



BUILDING: LOUIS I. KAHN AT ROOSEVELT ISLAND

Late in 2012, nearly four decades after the death of architect Louis I. Kahn, his Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park opened at the tip of Roosevelt Island. A luxuriantly austere granite prow topped by tree-lined allées, it points toward New York Harbor and out to sea. The title of photographer Barney Kulok's visual meditation on the project invokes the dual nature of *building*, which, like *drawing*, is at once a verb and a noun, a process and its product. Kulok photographed within the shifting perimeter of the site, working early and late in the day and seldom concerning himself with literal scenes of labor. If his peripheral, suspended-time stance kept him out of the way of the workers, it also engendered an aesthetic that echoes Kahn's own emphasis on materials and their activation by sunlight.

Rather than represent "building" (the gerund) as the gradual, coordinated realization of a monumental design, Kulok represents it through a series of minutely observed details. The keynote throughout is lyrical: while builders work, their materials play. Thus, two engineering drawings, repurposed as the window blind of an office trailer, glow with the light of sunrise. A sponge resting on granite makes a Magrittean pun on solidity and saturation. A bent wire and its shadow complete each other, as entangled as tango partners. A white-spattered dark wall becomes a wave of roaring surf; wedges of wood on planes of particle board conjure a minia-

ture mall. Despite the ephemerality of these scenes, in sequence they convey the arc of the builders' job. In this novel composed of visual haiku, the story is about *stuff* (stone, twine, gravel, scribbled-on plywood) turning into a *place*, the natural-looking outcome of an idealist's long-ago idea. (In the final image pairing, the carved stone word "IS" faces a neatly suited figure at a governmental podium who gestures off-page into the future.)

As a language of photography, black and white once signaled a bid for timelessness, but to work in black and white today is to invite charges of nostalgia (for belief in timelessness, among other things). Kulok pushes his luck one step further, for one cannot render construction debris in monochrome—a pour of white sand on black soil, beads of dew on pale gray plastic—without calling to mind Robert Adams' *The New West* (1974), Lewis Baltz's *Park City* (1979), and other such notes of dark doubt about building in the era of Kahn's final years. (The earlier graceful rigor of Yasuhiro Ishimoto's *Katsura* [1960] is in the DNA here, too.) Kulok, remarkably, adapts this skeptical idiom to the purposes of a celebrant and pulls it off, giving Kahn the posthumous interpreter—clear-eyed, historically minded, informed but independent—that he deserves.

—Joel Smith

Building:
Louis I. Kahn at Roosevelt Island.
Photographs by Barney Kulok.
Essay by Steven Holl.
Afterword by Nathaniel Kahn.
(New York: Aperture, 2012)

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Yael Bartana, still from *Mary Koszmary*, 2007, Super 16mm film transferred to DVD / ABOVE: Yael Bartana, stills from *Mur i Weiza* (Wall and Tower), 2009, one-channel RED transfer to 35mm film (images courtesy of Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv)

