

# How much wealth can originate from this reductionism

A conversation with Nahum Tevet

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## Introduction

Ever since his piece *Man with Camera* was exhibited at the Sao Paulo Biennial, 1994 (Curator: Sarit Shapira), Nahum Tevet's work has entered into a new phase, surprising in its dimensions, beauty and intricacy. The new works are essentially a further development of the language of minimalism, characteristic of Tevet's art since the mid 1970s, intensifying his act of construction via the minimalist language in a way that negates its historic nature and challenges it. Nonetheless, they seem like a breakthrough due to their size, and the reduction of the shapes and colors incorporated in the simple construction (overlying and juxtaposing). The work exhibited at the Museum of Art, Ein Harod (1996) and his most recent work at Dvir Gallery - pieces which filled up entire halls - emphasize Tevet's transition from constructing sculptures or installations to fabricating entire worlds, private cosmologies. Other works from the same series were exhibited at the Magasin 3 Kunsthall Stockholm (1996), the Lyon Biennale curated by Harald Szeemann (1997), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen (1997), and in his one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna (1997).

Studio has chosen to mark the new phase in Nahum Tevet's work by joining him and his students at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in a conversation held at Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv - the site of his new exhibition (A Page from a Catalogue, Feb.-March 1998).

Within the framework of a joint class with Ohad Meromi, Tevet presented his works to the students and addressed questions. The discussion fluctuated between inter-sculptural formal matters on one hand, and meanings, ideology, utopia and ethics on the other, and contained references to his early minimalist work in Israel as well as to later developments in his art. This conversation was the basis for the one published here.

Sara Breitberg-Semel.

Nahum Tevet: For a change, let me be 'the artist' who presents his exhibition to his students, describing to them what transpires in it: The walls around us feature early works which were exhibited in my first solo exhibition at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, in 1976, when you were two or three years old. The entire space of the gallery is occupied by a new work, evolving around a sculpture from the 1980s (Painting Lesson # 7 1989), which stands in its entirety at the center of the new work. So in fact, we are standing here now, surrounded by the 1970s, and through my '1990s manner of work' we are looking into my 1980s - a sort of blending and compression of times.

The works from the 1970s are taken from a series entitled Pages from a Catalogue (1976). The question which preoccupied me then, was how a painting or a sculpture allows itself to occupy a place in the world. It prompted me to rely on 'systems'. I used to invent all kinds of far-fetched methods, fictions of sorts, which manipulated 'mathematical logic' or poetical logic to render a work. And there was always the impending question, what is it that gives this object the right to exist? Where does it come from? Can it be justified like other objects in the world?

The pieces exhibited here are typical of my 1970s work. It was based on pages from Cezanne's catalogue Raisonnee, presented on the left-hand-side. Out of the catalogue pages I draw a fictional system of classification according to size, rendering the sorted information a basis for creating something else - abstract painting, a la Ryman or Mangold, painters that I liked very much at the time, even though it's not the same at all. It is painting which is constructed in a totally different way.

Unlike other 'system artists' in Israel, who were not interested in the visual result, in the aesthetic of the work, my works have always been concerned with 'how they look'; they wanted to be "beautiful", and just as well, it was important for them to understand how

they were created. They chose to crystallize like things in the world, to masquerade as ready-made. The "beds" I did in those years, for example, are, among other things, paintings which offer themselves as beds (Arrangement of Six Units, 1973-74).

These systems are "excuses", funny excuses for creating an object, a way to obtain the pictorial visual presences that interested me. I have never accepted the rejection of the 'visual'. The mechanism of 'excuses and methods' trusted in and aimed at the visual, which remained important.

The works from the 1970s contain ideas which subsequently evolved and got "intricate", and re-surfaced in the new work from 1998. It begins, like the Painting Lessons series (1984-1990), from a basic form, say the small table there, with all kinds of variations, enlarging, stretching, reflections, duplications and mutations. With time, the forms partake in a game of sorts. I invent one shape and another, and one thing gives rise to another - often incidentally, with mutations and violations, as if there was a virus. It isn't the strict formal Modernist discussion of the "evolution of form", nor Sol LeWitt's variations, but rather something much more skeptical, fluid, playful, open, intimate and less rigid. It is a work which has been executed over the past few weeks, when Dvir [Owner of Dvir Gallery] brought up the idea of exhibiting, and I was somehow tempted. Usually I'm very slow with decisions like these. It is a slow pace which has been fundamental to my works of recent years.

One of the decisions I made after my large-scale exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1991 was that I want to further explore and radicalize my interest in time-consuming works; works that from the outset go for size, for quantity, for complexity, and for a lot of work invested in them. The new works challenge the "art system" to some extent. I start a project in the studio, I don't commit myself to any show or timetable. I begin a story. It is important for me not to know what's going to be in this work, to work without a plan and without a program. Perhaps there is some intuition. Say I want a more comprehensive work, that would weigh more heavily on the studio space, that it will be more intricate, or will be devoid of color. All kinds of decisions like these. But the principle of making a move which involves a long story was important, and it evolved from the previous series of works. It is a move toward complication, intricacy, multiplicity; a multiplicity of narratives, a multiplicity of concepts, a multiplicity of statements, multiplicity on any possible level. I wanted to split meanings, to throw a

thousand and one concepts into the same pot.

**Ohad Meromi:** The works from the 1970s are divided, as it were, into two parts. There is the conceptual part, and there is the part of painting. On one side there is the justification, the page with the Cezannes, and on the other - you do something with it. That is, you use the left hand side to create the right one. It interests me to understand how you make this division, why do you have to construct for yourself a point of departure, a justification for painting, at all.

**Tevet:** One of the characteristics of the 1970s works, not only my works, is some precedence of the concept. In other words, there is some plan, there is a program, the preconceived idea is the engine of the work. Since you were a student at the Bezalel Academy, I can give you an anecdote from around 1980. When I started teaching at Bezalel, the conversation with the students was always like this: someone would present a painting and then the teacher would ask: where is your focus? or claim: you are not in focus. The teachers demanded a precise phrase, some explanatory sentence for the work; an ideological or mathematical phrase, or some rationale that explains the work. I disagreed with that from the very first moment, but later on I formulated it in a critique concerning the desire to phrase some idea which produces a work in a simple, single sentence.

When I started the Narcissus Series (sculptures from 1979-82) I thought I would have liked to make works that can't be photographed. Photographing means that in one glance you can see and understand and remember the works.

Sarah Breitberg-Semell: You say that in Bezalel you objected the kind of work rationale that can be encapsulated in a single sentence justifying it. But what you are showing us here from the 1970s is precisely the kind of work you're criticizing.

**Tevet:** The question is, what the relation is between the "plan" or the "method", and the object. Here it is "far-fetched", made up, not self-evident. My work evolved in relation to my moves in the 1970s, while embedding a critique of conceptual art or the art of the '70s, mine included. I thought there are other ways to work too. For instance, what would happen if a work would be a realization of ten ideas instead of one. What would happen if these ideas would also be antithetical. And all these thoughts and criticism also come into the work.

The other point which preoccupied me was: Whether the idea has precedence over the object or not. The interesting point for me was to deal with all kinds of ideas, some conceptual and theoretical, through concrete things, through experience, through the way in which they behave in the world, through the associations and additional meanings all these "theoretical objects" have.

**Breitherg-Semel:** From your description it sounds as though Israeli art on the whole was immersed in a move of rationalism, creating systematic justification of forms, avoiding objects, and you rejected it... but I, as one who remembers that period a little, can recall that you were one of the only people here who maintained some sort of logic, of concept and minimalism, who really relied on an a-priori idea. And indeed, this whole debate you're describing is almost your own self-debate, a debate between you and perhaps one or two others I can think of, and with American art. Am I describing it correctly?

**Tevet:** I think the work of any serious artist evolves from self-deliberations. You perform certain moves and understand them. At a certain stage, after comprehending and performing and exhausting it, there comes a moment when you must ask yourself whether this kind of thinking still works for you.

**Breitherg-Semel:** I'm much more interested in the moment when you entered into this method of work than in the moment when you abandoned it, since this transition to a defined minimalist move wasn't "natural" in Israeli art, and you were among the few who performed it. The moves of Israeli art, even in conceptualism and in minimalism, were more romantic and less systematic acts. The compliance to a strict rationale is one of the things most removed from the cumulative character of Israeli art, which may, perhaps justly, be described as art nearly devoid of minimalism. I'm very interested in how you decided on this place, despite everything. How did you get to a place where Cezanne's formats are the form-setters? How did you get to establish painting based on such a concept?

**Tevet:** Perhaps to some extent it was a reaction to the place where I studied painting, with **Rafie Lavie**. He offered painting essentially concerned with inner tensions and relations, and I inquired about the relation between painting as an object and its surroundings - the world. How come you take something and hang it on the wall. How does it cling to the wall. Which led to the invention of all kinds of stories and excuses, as I described earlier.

### **In the middle of the fall down the rabbit-hole**

**Meromil** Regarding your new work, there are two possible readings. One would talk about a pile, a construction, the self-constructing structure. The other would refer to a trap, a maze, both intellectual and physical. I'm interested to know what kind of tension you are after., what kind of boundary between a centered, closed, constructed object and something the viewer can penetrate? It constantly remains on some borderline. What is this borderline?

**Tevet:** You can discuss this from several perspectives. One, in view of the discussion about the systematic or readable thing. The new work presents itself as antithetical to the 1970s. All the decisions and all the exhibits are in a constant, fluid state of ambiguity or meaning-splitting. It is painting and it is sculpture; it's abstract and it's figurative. Also on the level of the images themselves, nearly everything is not what it seems. I can exemplify this through the tables. There is no element here which is a real table, although there are countless tables here. There is a miniature of a table, a sketch of a table, a model of a table. They occupy various linguistic levels or identities, although we say - the table. But it's not. There is no element here about which you can say: this is a table derived from everyday life.

I can also exemplify it by asking about scale. The work oscillates between broad sequences of scale. In a text written about me by the British critic Michael Newman (Cat. Nahum Tevet, Kunsthalle Mannheim, 1986) he draws a comparison to sculptor Joel Shapiro's use of miniatures, and I think it can clarify this nicely. He says: Joel Shapiro too has this little house or little boat or little table. But in Shapiro's case the relation between the viewer and the miniature is fixed. The bottom line is, it is a modernist space. You are like Gulliver, and it is small. Whereas in my work there are acts of inflating and emptying. If we borrow the image of Alice, then you're in the middle of the fall down the rabbit-hole. Most objects play on a situation not easily identified. The relations or status in the work aren't clear. On one hand it appears really big, but it is totally non-monumental. My sculpture blends public scale with intimacy. This is also linked with the status of the work. I was preoccupied with the issue of fluidity. Is it an installation or a sculpture. Now it looks like an installation because it takes up the entire room.

**Meromi:** To me, for example, it is not entirely clear. I'm not sure it's an installation. Why can't you enter the work? On the opening night I tried and almost broke it, I felt terrible.

Tevet: In this work as well as in others there is something physical which has to do with the movement of our body, with the presence of the sculpture before the body or of the body before the sculpture; some kind of a classical minimalist move. Things stand in a space, they refer to our body, we are measured in relation to them. They measure us. Part of this project was eliminating any simple or clear reading of what we see. Something is happening here. The internal part of the work, the work from the 1980s (The Painting Lesson), is pictorial. There is some kind of a fusion between what you look at and what you feel. This place where you are "dying" to stretch your body a little more, and "get" some more or know more or understand more of this world represented here - it's almost the thing that interests me most about making these sculptures. The place where you blend the concrete, the physical and the behavioral; the corporeal and that something which is only subject to seeing. Maybe this is the trap you're talking about, or the pile, two of my favorite images.

Within the context of the "failure" of conceptualism or dematerialization, there are two options. One is to play the "mysterious monk". No objects, everything evaporates, you create conceptual ideas and feel clever. Another is to use objects in an inflational manner, making this big pile where the discrete object is in fact valueless by itself.

Breitberg-Semel: If you are talking about the value-lessness of the discrete object, why didn't you work with ready-mades?

Tevet: The problem of the ready-made is discussed here in a more intricate manner. It's an artificial ready-made, a joke about ready-made.

Meromi: You devise a method and then you violate it, destroy it.

Tevet: These objects actually originate in some production line. That is, there is a production line in the studio. You make twenty tables. You make ten of these.

**Breitberg-Semel:** Although you talk about physicality, no table here, as you said, is really a table you can sit by.

Tevet: They are always reminiscent of things in the world, but they do not take part in it.

Breitberg-Semel: I would like you to elaborate on their relation to things in the world. These types of choices that open up a gap from the real, although we talk about something so physical.

**Tevet:** It's not so physical. I mean, there are many things which are very non-physical.

**Breitberg-Semel:** Physical in the sense of taking up considerable volume. It's also transparent, but it is voluminous, it has weight, but yet it doesn't have weight. We measure the installation through physical questions, also the negation of physicality.

**Tevet:** if you want, you may say they are some kind of index or shadows or reflections of things. That is, it's not the minimalist object and it's not the table and it's not the painting, and it's not the book, but rather some kind of shells or shadows or things reminiscent of things.

**Breitberg-Semel:** These are the images you use for the elements - shell, shadow, reflection?

**Tevet:** Yes. Among others.

### **Sculptural layers in a storehouse**

**Galit Greenberg:** I get the feeling that there are some things here which can definitely emerge and stand in-and-of-themselves, as discrete sculptures.

**Tevet:** An entire system of moments has been created under this umbrella of the pile or the maze. The work never appears like a pile, in the sense that things have been thrown one on top of the other. It is not "accumulation" as a sculptural move, as in the case of Arman or others, who throw things and they fall the way they fall. It's not even the early Tony Cragg. Perhaps a little like Brancusi's studio in Paris, sculptural layers organized in a storehouse of sorts.

**Shai Tzurim:** What are you hiding?

**Tevet:** Why do you think I'm hiding something?

**Tzurim:** Somehow I sense it. You talked about stretching, about peeping, about these walls that conceal the center.

**Tevet:** Concealments are tempting. We are used to a certain pace of perception. That is how our culture is constructed. For me, the slow act of 'reading' is important. I want to create a situation where you come to this sculpture, it fascinates you, you walk around here and you experience. Afterwards you'll go and you wouldn't be able to tell someone else what was there. That is, we cannot describe this situation in words, we cannot plan it according to a formula. In this sense, this experience, the attempt to find what's hidden - is important. You won't find anything and I won't find anything. But this act requires an active viewer.



**Breitberg-Semel:** Can we talk about this act as the development of some ethics of art?

Tevet: To my mind, we are dealing with a committed viewer, who undergoes a process of wandering and staring. I hope this act embeds an intricate, rich, unexpected, surprising, funny, at times dramatic experience; all kinds of contexts and connotations; talking about all kinds of moments in the traditions of sculpture, moments in the biography of my oeuvre, which are a theme within this work. The sculpture exists as a sculptural. visual presence, as an event. A world.

**Greenberg:** Regarding the strategy of the work, of this specific sculpture. You say: "I don't know in advance". Namely, I don't have in my head any formulation of what exactly I am going to do.

**Tevet:** I want to make some comment about the decision to take the work to some radical stand. I bring the work into inflational dimensions. This madness, as we may refer to it, or this violation of the rationale, is eventually spurred by the thought that things must be taken to an extreme. Meaning, to do it within this certain logic, which seems to be non-logical, to push it more and more and more. In this sense, I find some link, however paradoxical it may be, to works from the 1970s. They also take things to the limit.

**Greenberg:** I'm asking about this specific work. All these objects were in the studio. Indeed you created them once, but they've been lying around there for some time now. They are objects which you simply possess. I'm asking this with regard to the strategy. Do you say: these are the elements, and now the question is, how do I create the conversation. Although you have made them, they become ready-mades.

**Tevet:** Some of the ambiguities, or the "schizophrenic" approach, or whatever name we call it, is already inherent in the construction of the objects. The objects are constructed out of the knowledge that they'll do nothing in-and-of-themselves. In their design, in their formal or thematic solutions, and in their processing, these objects assume they do not stand in their own right. That is why I make ten of these, twenty of these, and I make them all with no plan.

**Shelly Tal:** You mean, you made them, but its anonymous.

Tevet: I construct letters of sorts or parts of words. But up to the point when they are arranged in a certain form and enter a context in a work, they are nothing. One of the challenges posed by these installations or sculptures is to see how much wealth can

originate from this reduction. This work has a dictionary of forms, which develops from a minimalist or constructivist dictionary, and I do with it something contrary to a minimalist act. It's a type of challenge: to take this minimalist language and utilize it in the opposite direction. I use this language in a way totally different from the way it should be used according to its 'serious codes'. I think this raises a question of freedom. What I'm interested in and like is to ask each time anew, how much can you invent, how much freedom can you possess, despite the limitations you deliberately impose upon yourself.

Breitherg-Semel: Why is the human touch so important within such a heap?

**Tevet:** I'm interested in the different presence of objects created by hand, where you see that the nails are not stuck every three point four millimeters, as opposed to machine-made objects. You see the handwriting. These details help me create the work's sense of intimacy and draw the gaze inward.

**Yitzhak Layish:** We talk about minimalism, but a much more industrial minimalism, machine-made. And here it is more like an Italian family that makes its own furniture.

**Tevet:** Indeed it acts like an Italian family, which makes stools or what have you, but here it is merely a mimicry of a production line, not production which fulfills some function in the world. It is a production line which produces nothing.

Breitherg-Semel: There is great physical pleasure in walking around such a work. As if there is a huge galaxy here, that sends me home with aesthetic pleasure, but also with a basic feeling of futility, of failure in understanding. Perhaps it tells me something about the failure of the possibility to know. I'm asking you...

**Meromi:** It took me many years to begin to understand what you are talking about, and I identify very much with the feeling of repeating and making it accurate. But how is it that you are not worried about prevalent habits of viewing. How can you be so sure that apart from students and teachers there'll be other viewers who will come and stay and undergo the entire process, and who will eventually be granted great 'gifts' by the work. How can you be so sure that people will really work this hard?

**Tevet:** One of my points of departure or assumptions for the work process is that first of all this thing has to work somehow. That is, without all this talking and without theories and without stories and without you being an "art expert": the work, this trap, captures you, draws you in, tempting you to walk around in this maze. I think that the maze in this

sense can.

serve as an image and an answer to Sarah. Yes, I know that art, or any system of knowledge, cannot provide a solution for anything. I don't intend to teach you anything. I think this is not an easy statement to make, but I do not intend to explain to you all kinds of things about the world. I don't think there is any system, like art for example, that can explain the world. Everything is doubtful. The mistrust and skepticism are embedded in this work. All this is essentially an attack on reductionism. Namely, this modernist assumption that you can reduce the world or art to its essence. I don't feel I can trust any of the reductionist expressions. This is why the work is like a growth, a tumor. It inflates and inflates and inflates and inflates, and this whole intricate spectacle is created. It observes the world out of some suspicion. But out of all this skepticism originates a world where there is room for optimism.

I really enjoyed making this work; the decision to put the nineties on the eighties. Such a leap in time. Seemingly everything is the same, the same production line continues to produce this. But suddenly it turns out that this is an entirely different language. A totally different presence. A mixture of the theatrical and the pictorial, of that something which is painting, which is virtual, non-physical, and the physical.

**Keren Rousseau:** I see the work as a kind of replica of the system of the universe in general. Some position, even classical, almost romantic, underlying all this pseudo-minimalism. Even in the sense of ambition, of pretending to present such a bombastic epic, something you hardly see nowadays in art. Like writing a great novel. It disintegrates into a thousand and one sub-themes, and everything connects to everything so wonderfully. It's a clever formation. There is a sense of climax here. I interpret everything Nahum says and does here in this way, and not only in intra-sculptural senses. The metaphysical feeling is, for me, the most dominant, even when it is critical or absurd. Perhaps after all, it comes from a place of yearning for meaning. There is a lot of freedom and invention here, like an answer to a question, to what extent can a person develop things in view of the basic limitations of the universe. The sculpture exists as an event, like the big bang. There is no linear development, there is a circular route encircling the self, and striving toward it in a growth process. It is a powerful drama featuring an encounter of body versus sculpture. Man against the world.

I would like to add to Sarah's comment regarding the failure. The work indeed conveys a

basic sense of futility, of inability to understand, but for me, it is a very optimistic work. It has some Sisyphean optimism. This struggle. And knowing there has to be a secret. Recognizing the failure and not submitting to it. This is the greatest gift it gives.

### **The Modernist Project - The Pretense and Complication**

**Meromi:** You may even be accused of Modernism (fortunately, today it's already OK even to be a Modernist). You shift from a space to the theatrical, from the physical space of the work, from this world to some...

**Tevet:** Observation, distance. There is a question here concerning a historical sequence involved in progress. Is it really true that an argument which historically is made later is better than one which preceded it? This work embeds some "island" according to one logic and next to it an "island" according to a different logic. One undermines the other, and they can confront one another. There is no judgment and no dogmas. On the other hand, it never stems from scorn or a patronizing dismissal with regard to the Modernist project. These islands appear like moments from the history of modern sculpture, or the history of Modernism. I don't take these moments as if they were corpses, or historical fossils. For me they represent a socio-cultural project which became complicated. It applies to modern sculpture just as it applies to the kibbutz - both are test cases of the Modernist project. The images I use embed, I believe, the pretense and the complication. It's not an informed-historicist allusion. It's not a hedonistic game of quotes. It's not a mere formal issue, but rather an attempt to look at heroic moments in modern history and see whether they can be utilized.

It is not the lamentation of Modernism which was typical of the 1980s. There is an optimistic aspect to this work. The scope, the effort and the pretension are those of a total work of art, with a utopian dimension. Tatlin and Schwitters come to mind; but what is it that triggers their figures, where do they come from? Out of piles of objects and signs, remnants, everything is constructed by laying one thing on top of another, as if after use; something that is put aside almost casually, every detail is constructed through a simple mundane act, through colloquial language, and the sum total - the entire system is one of wealth and intricacy, of trust in the process rather than despair.

**Breitherg-Semel:** You have given us here a moving description of your projects, which some dub, not without disdain, formalist sculpture. One way of describing the change art

has undergone from the 1970s on is to talk about its opening up to a socio-political context. Art has filled up with concrete contents and its agenda has come to resemble the public debate. It is less formalistic and more political. This move no longer characterizes your works. In an era when "everything is political", as it is often said, how would you define your position?

**Tevet:** You cannot claim that "everything is political" and say that there is art that lacks a political dimension. No one has a monopoly over the way in which art relates to the world. There are people who have made themselves experts in the social field and know what should be said and what's right. I'm not willing to take part in this and be considered someone who does the right thing. It's too easy. Pointing at confusion and perplexity in reality and examining the validity of language - these are ideological acts. Works which constantly demand involvement and judgment are ideological and political - without being over-righteous.

It so happens that we stand in Meonot Ovdim IIX [workers' quarters # 8] - The masterpiece of Israeli architectural Modernism from the 1930s, a cooperative in the process of disassembly - inside a hall which used to be the culture room of this Bauhaus-style complex and now houses the Dvir Gallery. In this very site, my sculpture places the Modernist project and its validity at its heart. My own artistic biography blends with a much wider local and universal context.