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Reading the Sculpture of Nahum Tevet

The oeuvre of Nahum Tevet should be considered within the context of several contemporary developments which have profoundly altered both the interpretation and the actual discourse of sculpture. The most important of these developments has been labeled "deconstruction". Although originally referring to literary criticism, this Derridean concept has been applied to other cultural contexts as well.

On closer analysis, Nahum Tevet's work appears to be exemplary of this new approach; the more so since he began his investigation of the fundamental assumptions underlying modernist sculpture before the term "deconstruction" was applied to the visual arts.

To understand the full scope of the radical break that Tevet's sculptural conception makes with the post-minimal tendencies dominant over the past thirty years, we should consider his art against the background of Greenbergian reductionism. In his *Towards a Newer Laocoön*, Clement Greenberg argued that the essence and finality of art in general and of each medium in particular consisted of and coincided with an analysis of its own specificities - i.e. that which separates it from all that is not art and from all qualities not proper or exclusive to a given medium. Sculpture was thus supposed to contain no references to the non-aesthetic (i.e. "real") world, nor to any other medium (in the first instance to painting, and secondly also to architecture).

In this reductionist purism, all metaphor, mimetic references to reality ("images of things"), relational types of composition, color, personal style, etc. were gradually thrown overboard, leaving us ultimately with an autistic, redundant "degree zero" of art: the empty stage as theater, silence as the ultimate music, the bare canvas as painting, and a sober and sobering polystyrene cube as sculpture.

It is obvious that this logic could not be carried any further. Its final consequences, which became evident somewhere in the mid-sixties, did not seem to give any profound, let alone lasting, answers to most of the fundamental issues of sculpture.

Nahum Tevet's sculpture appears to be the very opposite of the results derived from this reductionist sculptural logic. First of all in its underlying strategy: instead of severely

excluding all "alien" elements (e.g. qualities traditionally associated with painting, such as color and plane composition), he adopts an eminently inclusive attitude. His works are very complex. and often combine divergent kinds of logic which cannot be subsumed to a single overall aesthetic programme such as Greenbergian reductionism. On the one hand, for instance. the presence of chairs and other objects which also have an existence independent from their inclusion within a work of art, refers to the "found object" tradition. with all the intricate and far-reaching aesthetic implications this entails. On the other hand, characteristics of the traditional modernist types of composition - linearity, seriality, symmetry, axionometrically centered relational design and the like- are replaced by a very complex additive, cumulative logic. In fact, one can no longer speak of a relational composition when describing how his works are ordered; perhaps we should replace the concepts of order and composition with the concept of "reading". This implies that the centre of gravity of Tevet's sculptural discourse has shifted from a preoccupation with form as such (formalism) to an epistemological standpoint. This, needless to say, is a categorical break. Both the frame of reference and what is at stake are fundamentally different.

When confronted with a Tevet sculpture, we experience a feeling of inadequacy, of both our sensorial and - much more pervasively - our interpretative apparatus. It is virtually impossible to perceive the sculpture in its totality, or from one angle or from one point of view only, let alone to know- deduce - it from one look at it. When we move around it, or when we let our eyes wander over some of its not-so-contingent parts, we try to order all the visual data within an interpretative scheme or mental reconstruction. But such a scheme seems to elude us. All the snippets of information. all the changing viewpoints, all our shifts of motion, all the partial views and all the parts of the sculpture stand in no predictable or even logical relation to each other. When we try to remember, to visually reconstruct the sculpture as it is, in its totality, by winding back all the visual information we have registered with our eyes closed, or by turning our back, we realize that we cannot visualize. cannot reconstruct an overall mental image of it. In other words. Tevet's sculpture exists only in the perception of the viewer, on the one hand, and as a material reality (object), on the other. Not as the materialization of some preconceived or preconceivable sculptural idea or form, for instance. It cannot be approached via an aesthetic based on platonic ideas. Tevet's approach to sculpture could therefore be

characterized as exquisitely phenomenological.

Donald Judd, the most outspoken theoretician of minimal sculpture (which Lucy Lippard quite pertinently labeled "rejective sculpture") characterized his sculpture as "a form as a form as a form", as opposed to traditional sculpture, which could more or less be paraphrased as "a form as a form as a carrier of meaning (s outside of it)". Judd's definition of his putative ideal sculpture is very redundant, tautological. in nature, but some of its implications become clear when we contrast it to Tevet's works, which obviously seem not to begin from a preconceived, abstract form or, for that matter, from a Gestalt, and which in contrast to Judd's repetitive, stereometrical volumes - cannot be fully perceived at one glance. In order to enhance the formal complexity of his sculpture, Tevet applies color to his works; this does not at all simplify the process of reading/interpreting them, but much rather disrupts it and absorbs all the attention of the spectator, who cannot abstract or recognize familiar modes of sculptural order. The fact that we cannot subsume these sculptures to any given epistemological structure, preconceived construct, or cognitive unit. makes us suspect that the artist might be intending a critique of the interpretation or the "cognizability" of sculpture. Hence, an epistemological approach to sculpture.

The aesthetic programme behind minimal sculpture was eminently consistent. The Greenbergian view of the evolution of art as an ongoing process of cathartic self-purification and simplification in all senses, runs nicely parallel to other "master narratives" that are so typical of modernist world views, be they Hegel's metaphysics, Marxist dialectic materialism or the quintessential paradigmatic model of deductive science: arithmetic.

Tevet's sculpture opposes any overall interpretation, by its very complexity. Because of how it mixes up different and divergent categories ("found objects" versus constructed parts within the one work), and by its references to painting (cf. the title of most of the works in this exhibition, *Painting Lessons*), it implies an undermining of any overall, totalitarian approach that bases the interpretation of art on abstraction from perception. If modern art can be seen as a metaphor which in the final analysis - and by analogy - proposes that the world can be known by reducing it to some underlying, completely knowable logical structure. Tevet seems to be pointing to the frustrating and embarrassing truth that the world is in fact full of gaps and flaws, and that no system of

interpretation or deductive epistemology can give us a clear, total and definite insight into the world. His sculptures seem to be saying that different points of view, uncongenial and heterogeneous though they be, can and should be adopted if we are to get any real, unbiased idea of what the world (and the work of art) is like, and that - last but not least - the world exists only insofar, and as long as, we can experience or apprehend it.

The direction in contemporary philosophy which most clearly and most thoroughly comes to terms with this sobering realization and also proposes a possible alternative, is Derridean deconstructionism. As opposed to structuralism, from which it originated, deconstructionism does not grant much relevance to the structures and systems it discovers via analysis and deduction as contents of meaning for their own sake: it is much more interested in and preoccupied with results of inductions, with parataxis, and with the recombining of results of analysis.

Applied to Tevet's sculpture, this means that the artist no longer isolates one specific aspect of sculpture, such as primary, stereometric form (Judd). or weight (as Richard Serra stated about his own work). and blows it up to monomaniac proportions. It means, rather, that he will comment on the totality of sculpture as a text-context with all its complex interrelations, by deconstructing it. decomposing it, and presenting its parts in such a manner that previous grammars can no longer help us to read it. He thus confronts us with a totally new assessment of sculpture as an epistemological-aesthetic field.

Most pre-Caro, pre-Smith sculpture could be analyzed by describing the relations between different parts of the work to the whole, as they relate to a central axis or a grid, etc. Tevet's sculpture clearly is not organized around a central axis or centre of gravity to which other parts would be subordinated according to a hypotactic visual grammar. Tevet uses a paratactic syntax, which means that his work makes sense only as a text full of contradictions and parallels, rather than like a sentence in which all parts contribute to one statement on the basis of relations of interdependency and subordination. On the other hand, at times this chaos appears to be directed by a rotating, spiraling movement. But any possibly directive circular rhythm which might point to a linear type of reading is contradicted by the "illogical" use of color, by the introduction of "objets trouvés" which divert the spectators attention, by a haltering staccato rhythm and - most of all - by the fact that the information which the viewer gets from one point of view does not at all prepare him for- and is often contradicted by - the information he obtains from another

point of view. The result of all these impressions does not lead to any clear-cut conclusion because, quite simply, one cannot add apples to eggs: i.e., one cannot subsume divergent categories under one greatest common denominator.

As mentioned above, Tevet does include chairs, pistols, and the like in his works. Let us analyze his use of chairs/tables as an exemplary deconstructionist strategy of his aesthetics. Chairs have been included in modern sculpture for a diversity of reasons, which could tentatively be grouped around three (more or less) interrelated main lines of force. First of all when the status of the pedestal or base (or in the case of painting, of the frame) was put in question as a marker of the epistemologic separation between the world of art and the everyday reality, it was replaced by the trivial object par excellence, a chair, in order to question the necessity of this radical separation (cf. Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913). Secondly, the chair (or table) did frequently function as the exact opposite of this banal cosiness, as in the surrealist "Unheimlichkeit" (cf. Victor Brauner's *Wolf-Table*, 1933-1947, and Alberto Giacometti's *Table*, 1932) and was often charged with sexual meaning (cf. Allen Jones' *Table Woman*, 1969). A third line of force is also based on the chair's (or table's) triviality, its being exemplary of "literal objects as opposed to metaphorical objects", in Donald Judd's words (cf. Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*", 1965, which is a visualization of the Juddian tautology "a chair as a chair as a chair").

In Tevet's *Painting Lessons*, chairs and tables often function as pedestals, while supporting beams that link different parts of the sculpture. They do have an epistemological function, but this is not related to the concept of the base or pedestal, although it does imply a critique of the problematic relation between the purely aesthetic and the non-aesthetic contexts. On closer analysis, this critique springs from the difference between chairs as undeniable concrete found objects par excellence and the constructed "abstract" elements which further constitute the sculpture. It is as if the logic of Caro's additive sculptural sentences - which, after all, are still sentences within the text and history of the "master narrative" of modernist formalism - were being intertwined or confronted in an explanatory arrangement, an "Auseinandersetzung", with the found object, a radically non-formalist and more precisely semantic direction, based on the manipulation and shifting of categories. Two uncongenial discourses are juxtaposed. In other words, Tevet's work relates to sculpture as a text, to the history of sculpture with its

flaws and irreconcilable divergent programmes.

In closing, we could state that the work of Nahum Tevet relates to sculpture in its totality; it cuts across different periods and styles, and stages conflicting sculptural programmes and theories in an astonishing formal and visual complexity. In this sense, it is a clear reflection of contemporary thought and philosophy.

Plurality and experience are the key words. Every shift of focus. every other angle of vision adds new information about the same (?) work, but does not lead to rigid conclusions. Tevet's work is one with the spectator; it exists for him only during the time of perception, it cannot be reconstructed mentally, or deduced from a preconceived aesthetic programme or formal structure. The time the spectator spends with these works is visually very fascinating. And the fascination is actually visual, not just a mere visualization of contemporary theory of sculpture, as the present text might suggest. This text .after all, was not meant as an introduction. It is intended to come after the viewing.

Let's have a look and shut up.

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