

Claudia Gioia - Let's start with your history. Your artistic education, your cultural references and influences and your personal path. How do you place your research and who were and who are your companions?

Nahum Tevet – During my High School I started taking courses in painting and drawing. I was born in a kibbutz, and the kibbutz educational system was very supporting for art. I saw myself as a painter and immediately after the army I was looking for a place to study. I felt that the schools were not good places. I mean at that time the Academy was, only at the beginning, as a contemporary art school. There was actually Raffi Lavie, whose retrospective is now at the Venice Biennial, and in those years, in 1969 and 1970 he magnetized a group of young artists that studied with him mostly on a private basis. I was 23 and he was 33, at that time he was leading a real, I wouldn't say revolution, but he was the most important figure in creating a new young scene of Israeli art. One could say that it was really the beginning of contemporariness; it was the end of a certain kind of painting that was mainly a local version of French abstraction. There were some three or four wonderful painters that were not known internationally. One of them was extremely important for the new generation: Arie Aroch. He was a painter and an intellectual who served the Israeli ambassador in Sweden at the time of Pontus Hulten, he knew about Duchamp and he saw Jasper Jones and Rauschenberg in real time, and somehow it influenced his work. He became a wonderful painter when he was 60 or so. He presented important conceptual questions in a very sensual painting, full of biographical anecdotes, Russian constructivism and modernism. For example in his home he reconstructed the Duchamp bicycles' stool, a sort of "fabricated ready made". There was a group of young artists that made experiments in many directions, few of them worked between London, New York and Tel Aviv. And there was the activity of Yona Fisher, very important curator of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, who showed a lot of conceptual and minimal art there. For example, in 1970 he did a big important show of Israeli conceptual art in the museum and it was only one year after "*When attitude becomes form*" of Harald Szeemann.

G - Carmit Gil, Amit Goren, Efrath Shvily, Sigalit Landau, Michal Rovner... to mention only few of them just to reflect about the dynamism and the vitality of the Israeli creativity and about the languages, which, in the differences, seem to do not bypass the great knot of the responsibility of the artist.

T - It involves a very complex question: Europeans, Americans and other people who come to Israel, what are they looking for? There is a certain image of Israel, which is understandable but which causes a problem: whenever a curator comes to Israel he is always attracted by the artworks that confirm his preconceived idea influenced by the media. But the real question is about the relation of real life and politics and how the art reflects this issue. Two or three Biennials ago, Guy Ben Ner exhibited. He is a very good artist but he doesn't fit to that cliché because his work is about, you know, family, Moby Dick and fatherhood stories. It's somehow "less Israeli" in a way but I think this is a very good example for Israeli Art. I think the best Israeli artists, like Avner Ben-Gal, Guy Ben-Ner, Zvi Goldstein, Ido Ba-Rel and more, offer another model. The important question is: "What is Israeli about Israeli Art?" I think that if there is something, which is really Israeli, it should be in the thinking of Israelis, in the sensibility of Israelis, in the way they see the world and not necessarily through their directly political subject matter.

There's something important in my work, which has to do with the fact that I'm working over there, in isolation from the system. I can work on a piece for eight years, I can work on a piece turning my

back to the system, as if I'm not part of the production line, but I do what I do, like a scientist in his laboratory.

G - In your first installations homogeneity seems to prevail. Fragile objects, one close to the other, plywood forms with pastel tones, propose an epistemology, which seems to draw on the abstraction of Sol Lewitt, which has observed the Bauhaus experience drifting then apart from it and which in your sculpture turns into a new minimalism. Works like *22 Arrangements of Ten Elements in the Studio*, 1978 or *Arrangement of Six Units*, 1973-74, offer a new fluency to the look, which, in accumulation, finds its way of escape through the repetitiveness of the arithmetic unity.

But in the '90ies homogeneity seems to collapse and the assemblies become nervous, syncopated, contracted like the works of Reinhard Mucha, which are anyhow work without borders. *Man with camera* of 1993-94 or *Seven Walks* of 1997-2004; seem to react to a great shock, which do not allow a clear spatiality.

T - I really started as a sort of minimalist who moves from monochrome paintings to space and for me, then, any plan coated by paint was conceptually "A Painting". My question was: what can be done with these "Paintings". One thinks of the gallery space as a "white cube", but in Israel at that time there wasn't a white cube but there were only Israeli apartments actually turned into galleries, full of elements recalling the past history of the place. In a way when I analyse my formative moments, I remember the way I did these installations; for example the one of the "six beds". I was thinking about Donald Judd and about Carle Andre. I knew theirs works not from seeing them directly, but only from magazines. I saw that stainless steel and I thought that I could comment on it in a very simple manner with my "Painted Plywoods", which were so thin. They almost looked like a piece of cloth, it can be leaned to the wall, it can fall on the floor, and it can be lifted off the floor, exploring that "truth to materials". I liked that moment when abstract forms start to recall something in the world. When I started to install in the gallery space I was very much aware that I worked between two codes: the one was the formal abstract art discipline and the other had to do with this real apartment, with every day life. There was a very interesting moment for me when I understood that I walked somewhere in the gap between abstraction and figuration, real life and art, synthesizing them in one gesture. We worked from far away, we didn't take part in the real discourse of art, and we were over there. No one cared about what we were doing. You knew that you were not going to change art history because no one will see you. So for me, there is the real discussion about art in Israel which shouldn't be only about the news. It's about how you can live meaningful life as an artist, which is, as ambitious, serious artist.

In the middle of the Seventies I started to travel around and in more than few cases I was mostly surprised and some time "disappointed" by seeing sculpture I knew before from reproductions. So I started thinking about the relationship between photography and sculpture. I started to work against that idea of the "wholeness", of a work of art that must be perceived at once. I was looking for a more complex experience. I looked for something that resists possession, something that one cannot recall. Something, which could activate you and take time. I was thinking on sculptures that cannot be photographed, described, or grew from one single sentence. Quite "reactionary" sculptures, in a way, at the end of the Seventies, when everyone was doing "projects", everyone was making plans in his studio and was producing them in the factory or on a site. I moved back to my studio, playing the role of the "artist in his workshop".

During the Eighties I had this metaphor as my thinking model: throwing a stone in to the water, you have these endless circular waves and you imagine a bird or a cloud passing above and "trapped" in the water reflections. This allows my sculpture to metaphorically take everything from the outside world like a big assemblage. So if you see my sculpture from 1984 and on (the *Painting Lessons* series, 1984-1990) you can see a strong spiral composition and, instead of a simple assembling of whatever is around, I decided to work with my "Building Blocks", objects that I do in my

workshop, in my production line, like “artificial ready mades”. I painted them in all manners as to allude to many things outside of themselves and to art history.

During the Nineties, after the *Painting Lesson* series, I tried to do works where many things were happening at once and at the same time, where there was no centre and so you didn’t have this kind of energy’s supplier for the work. This was actually what gave me a kind of framework or method for the works of the last almost 15 years. The other big difference is that in the works of the Eighties I was interested in overcoming gravity, working like a magician throwing balls in the air. But from the middle of the Nineties I decided to do works only on the floor.

I wanted to make pieces that take more space and I understood that if it’s on the floor you really walk in the painting, in the space of the work, thus the question of the point of view is more complex because there is no one front but so many fronts.

These works of the 90ies started to take over the entire exhibition space. They were built in my studio, they take long time for me to make and I think it’s important. They grew organically, with no planes. When I start a piece, I have no idea of how it will end. I like it if think on me as a same kind of minimalist and you get this maximalism... When I started to work on “*Seven Walks*” I knew I’m going to do my most radical work, but I had no idea it will take me eight years to do.

G - Your work and your sculptural language play with a serial approach in which forms and objects seem to be casually placed. But this casualness is however organized by a geometric look, which doesn’t concern with chance but with the research of a harmonious disharmony. How much does casualness coexist with predetermined things in your installations?

T- I was basically thinking about synchronicity since the early 80ies. What will happen, for example, if an artwork starts from ten ideas at once instead from a “pure idea”? I thought of the space where many things are happening at the same time. I think this have to do also with my coming back to the studio and working on a piece, for very long time. By saying that there’s no plan. I replace some rational method by something which is much more ironic and fluid, something that grows organically like a bush. Maybe this is a good model for the works of the ‘80ies, where there’s a centre growing in all directions. The work is really open for chances, for accidents, for unplanned events. I start a piece so as I start an adventure. I don’t know what will happen and by taking this strategy, there are many operations involved with many different codes. There is always this restlessness in the stillness and the silence of the works, which says: ok, if you move here it will all look different and you may understand more of this certain logic. When you change a little your point view or perspective, the whole may fall apart and something new may appear either a new order or a new logic, or a new proposal or something that will destroy your previous assumptions. There’s always the sense of “not yet something” or, maybe, “after being something”....

G - Whether they develop on the ground or on the walls, your sculptures play according to two very strong elements of recognisability: the architectural dimension -through constructivist and modernist suggestions- and the object trouvés.

The architectural dimension seems to help you to decentralize your installations, which are not placed around a central axis anymore but they are so oriented with the aim of overcoming the idea of a close and monolithic sculpture. Your sculpture doesn’t look for a centre it can close itself in, but for a space where it can develop through. There are many possibilities of suggestions, from *Suprematism Architecton (1925-1926)* of Ilya Grigorievich Chasnik to the Wexner Center (1983-89) of Peter Eisenman.

The reference to the object trouvé doesn’t allude to the ready made but to that mixture of architectural models and little furniture, which is proper of the sculpture of Ludger Gerdes and Harald Klingerholler. Moreover, the look focuses on a minimalism, which makes the

recognisability of forms and of the relation between object and subject and the subsequent surprise, to be a central aspect of your research.

And so, could we say that the sabotage of the project's boundaries and the overcoming of the self-referentiality are other constitutive part of your artistic language?

T I'm interested in the viewer's experience, in someone walking and seeing, having a journey, not only a metaphorical journey in the reading of the sculpture, but a real journey. The sculpture in a way is a sort of landscape, of architecture.

About the relationship with architecture; on one hand I work with my "Building Blocks" that are reminiscent of some models but of course I build nothing or I build something that is not functional. There is of course a certain image of the city and architecture but it's done with the objects from the inside, from the home. There is always a space that is a public space, but there is this intimacy.

Regarding the ready made, I just do objects, little tables, and little boxes and when I build them there was no program, I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know if I will use them and what I was going to do with them; these could be the boxes, or the boats, or the little tables. I have no idea about their function, I like doing objects but it's a theatre of the production line from real life. The objects are not "art pieces". It's not ready made but it's an artificial ready made. They are not real things but they are actually images of real things. They are shadows; they are the objects envelopes, they are empty, and they have no function. If I'm not using them they are like dead objects. They really are good for nothing. This is very important and it has to do with what you said before because they are closed to the real order of the world but they don't take part in the world really, they are almost in it but they are not in it actually.

G In Tel Aviv, you have recently made *Ursa Major with Chairs and Boats*, a great public installation. What does the public dimension mean in your work and how did monumentality influence your sculptural language?

T You know the idea of the monument is basically that you show something and you have a strong statement to deliver. In my largest and most monumental work like *Seven Walks* you can spend hours with it but there is no message for you to take home. And it has to do with this restlessness and impossibility of possession.

Regarding this project, I was commissioned to do a wall piece, which I did not do since 1990. And it was very challenging because there is something in my work that have to do with slow experience, with a slow "reading"; there is this intimate relationship between the viewers in a given space and the complexity of a lot of things happening together that shutter and destroy the possibility of a simple reading. Everything that is a "problem" for a public work and you know this is the most lively street of Tel Aviv, the Rothschild Boulevard, the centre of the Bauhaus Architecture in Tel Aviv. In this area there are trees and nice buildings, it has a beautiful scale and suddenly you have these big towers. These buildings somehow, more than other buildings of the city, give the sense of very dynamic and dramatic verticality.

I decided to work with the Star constellation of the Ursa Major (the "Big Bear") on the wall. I thought it would be nice in the middle of Tel Aviv, in the midst of the city action. I wanted to offer a kind of space, which is a detachment from the real world. Although it looks to be related to the given architecture, the work will take you to another space, with different rolls. I wanted to create something that will stop people, will stop you from the everyday speed of the city and if you look at this you may find yourself in a space of imagination. I think it's a political statement. You take the space of the bank and you say: there's another option.

My works always dealt with reflections, with images of water and mirrors. In this work I made a very simple gesture: I take something, which we see in the sky, a star constellation and put it on the floor, I arranged it by groups of chairs and then I lift it back to the wall. Actually, if you “read” the piece or think about it, you may question that space and your orientation in it.

G The colour is another important element of your work. We have already mentioned Sol Lewit and the geometric, but neat and clean, chromatism of his works. But it may refer also to the abstraction of Piet Mondrian, even the most minimal works of *Schildery n.10*, or the rigour of Lazlo Moholy-Nagy (*Composition QXX*). Painting and sculpture seem to intertwine in the tension to physically define the sculpture itself, as if, through the painting, the sculpture shows itself to the world by its self-representation.

T You can see that in my work of the Seventies I was questioning the relation between sculpture and paintings, and I think that in different stages of my work it was dealt differently. At the beginning, as I said, with the very early works of the 70ies, it can simply be read as painting lying on the floor, or painting moving from the wall to the real world looking for a space for itself and, on the other hand, for its “functions in the real world.

In the Eighties I used different codes of applying paint. This is the subject of the *Painting Lessons* series, where it’s possible to see different options of applying paint and each one was referring to another cultural moment. The table top was like canvas, some times “A Painting”, some times just furniture.

In others works like *Seven Walks* there are areas that are green, or black, or white but not in terms of the total composition; if you go from one area to another area, you will have different scenes, different psychological atmosphere and different colours. That recalls memories of every day experiences and places. I’m using the paint against the sculptural. It’s like a skin, separated from the objects.

G In your work at Volume!, you choose the monochrome and the grey. By lowering the tones, the attention is focused mostly on the architecture and on the metaphysics of the installatory landscape. That’s an interesting choice, considering the apartment-dimension of Volume! and the possibility of widening spatiality through a labyrinthine metamorphosis. Architectural constellation. Metaphor of the otherwise and a lexical action on the world. Please, tell us something about this work

T This is a strong place. It’s a very strong background for my basically modernist units. So the very subject of this has to do with my elements in that space, its history and atmosphere. It’s so picturesque, it’s so “beautiful”, and it’s full of character.

In many of my works, the Bank too, there is that tension between the site-specific and something that I’m imposing on the site. I usually work in the studio and just bring the studio piece to the place, and I do some adaptations that propose for the viewer the possibility that this piece was done specifically for that place.

Volume! is not a big space, it’s really like a home; there are living rooms, corridors, very strong feeling of a living place. And it somehow brings me back to my very early installations in that apartment/gallery in Jerusalem in the early Seventies.

I want to do very quiet piece here. I think that even in my most intense installations each elements stands for itself, lonely, separated. I think about this sense of restlessness in my work. This is exactly the challenge for me in Volume! space, because it’s clearly going to be with less elements and “silent”, but I want to subvert this silence. I don’t want to allow the viewer to rest in some kind of melancholic and sentimental feeling. I look for a silence that keeps you alert.