

**Eli Friedlander**

## **Reflections of Space**

*Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble). What we are destroying is nothing but structures of air, and we are clearing the ground of language on which they stand.*

(L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 118)

Where does the work of Nahum Tevet take place? One might understand it in relation to various sculptural traditions: formalism, minimalism, the ready-made or constructivism, working so to speak along their boundary lines, or with what remains of them. While the attribution seems correct it does not provide a way to assess the significance of the work. This is primarily due to the fact that there is as deep a divide as can be between those various practices<sup>1</sup>. The more the conflict between them is fleshed out, the higher are the stakes of a possible rethinking of those dichotomies, the harder it gets to think them through. Nahum Tevet's work provokes the expectation of going beyond that divide. It remains to express in what way this is attempted.

I want to approach the place of this work and therefore the conflict between these practices by thinking of its preoccupation with space. To be precise, space here is not to be taken as a meaningful form, as determined by a set of internal relations. Rather what is opened is spatiality insofar as it is a dimension of being in the world. Spatiality is what Heidegger would call an existential, rather than a categorical determination<sup>2</sup>.

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My essay will be devoted to thinking about one work, "Untitled 95-96"<sup>3</sup>. There are several significant contrasts between this work and earlier works of Tevet's. Such differences are not merely a matter of detail or variation. There is in the present work a new opening to matters that preoccupied Tevet from early on. It is important therefore to describe it in some detail.

The central area of the work is rectangular and is delimited primarily in terms of the denseness of the placing of the elements. It is itself divided into two recognizably equal areas. The dividing effect is produced by a path running in the middle and through that central field. The path itself is not walkable, since various obstacles, mostly not higher than knee high, are placed on the way. It is nevertheless the only open perspective from one side of the work to the other that one finds.

Around the central area we find a more open expanse delimited by rectangular planar elements, suggesting as it were gateways or paths to and around the central area. Those rectangular elements are themselves very prominent in the central area. They are significantly new elements in Tevet's work. They make their first appearance, though less elaborately, in "Man with Camera". There, they encircle the central area but are not themselves incorporated in it. Those elements are readable in different ways: I will think of them as partition walls, as screens, or as wooden simulacra of stretched out canvases. It is imperative to the understanding of the work that such ambiguity as to their identity be retained.

In addition, there is a very restricted number of elements that appear and reappear throughout the work. They are all simple, easily recognizable. Each is self standing, retaining its independence, its existence as a mere thing. Some of those elements suggest recognizable items such as benches, bridges or tables; others evoke boxes, beams or slabs for construction. All elements are recognizably fabricated. Indeed in a very simple way, but so as to distinguish them from raw material as well as from minimalism's total objects. For instance, the white planar elements I mentioned above, have a groove separating their front plane from the frame, signaling that those parts were put together to form this element<sup>4</sup>. Many of the elements look hollow, others are a mere skeletal frame, whose fragility is reinforced by the recognizable use of wood, defeating their immediate identification with construction material. They are not immediately for something, but nor do they have an attractive presence in themselves.

Elements may recur and vary in size but the effect of the work does not have to do with variety or wealth of form. Neither does it use the merging of forms or that of their various compositional possibilities to create its effect. One might think of the array of elements as a dictionary of terms to be used for construction, but it is important to stress there is no

recognizable syntax or sense of relatedness between the elements. This is a clear difference from earlier works of Tevet, where there was a very distinct sense of the putting together. The title of an earlier series "Painting Lessons" suggests this didacticism: simple movements that can be repeated around various axes. There is none of this in the present work. If elements are related, it is by touching, leaning, standing on, or lying on top of one another.

There is no structure or construct in "Untitled 95-96". There is barely anything we would call work in the placing of those elements. The work is beyond the realm of the constructed or, at the limits of it. Even in places where there seems to be a special denseness, it is more evocative of something like crystallisation (with its relation to reflection and refraction) than of the construction of a complex structure by manipulating elements and putting them together. We are before the realm of work and its directedness.

This might be further described as a contrast between what I would want to call the stillness of that work and the dynamics that characterised Tevet's earlier ways of putting together things. Tevet's works never did contain a simple movement: if there was a recognizable spiral movement, it was always checked by collision of elements, drawn together to some center of attraction. "Untitled 95-96" is a work that is completely lacking a center and a dominating movement. Instead, there is a parallelism, especially as one experiences the rhythm created by the planar partition walls. The work instils a sense of quiet dispersion. This has to do with the fact that the elements are mostly posed on the ground, on the floor surface. Earlier works were either oriented to the wall, or would distinctly rise from the surface of the floor. Here there is no measured rising taking place. This is not to say that there is no gesture of rising above the layout of the elements, rather that this gesture itself is to be explained given the sense of stillness.

Another clear contrast between this work and, for instance "Man with Camera", is the sense that many elements give of standing. Verticality determines how elements are placed in the field of the work. But it is not the verticality of a meaningful structure (whose model is, say, the building or the human body). Elements just stand there. There barely is any construction, but there is standing which distinguishes this material from what is merely left around.. thrown away. The standing itself suggests a possible putting to use.

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It is quite clear that Nahum Tevet's works pose for the viewer the problem of an overall perspicuous representation. This issue has been central to Tevet's thinking as the names of some earlier works suggest. "Man with Camera" poses the problem of the snapshot view of the work. It is not representable by means of a photograph. The photograph cannot stand for or represent the work. The title is ironic in providing one with a clue as to how the work defeats any touristic experience.

One would be tempted to use another title of Tevet's earlier work "Sound for a Silent Movie" to suggest that a movie camera and its effects might be more appropriate a means for encompassing that work. And yet there is no clear sense of directionality, of movement, of continuity, that a movie camera could take hold of and enfold 'gradually. The work problematizes both our sense of space and of time and our orientation in and through them.

What is the particular mode in which this difficulty of orientation arises? Complexity seems to be a term that is often used to characterise the difficulty Of orientation<sup>5</sup>. But this work does not create a general effect of chaotic complexity. The very distinction between the simple and the complex brings in the idea of construction, of putting things together, which, as I want to claim, is foreign to this work. There is indeed a multiplicity to which one could ascribe the term "countless", but the countless should be distinguished from the infinite. It is what does not demand to be counted. The work does not present a difficulty of encompassing by suggesting a figure of infinity. On the contrary, the work just stands there, and most openings seem rather manageable for our surveying. There is no clear moment of breakdown of our surveying capacity. The work is not geared towards such a moment a breakdown.

There is no perspicuous overview of the whole piece, but importantly there is no figure for chaotic or infinite complexity either. A certain romanticism of the place of creation will avail itself of such figures. These are figures of sublimity which are fascinating and therefore ultimately problematic thematization of this moment. They make us expect the wrong thing as we attempt to open ourselves to what shows. There is too much heroic pathos in this figuration, too much figuration of that mythical moment, too much mythologising of the creation of meaning. It is then most important not to characterise too clearly what draws you to this work. Not to figure its attractiveness.

Images come to mind as one thinks of creation: images of monstrosities, titanic or demonic power, images of gigantic or galactic proportions. Such images hardly apply to the stillness of this work. We are not in a place of ruin, of this image so potent for a romantic sense of return and rebuilding. It is not a sense of decay or monstrous fragmentation that overcomes us. Any tomatization of the concept of matter, of that which can be pointed to as the place where we expect something to emerge, is defeated by Tevet's work.

The woodenness of the elements does not show the mysteries of the wood as such. They are for the most part made of wooden boards that are prefabricated. The sense of matter in this work of Tevet's always remains very close to the ordinariness and unobtrusiveness of things. It does not draw our attention, or we are not drawn because of that.

There is, one might say, a poverty of means in evoking the scene of creation. The nature of the material shows this to be a place where we encounter the habitual, or the ordinary - that in which we inhabit or dwell. It is here that I think comes out the meaning of Tevet's use of what one might call ordinary material.

The description of the work in those terms then allows us to elaborate further the terrain in which the question of the emergence of meaning will be asked: What is the relation between the constructed and the habitual? We can inhabit or dwell in what we construct, but this does not mean that construction, or building, is more primordial than dwelling.

When various forms of relating to specific meanings or meaningful forms are defeated we are not left nowhere. We are left with stillness. The stillness of the piece is not the stillness of no meaning whatsoever, but rather the stillness of silence. Silence is a space where meaning can occur. This work is of a stillness that is before beauty, and after sublimity. The silence of the piece has to do with its intense preoccupation with spatiality.

But what is spatiality that appears when certain modes of being in space are put aside? It is not the sense of space as a homogeneous medium in which things coexist. But neither is it a definite locality that is experienced either. The work does not provoke us to a sense of the surroundings, to a dialectical relation with the experience of the surrounding (as was the case with certain earlier installations of Tevet's). One as it were remains engaged in the work itself, but not with anything in particular there apart from the opening of space itself.

Space is made for things to emerge. And this opening for meaning is not itself a definite place or locality. We are left open to the condition of dwelling as such, before any construction or building has taken place, before any meaning has caught our attention. Spacing appears in Tevet's work as what allows the inhabitation of particular localities, it is related to the habitual. The habitual is more primordial than the inhabiting of localities. In order to show US spatiality the work must in the first place release us from modes of involvement with things which obscure that dimension.

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Home is a place of orientation. To be at home, means to live with one's whole self-oriented. Orientation is being at home in the world, or it is a central dimension of being in the world as such. It is essential that this dimension always recedes to the background as one is engaged in things or interested. Dwelling is always pushed to the background by what is constructed. This just poses more acutely the problem of exhibiting this condition of dwelling for experience.

Tevet has said that his "sculptures are instruments for viewing"<sup>6</sup>. Elements of the work are not there for themselves, nor are they there for construction, but so as to allow something to show. Here we might think of them as instrumental in allowing spatiality to appear. In order for those dimensions of existence to be revealed through that work, one must not be absorbed in what there is. What is there, in the work, is not there for our attention, but so as to defeat certain ways of interacting with the already existent. The work then exists in its attunement with the subject.

I have described Tevet's work as having to do with what merely stands, before the erected, in measure, according to a plan. Measuring and the objective standard are not yet operative when one is opened to that primordial spatiality. But this just raises the question what stance is creative of a standard for orientation. That will have to do with the human body and its capacity to stand in an environment and to withstand its intrusions. The body can provide a standard of orientation through itself, as it were apart from any definite concept or measure.

I have in myself a sense of orientation in my surroundings, most clearly apparent in the distinction between right and left. An important figure for bringing out that there is orientation is

the mirror image or the reflection. The mirror image is what inverts right and left. If one does not use it to recognise a figure and its properties, but rather to reflect orientation as such, then it is through the inversion that one becomes aware of that which is always receding. The inversion of left and right creates the uncanny awareness of our reliance on orientation.

Reflection is crucial to the formation of meaning. In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant speaks of the judgement of taste as constituting the essence of what he calls the reflective judgement. It is a judgement that creates a concept or that is related to the appearance of meaning. The bare condition of the emergence of meaning is thought by means of the aesthetic judgement in terms of the attunement through reflection of subject and work. Responsiveness as such, that is, finding one's unknown, because rejected, thoughts reflected in the object, is the very phenomenon of the emergence of meaningful form. But it is essential that reflection produces this displacement, or transferential effect, from one's ordinary involvements. It is only then that one finds non-narcissistic pleasure in reflection. It is in that sense that I want to conceive of the whole work as a reflection of spatiality. It brings me back to a place where I always am without being aware of it.

Reflection, one wants to say, demands a surface. It is the condition in which a three-dimensional object or environment is projected onto a two-dimensional surface that reflects light. But Tevet's sculptures hardly ever contain that kind of reflection. Early on, in the "Narcissus" series twin structures evoke the sense that one is the reflection of the other. One might argue that a three-dimensional reflection should be called a repetition or a variation, and yet one senses that Tevet works with reflections. This means that what is there is there so as to create the effect that it is not really there. It creates the effect of an imaginary reflecting surface, call it the illusion of an illusion. Reflection is nowhere, but it is nevertheless what the work as a whole is about.

In "Untitled 95-96" the elaboration of the topic of reflection is brought to a new state. Indeed, there is no structure, thus no means, to create the illusion of reflection in the same way as in the earlier works, but one senses that the theme of reflection is addressed. Hints are provided by noticing small mirrors that are placed between the wooden elements. But what is reflected? Reflection is not a matter of structure, but it appears in relation to the elements themselves. Symmetries are all important in the elements. They are reinforced by a distinction of colour that divides many elements into equal parts. The figure of the table itself contains such symmetry and when it is duplicated in a box like skeletal frame, the sense of mirroring becomes very vivid.

But we are not drawn to the mirroring of elements, rather to the fact that through mirroring space is doubled or enclosed. This is how I understand the distinctive sense of hollowness in this work.

It is necessary at this point to provide a first interpretation of the planar elements that run through the work. They function primarily in a play of clearing and concealing. They open and close partial views, or paths into the work. In their layout around the central area and within it, they open one area as they close another to our view. This means that there is no retention or synthesis at work, but merely the play of clearing and veiling. This is the reason why complexity is not part of this work since there is no demand that the work makes on us to retain what has been covered. Memory does not play an important part in this work. One is attracted to the fact that something appears and disappears at all, not to how appearances are related.

The vistas that are opened are not in themselves intricate, they are often rather simple: several elements leaning against each other, standing between those partitions. There is no place where complexity as such strikes you. Indeed it is not just the case that one does not have an overall perspective, there are for the most part no intersecting perspectives on particular parts of the work either. There are, as it were, more and more partial openings or clearing up of areas of the work, but they do not intersect. Intersections are the formation of a stable identity for a thing by means of comparisons, they constitute a proof of its reality. It is putting together views, or synthesizing them. The experience of Tevet's work avoids, as I want to think of it, the thought of identity and synthesis.

Original spatiality is also distance. But not the measuring of distance or the metric, but rather the sense of the near and the far. The appearance of the near has to do with the functioning of recognizable items in the work: The table and the bench are what they are, primarily through our bodily involvement with them. With these elements appears the sense that one is supported. It is in this context that one should understand the use of the element evoking the shape of a boat. Its function is to relate us to the reliance on ground, to the possibility of walking. Call this the reliance on ground before one needs it as a foundation for construction<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, the evocation of such recognizable items should not be understood as the reintroduction of figures into an otherwise nonrepresentational field. They are importantly evocative of man's immediate dwelling place. Moreover, they are such as to unobtrusively support his activities and the various postures of his body. They are elements that recede to the background so as to support the body. They are what one might call the near, if this is again not understood in terms of measurement.



Spatiality is also the primordial sense of inner and outer. This has to do with the sense of one's body as the inner, and of its surroundings as external. The possibility of establishing that distinction provides a fundamental sense of security in oneself. One tends to conceive of the inner as the mental space of representation and private feeling, and the outer as the material. This dualism displaces a more fundamental way of establishing the separation of inner and outer, a primordial sense of recollection and of safety in oneself. Much of what dwelling is about has to do with creating this sense of security.

It is in this context that I want to read a further effect created by the white panels. One is tempted to think of them as partition walls. Room is created between those partitions, sometimes larger, sometimes narrower, suggesting a mere passage. But it is important that in no place do these panels intersect to suggest walls coming together to form a corner. This would provide a clear sign of an interior and an exterior. The panels keep being placed so as to bring out this dimension.

The distinction of the inner and outer is importantly related to the distinction between the sense of time and of space. Time has been characterised by Kant as the form of inner sense, space as the form of outer sense. As I represent things to myself inner sense and outer sense come together in me: space and time are as it were coordinated.

Now, what constitutes the inner in terms of the form of time, is primarily the capacity for retention which is memory and projection which is the prefiguration of the future possibilities. Spatial movement is importantly a mode of figuring time for ourselves. The synthesis of form in space provides a figure for the elapsing of time in the subject<sup>8</sup>. Nahum Tevet's work places one on paths where hardly any visual memory or any projection are possible. I have described that as an experience that defeats synthesis. The work thus defeats the conditions of inner sense. It releases us to the sense of the body's belonging to the world and to things. Not through an experience of shock, but rather by creating quiet wonder. The possibility of wandering in this condition is crucial to the experience of the work and its world. Wandering and the walk is the condition of the quiet experience of wonder associated with the space this work opens<sup>9</sup>. Time then figures prominently in the experience of the work, but as a repeated experience of the present rather than a reliance on duration.

But such a taking of steps is also the awareness of the sheer difficulty of the forming of oneself, and of leaving space open for what appears. A moment of avoidance inevitably follows this awareness, I call this the moment of precipitation into the represented.

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Let me approach this dimension by speaking of how colours function in this work: There is no painterly application of colour over the elements, no texture or pattern. Sometimes it is merely some varnish that is applied to the wood, to protect it. Other times industrial paint covers a surface. I have already noted how the symmetrical colouring of certain elements works to evoke a reflecting surface. More generally, colour brings us to the surface, or makes objects appear as lines and forms against a background. It poses the question of the relation of the object and the surface. Such relation, one might add, stands as paradigmatic for the issue of the relation of object and appearances or the thing and the space of representation. It is here that the reading of the planar elements as simulacra of canvases comes into play. They can be thought of as surfaces upon which things are projected and related.

The coloured surfaces and their interrelation allow for a possibility of collapse of the elements onto a plane, as it were creating a picture. What is the nature of that collapse, or projection of the thing in all its spatiality onto the surface? I have argued that the lack of a perspicuity defines the primary condition of experience of this work. This can provoke a precipitous gesture of rising above that condition. The work itself provides a sign of that precipitous rising above. That gesture is the beginning of movement that is thematized by the upside down table-like elements raised at an angle from the horizontal plane.

The work is about the average height of a person. The sense of its spatial multiplicity as it rests on the floor contrasts with the temptation to take an overview at eye level. It is important that one can attempt to have a view from above the set of screens. One can, tip toe raise one's head above the multiplicity of elements and see from one side of the work to the other. This possibility is, as I understand it, what the central path suggests. That it is in no way walkable, directs us to attempt the overview with our gaze. It is in the interaction between those two dimensions that I locate the gesture of that work. One might think of it in terms of the relation between an experience of the limbs, in particular the legs that must take steps in this area of

obstacles and fragile balances, and sight which prefigures the way, or precipitates one ahead of oneself.

Seen from that point of view, one can interpret differently the hollowness of the elements, their smallness, their being fabricated. The construction that will arise out of them can turn out to be that of a stage rather than a dwelling. That danger, call it the threat of emptiness or of theatricality, is always a possibility for the being in meanings<sup>10</sup>. Far from denying the place of that threat, Tevet introduces it for reflection and marks it by means of the gesture of the work. As one takes this dimension into account it is possible to say that dwelling will appear through the ever present necessity of return from emptiness to spatiality.

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<sup>1</sup>) One might avoid the difficulty of putting together those various practices by thinking of tradition as mere remains, so to speak empty shells which can be put together because they are just shadows of meaning. Alternatively one can speak of various language games, rather than one master narrative. But this does not make the situation more comprehensible, since what is at stake is precisely why we should care about putting such things together. The most forceful statement of the divide between modernist sculptural practice and minimalism, showing the stakes of that rethinking, still remains, to my mind, Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (ArtForum, June 1967). The divide between these two sets of practices can be expressed in many ways: it is that between works of arts, within the bounds of the medium and the object as such. Thinking of it in terms of a meaning that is located in an autonomous object as opposed to a work which creates a situation, or that situates its viewer in a locality, is yet another way of bringing out the contrast. Issues of presence and temporality will figure prominently in this debate, as well as in the present essay

<sup>2</sup>) Heidegger's understanding of spatiality and its relation to dwelling and building is at the background of many claims of this essay. I take up from *Being and Time*, (Harper & Row. New York. 1962), part one § 22-24, and from the essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' in *M. Heidegger- Basic Writings*. (Harper & Row, New York. 1977).

<sup>3</sup>) "Untitled 95-96" has two versions. the Stockholm and Ein Harod versions. The differences between them have to do mainly with the necessity to respond to the different exhibition spaces in which the work was placed. My essay was written primarily in my response to my experience of the Ein Harod version.

<sup>4</sup>) If one interprets those elements as stretched out canvases. then this groove marks the distinction between canvas and support. Think of it as a figure for the whole problem of the borderline between the pictorial and the sculptural.

<sup>5</sup>) See on the issue of complexity, Michael Newman's 'In the Post Modern Labyrinth' in Nahum Tevet, *Sculptures, Exhibition Catalogue, Stadtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, Neue Galerie — Aachen 1986*, p. 7

<sup>6</sup>) Nahum Tevet, 'Recent Works', an interview by Michal Na'aman KAV, No. 3 dec. 1982, Tel Aviv.

<sup>7</sup>) It is important that an evocation of childhood appears in this work. This is clear in the boat-like element or the smallness that suggests a doll's house perspective on certain recognizable furniture elements. One might interpret this evocation of childhood in the context of the particular sense of dwelling and spatiality one has as a child. This is a place before the lessons.

<sup>8</sup>) Kant speaks of the experience of sublimity, where a problematization of our imagining of a mode of advance in space does violence to the form of inner sense which is time and as it were gives us a standard for what is beyond the gradual enfolding of time.

<sup>9</sup>) Walking and taking steps is crucial to the elaboration of this moment of the creation of meaning in such authors as Rousseau. Emerson, Nietzsche. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein

<sup>10</sup>) This is not unrelated to the term of criticism "theatrical" that Fried uses in his 'Art and Objecthood'. (ArtForum. June 1967).