

Michael Newman

## In the Postmodern Labyrinth

*Postmodernism and Complexity*

In 1966 the American architect Robert Venturi published a book which was to become a manifesto of postmodernism: its revealing title is *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*<sup>1</sup>. Arguing against the exclusions and reductiveness of the Modern Movement, Venturi called for an architecture not of either - or but of both - and, for double-functioning elements, for ambiguity, for the combination in a single building of abstraction and representation, and he wrote of an "obligation towards the difficult whole."

The first thing that strikes the viewer of Nahum Tevet's current sculpture is its complexity. The eye is drawn to the multiplicity of incident and explosions of detail in tension with a vigorous structural movement. But in creating this sculpture of "complexity and contradiction" Tevet has not rejected modernism but rather remembered and learned from the history of modernist sculpture in order to create a synthesis which continues to take seriously the condition of modernity.

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard has argued that the postmodern condition is characterized by a loss of faith in the grands recits, the master narratives, of progress and enlightenment<sup>2</sup>. What we have instead is a multiplicity of coexisting "language games", a term he borrows from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, each with their own rules and uses. I don't entirely agree with Lyotard on two counts. Firstly, while modernist art has reached a crisis (intensified around the time of Minimalism and Conceptualism) the project of modernity is, in the words of Habermas, unfinished, and the capacity for social action and progress still exists. Secondly, we haven't simply left the master narrative behind but rather continued it in the form of the "end of the master narrative" which defines our relation to it. These speculations are not an irrelevant aside, but rather a precondition for understanding the exemplary nature of Tevet's sculpture and the reason why it is among the most important art being made today.

Modernism as a utopian project in art had lost its credibility by the end of the 1960s: at least this was how it was perceived in the art centres of Europe and the USA; the

utopian potential of modernism is still there for "developing" nations. During the late 70s modernism began to be perceived as code, a structure from which meaning is generated rather than a historical logic. In much current sculpture modernism is reappropriated as code, and meets the codes of architecture, design and consumerism, often with a subversive intent. Tevet creates complexity in his sculpture by fragmenting the linear passage of the viewer's experience and multiplying the codes or levels of meaning to which the particular work alludes. Thus a single element often functions in a number of different ways, looking radically different from different points of view, referring to other art such as Constructivism and Minimalism, and drawing on the ordinary experience of furniture.

### *Experience and Signification*

An early stage in Tevet's development towards his current approach to sculpture was an installation in 1973-4 which consisted of six elements, like a low table or bench, each with six legs. Clearly he was at this stage positioning himself in relation to the dominant approach to sculpture at the time, that of Minimalism. Minimal sculpture sought to dispense with the compositional relations which, for American artists at least, was identified with the European tradition. Donald Judd, to whose work Tevet's installation alludes, said in an interview in 1966:

"The whole's it. The big problem is to maintain the sense of the whole thing ... the big problem is that anything that is not absolutely plain begins to have parts in some way. The thing is to be able to work and do different things and yet not break up the wholeness that a piece has."<sup>3</sup>

Judd countered "European" composition with wholeness, the sculpture was to be taken in all at once. In his sculpture of the 80s Tevet reverses this for complexity, multiplicity and composition. He breaks up the wholeness, shatters and explodes it. Minimalist seriality and repetition is parodied by Tevet in the modular units of this early installation. Tevet goes against the grain of what Rosalind Krauss has called the "resistance to meaning" of Minimalism.<sup>4</sup> She sees Minimalism as having completed the removal of "inner necessity" from sculpture which she traces through Rodin, Picasso and the ready-made of Duchamp. The refusal of illusionism involves a rejection of the notion

of the private self as the source of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Meaning henceforth to be lodged "within the conventions of a public space". For Tevet too meaning is lodged within the conventions of a public space, but instead of reducing the meaning of a sculpture he multiplies it.

For Donald Judd, writing with an American pragmatic tradition, what a sculpture was, what it was made of and how it was structured, had to be immediately apparent. Sculpture was not to have a hidden interior, and neither was it to employ illusion. This was associated with a rejection of Idealism, of *a priori* systems and meanings which could be separated from the experience of the work. Instead Minimalism threw the emphasis on the sculpture's relation to its environment and the changing phenomenological experience through time as experienced physically by the viewer: it is this emphasis on the self-conscious attention to experience which defines the "theatricality" of Minimalist sculpture so vehemently criticized by Michael Fried who contrasted it with the "absorption" demanded by Modernist art.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this theatricality which postmodernism has taken over from Minimalism, and we see it too in Tevet's sculptures which seem to "perform" for a viewer whose position they constantly throw into question.

A problem which arose for Minimalism concerns the conception of experience which it implies: experience was abstracted and bracketed off in a way which avoided questions of mediation and representation - the kinds of questions which contemporary sculpture has taken up. How, for example, are we to account for the homology between Judd's immaculate sculpture and the manufactured commodity? And how does a similarity with furniture effect the meaning and experience of specific pieces? These are questions already being raised by Tevet's early installation where the modular elements allude to the typical units of Minimal sculpture, which most often generated structure by means of repetition (Andre, LeWitt). At the same time Tevet's elements connote pieces of furniture like tables or benches. The way that they stand on the ground on their legs seems to imply that they are empty bases. This points to the question of the base in modern sculpture: the removal of the sculpture from the base requires the redefinition of its difference from other objects encountered in the world. Conversely, the readymade, the placing of ordinary objects on an aesthetic base, whether literally or metaphorically, raises the problem of the source of the status and meaning of the work of art. Tevet's "table" modules are in a sense fabricated readymades. They draw on the prior experience of objects encountered in daily life which are also "bases" for the body and objects, chairs

and tables. Tevet has continued to use the "table" module to this day, together with the incorporation of found objects, notably chairs, and other elements fabricated largely from wood which define planes and lines.

Tevet often presents the same element according to different languages: a part of the sculpture can be a Minimalist serial unit, or refer to furniture. Or a piece of furniture, such as a folding chair, becomes part of a formal composition. Thus the abstract space of modernism is interrupted by signifying elements. Tevet continues the Minimalist emphasis on experience, but not in the reductive form of "pure" experience which is an abstraction, but rather as an approach to experience which incorporates connotations and representational codes. His sculpture is concerned with a central problem of our culture: the split, in a culture saturated by the mass media, between signification and bodily experience. His approach to this problem is to incorporate signification within a sculpture which does not allow itself to be appropriated either by photographic reproduction or by totalization under a concept.

The removal of even residual figuration from the object itself in Minimal sculpture served to draw attention not only to the viewer's bodily experience, but also to the environment in which the sculpture was placed. During the late 1970s and early 80s Tevet made a number- of installations which used the particular architectural spaces which they occupied. An installation in 1979 at the Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York, featured a wooden construction in two different rooms, each one a mirror inversion of the other, differently oriented in relation to the entrances. While it was possible to see parts of both simultaneously, acts of memory and matching were required to perceive the symmetry. The *Narcissus* series of 1982 while no longer dependant to the same extent on a specific architectural environment, continued to invite the viewer to perform acts of orientation and matching in order to discover the mirroring in the symmetry and inversion of the structure. Thus the sculpture offers perceptual evidence to the viewer who is drawn by the suggestion of an order to synthesize sensations which occur through time and analyze these sensations in order to discover the rationale of the work. As the sculpture becomes more free, intuitive and independant of an overall rational system through the 80s, it comes to resist more strongly this kind of conceptual appropriation.

Constructivism posited an abstract space, and a Hegelian sublation (*Aofhebung*) from the particular to the ideal, whether this was to be achieved through social

transformation or the triumph of rationality. Tevet posits the simultaneous coexistence of different orders of experience and representation without implying any hierarchical transformation of one into the other. Abstract space coexists with domestic scale related to the body and the familiar environment. Some of Tevet's sculptures employ a dominant spiral movement which is reminiscent of the dynamism of Futurism and Russian constructivism but actually more like the opening up of a fan-like space that we find in the late paintings of Braque. Tevet's approach is characterized by the tension between the suggestion of overall structure in the sculpture and the explosive, centrifugal tendency of its details. It is as if the elements are drawn together not by logic, as in the necessary relation of parts to whole in manner of Constructivism and Minimalism, but by some kind of force analogous to magnetism.

### *The Sculpture as Labyrinth*

The transparency of Tevet's sculpture is not rational but illusory, an invitation into a perceptual maze. There are enough hints of structure to invite the viewer to try to discover some kind of rational organizing principle (rhymes, repetitions, inversions) but the complexity of the sculpture is such that it cannot be totalized in this way. The "language games" cannot be resolved according to a single master narrative. The knowledge the sculpture conveys is that of the limitation of rationality. Its apparent transparency is an invitation into a perceptual labyrinth, full of deceptions, illusions, mirrors and contradictory clues. The metaphor of the labyrinth teaches that we are all caught in the world and have to live our lives accordingly. Moreover, there is no *absolute* knowledge through which we can "appropriate" the world. The order of the sculpture is not a necessary one given by a preconceived idea or a necessary relation between part and whole, as in the Minimalist grid. The kinds of decisions which are involved, while based to some extent on the "given" of the modular unit, assert the value of human freedom and intuition. Behind the multiplicity of language games is the recognition of the ultimate arbitrariness of any logical system. While Tevet's sculptures feel intuitively "right", in this sense they have necessity, and indeed beauty, they often convey a impression of precariousness, as if the whole construction might come tumbling down at any moment. The combination of vigour and energy with the poise of a balancing act, gives the sculpture a tremendous

freshness.

Tevet's sculpture takes a long time to get to know and calls for an act of memory on the part of the viewer. It does so in different ways: in the effort to discern order and coherence in the complexity of the work, to synthesize the series of surprises provided by different views; in drawing on the cultural memory of the history of modern sculpture; and in bringing to the aesthetic context the memory of the mundane engagement with objects. Tevet has said that "My sculptures are instruments for viewing."<sup>7</sup> The unfolding of the sculpture is a narrative for the viewer, a rich, multilayered experience through time. If Tevet makes sculpture which can't be appropriated either by representation (photography) or by concept this is achieved in part through time - the time needed to circumnavigate the sculpture. His concern is to slow down the viewer's perception of the sculpture. This was also a feature of the work of David Smith, in the view of Rosalind Krauss who writes, "Smith uses detail, much of it sensual, to arrest the viewer's attention and to slow down the pace of perception by fragmenting the forms and working against the grain of the thrusting gestures of the sculptures."<sup>8</sup> The same is true of Tevet's use of detail in relation the dominant ant "movement" of a piece. This issue of speed has become particular aggravated in our contemporary media-saturated society. While drawing on the codes of mass production and seriality, Tevet subverts them by means of his emphasis on the irreducibility of the individual viewer's experience of the sculpture.

### *Against Possession*

The resistance to overeasiness consumption or conceptual "possession" of Tevet's sculpture also relates to a central preoccupation that Krauss identifies in David Smith's work. Illusion in sculpture is concerned with its resistance to possession in the way that we can possess other objects: "The illusion in sculpture turns on the question of possession itself: either actual physical possession or, in a more sublimated form, intellectual possession - the viewer's ability to comprehend."<sup>9</sup> Smith defies possession by the very emphasis on surface or "face": "One of the most important discoveries Smith made in the 1940s . . . was that by directly confronting the fact that freestanding objects have successive aspects or faces, he could defeat the perception of the internally coherent volume and thereby the

viewer's sense of possession."<sup>10</sup> This is also true of Tevet's sculpture which, despite the overall impression of transparency, often changes surprisingly from different points of view: a closed form, for example, suddenly opens up, or a structural element changes direction. Sometimes mirror-surfaces are used to create an unexpected pocket of virtual space. Krauss' remarks concerning Smith's *Cubis* also apply to Tevet: "Smith's structural arbitrariness deprives the *Cubis* of the logic of weight and support, of skeletal cohesiveness or a coherent center of gravity, of the sense of completeness that adheres to the depiction of familiar things."<sup>11</sup> Tevet inflects non-possession with a different meaning to Smith: as less a psychological taboo against the violence of sexual possession than an assertion of the richness of experience and the multiplicity of possible interpretations.

#### *The Reintroduction of Illusion: The Sculpture as "Painting Lesson"*

If Minimalism was literalist, associating illusion with deception, Tevet is concerned to reintroduce not only illusion but also narrative into his sculpture, but to do so while preserving the Minimalist emphasis on perceptual and bodily experience. This means that illusion is not a "picture" presented to a spectator who remains in a stable, fixed position, but rather a way of destabilizing the viewer's sense of direction and self-certainty in order to achieve a reorientation to the world. This is, essentially, a continuation of the Cubist project in contemporary terms: we find in the early cubist constructions of Picasso, such as the *Guitar* of 1912 made from cardboard and string, a similar conjunction of the literal and illusory orders — the insistence on materiality and surface is combined with the strings which converge on a point, a humorous reference to the perspectival illusion of recession.

In this light the significance of Tevet's abiding concern with mirroring and the actual use of reflective surfaces in his sculpture can be appreciated. The mirror image is an inverted duplication of its object within a virtual space. By his use of mirror reflection in his recent work Tevet throws into question any secure distinction between illusion and the literal reality of the object, a distinction upon which Minimalism insisted. The mirror creates a pocket of virtual space which carries the seemingly Constructivist transparency of the sculpture into the realm of pictorial illusion. In effect the mirror mediates between

sculpture (three dimensional object) and painting (representation on a flat surface). Hence a sculpture can also be a "painting lesson".

Rosalind Krauss has suggested that the pictorialism of Anthony Caro's sculpture *Early One Morning* centres the meaning, on "the mutual incompatibility of the two conditions of a constructed sculptural object. What it implies is that pictorial organization is now incompatible with an experience of three dimensional physical mass."<sup>12</sup> And Clement Greenberg defined the essence of Modernist sculpture as dematerialization:

"To render substance entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space — this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage. This kind of illusionism is stated in pictures whose paint surfaces and enclosing rectangles seem to expand into surrounding space; in buildings that, apparently formed of lines alone, seem woven into the air; but better yet in Constructivist and quasi-Constructivist works of sculpture."<sup>13</sup>

The "two conditions of a constructed sculptural object" are only incompatible within a linear modernist historical logic. Within Postmodernism they become "language games" which can coexist within the complexity of a single work, so a sculpture can also be a "painting lesson" where paint can serve the contradictory aims of both emphasizing and dematerializing surface. The way in which colour is applied alludes to different orders of experience: when Tevet paints the surfaces of elements in the sculpture this is both as a reference to fine art painting, and also the "cheap" application of colour to surfaces such as walls and fencing in the city.<sup>14</sup> In Israeli schools the art class is referred to as the "painting lesson". The colours Tevet employs in the Painting Lesson series are most often those found on a designers colour chart, the typical colours of industrial design and interior decoration. So the fan-like structure of the sculptures alludes to the opening up of a wad of colour samples enclosed in a ring-binder. Thus colour itself becomes a kind of found object with its own codes and connotations, rather than a dematerialization into the pure optical experience of Modernist abstraction.

*Abstract Space and Human Scale*

El Litzky said that his *Proms* were concerned with a halfway stage between painting and architecture. The virtual space of painting was used to create a utopian abstract space into which a new order of structures might be inserted. Tevet evokes this kind of modernist space only to confound its utopian abstraction by inserting used objects, such as the type of folding chair which derives from modernist functionalism but has become battered and worn, and is removed from function as a ready made into the aesthetic context. He also does so by the use of scale, the relation between the size of elements and the habitual norms of the human body, as distinct from abstract proportion which depends purely on internal relationships. Tevet combines in his sculpture the two incommensurable orders of modernist abstraction and bodily, indeed domestic scale as two "language games" or codes. These linguistic terms are limited as metaphors for Tevet's sculpture, since this elision of codes or "language games" is experienced in physical terms.

Effects of scale and the disorientation of the normal "upright" perception of the world are central to this experience. Around the norm represented by familiar objects incorporated as "ready mades", the use of larger and smaller modules creates effects of enlargement and miniaturization. This alters the viewer's subjective perception of distance - it is as if the viewer is thrown back from the sculpture by the smaller modules, so that the sculptural elements seem to oscillate between projecting towards the viewer into his or her space and withdrawing away into a distance which is illusory. I am reminded by these alternations of scale of descriptions of miniature and gigantic worlds in Swift's 18th century novel *Gullivers Travels*. The use of scale in Tevet's sculpture concerns the loss of the stability of the subject which is a reversal of what *Gullivers Travels* is about, which is normality. In the novel the scene changes in relation to a stable subject but the subject of the relativistic, postmodern world no longer has stable norms upon which to rely. The sense of the miniature or the distant makes certain of the sculptures appear at times like a far landscape, or a map or diagram.

If a process of mapping is invoked, this is in terms of the viewer's effort to achieve some kind of orientation in relation to the sculpture, an orientation which must take account of the viewer's own position. Tevet has said of the complexity of his sculpture that "It's a device to draw you in - while 'mapping' - to turn you to the centre point

(target') of the piece."<sup>15</sup> The reference to the constellation in *Ursa Major (with eclipse)* (1984) alludes to just this process of mapping and interpretation which is dependant on the viewer's position. Tevet's use of scale might be compared with the some of the sculpture of the late 70s by Joel Shapiro where the miniature object makes the viewer feel large and clumsy, conveying a sense of awkwardness. But in Shapiro the scale was consistent in each work, whereas Tevet creates complex disjunctions of scale within a single piece. If some of the sculptures suggest constellations and planets in a weightless astral universe, another language game in contrast with the domestic and familiar elements (such as the gramophone records in the second version of *Ursa Major (with eclipse)* (1985) and Painting Lesson No. 3: "*Still Life with Ursa Major*") (1985), this is an assertion of the relativistic condition of modernity.

### *Defying Gravity*

Tevet draws upon the ways in which we normally see things in rooms in order to introduce uncertainty about the orientation of the sculpture. This is a development from the preoccupation with inversion in works such as the Narcissus series concerned with mirroring. In the sculpture of the 80s chairs are placed on the wall as if it were the floor, the modular units, which as "tables" seem to imply a "normal" placement on the floor, are tipped, tilted and inverted. According to the orientation evoked by the elements of the sculpture, floor can become wall and wall floor. *Painting Lesson No. 5* has a single castor on a "box" module which thus appears to be "on its side", an orientation not implicit in the form itself - this is the kind of effect Tevet achieves by means of the combination of the constructed with the ready made.<sup>16</sup>

Objects in Tevet's sculptures seem to float defying gravity and the normal coordinates of the horizontal and the vertical. It is as if the viewer were in some kind of space capsule where gravity is no longer in operation or as if the sculpture itself were a machine travelling through space. William Tucker has written that "A sense of gravity, of a strong relation between the form of the object and the ground on which it lies, has been central to the most vital modern sculpture since Rodin."<sup>17</sup> A sense of gravity is also central to Tevet's work, but it would be a mistake to suppose that gravity can only be

expressed by heaviness. Indeed, the very effect of weightlessness of Tevet's sculpture depends on the norm of gravity against which it works. The postmodern condition may consist in the loss of norms, of a master narrative or stable reference point around which to organize and interpret experience, including the master narrative of modernism. But we can only experience and understand this in relation to precisely those norms and master narratives which have lost their legitimacy. This is what I meant when I wrote above that our master narrative is the narrative of the loss of the master narrative. As Tevet shows in his sculpture, this is a situation which opens rather than closes possibilities for experience and meaning.

### *The Artist as Bricoleur*

Tevet's studio is to be found in a district of artisanal and light industrial workshops which open onto the street, in which sheets of metal and plywood are stacked, and the skeletal frames of furniture piled waiting to be finished and upholstered. The artist's studio is not so different to these workshops, yet at the same time is a part of another world the values of which are not those of use but of aesthetics. Postmodernism adopts a paradoxical relation towards the aesthetic: challenging its boundaries and drawing upon ready made objects and images and non-aesthetic codes, while at the same time depending upon art's institutional framework and history, and the attitude of mind which they induce in the viewer. Postmodernist art often takes the form of *bricolage*, an act of recycling and restructuring that which already has meaning.

Like many other contemporary artists, Tevet works as a *bricoleur*, not only by reusing found objects, but also by recycling codes and references to the history of modern sculpture. Levi-Strauss contrasts the *bricoleur* with the engineer, just as we might contrast the post-modernist artist with the modernist.<sup>18</sup> But such an opposition can be misleading. The problems of modernity are still with us, even if we no longer accept the solution of the modernist narrative of progress and stylistic development. The lesson of postmodernism is precisely that modernism has *not* been superceded, because, paradoxically, we no longer accept the modernist logic of supercession. So the discoveries and possibilities of modernism still remain open to us, and Nahum Tevet is unwilling to abandon them, as his sculpture proves. Not trusting any single system of description or

logic of style, Nahum Tevet's sculpture is accretive rather than reductive, made by adding rather than taking away. It is generous to the viewer, providing a complex, multi-levelled and continuously surprising experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> "Questions to Stella and Judd", Interview by Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard, *Art News*, Sept. 1966, reprinted in *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, ed. Battock, New York: Dutton, 1968, p. 154-5.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York: The Viking Press, 1977, p. 245.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *inform*, June 1967, reprinted in *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*.

<sup>7</sup> "Nahum Tevet, Recent Works", an interview by Michal Na'aman, *KA V*, No. 3, Dec 1982, Tel Aviv, quoted in B. Collings, *Aspects of perception, art and cognitive science*, Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith, Cambridge Massachusetts, and London*: The MIT Press, 1971, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144..

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178-81.

<sup>12</sup> *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, p. 144-5.

<sup>14</sup> According to Sara Breitberg-Semel the use of "poor" materials is a characteristic of Tel Aviv art. See her essay in *The Want of Matter: A Quality in Israeli Art*, exhibition catalogue, The Tel Aviv Museum, 1986. Nahum Tevet was included in this exhibition.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Nahum Tevet: *Narcissus I B and 3A*, exhibition catalogue, The Graduate Center Mall, The City University of New York, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> David Smith used castors on the base of *Zig N* (1961; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York).

<sup>17</sup> William Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966.