

Joshua Decter

## Nahum Tevet: De-Constructive Orderings

The sculptural practice of Israeli artist Nahum Tevet indexes a number of historical-aesthetic trajectories: the architecture-inflected language of Russian Constructivism; the Duchampian readymade paradigm; and idioms of American and European modernist sculpture, including both minimalism and "formalist" work. Considered from this multi-perspectival vantage point, Tevet's work enters into an international arena of sculptural practices that seek to examine the salient features of the intersections between sculptural form, architectural code/structure, and the vernacular of so-called "everyday" objects collated from the realm of the ordinary, the utilitarian. It is out of this complex network of intersections that Tevet articulates a unique sculptural language.

The hybrid condition of sculpture described above is evident in the work of a number of prominent contemporary artists: the Americans Siah Armajani, the late Scott Burton, Alice Aycock; Ludger Gerdes, Thomas Schutte, and Wolfgang Luy from Germany; the Soviet Ilya Kabakov; John Armleder from Switzerland. While there are certainly numerous other artists who engage similar issues in their work, the aforementioned group effectively demonstrate the diverse conceptual and formal approaches which have been employed so as to produce a de-stabilization or over-turning of sculptural tradition and convention. This discussion already implies a particular condition that exists within contemporary cultural production: within the avant-garde in First World cultures, significant cross-influences exist which generate either the appearance or reality of formal/ conceptual correspondence from one context to the next. Regarding the American and European contexts, such correlations define the general parameters within which specific transformations of modernist/post-modernist sculptural language may occur. Tevet, having worked and exhibited both in Europe and the United States, participates in this domain of historically-conscious production.

It is tenable to suggest that one may identify the latent signs of a shift from modernist to post-modernist paradigm within certain early avant-garde/modernist practices; for example, Duchamp's transfiguration of the commonplace into aesthetic configuration; Picasso's transformations of everyday cultural materials and objects into

the formal devices used within a quasi-abstract, quasi-representational vocabulary; Tatlin's use of an architecture-based lexicon as the implicit structure for the "space/site-specific" logic of his Counter-Corner Reliefs. Like other artists who began working during the late 1960s/early 1970s, Tevet approached the problem of sculpture-making as an investigation of the aforementioned historical-aesthetic issues, as well as the implications of a site-specific strategy which examined the structural characteristics of the exhibition space. A work from 1974 entitled *Corner* was comprised of three chairs placed in a triangular configuration (one on each of the perpendicular walls that formed the literal architectural corner, the third diagonally opposite the literal corner), with two painted wood rectilinear strips laid over the triangulation of chairs. In this project, Tevet produced a site-specific enquiry into the particular architectonic conditions through a "doubling" or symbolic mirroring of the gallery's actual corner, while also constructing a sculptural configuration essentially defined by the attributes of the utilitarian object translated into a readymade aesthetic object. A subtle re-mapping of institutional space, this work also is indicative of Tevet's developing dialogue with conceptual principles and formal idioms of minimalism; specifically, a re-consideration of those types of minimalist practice - e.g. Robert Morris - that address, either explicitly or implicitly, the ambient architectural conditions of the exhibition site. It might be suggested that Tevet, undoubtedly also aware of Daniel Buren's de-constructions of cultural institutional spaces, attempted to engage in another form of this practice.

An installation in New York at the Bertha Urdang Gallery in 1979 would seem to confirm the observation that Tevet had become interested in examining the spatial and architectural conditions of the exhibition site. This project was installed in two separate rooms of the gallery, each component comprised of a rather complex network of thin wood-beams that established an intrinsic structural logic (a relatively "open" construct that delineated a specific quadrant of space), while simultaneously making subtle reference to the pre-determined gallery conditions. In a sense, the linear quality of these wood constructions became something like a mode of drawing in space - drawing that assumed a material, dimensional presence, an ordered variation upon an architectural theme that was disclosed as one experienced the overall site.

This minimalist-inflected/readymade vocabulary of the table and chair-like structures would become the building blocks - the primary lexicon - for the interrelated

series of works produced during the 1980s. Such projects addressed the dialectic between internal architectonic structure and the conditions of the site in a more nuanced manner. Furthermore, the tension between representation and abstraction became a dynamic incorporated within the overall configuration. In the series of works entitled *Narcissus* from the early 1980s, Tevet seemed to propose that a type of "scatter aesthetic" - epitomized by the work of Barry Le Va - could be re-deployed as a compelling framework to examine the relationship between order and chaos, the rational and the irrational, logical structure and systematic de-construction of that logic. Yet Tevet also introduces a quite different type of sculptural language: namely, the residual signs of a brand of high modernist formalism usually associated with the work of Anthony Caro. Expanding upon Caro's linear delineation of structure in the work from the 1960s, Tevet similarly utilized what might be described as a "skeletal" language to suggest more substantial dimensional structures. But in Tevet's work, there is a willful orchestration of virtually anarchic interpenetrations of form; it is only upon further scrutiny that a spatial/structural order begins to coalesce. Such qualities are evident in the works produced for the *Narcissus* series, just as we can identify a steady progression of increasingly refined vocabularies from piece to piece- a constant process of structural permutation and modification. Abstracted chairs, tables and other architectural-like forms appear to spin in a circular motion around a vortex of skeletal beam-like structures that function like spokes - mapping and measuring the territorial/spatial parameters of the given exhibition site. The self-contained logic of these works de-construct into discrete constituent parts - and then accrue once again into an overall configuration. Materialization and de-materialization are brought into an uneasy union.

It would not be until the *Painting Lesson* series (begun in 1984). that Tevet began to offer a more fully developed integration of sculptural considerations and issues of painting. In this series, Tevet utilizes painting as a means to underscore individual components of an increasingly complex structural matrix. Painting also is employed to reinforce both formal correspondences and contradictions that occur within the fabric of a work. If it is possible to read some of the works in the *Painting Lesson* series as evocative of a certain type of theoretical/hypothetical architectural space (i.e., a representation of a model for a constructed impossible environment), then it might be suggested that Tevet here utilizes paint - always subtly applied as a structural complement, never as a negation

of that structure - as a type of private code with possible symbolic value attached. Yet it is more tenable to suggest that Tevet is concerned with how the painted dimensional/ planar surface becomes a physical surrogate for the one-dimensional language of painting (as pictorial construct). There is something evocative of a mutated (post) post-Cubist language transformed into sculptural lexicon. Important too, here, are issues of scale. In individual works from this series, similar forms are manipulated and set against one another so as to produce subtle subversive scale relationships, which in turn generate a paradoxical dynamic of structural entropy and integrity. Tevet's use of scale is played against the series of illusionistic balancing acts that are produced within the overall structural matrix, as is evident in a work such as *Painting Lesson No. 4* from 1986.

Tevet's concern with the pre-determined architectural conditions of the exhibition site manifests itself more emphatically in a work from 1986-87 such as 886b. Here, the artist essentially constructs a piece that is both floor-based and wall-based; the central organizing structure actually seems to exist on the wall plane, spilling its "contents" out onto the adjacent floor plane. There is a re-configuration of the floor-plane as primary territory of structural mapping; the wall-plane becomes, for all intents and purposes, a surrogate for the floor. The work is comprised of painted, quasi-open rectilinear box-like structures, table and chair-like objects, as well as actual records (these pressed discs are found objects that function as circular compositional devices) to create a dynamic of imploding and expanding constructs. In works such as the 1986 *Jamma'in*, or the more recent *Jamma'in II* (1989-90), Tevet leaves the floor completely and colonizes the wall plane, continuing to organize the various painted wood geometric components around a circular compositional vortex.

As a sculptor concerned with the continued viability of "sculpture in the expanded field", Tevet has developed a hybrid language, vocabulary, and quasi-referential, quasi-abstract iconography that offers a compelling re-consideration - and re-configuration - of historical influences. Combining a penchant for formal innovation with an underlying conceptual system of organization, Tevet makes work that bridges the gap between methods of installation practice and the realm of the autonomous sculptural object. The development of specific works within each series attests to the degree to which a logic of accumulation or accretion is utilized by Tevet as a framework of systematic structural modification and transgression.

New York, 1990