, *Sosúa* (1998/2001) is a series of portraits of former German Jews who emigrated to the Dominican Republic at the time of the Second World War. One such photograph, *Felix Koch,* an elderly man stands outside his tropical home. An old German street sign, *Lindenstrasse,* hung on the wall points to his transplanted condition and reminds the viewer of his European past. Similarly, *The Americans of Samaná* depicts the descendants of freed African American slaves who live now in the Samaná Penisula in the Dominican Republic. In both of these instances, migration occurred because of a violent historical past. As with the German Jews in the Dominican Republic, the location of the Lubavitch sect in New York was caused directly by the Holocaust, and its rapid expansion was driven by a direct feeling of a need to repopulate after the annihilation of Jews during the Shoah. Yet, whereas in *Sosúa* Robbins/Becher track the result of intermarrying and complete assimilation of Jews with the native Dominican population (*Ronni and Priscilla Kirchheimer*), in Postville shots of Jews and non-Jews are limited to economic transactions. To that extent the Lubavitchers are not dislocated but relocated. Further, as suggested by the text on the wall, their move to the mid-western plains can be seen as an attempt to recreate the Shtetl life-style of Eastern and Central Europe which was obliterated during WWII. Their migration and diasporic movement today can be read as an active spreading of culture stemming from a religious (missionary) impetus. Indeed, many of the photos in the series, such as *Lawn Mowing*, and *Working at the Plant*, point to a successful acculturation. Taken as a whole, Postville chronicles how the Hasidim effortlessly colonize the mid-western town; both adopting, and adapting to, their new life style. Besides, it is not a one-way street and the

adaptation works both ways as evidenced by *Barbershop* which shows a non-Jewish barber cutting the hair of a Hasidic man.

A thin blue frame encloses each of these photographs, a border the very color of which links these portraits to another space — one which exists outside of Iowa or even the United States. As for all of their work, frames are carefully chosen by Robbins/Becher; more than a practical convention they are meaningful frames of reference and function as much as parts of the work as the images. Although exiled to the margins of the work, their size, color, material and uniformity work together in a dialogue with the subjects of the photographs. Thus, in an earlier series *Wall Street in Cuba* (1993), a choice was made to frame the architectural remains of the Havana Stock Exchange with thick metallic blue borders that suggest the stock color used by the U.S. military, indicating both the past and present role of the United States in Cuban economy and politics. The frames were designed by Robbins/Becher so that the interior edges would fold over almost into the photograph, creating the effect of an ocean surrounding an island. In the Postville series they used a different blue, one that is however immediately identifiable as the blue of the national colors of Israel. That Judaic blue reminds the viewers that the Lubavitchers, like all Jews, are granted a citizenship by the State of Israel together with their American one. Thus, on the one hand citizenship is determined by where they live (U.S.) and, on the other, by their declared religious affiliation. The picture frame serves not merely to delimit the space of the photograph provides an historical backdrop referencing the complex historical establishment of the State of Israel in 1947 and its relationship to orthodox Judaism today. The frame then functions dually: it simultaneously refers to what can be represented as image—the photographed individual subjects—and at the same time refers to what is outside of the frame, the elusive "hors texte" the ideological socio-historical political reality that cannot be reduced to a single photograph.

This same thin blue frame is featured in a companion series, *770* (2005), which is the twin, double, or better yet, mirror opposite of *Postville*. Here the focus is not on people but rather on architectural structures, specifically a single brick edifice and its imitations. The documentary shots are identified by their geographical location and the perspective used for each: *Sao Paulo, Brazil, Far View Kiryat Ata, Haifa Israel, West View, Rutgers University*, and the like. There are at least two photographs of each building: one, in a standard rectangle format, contains an establishing shot showing the building in its geographical context; the second, in a panoramic format, is a close-up ("like a head shot") of the same building which, with its cinemascope proportions, also shows 2/3 of what is next to it. This is yet another instance of how Robbins/Becher confound both expectations and photographic conventions by placing a basically panoramic subject (the building with its background) in a standard frame and the close-up into a long frame. In each instance however, what is striking is the uniform features of the building — the identifiable materials, the placement of the windows, the steps, the architectural gestalt. What is always the most similar is the front bay window. For example, in *Far View, Ramat Schlomo, Israel* the viewer is confronted with a sea of densely packed similar white buildings amidst which stands, like an island or beacon, a lone red brick structure. With the cinemascope prints the building is always placed in the exact same position in the print leading to an "elevator effect:" that is to say that whenever an elevator door opens the immediate view onto a hallway is the same no matter what floor one is on. The locations are from all over the globe—Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, and the United States. In some instances an attempt has been made to uniformize the landscaping in front of the house and to plant a tree. The overall architectural as well as natural background may vary widely:

from the streets of downtown Los Angeles, to the vertical urban development of São Paulo, to the "old world" buildings of Milan, to the wilderness lake setting of the province of Quebec. However, there is a visual constant: the building. The serial appearance of the buildings instantly brings to mind the interconnected relationship between seriality and the medium of photography. The reproducibility of the photographic image from a single negative finds its correlative in the reproduction of the architecture of a single structure into multiple edifices around the world. This serial nature of production, combined with the logic of the image, calls to mind the modern status of production under global capitalism. The visual recognition pattern recalls identification strategies used by corporations to facilitate quick location of their businesses. Around the globe, the golden arches logo indicates that a uniform fare of food is available, just as the blue "H" of the Hilton logo promises a standard plus hotel comfort.

However, the "Collegiate Gothic" style house documented around the world by Robbins/Becher is neither connected to a fast-food establishment nor to a hotel chain. In fact, its model the former residence of the seventh Lubavitch Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and that original (also photographed by the artists) is located at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Schneerson is considered as a Messiah amongst the Chabad Lubavitchers and, in part, the exponential growth of his group can be attributed to his extraordinary efforts. It should be noted that the Chabad Lubavitch community, which began in Crown Heights with only one Rabbi, now has over 2,500 sites world-wide. The omni-present blue frame leads back to Israel and to Kfar Chabad, the most prominent Lubavitch center outside of New York. Schneerson died in 1994 and this has led some of his more fervent followers to reproduce his house elsewhere so as to facilitate his return through visual recognition. Many of the imitations are even placed to face the same direction as the original (despite hemispheric differences). The serial reproduction of the 770 building has led to the observation that the religious movement has transformed itself into a commercial franchise.[2] The production of replicas of the 770 building also has its roots in tourism, for like other groups the Lubavitchers like to travel and therefore desire clearly designated meeting places where they can congregate and "touch base." Furthermore, to avoid confusion, and to facilitate touring, many religious resorts of various denominations have adapted the same franchise strategies as say, Club Med. Although focused specifically on the 770 buildings, Robbins/Becher's series opens up the problem of the rapid global proliferation and infiltration of mass production into all aspects of everyday life. Over half a century ago, the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre drew attention to the post-war phenomenon whereby cultural production is directed to everyone, and he linked it to a theoretical concept of 'seriality.' For Sartre, seriality is integral to the "ability of the mass media to remake the social world according to the logic of the image," which is "a key facet of the future directed world."[3] The idea of a "future-directed" plan encourages further reflection on the reception of these images/structures in the future. Here, it is necessary to recall Robbins/Becher's early *colonial remains* which, in part, consists of images of left-over buildings (such as a Lutheran Church) from the former German colonization of Namibia during the first decade of the twentieth century. The historical result of that occupation was a bloody massacre primarily of the Herero population in 1904. Now, a century later, the remains of that history are inscribed in the architectural structures which have survived. The mass produced image can disseminate them globally: the facsimile operating both centrifugally and centripetally. The photograph of the 770 building in Melbourne both centers the reference to the specific location "down under" and radiates outward to connect to the broader international network of other 770 sites throughout the world. Of course, visual iconography is by no means

new and has always exerted a powerful influence on the manner in which religions have been configured and represented. However, what is now striking is to what extent visual spectacles and late-capitalist modes of production converge in this case.

Although Postville, Iowa, shelters Chabad Lubavitchers with the highest proportionate concentration of Rabbis in the world, it lacks a 770 building. The structures that do appear in the images: the processing plant, mini-mart, gas station, post-office, antique store, are all remarkably non-distinct in their style. Even the Yeshiva building and a Rabbi's house do not stand out (the latter is marked by the addition of a Menorah on the front lawn). Difference is established by the occupants of these structures. Similarly, the activities in which they are engaged do not indicate any religious practice; rather these are completely secular activities, such as filling the car with gas, shopping, playing games, and bike riding. In one image, *Chance Meeting,* an older man on a fire engine red Yamaha Rezz moped is engaged in conversation with the driver of an identically red colored jeep. Only the vanity Iowa license plate that reads "Chabad" betrays the owner's religious identity. Robbins/Becher seem to suggest a parallel between the manner in which religious accessories are worn on the human body and similar signifying displays on automobiles. This particular photograph, and several others such as *Lawn Mowing,* play with clichéd expectations of what is modern and what is anti-modern. In particular, one image stands out precisely because of its very contrived "timelessness." *Fishing* features a middle-aged man and his young son sitting under the shade of a tree, fishing rods in the hands, clothed in traditional costume. Again the nostalgia-imbued image works bi-directionally: simultaneously towards the idle past time of a father and son fishing, and towards a reappropriated past of a pre-modern Shtetl. A deeply conservative, anti-modern nostalgia marks both parts of the picture puzzle.

Whatever the importance invested elsewhere in seeking to achieve architectural verisimilitude in the 770 buildings, in Postville the signs of Hasidism are worn on the human body in the form of their clothes and accessories. The characters seem to play themselves as Hasidm, their gestures pointing to the theatrical and consciously performative dimension of their identity. Their performance becomes an external promotion of their culture just like the architecture of 770 replicas signals their Hasidim identity. In both instances, religious beliefs are reduced to a seriality of visual signifiers — whether standard red brick stones or uniform black pants and Tzitzits. The propagation of religion is enacted both by its theatrical presentation and by its reliance on modern marketing strategies of production and dissemination. Religion therefore becomes yet one more form of serialization. It is then not surprising that the Lubavitchers rely heavily on contemporary hi-tech modes of communication such as the internet in order to promote their cause.[4] This highly organized and modernized aspect of their identity cannot be seen in the images but can be found outside the frame. By pairing together the two series of photography, — those of portraits of rural life and those of nearly identical buildings around the world— Robbins/Becher point to the gap between the two sets of images. By focusing on surface effects, they urge the viewer to think about the history and narratives performed behind the scenes, out of sight of the visual signifiers, in short: beyond the image.

[1] For an in depth discussion on the theoretical function of the anecdote in relation to history and counter-history see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, Practicing New Historicism Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

[2] "Chabad is a franchise now. Like there is a McDonald's in every town, there's a Chabad House in every town. I call it the McDonalization of Hasidism." Samuel Heilman http://www.mapsites.net/gotham01/webpages/isaacs/770rebb.htm

[3] Edward Dimenberg, Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 81.

[4] Interestingly enough the Hasidim in Postville have been decreed not to use the internet in their homes as it would not conform to strict "Glatt" codes of ritual slaughter.