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A Measure of Discontinuous Multiplicity

Let me start with several obvious observations regarding Tevet's more recent works:¹

First, each consists of essentially distinct elements.

Second, the plurality and distinctness of its constituents is experienced before one has a sense of the totality of which they are the elements.

Third, the elements give a clear impression of being planned and constructed, but they themselves do not seem to serve any further purpose.

From these three observations I would like to develop the themes of the present essay. In particular I want to address what seems to me the most insistent enigma of such works, their overwhelming sense of space. Such space, or sense of spatiality, emerges locally, in relation to this or that area of a given work, as well as in relation to the work as a whole.

A.

Space in Common

The distinctness of elements, of things *standing apart* from each other in a work by Tevet, gives the sense that it evades composition. This does not imply that what rules it is disorder. There is actually a certain "neatness" to it. Elements are not jumbled up, even if sometimes one leans against another. The work exists beyond the grammar of order (and therefore also of disorder) altogether. Many elements give the impression of just *being there*. The overwhelming verticality of the work is not that of a meaningful structure (whose model is, say, the building or the human body). Nor is there any construction, beyond that in the elements themselves. Their standing there, nevertheless, distinguishes them from material that is merely dumped or thrown away. Elements may recur and vary in size but the effect of the work does not have to do with variety or wealth of form. Nor is there any play with seriality. When a certain element is tilted, for instance, it is not for the purpose of connecting it with others, but rather as though it is mechanically rotated around its axis. One might think of the array of elements as a dictionary of terms to be used for construction, and speak of Tevet's "language". But it is important to stress that there is no recognizable syntax. The most important aspect of language, its compositional principle, is lacking. One cannot imagine how elements would fit together, other than concentrated or dispersed, collected or abandoned. Even if the density of elements increases towards the center, such concentration is not a mode of composition.

How then are we to characterize what emerges before the possibility of composition, of succession and counting, of unifying and distinguishing kinds? Insofar as one is

released from attending to the relations between things a peculiar spatiality is opened by the beholder's existential determinations. The possibility of walking and the obstructions to advance, the opening of vistas, the sense of orientation or disorientation, verticality and ground, constitute central categories through which this original sense of space emerges. Tevet has remarked that his "sculptures are intended for seeing".² What is there, in the

work, is not given to be seen, there for our attention, but serves as an instrument to make manifest that which remains unobtrusively in the background in our ordinary dealings with things.

In a work by Tevet space appears not through a set of geometrical or topological properties, but first in the possible openings it provides as well as in the obstructions to our access to things. The planar elements one finds running like screens through many of Tevet's works function primarily to produce such a play of clearing and concealing. Through their layout they open one area as they close another to our view. The vistas 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. The work makes no demand on us to retain what has been covered. One is attracted to the fact that something appears and disappears at all, not to how appearances are related to produce higher unities. There are for the most part no intersecting perspectives on particular parts of the work either. Intersections of perspectives would allow the formation of a stable identity and provide a sense of the reality of things. A work of Tevet avoids such synthetic identity. Not only does it appear fragile despite the elements being solidly built; it gives a sense of the ephemeral and the passing – primarily because what is revealed is so much a part of the non-unified movement that allows it to be experienced.

Nahum Tevet's work places one on paths where hardly any visual memory or any forward projection are possible. The possibility of *wandering* in these conditions is crucial to the experience of the work and its world. Wandering, and the walk, are the conditions of the quiet experience of wonder associated with the space this work opens. (I assume incidentally that the title *Seven Walks*^{pp.99-119} is ironic in its implicit reference to the seven days of Genesis, for the idleness of walking is precisely to be opposed to the labors of creation. But one might also say that the original emergence, if not creation, of space, demands release and rest rather than construction.) Wandering which takes place outside would be contrasted to dwelling. But Tevet's space is neither an inside nor an outside. Think how the white panels in, for instance, *Untitled* (1995-96)^{pp.65-73} can be taken not only as screens, but also as suggesting partition walls. Room is created between those partitions, sometimes larger, sometimes narrower – a mere passage. But it is important that in no place do these panels intersect as walls coming together to form a corner. This would have provided too clear a sign of an interior.

Distance, so crucial to our sense of space, is experienced in Tevet's works not only by an objective estimate but also through nearness. 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. These elements are evocative of man's immediate dwelling place. They are such as to unobtrusively support his activities and the various postures of his body. Such shapes as the "boat" and the "table" also open up a play on scale in the work. Their reduction in size brings out how the body's position provides from itself a standard before the existence of any objective external measure. The body's capacity for orientation in surroundings depends on and is most clearly apparent in the distinction between right and left. An awareness that there *is* such orientation can be prompted by the mirror image or reflection, insofar as it precisely inverts right and left.³ But reflection is not primarily a matter of reflecting surfaces; it rather is a principle of the constitution of the elements themselves. Their internal

mirroring is reinforced by distinctions of color that divide many elements into equal parts along the axis of symmetry. The figure of the table itself contains such symmetry and is itself duplicated to form a box-like skeletal frame. These are themselves reproduced in areas of higher density, but always without producing a construction. It is rather as though mirroring has solidified or crystallized through a natural process to enclose and organize a portion of space.

B.

Schema and Model

Elements in a Tevet work are recognizable, but the work can in no way be called figurative. Here we are reminded of a boat, of a measuring rod or a cigarette, of a book, of a table, a bench or even a building. Finding shapes that remind you of various things is seldom welcome in art. It seems to belong more to the condition of a child looking at clouds, than to a properly reflective state. How do we understand then the preoccupation with recognition, assuming that the role of those elements is not to elicit associations and reminiscences which would then form the universe of meaning of the work (for what would a boat, a cigarette, a bench and a book have in common? Tevet is not, after all, an heir of Surrealism). I have spoken of the general sense of the near and the habitual that the use of recognizable elements can provoke. But their recognition is itself of a particular sort: it is the recognition of the schematic.

The elements are simplified shapes that give the appearance of being serially produced out of a set of simple plans and fixed designs. One finds here and there hollowed surfaces, the leftovers of what one would imagine was a process of cutting out identical elements. Even the larger, more elaborate elements do not leave behind any distinctive traces of individual creation in the process of production. If anything we feel that these elegant pieces were constructed by an accomplished craftsman. (Keep in mind that the register of the instrumental, rather than the creative, serves Tevet to describe what he is doing).

The schematic might initially be characterized as a simplified shape lacking the details though recognizable enough to stand for the real thing (for instance, a certain layout of a stick figure can suggest a man walking). A schema is further something standing between an abstract plan and its full realization. It can function as a model that mediates in the process of realization, insofar as it is concretely visible and at the same time simpler or smaller than that which it is a model of. But although the elements are schematic, produced according to a plan, one would hesitate to say that Tevet shares with the conceptualist the primacy of the concept in art. The experience of the work goes beyond the planned insofar as its primary subject matter is not merely the produced elements, but rather the possibility of recognition in relation to the whole, to the space opened by the elements.

Can the schematic be a characteristic of the space of the work as a whole?⁴ Visiting Nahum Tevet's studio after one of the large works has been shipped to its exhibition space, one can see a complex pattern of masking tape covering the floor, as though forming an earthly constellation. No doubt this shows how much thought is given

to positioning the elements. But the fact that there is no way to encompass the work as a whole by an intentional effort of the mind holds not only for the beholder, but also for the artist himself. Tevet's plans and calculations do not aim to close up everything, but rather to let space open of itself. What exists beyond the mere realization of a concept, yet way before the complex products of creativity and design, is given to us as a sense of space.

C.

Total Discrete Multiplicity

Since the elements of a Tevet work cannot simply be called "parts" of a whole, it follows that the problem of emergence of a totality is one of the main themes of such work. Sometimes, circling around the work, we would catch a glimpse of an ordered area. One strategy to create local order without composition is through the projection of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional background (thus the planar "screens" or "partition walls" I have mentioned function also as "canvases"). But similar attempts to encompass the *totality* of the work pictorially are bound to fail. The lack of a perspicuous picture of the whole defines the primary condition of experience of Tevet's work.⁵

I have spoken of a work of Tevet existing in relation to the viewer. But a converse experience through which the viewer is left out can also arise: the more one attempts (and fails) to relate to the work as a whole, the more one is aware of its insistent self-standing or independent nature. The more one is keyed to its consisting of discrete elements, the more it appears as the mere presence of such discontinuous multiplicity, wholly uncooperative with one's own approach to it. One feels as though one is an outside observer to a world of things. This is no more a space of human experience, but one deserted by human presence. Each thing is merely there and shares no common environment with the others. (This is why despite the broad layout of a work, one does not experience it as a landscape). Ordinarily, we experience things in a nexus of purposes always belonging to a context, one thing leading to another. Tevet's elements are dissociated from such a nexus. Their isolation is reinforced by the fact that they appear as things that were constructed for some reason but were consequently taken out of circulation and abandoned.⁶

Isolated things taken out of their context might appear strange, even mysterious (Surrealism's uncanny objects and the minimalist "Thing" take advantage of this dissociation from the conditions of experience). The lack of a similar "aura" of mystery in Tevet's works is due not only to the kind of material used (processed wood, painted like the Formica used in kitchens) but also to the fact there are so *many* of these isolated elements. Among all the standard shapes recurring in various places, none is pre-eminent. Despite the differences, no area is more important than another. This lack of a focus or hierarchy is part of the relinquishing of construction. Far from making us lose interest in the work, the general sense of equivalence brings out what I think of as the experience of multiplicity.

Multiplicity may be captured first by the sense that there are countless elements in Tevet's works. The countless is not the endless. The countless does not demand to be counted, whereas the endless suggests a failure of counting, thus a sense of infinity. When I refer to the multiplicity or plurality evoked by Tevet, it is in no way in the service

of a pathos of the infinite. It is rather the very concrete and unremarkable multiplicity of what is ordinarily experienced as a unity of the human world that is brought into focus as things are dissociated from their unifying context. It is not the case that wherever there are many things, there is a sense of multiplicity. That would require taking the many things as a whole, yet retaining their self-standing quality. It is one of Tevet's achievements to bring out that paradoxical possibility of a discontinuous whole, of a sense of totality that would arise out of, and be presented solely by, multiplicity. Tevet does not give us any chance of relating to the work as a totality by way of an overview, as a continuous synthetic experience (say by walking around it and relating perspectives), or by means of a system that could afford to grasp its inner logic. But it is precisely this staunch refusal, the arrest of those motions towards unity, toward the all-encompassing construction, that let us remain at the moment when the work oscillates between mere plurality and dispersion and the emergence of the space of such multiplicity. The discontinuity of the multiple then would appear not merely as a failure to achieve a unified whole, but as that presentation of totality as it would be manifest to us, to limited or finite beings.

In a famous engraving by Dürer an angel broods over a field of strewn geometrical prisms and instruments. The objects surrounding the angel are not abandoned because they are unfinished, left out of the realm of work as unsuccessful products. There are no traces of combat with work, no sense of discouragement and failure because the task was too difficult to complete. Rather, a rarefied air of completion pervades the products; so rarefied, in fact, that completion collapses into emptiness and melancholy. One might imagine, brooding over one of Tevet's works, a modern angel of melancholy. And yet, out of the astounding stillness of the work a space opens up and the whole expanse lights up with the hint of another order, beyond the planned, its failings as well as its successes. It is not the struggle to mend things, to put them back together, that allows this initial convalescence from melancholy, but the spontaneous emergence of a space that spans and keeps in balance that which has been torn out of context. The multiple, the abandoned and the dispersed as human endeavours are returned to a more natural setting.

1

The present essay treats solely of works by Tevet from 1995 to the present. The question of the nature of the progression of these works could itself be the subject of an essay. It seems that something is problematic in the very idea of succession, development and even individuation and separation of these works from one another. This is due to the fact that the logic of the works follows a principle, not of composition or construction, but rather of simple addition. One might argue that the space in which the work is exhibited constitutes its principle of limitation. But works of Tevet are not primarily installations. They have their own space, (no doubt one that takes into account the place in which the work is exhibited). That space is turned inside into the works' own expanse, rather than directing us to its surroundings. It is to the characterization of this spatiality that the present essay is devoted.

2

Michal Na'aman, "Nahum Tevet Talks About His Works", *Kav* 3 (December 1981), p. 5 [Heb.].

3

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.

4

Sometimes the work itself suggests something of a model (hence the architectural associations it can give rise to). This is most obvious in Tevet's "miniature" work *Underground Event* (1997) which is placed below a reduced scale model of the building of the site where it was exhibited.

5

As the title of an early work – *Man with Camera* (1992-94) – suggests, the possibility of a snapshot view of the work is problematized. The title is ironic in providing one with a clue as to what defeats a touristic experience of that work. One would be tempted to use another title, of Tevet's earlier work *Sound for a Silent Movie* (1986), 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. In *Untitled* (1995-96) the upside down table-like elements raised at an angle from the horizontal plane suggest a gesture of rising above one's limited condition of viewing. The work's height 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. One can, on tiptoe, raise one's head above the multiplicity of elements and see from one side of the work to the other, above the screening devices. This possibility is further suggested by the central path running through it. 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. Defeating the temptation suggested by such gesture poses the question whether the space of the work as a whole can emerge otherwise than through that precipitous visualization.

6

When thinking of a work by Tevet in terms of its attunement with the viewer, the spaced areas surrounding the center of the work are read as entry-ways and passages, leading inward, into the thick forest of elements. But when one emphasizes the self-enclosed nature of such a work, one would think of them from the inside out, merely as elements further abandoned, or dispersed.