

Hagi Kenaan

An Infinitely Thin and Transparent Surface: the Threshold of the Image

I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?

– Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*¹

1.

“I want to create a situation in which you come to this sculpture, it intrigues you, you walk around it and come out with an experience. But, then, when you walk away, you won’t be able to tell others what was there, what it was that you had experienced. This is a situation which we cannot describe in words”.²

Nahum Tevet uses the word “experience”. What kind of experience is he talking about? It’s an experience, he says, that “you won’t be able to tell others” about. Tevet’s works have never given themselves easily to words – but not because they’re beyond language, or because they leave you wordless – open-mouthed – like the sublime. Instead, the works locate themselves beside the words, at some incline, some angle, that suddenly makes it difficult for language to present things to us, as it usually does. Tevet’s work introduces a dimension of foreignness into the words – not a foreignness as when you travel to a distant land, but more like an apartment that has suddenly been emptied out, or a childhood room that has been transformed; or perhaps, even more nuanced, a foreignness that has to do with microscopic deformations in invisible spaces created within the ordinary. When language attempts “to tell others what was there”, for example in *Question Five* (2000-03)^{pp.133-145} or in *Seven Walks* (1997-2004)^{pp.99-119}, the words no longer feel at home.

Remark 1: In putting Tevet's works in their historical context or within philosophical, theoretical frameworks, we typically allow the gap between language and the works to disappear. This, however, is where we need to be especially cautious, and not to hurry. The unclear gap between language and the works is something that is important to remember: it must be kept alive while we carve a place for the works in discourse and understanding.

How can we talk, then, of a situation that "we can't describe ... in words"? In the '70s Tevet talked about his works in terms of a "manipulation of the viewer's behavior." This, however, was never meant as the expression of any strict form of behaviorism. The term "manipulation" is not used in the sense of ordered conditionings and responses, of a "do this and don't do that," but implies that the viewer is, at heart, an active agent for whom the visual field is a domain of action. The works block off from the viewer the option – the dream – of pure contemplation; seeing is not an event that occurs behind the eyes and inside the head, is not an inner relation between a viewer and an image, but a real condition of our moving about in this world. The visual field is not a rear screen of a *camera obscura*, but a life-world that opens up through the "intersection", as Merleau-Ponty calls it, between the eye and the body's possible routes of action: "Everything I see is [...] marked upon the map of the 'I can'".³ In other words, our seeing is always interwoven into our ways of acting in the world; and Tevet's works, today too, do not allow us to forget this. The viewer is situated in them by way of a particular involvement in a particular space, an involvement that presences the viewer's bodily dimension, the concreteness of the space (with its dynamic directionality) and the concrete temporality of the gaze.

2.

Big Lying Painting, 1978: "It's impossible to see this large painting as a whole from any point of view. The painting forces the viewer to move around it in order to see it".⁴

The concrete matrix of body/space/time becomes so central in the encounter with the works due to the viewer's movement, one which over the years (and with the

development of the works) has become more and more complex. In the works of recent years, the walking the viewer is required to do has been moving further and further away from the everyday forms of walking. Unlike walking to open a door, or to the grocer's, or walking down an avenue (and also unlike walking around a building looking for the entrance), the viewer's walking takes on a hue distinctive to the work. If the earlier works require the viewer to complete a peripheral movement, executed in relation to, and through eye contact with, some "center" – the movement in the latest works loses this clear purposiveness. In the early works the viewer moved because of a need to fill gaps, because of an absence and a quest (even if a futile one) for an inclusive point of view that could perhaps constitute some kind of solution; in the works of the recent years, however, the gaze that conducts the walking is no longer suffused with the inner form of an absence; it is no longer in need of a solution, but opens itself up, out of an acceptance of the excessiveness of the visual, out of a desire – and not merely out of a need – to see more.

The gaze in these works does not seek to close a circle, yet the viewer's movement creates a route that in the end does circumambulate the work. In this sense the walking does have an end – but since the arrival at the end is not a goal, the walking itself does not occupy a central place in the viewer's field of experience, but is experienced, rather, as the self-evident ground out of which grow and to which are gathered the body's various movements: pausing, stopping, legs together, legs apart, foot at an angle, shoulders back, stretching the body in order to see, various tempos, the neck works a lot, at times the knees, bending down, rising up, the pelvis, on tiptoes, the hands work less, hidden movements of equilibrium, a hand reaching out to touch, with a finger, two fingers, pulling the stomach in – a futile attempt to slip inside. "This place, where you're 'dying' to stretch your body a little more and to see more", says Tevet, "is almost the thing that interests me most in making these sculptures".⁵

3.

"My sculptures are intended for seeing, not for physical contact".⁶

And yet, although the bodily dimension of the viewer is clearly present in the encounter with the work, the question of the body and its situatedness is not, as I see it, the major issue in Tevet's art. Tevet's work does indeed address a viewer "who registers it bodily through the spine",⁷ but the functioning of the body is ultimately more of a background, albeit a necessary one, for the appearance of the work's horizons of meaning. In other words, the viewer's corporeality functions more as a basic premise, as a form of experience, than as a theme the work actually grapples with. More specifically, we may say that while Tevet's works indeed embrace certain phenomenological insights that were central in American sculpture of the '60s and '70s, these insights neither constitute the focus of the artistic act nor belong to the core of the "discovery" or the revelation occurring in the works. In Tevet's oeuvre we can definitely identify themes from European phenomenology, which in the '60s – as Rosalind Krauss has shown – filtered into American art and received a distinctively American "twist", on the background of what Krauss understands as a voiding of the concept "sculpture" and a need to redefine it.⁸ Thus, following moves made, for example, by Richard Serra or Alice Aycock, the spatial situations created by Tevet present the body as essential for any understanding of the relationship between the human subject and the possibility of meaning. This is not simply an addition of a tier to the traditional conceptualization of the human subject as an essentially rational, transparent and self-sufficient viewer – but, beyond criticism, a suggestion for a new and concrete mapping of the subject's being-in-the-world. Nonetheless, while in Serra's or Aycock's works the environment (or the "anti-environment") functions as an experimental laboratory in which questions about the subject's bodily – perceptual/spatial/public/private – situatedness are constantly explored, in Tevet's works the acute question lies elsewhere. In my view, the central question – and also the central "experience" – in Tevet's works grows out of the engagement with the essence of the visual, more than anything – visual in the distinctive sense that engages the painter more than the sculptor.

Painting – or, in more general terms, the question of visual representation – is a conspicuous theme in Tevet's works. First of all it appears as an explicit theme, a title, of works such as *Painting Lessons* (1984-90)^{seep.29} or *Man with a Camera* (1992-94)^{pp.57-63}; beyond that it becomes relevant through problems of coloring, through areas marked by a

clear pictoriality, through aspects of the craftsmanship itself – the use of elementary base units, the kind of choices, work processes. “You actually work like a painter”, Deganit Berest says to Tevet: “Instead of a tube of paint you place before you the parts that you’ve built, and then you choose and build from those”;⁹ and perhaps more than this, painting resonates and calls itself to mind in the works as an idea through one of the most fundamental dimensions of Tevet’s art: reflection, likenesses, mirror images – the presence of Narcissus. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the term “viewer” continues to be so central to Tevet’s speaking about the work’s audience. For Tevet, the term “viewer” is neither arbitrary nor is it simply a matter of conventional use. Instead, Tevet envisions viewers because for him the unfolding of the works’ meaning is primarily visual: “My sculptures are intended for seeing”. But here we need to be somewhat more specific.

4.

“When you go inside them, you remain a mere spectator, you remain alienated. The work invites and repels, draws in and throws out”.¹⁰

In what ways do the works in the exhibition engage the visual? What kind of visuality opens up in them? What gaze, what seeing, what kind of optics do they call for? Or, more simply, what kind of visual experience occurs here? The character of the relationship between the works and the eye is not one that we should take for granted. Recalling what we said earlier about the relation between Tevet’s works and descriptive language, we may analogously point to a similar tension between the works and the gaze directed at them: distance and nearness. Or, in other words, just as the works resist language, they also refuse to give themselves to a certain kind of gaze or to a certain kind of visual representation – photography, for example. Should this be understood as a resistance to regimentation? To an order imposed upon them from outside? The tendency to oppose the unity and totality of the gaze is a familiar theme in Tevet’s oeuvre, a theme that recurs again and again and is valid today – even if in a different version – no less than it was thirty years ago. “It led to sculptures [...] that present to the viewer the impossibility of

an inclusive gaze”, or “to make works that cannot be photographed. To photograph means that it’s possible in a single gaze to see and understand and remember the works”.¹¹ When we think about this theme today, we need to ask if what we have here is only a matter of an inherent complexity, a heterogeneity, that stands in opposition to any kind of visual objectification – to a framing – or perhaps something deeper, which is connected to the visual uniqueness of the works themselves, to something in the works’ distinctive visuality, that essentially eludes visual representation.

If so, what can be said about the form in which these works give themselves to the eye? We may begin by saying that the work’s resistance to photography stems not from the limits or limitations of photography as a medium, but primarily, from a sort of refusal that is integral to the essence of the work’s visuality. *Seven Walks* shows itself precisely via its resistance to the eye’s natural tendency to grasp. It gives itself in its indifference to the eye, an indifference that is experienced by the gaze as a refusal. In other words, the visuality of the works operates as a double movement: on the one hand, the works open up a field that indeed attracts and lures the eye into a multiplicity of details, changing rhythms, sequences of pictures, complexities of relations and constantly changing levels of depth; but at the same time the field is dominated by an almost absolute visual silence – the visuality of the still life. This tension finds expression in an effect of a certain blurring, a difficulty in keeping one’s focus stable. Is that what Tevet means by “the work invites and repels”? To put this in another way, the work appears to the eye as that which has no hold on – that avoids catching – our eye. The unfolding of Tevet’s visuality occurs in a manner that is contrary to the tradition of representation, where the craft of the image begins with the control of the eye. The image’s ability to control the eye is a condition of its ability to create a visual illusion while concealing the fact that it is (only) an image. An image has various ways of holding a gaze. It can turn somersaults in the air, shatter into fireworks and throw sand in the eyes; it can also ensnail itself, withdraw into itself, in a way that hypnotizes the gaze no less. At any rate, in both of these directions, the image is “doing some work”.

In Tevet’s latest compositions (*Seven Walks* is a good example), something happens to the image’s labor potential. The image doesn’t dissolve, doesn’t go on vacation, but its appearance is no longer rooted in the fundamental effort required for a

frontal positioning of the image as an image (as we see, for example, in *Narcissi*^{7seep.31} or *Painting Lessons*). What happens here, visually, is not a cancellation but a neutralization, a bracketing or a suspension of the craft of the image. Indeed, the present works turn their back on the virtuosity that characterized *Jamma'in* (1986)^{p.41} or *Sound for a Silent Movie* (1986)^{p.32}; and we may further say that the act of turning the back, a turning of the façade on its axis, is a fundamental aspect of these works' visuality: think of Miles Davis playing with his back to the audience, or Velázquez displaying the back of the large canvas in *Las Meninas*.

The work addresses me in not addressing me. It is simply there, present, like a deserted town or a long-unused airfield, a complex system with all its parts in place but without the cogwheels necessary for turning it into a real functional cycle, into a complete and determined fact in the visual field. A work by Donald Judd is a fact: the object's concentration is so great that it just crystallizes into a form of facticity. With Tevet, in the latest works, the object is no longer interested in holding itself (as, for example, in the long arms of *Narcissi*); it retreats from its own façade and gives up the inner drive forward, the spectacular entrance into the space of being-seen; all in all, it does not want to be registered in the titles office of the visual. From a different direction one could say that the work's visuality is not built through the ostensibly necessary relations between object and background. A visual object cannot sustain itself without a background: it requires a background in order to operate in the visual field. In Tevet's works there is no background, only objects. Behind every object, instead of a background, there is another object, which also has no background. The object, then, is present in the visual field, but, in the absence of a background, its visual presence is not built upon self-presentation. The object does not come to the eye, nor does it flee from it. It is there, for the eye, simply as something that has been laid there. The same applies to the relations among the objects: unlike the case in the past, the name of the game here is neither construction nor deconstruction; there are only ways of being laid somewhere or being put in a place – one thing laid beside another thing, one thing put on another thing, one thing leaning against another.

Remark 2: What's between the state of being put in a place and that of being put away, left alone? Is abandonment the form of Tevet's objects? Recall Dürer's

Melancholia: seated while around her, scattered on the ground, lie work tools of various kinds, objects, instruments, discarded, disjointed from the circle of the active will. Is melancholy the mood reverberating in *Seven Walks*?

5.

“I build the sculpture and mark out on the floor the place and size of each part. [...] When I finish, I actually have a complete diagram on the floor”.¹²

In terms of its visuality, the condition of being put in a certain place signifies a kind of threshold. No complexity is simpler than a thing laid upon another, a stone upon a stone, like the field of dolmens near Gamla. This condition of objecthood underscores the fact that the grounds of the visual are always concrete – a horizontal plane, a floor. The ground, then, not only produces crops, not only supports and makes possible the stable posture of bodies; it is not only the lower boundary, nor only the place where seeing reaches to and ends: it constitutes, rather, a condition that makes our seeing possible. This visual dimension opened up by the floor maintains, however, a strange relation to the gaze. While intersecting with the gaze, the floor is that which never fully faces – is never in front of – the viewer. Its form of appearance is never frontal, since the viewer never stands parallel to and separate from the floor, but is always already implanted in it. Whereas the framing of an image in a picture hanging in front of us is dependent on the picture’s distance and separation from the viewer, the plane of the floor enables the visual to appear only because the viewer is connected to it directly and bodily. The floor is the origin for a non-frontal kind of visuality. So too in *Seven Walks*: the floor is the place from which the work grows, the place from which its visual space opens up. When we usually think about vision, we tend to forget the ground; and perhaps that is the reason why Tevet’s work consistently eludes the photographic gaze. It eludes the gaze because we are looking at the wrong place; and even if we were to look at the right place, the surface would remain concealed by the arrays of objects that have grown out of it.

The floor, as suggested, is not only a sign of a place where a tremendous compression, an opacity impervious to any seeing, begins. Within its zero thickness, the

floor's surface enfolds and then unfolds an entire expanse of visibility. The clearest example of this unfolding of a visual domain from within a plane surface is found in the image of a pool of water. It "alone dreams its dream of an inverted world"; it "views all and all is viewed in it".¹³ Here we return to the figure of Narcissus, whose presence is integral to all of Tevet's works. In what way is Narcissus present in the works?

The story of Narcissus is familiar, but it is, in fact, a less well-known aspect of the story which becomes significant in the context of Tevet's works: Narcissus is affected by and falls in love with his own image, reflected in the water. Indeed, Narcissus embodies a principle of reflection, but not just a general principle or a conventional form of frontal reflection as in a mirror standing opposite. What is distinctive about Narcissus's reflection is that it takes place on a horizontal surface, to which Narcissus has to bend. Moreover, the interesting question in this context is: whom does Narcissus fall in love with? Here, the discussion of narcissism, of relations of mirroring, reflection and representation may conceal from us the fact that between the Narcissus who looks and the Narcissus who is looked at there exists an additional dimension: the surface of the water. This is an infinitely thin plane that nevertheless contains within itself both the possibility of reflection and that of transparency.

Just as it is easy to forget the floor, so it is easy, too, to forget this surface in which the visual drama transpires. Narcissus, however, is the one who does not forget, and, more than this, he is the one who discovers this domain of the in-between. Narcissus not only surrenders to a visual illusion, not only falls in love with an object that turns out to be an image, but in doing this he also ends up making the dramatic discovery of a concealed region hidden between the object and its reflection. Isn't this why Alberti crowns Narcissus as the "inventor of painting"? What Narcissus recognizes for the first time is the inner form, the behind-the-scenes, of the visual field. He recognizes a primary dimension of the visual which precedes the frontal construction of visibility – a dimension that is always already there and yet remains buried by the common kind of vision that appropriates the visual head on. Narcissus uncovers an infinitely thin and transparent surface – the threshold of the image.

Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, translated with Introduction and Notes by John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), Book 2, Note 26.

2

From “How Much Happiness Can Grow From This Reduction: A Conversation with Nahum Tevet”, *Studio 91* (March 1998), p. 28 [Heb.].

3

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” (“*L’Œil et l’esprit*”), trans. by Carleton Dallery, in James Edie (ed.) *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 159-190, p. 162.

4

Nahum Tevet, placement plan for *Big Lying Painting*, 1978 [Heb.].

5

Tevet, in “How Much Happiness” (n. 2 above), p. 26.

6

From Michal Na’aman, “Nahum Tevet Talks About His Works”, *Kav 3* (December 1981), p. 5 [Heb.].

7

Nahum Tevet in a conversation with Deganit Berest and David Ginton “I Have No Plans, Only Intuitions”, *Hamidrashah 9* (June 2006), p. 205 [Heb.].

8

Rosalind Krauss, “Richard Serra: A Translation”; “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 260-275; 276-290.

9

“I Have No Plans” (n. 7 above), p. 211. From a different direction, Ido Bar-El writes: “Tevet positions his things using a process of subtraction and addition, and the comparison that this invites is the series of decisions the painter makes about his brushstrokes”, “The Magnet and the Pool”, *Nahum Tevet: Painting Lessons, Sculptures 1984-1990*, curator: Yona Fischer (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1991), p. 113.

10

Tevet, n. 6 above.

11

Tevet, n. 2 above, p. 23.

12

Tevet, n. 7 above, p. 215.

13

H.N. Bialik, "The Pool", *Poems* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956), pp. 361, 369 [Heb.].