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Bachelors Climbing Up the Wall

...there is only one means to exorcize the possessive nature of the man on a ship; it is to eliminate the man and to leave the ship on its own. The ship then is no longer a box, a habitat, an object that is owned; it becomes a travelling eye, which comes close to the infinite; it constantly begets departures. | Roland Barthes¹

Plot Summary

This is a story that wishes to unfold almost like a crime plot; a plot about a considered, unsentimental withdrawal from the community. It is also a plot about previous, seemingly different plots, in which particles were created only to become members of a total configuration—as well as these plots' sequel, in which bodies, assemblages and sites surreptitiously secede from the crowd, carving out for themselves distinct focal points. It is a plot about seclusion and separation from the congregation, without however being able to be identified without it; alternatively, it is a detective tale about a public whose validity never exceeds the sum of its parts.² These procedures run like a thread, back and forth, through all of Nahum Tevet's works. But in its present phase, in his smaller, encapsulated and more focused works, mostly cut out and demarcated on the wall like a sign, a picture or a relief, these plots, previously presented in tortuous, long-winded, elusive and covert ways, become overt, direct, concise, simple, sharply delineated and more defined.

These small-scale sculptures unfold, as a manifest, straightforward narrative, the same exploits previously folded within the large, multiple-itemed labyrinthine environmental structures that characterized Nahum Tevet's more familiar sculptures through the years. In this sense, the small sculptures are a summary, a concentrate, or a model of the larger sculptural pieces. In many cases, however, the same small sculptural formations used to be parts of large sculptures—and have broken off from them like satellites, extensions or secondary growths from processes of replication, reproduction and transformation so accelerated, that they seem to stray from any controlled, single-optional, pre-coded form of development. The small sculptural body—object or mutant object—can be seen as a model for other, ostensibly more complex and extensive processes in Tevet's work; yet at the same time, this model's plasticity and spatial capacity locate it among the bodies and objects of this world.

Past-Stations

The origin of Tevet's sculptures lies in painting. He himself likes to mention that he did his artistic apprenticeship taking painting lessons at Raffi Lavie's home, in the early 1970s—a constitutive momentum which Tevet has repeatedly alluded to through the years, especially in his dominant sculpture series *Painting Lessons* (1984-1990) ≥, which was a central reference point for a group of small wall sculptures he made during the same period. Already in his earliest pieces, however, dating from 1973-74, he placed manually painted white panels on simple chairs or wooden legs, as a minimalist unit whose manual production, with quasi-painterly brush strokes, turned it into an abstract painting. This minimalist painting-object was then taken down from the wall and placed on the floor, only to be raised again later. According to the values of the modernist "canon", such actions signify a participation in one of the critical gestures of modernism: the removal of the sculpture from the pedestal to the floor,³ the removal of the painting from the wall to the floor (as Robert Rauschenberg did at an early stage), and the transformation of the artistic object from representative to presentative. Yet Tevet does not stop there: he also slightly raises the lowered artistic item again, as if reendowing it with an exceptional identity and the exclusivity of a representative body.

These items were placed by Tevet in an empty space, as landmarks; quasi-minimalistic elements recalling very elementary, merely functional tables, chairs, beds or stretchers—objects usually found in ascetic spaces, designed for voluntary seclusion or forced isolation, like a monastery, hospital, boarding school, or a kibbutz in the early days of Zionist settlement. According to Victor Turner, within a wider anthropological context, such places are compatible with borderline or transitional situations, in which there is a move away from an existing symbolic order and a transition towards a new order.⁴ In the context of artistic modernism, the items placed on four legs also allude to paintings by Paul Cézanne, in which the table image serves as the format of the painterly "still life" (mainly apples)—a horizontal format instead of the vertical wall—while bearing it as a sculpture pedestal. This polar suggestion begins to produce in Cézanne's painting a new hybrid medium: painting that functions as an alternative format for a plastic-sculptural body that nonetheless seeks some kind of representative status, and sculpture that offers its modernist site (the horizontal plane and the immediately present objects) as an alternative format for painting. In other paintings, such as *The Card Players* (1890-92) ≥, Cézanne already confronts the table, as the carrier of the painterly object (the pipe placed on the table), with the wall as another possible format for the same object (a pipe hanging on the wall). Both formats, the horizontal and the vertical, are presented as equivalent, mutually interchangeable possibilities for this painterly object or objectified painting. Tevet seems to have taken Cézanne's suggestion into account. As early as 1976 he identifies as a homage to Cézanne one of his works, *A Page from a Catalogue (Cézanne), Four "Card Players"* ≥, in which two white panels lean against a wall, displaying the two-fold potential of the medium's operative plane.⁶ The memory of Cézanne's work is embedded in the work through rectangles marked in the corner of each of the panels,

whose dimensions are identical to those of four of the versions of *The Card Players*. Tevet took the information from a catalogue raisonné of Cézanne, and hanged the relevant page next to the panels.

In his first readymade *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), Marcel Duchamp refers to a mechanical device operated by the use of the limbs (the legs)—alluding to the painting of his time, which, using industrial paint and thus mechanically produced material, continues to rely on the use of the limbs (the hands).⁷ Duchamp seemed to have studied and assimilated Cézanne's lesson when he skewered and raised the *Bicycle Wheel* onto a simple barstool.⁸ Moreover, in exactly the same year in which this revolutionary object was presented, Duchamp also made a small drawing, *To Have the Apprentice in the Sun* (1913), which features a tiny figure riding a bicycle up a diagonal incline. Duchamp thus also gives his metonymy of painting a kind of representational status, by rolling the bicycle upwards or fixing its wheel on the horizontal seat of a raised barstool, which in terms of its practical function belongs, like the table, to the furniture family. The scope of the present essay is not broad enough to develop a complex discussion of the relation of Duchamp's work as a whole to painting, but in the context of discussing the "raising" of the painting's image, it should perhaps be noted, albeit briefly, that Duchamp's other early found objects are likened to painting while offering it a "stage" (a "platform") or some kind of elevated seat: for example, the object from *Chocolate Grinder* (1914) refers to the grinding of organic material, as some of the painting pigments used to be prepared in the past, and stands on a three-legged table; or the object from *Bottle Rack* (1914) ≥, designed to hold painting accessories (the liquids diluting the paint), which consists of lines and a chain of rings that grow from the bottom up.⁹ In the context of Tevet's work—especially in view of the images of whitewashed emaciated beds—we should mention in particular the poster *Apolinère Enameled* (1916-17) ≥, which shows the figure of an adolescent girl nonchalantly painting the skeleton of a white bed with industrial paint.

At a very late stage in his work, in a 1963 photograph, Duchamp is seen sitting at a table and playing chess opposite a nude woman (as if activating the model painter-model, but this time without the painting, which is replaced with the chess game) against the backdrop of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23) ≥, his "canonical" conceptual work—which ostensibly announces the castration of painting. Even in later years, when Duchamp seemingly demonstrates and sums up his abstention from painting in favor of contemplative activity, he returns, covertly, to one of his early paintings, *The Chess Game* (1910), in whose foreground two idle women sit at a table arrayed with refreshments reminiscent of Cézanne's apples, while at another table behind them, on a parallel plane, in a composition resembling Cézanne's *Card Players*, two players sit facing each other, absorbed in a chess game. In other words, Duchamp casts his characters in the context of the inventory of characters in Cézanne's painting, and suggests a principle of conversion (of the characters and of their planes of action) that operates in the discursive range between the discontinuation of painting and its continuing validity. In both his early and late works, Duchamp is concerned with representing the halting, the cessation (as of the wheel detached from the cycle) or the drying (as of the bottles on the rack) of the work of painting, and exposing the

masquerading of tools that belong to a secular and “low” world order as means of representation belonging to an upper world (in this sense, the table or chair function as a display pedestal, which despite the passage of time and its move away from the worlds of religious, monarchical and aristocratic art to secular and political worlds, continues to claim its historical status). At the same time, however, with changing dosages and degrees of hope, Duchamp also never ceases to offer a view of the potential of this substitute (or simulacrum) of painting and of that which lifts it from the ground—especially when it is reincarnated in other mediums and in means of representation that come from a non-representational, everyday, “low”, almost indistinct world order.

For Duchamp, art may have been the only site in which such acute nihilism and such absurd faith could co-exist under the same roof—and the table (in its various reincarnations in scenes of painting, play and “leisure time”) served him as this site’s quintessential scene. Later conceptual artists, who more or less belong to Nahum Tevet’s generation, such as Vito Acconci, Ian Wilson or Hans-Peter Feldmann, also made central use of the image of the table and its environment, especially its chairs, as the focal point and the representation of the “symbolic” order, as a site of convergence or as a substitute for the “tribal fire”—as the spearhead of institutional order and organizational power, but also as a place for discussion, studying, play, brainstorming and sublimation, in place of what once was ritualistic bonding in order to offer sacrifices (the table is also a kind of altar). When Tevet crisscrosses references to these critical junctures in modernism with the materials and (socialist, Zionist) ethos of the Eretz-Israeli Yishuv (mainly the Kibbutz), he suggests we see the local-peripheral circumstances, history and ideologies as possible grounds for finding and establishing a modernist canon that derives from the contexts of the local field (rather than being merely secondary or derivative). But it also suggests we process the rhetorical characteristics, the pretensions, the practice and the material culture of the kibbutz and of Zionist romanticism (in this case, in its more ascetic and labor-culture aspects) in a way that would anchor them in intra-artistic contexts which would infuse them with (or preserve in them) the world of the imagined, the dreamed, the sublimated, the more conceptual and less pragmatic.

Temporary Camp

Nahum Tevet often sets up his volume-slim and surface-thin bodies in a corner of an empty space \geq , like a temporary camp that has settled near borders—perhaps during a retreat, perhaps as a regrouping ahead of a new, more aggressive phase; they are not enplaced so much as holding on to the fringes, isolating a sub-space that seems to cling to the center, or perhaps distance itself from it. These objects-furniture-paintings are a beginning or an end of some kind of unknown territorialization, since these are elements that do not yet belong to any territory they might suggest: neither really to painting, nor to the one that produces “minimalist” objects—for the Israeli art scene, of which Tevet is part, does not adhere to the rules of the (capitalistic, historical, theological) production mechanism (with its attendant dialectic of affirmation and negation) which has given rise

to minimalist art—nor even to the territory that has engendered the dogmatic objects of local socialism, for none of them has conversed with the representatives of the artistic “avant-garde”.¹⁰ In any possible context, they identify as mutants of a territory, or as agents of deterritorialization. The quasi-modeled arrangement of these works presents what is not a model of a given production mechanism of objects, or what will always distinguish itself from such a model; at most, this is a model-proposal for a mechanism of objects that does not yet exist. For this purpose, Tevet replicates his items in limited series (the number of items replicated in each work is also limited, as is the number of times that Tevet replicates entire works or major parts of them), thus distancing them from any automatic and motoric—that is, obedient and “blind”—reproductive mechanism. The repetition is more a suggestion to repeatedly look at the same item, insisting on knowing it through reflexive observation, and perhaps even invoking an image of cell division (as in the biological process of incipient life),¹¹ which constitutes the genetic code and the preliminary body of a new, specific figure. In these reflection and dynamics, the appearance of the items (assessed one by one, one after the other) and their partial bonding examines, as it were, their suitability to assemble into some kind of corporation.

This pattern of replication and congregation seems to have been accelerated in Tevet’s works since the 1980s. The minimalist visibility that featured few and amply spaced details changed with time into an overflowing visibility of ever more crowded multiple details, which brush-push-against-cling-to each other, dividing and splitting into further similar units. The pale and neutral hues of the previous works seem to come to life in the later ones, turning into a variegated colorfulness, which covers the surface areas of the sculptural items with a mechanical action of evident manual coloring, which brings to mind modernist painterly procedures (like those referred to by Duchamp), as well as the action of a housepainter, a craftsman. Tevet’s new creature, from the 1980s on, is rich with participants and teeming with life. It grows in every direction, having no center, moving back and forth, forking into more and more possibilities of highly similar units, placed one on top of the other and one next to the other, replicating each other, usually also improvising on one another, climbing, falling off and so on continuously—with no choice of an orientation, with no preference of a ground, usually on the floor and sometimes also on the wall. The countless multi-directional replications, concatenations, inversions and crowdings of these units produce a general appearance of a fast, accelerated, almost hysterical reproduction process. But if we look at the details themselves—as Tevet’s work invites us to do, through the rich nuances of its details and the inventiveness that is shown in their combinations—we will notice that the relation between them and their neighbors is that of a slight, nondramatic change, like details within a system that develops in an evolutionary (rather than a revolutionary) fashion. Thus they constitute themselves as a language machine, in which each detail is an index redefined in relation to specific local circumstances and to its indexical affinities with other details—until the machine slowly becomes an organism.

The Fecundity of Bachelors

Pieces of furniture in Tevet's works—tables, chairs, beds and their descendants—are like a genealogy of sculptural items with a painterly feel, which converse with Marcel Duchamp's found objects. Thus, this tribal view of Tevet's works enables us to think a little differently about *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, Duchamp's most radical theater of objects, which highlights familial matters such as grooms and brides, brothers and sisters, potency, ejaculation, a desire for copulation or a potential fertility. A brief reminder: in Duchamp's modernist situation report, the "bride", situated in the upper section of the work like a perforated picture hanging on a wall, is strictly forbidden to its "bachelors", who are located in the lower section as hollow found objects, placed on raised contraptions. The copulation between the upper and lower parts, between the more "painterly" and more "object", between the female and the male, will never be consummated; the continuity will be stemmed and the family tree cut off. On the other hand, in Tevet's world the possibilities of reproduction and propagation have not ceased to be explored for over 30 years and more. Tevet's protracted path, from painterly objects placed on the floor and onto the wall, is not strewn with recognitions of the higher possibilities of the "bride" or the "painting" with their historical and metaphysical contexts, and therefore the issue of the heterogenic fecundity of the match between "bachelor" and "bride", between "found object" and "painting", is not pertinent for him. But that is exactly why he can certainly activate and animate this Duchampian world, which has come to a standstill. Yet in his own way, he does so using non-heterogenic objects, minimalist in nature, related to the Duchampian "bachelors", which keep examining, year after year, the potential of continuity, reproduction, dissemination, communality, familial relations. According to Tevet, the "bachelors" are already allowed to reproduce and spread out in every direction, including the wall—the realm which in Duchamp was dedicated to the "bride". Thus for example, in his work *Ursa Major (with Eclipse)* (1984) ≥ or in *Sound for a Silent Movie* (1986) ≥, the sculptural items extend over both the floor and the wall (in *Jemmáin*, 1986, they even settle solely on the wall). But since in most of the works from those years the teeming life that drives-produces-generates the images one from the other takes place on the ground, it seems that the essence and beginning of these reproductive processes can be found in the lower area, the range of the "bachelors" in Duchamp, from which they move upwards, to the "bride's" realm, which is this time populated with their clones and doubles.

The evolutionary prolificacy in these works may seem like the bustle of a private or tribal incipient life,¹² as a turn towards something that emerges. Alternatively, the rushed division and reproduction, which have no center and are therefore also not coded in advance, may be perceived as an accelerated and uncontrolled, anarchic or malignant process, deviating from a proper order of division, location, direction or survival. Either way, whether it is directed towards construction or destruction, this growth is incredibly energetic and vital. It suggests that terminal processes hold the possibility of a beginning, just as each moment of reproduction and growth contains the seed of corruption and catastrophe. Thus, despite the works' systemic and communal appearance, every instant,

every replication, every variant might, in principle, turn out to be an irregular mutation which will shorten the life expectancy of Nahum Tevet's extensive production mechanism.

This chance/risk applies to the entire range of images in Tevet's work, despite its long practice of transposing and recreating the same elements—mainly, again and again, schematic images of a boat, iron, chair, table, bed, book, magnet and cylinder-shaped mechanical implements or turbine-like bodies—as well as their specific assemblages (and the different shades of their combinations). In all of these, the act of repetition is not connected to a physical space or a given site of activity: even the larger, more complex and later pieces look less like site-specific works than encampments set up in the space, with their elements huddling together-holing up within their community. Moreover, none of the works' locations has supported the stabilization of their “genealogy”—that is, has provided an environmental support that has forged stable markers of identity capable of being assimilated by independent descendants. Similarly, nor does the repetitive movement pertain to the image of any object—since unlike in most of the “minimalist” pieces (which follow a defined and fixed object), it recycles the unit's shifting combinations, qualities and possibilities, as a relentless reminder of what is not-an-object and lacks the stable value of its images.

This instability applies to any mythological time which Tevet's works wish to join by moving those units which-are-not-objects in a slow cyclical motion, which for years has been returning back to them: to anything that is not an object, that is not a place, that is not any affixed and habitual time, that is nothing but the moments of change, variation, inversion, interweaving, breaking, filling and perforation; those very teeming and vital moments of beginning or end. These moments, and their sculptural embodiments, mark the perception of time-space in Tevet's work. For over 40 years it has repeatedly returned to them, allowing itself to avoid any calculation of a linear, historical and evolutionary operational sequence. Each time anew it gleans some details, or certain assemblages of them—sometimes part of an existing work, sometimes an entire piece (like *Painting Lesson No. 9*, 1990)¹³—and reformulates them in a new sculpture, as if none of the sculptures was an essential combination that could hold on to its details. It seems that all of his work over the years has been like one big reservoir which he has returned to again and again, in each visit also identifying it as made of multiple, separate and detachable items—for it makes no sense to think of any fundamental combination of these items if his work is made up of moments of beginning/end. Despite all the piles and multiplicities of items characterizing Tevet's large sculptural pieces, they consist of neither monolithic syntaxes nor items that have consolidated and disappeared into a mass, but rather a gathering of numerous discrete items, that just happened to have congregated together. It is a community made up of many different items that cling to each other, whose existence is contingent on their mutual interrelations (such as inversion, replication etc.), but which at the same time are also reliant on the momentary interrelations between strangers who need their mutual dependency in order to declare their distinctness, or alternatively, must announce their isolation again and again in order to establish more and more affinities and gatherings. Tevet's expanded space, made up of countless such affinities, moments

of coming into being in time that have become spatial capacities or “places”, is also the site from which, over the years, the small sculptural pieces have soared onto the wall: “brides” (in the Duchampian dialect) climbing up the wall and distinguishing themselves, each in its own embodiment, from the “groom” race.

The Bachelors’ Club and the Sites of Painting

The walls also played a role in Tevet’s larger and more complicated floor sculptures. They were overshadowed and obscured within the labyrinthine structures that have characterized his works since the Narcissus sculptures of the early 1980s. Already then they were described, in a conversation with Michal Naaman, as trap-formations that tempt the eye to penetrate and move through them, but that turn out to be a false temptation, which while leading somewhere, also blocks the way.¹⁴ Over the years, his works have continued to take shape as configurations of ways—straight and winding, advancing and reversing—which never cease to masquerade as guiding-lines. Tevet’s work certainly knows that we tend to look in dynamic lines for directions, road signs towards the “there”, which is usually different from where we are and seems to offer a goal, a meaning, an aim. In Tevet, however, these lines are also ordered to turn on their axis and go right back where they came from. The search for a destination turns out to be the discovery of a no-destination, and the “there” marked with a negative sign is seen as analogous to the “here”—the same “here” that is populated with the representatives of the beginning/end time of vital processes. The restoring of movement to the “here-there” (under the negative sign), and the streaming-suspension of this movement in a given space with limited surface area and depth, are often supported by various blocking bodies—which, starting with the work *Man with Camera* (1992-94) ≥, take the form of white walls. Among the manifold more plastic and sculptural forms around them, these walls restate, within the sculpture, the name of painting—the medium that usually hangs on them, or whose historical format (the canvas or the paper) parallels their boundaries—thus raising the issue of the validity of discussing it in relation to Tevet’s sculptural work. Some of those white walls—as, for example, in *Man with Camera*—whether they stand erect or left lying on the floor, are laden with small images (for example, “tables”, boats or “cigarettes”¹⁵) that seem to grow on them, thus also looking like the surface of a painting featuring several images. Then the limited spaces within the sculptural environment itself—those situated in the gaps between the walls—also wish to be perceived mainly in relation to a painterly space, in particular the modernist one, which by nature is narrower (or one-dimensional) and flatter. And so, it is possible to ascribe to the medium of painting all the attributes of the concrete spaces in Tevet’s sculptures: for instance, to define it as belonging to a beginning/end time, or as movement towards a destination and an aim that is nipped in the bud. In taking a vertical position alongside bodies placed on the ground or lying prostrate-dropped on it, these walls also reintroduce into Tevet’s later work the discussion of its relationship with Cézanne’s painting—especially, as already mentioned, the dialectic of its placement on the wall and on the

horizontal plane of the table.

The panels that stand vertically among the horizontal items also cut off various parts from the totality of the sculptural work, underscoring the fact that the details of the Tevetian work are distinct and detachable. As time goes by, the erect elements gradually proliferate—and with them the compartmentalization, the division into cells and the distinction of the space and items within them—a process that culminates in the vast operatic work *Seven Walks* (1997-2004).[≥] These intermediate spaces look like rooms, sometimes crowded like cubicles and solitary cells and cabinets, which invite us to see them as sites designed for forced confinement or voluntary hiatus, places for seclusion or lingering, which are used for punishment, for asceticism, for hiding from the public eye, for exclusion from the community, for retreat, for contemplation, for solitude. This compartmentalization highlights the lack of monolithicity in the work as a whole, its being assembled from numerous parts, each of which withdraws into itself. The more the works multiply their crammed parts, the more the aggressiveness of the blocking bodies grows, chiefly the walls, which are usually human-size and thus confront the body as unequivocal barriers. Yet what is forbidden to the body as it seeks to draw near, is still permitted to the eye and is moreover supposed to seduce it: to wander around and swallow as much as it can of the alternately revealed and concealed views. Leaving the majority of the sculpture's parts as a mere visual field is another way to enable us to think of it as a site for the medium of painting—which as we know, can only be experienced in a visual and imagined way—and moreover as a purist modernist painting, such as Kazimir Malevich's or Robert Ryman's, because of the secluded nature of these Tevetian spaces, which are often covered with a layer of white paint.

Yet late works, such as *Seven Walks* or *Take Two* (2005), continue to engage also the lower part of the body, made up as they are of more massive bodies, and tending to emphasize the sculptural configuration's physical weight and its connection with the ground. Simultaneously, they never cease to produce and crowd together numerous viewing situations confined within a labyrinthine formation, and with them many more situations of concealment and unveiling which seduce and distract the eye as it drifts on their trail. Occasionally, the eye also drags the body behind it, forcing it to bend, stretch, become stuck in the details, imprisoned, blocked from what it is actually allowed; often, it cuts itself off from the body and wanders on its own, searching for what it looks for at its own altitude.

In slightly later works, such as *Several Things* (2006)[≥] and *Diver* (2011)^{≥≥}, something else seems to happen: returning to some work patterns that characterized him in the 1970s, Tevet enhances in them the infrastructure of a grid, restoring the spacing between the sculptural items and thus also limiting again the cruel dialectic between the body and the eye (or the head). There is no longer any need to highlight a harassed and blocked body, because the generous gaps among the single items allow it to move more freely, and the eye's validity is also reinforced due to the "aesthetic distance" it is offered—the distance required in order to view exhibits (such as painting, photography, or cinema) that can be known and felt only through watching. The number and size of the large bodies have been reduced and they have become more emaciated, more polished,

more demonstrative of the painterliness and colorfulness (albeit in different shades of white) of their surface areas. The compartmentalization that had featured in Tevet's floor sculptures was also enhanced in these sculptures, yet it was done through the act of spacing (as of different displays in an exhibition space). At that time Tevet's work also returned to determinedly exercising its climb from the floor to the wall, for Tevet has never made as many wall pieces as in the last four years.

Exile from the Ground

Nahum Tevet's wall pieces began with *Once Here Once There (Narcissus)*, which he made while living in New York in 1980 and which he exhibited the same year at the Bertha Urdang Gallery. Later, on returning to Israel in the fall of 1980, he made a large wooden floor version of this sculpture (which was acquired by The Israel Museum). This work was the first in a series of sculptures, all of whom were called *Narcissus* and marked with numbers and letters (*Narcissus 1*, *Narcissus 1a* and so forth). In his exhibition at CUNY Graduate Center in New York in 1982, he showed two large *Narcissus* sculptures made of wood and iron. During the show's installation a passerby dropped in who used to follow the work's progress every single day. When Tevet asked him what was the meaning of his interest in his work, the visitor replied that he wondered whether the sculpture was supposed to fly. Tevet recounts that he was thrilled by the response, and that "a year or two later I made a series of reliefs, which feature the structure from *Narcissus 1b* ≥ as the structure which carries the constructions and some adjoining elements".¹⁶ The chronicle of Tevet's reliefs and first wall sculpture had a number of implications for the later wall sculptures: the departure point for the latter is the ground surface, the "low" "substitute" (or simulacrum) for the historical representational space of wall displays, which it was never part of. Later, from the same place to which modernist sculpture was removed from its position of prominence (without having any prior prominence) and from the site to which it was displaced (without having any primary mother-base), Tevet's modernist sculpture undergoes another displacement—to the wall; that is, it attains its representational space through a double exile.¹⁷ The displacement is already structured into, and even announced by, the name of the early wall sculpture *Once Here Once There (Narcissus)* ≥, which redirects the reflective planes of the classical myth: if *Narcissus*' physical body found its reflection on the ground (water) surface, then in Tevet, conversely, the sculptural body—which to begin with is placed on the floor, and built as a reflection on the horizontal plane—is reflected yet again on a wall. The wall sculptures made later also tend to look like views—often as segments of urban structures—designed to be looked at from above, yet removed from the floor onto the wall. This displacement makes the viewer's body feel uncomfortable in front of them. One is required to stretch the neck to the side, or to see oneself as occupying an inappropriate position, feeling that in order to see the work properly it would have been better to hover in front of it lying down. In relation to these acts of displacement, structured into Tevet's wall pieces, we might want to mention the

words of Haviva Pedaya, who writes about the significance of walking in Jewish thought and history, especially in modern times: “The issue of the vacillation between the real and symbolic planes of time and place is a key issue for understanding the shifts in collective Jewish history; it is a fundamental issue pertaining to the relationship between the concrete level of reality and the symbolic level in the life of the exiled collective. These levels—in so far as the discussion deals with walking as a way of moving in space—are represented both on the horizontal axis and on the vertical axis; for the exiled subject, abandoning the real city is a movement in the space of the concrete reality which reinforces the connection with the spiritual place on the transcendental axis [...] abandoning a place in favor of wandering is always accompanied with a sense of connection to a different axis: whether a symbolic place or the real or lost ‘self’”.¹⁸ And she goes on to write: “As a direct consequence of the Jews being directed to the no-place—the sea, the ex-territorial—the Jews find it hard to reach the absolute place par excellence”.¹⁹ Instead, she suggests, “the approach of many of the writers of Hekhalot literature and apocalyptic literature was to displace the passion onto the substitute, the imitation, the compensation on the symbolic or mythic level—to the heavenly city, the heavenly temple, the revelation up above”.²⁰ Tevet’s work, then, which has made the drifting of the eye and the walking of the blocked and battered body one of its major tenets, goes one step further in the small sculptural pieces, using an imagined body within the exhibition space (ostensibly the artwork’s most organized and respectable space) as sailing and floating towards the ex-territorial, “the absolute place”, the “heavenly city”—a utopian place which in Tevet’s dialect for this central modernist image, involves a passage from the floor to the wall.

Painting Lessons, or Lessons towards Painting

This exile from the ground, from the body and from the viewing standard reserved for floor sculptures can be looked at another way, based on looking at Tevet’s sculptural works as part of a long procession of references to the medium of painting. Thus the wall sculptures will be seen as sculpture operating as painting, rising to its representational and institutional plane (the wall) not on the basis of historically belonging to it, but only after taking its place on the floor²¹—that is, on the site of the modernist discussion of painting, which condemned it to be lowered to the floor and replaced its representative status with a presentative one. Since Nahum Tevet’s wall sculptural works are also armed with the memory of their 1970s predecessors, and so are also loaded with the memory of Cézanne’s painting and Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, they also know that lowering the painting to the horizontal part of a standard practical object such as a chair, a stool or a table might restore it to a new and different exalted and representational status. Raising the sculptures to the wall is therefore also a further “bouncing” or “lifting” in the process that Tevet’s work has been familiar with for years. Many times, the assemblage of small sculptural images is set against a surface, as if a piece of ground had been torn off from the floor as they “took off” towards the wall, now serving them as a “small stage”, which

also alludes to the earlier “springboard”, before they made it up here. Turning on its axis, as if making a 90 degrees turn in order to cling to the wall, this “small stage” of the wall sculptures illustrates the eerie route taken by the sculptures or wall displays on their way up. The plane on which the images of the wall sculptures are placed, which deviates from the straight and narrow of sculpture, is a kind of statement on the qualities of the format and the surface—those concrete and symptomatic dimensions of the medium of painting; presenting this plane distinctly and directly on the wall is also an expression of the moment in which Tevet’s work focuses and clarifies through the small wall sculptures, among the rest of its many concerns, its discussion of the relations between sculpture and painting.

In his acclaimed book *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010), Edmund de Waal describes the genealogy of his family and the history of its relations with its collection of “netsuke” (miniature Japanese sculptures). He writes about two of them: “It is an ivory carving about what it is like to carve into wood. Both are about finishing something on the subject of the half-finished”,²² as if their tiny size blurs their boundaries (their finiteness) and their qualities and enables us to see in one medium the other mediums. In Nahum Tevet too, the miniaturization of the sculptures (evident in direct observation and even more conspicuous in a comparative viewing, which assesses them in relation to his large-scale sculptural pieces) makes the maneuvering between the mediums easier. In the wall sculptures, especially those made in the last two years, it even seems that Tevet is trying to refrain as much as possible from referring to the size of his extended works, and to adopt as a scale the proportions of a tableau painting—and several small wall sculptures (especially those covered with strokes of diluted paint, with few shades) can even be considered as drawings or aquarelles. When the number of items in a sculpture is small and its borderlines are clearer, the link to the history of painting also become more accessible. Thus for example, the black square surrounded with only a few details immediately brings to mind Kazimir Malevich, and the perforation of the surface area with a constellation of dots alludes to Lucio Fontana. The volumetric space of most of these sculptures becomes thinner and flatter; they mainly consist of colorful surfaces, whose mutual organization resembles the construction of a painterly space, with its illusive depth and concrete flatness.

A large group of Tevet’s wall sculptures is a variation on *Painting Lessons*, his major sculpture series from the 1980s.²³ These works, which are like a floor sculpture turned on its axis, its bottom clinging to the wall, bring into focus the shape of a fan; like a spread out deck of cards or housepainters’ color-catalogue \geq .²⁴ It is a sharply delineated form, usually painted with a variety of colors in the early wall sculptures, and mostly in dark shades in the later ones, which sketches on the white wall a clear invitation to see it in the context of the image of the open cards held by Cézanne’s *Card Players*; rectangular shapes that echo the boundaries of the format of painting (as a representation of the autonomous language and medium of painting), but also introduce into this formalistic reading a vigilance vis-à-vis the lures of accidental luck, coincidence (the Dadaistic “chance”, in days to come). This fan shape sometimes grows on several of the wall sculptures’ planes, from the lower-back to the foregrounded-front, extending all along the

work's arching or zigzagged perimeter. Thus it brings to mind the rectangular forms in Marcel Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918) \geq , spread wide in all the colors of the rainbow, in a diagonal line that moves up and down, like a catalogue of industrial paints offered to the customer with all its myriad shades. Moreover, Tevet's fan images, spread both on an extended scale (over several planes, as in Duchamp) and on a more reduced scale (over one plane, as in Cézanne), direct us to read the image of colorful rectangles in Duchamp's *Tu m'* in relation to the image of the cards in Cézanne's *The Card Players*—as the image of a technical aide for coloring (or “mechanistic” painting) with a “cold” industrial material, which relates to an instrument of play (that is of language, of art) still held in a warm human hand. Thus we might also remember that the color-catalogue fan in Duchamp's *Tu m'* unfolds between the silhouettes of two of his readymades, *Bicycle Wheel* and *Hat Rack*—that is, it stretches between two indexes of accessories, one related to the foot, the bottom end of the body, and the other to the head, its upper end; both together seem to demarcate the limits of an absent body, which is nonetheless very present in its absence. The limits of this body are the legs and the head, the corporeal and the rational, the “vita activa” and the “vita contemplativa”—the two realms which have always nourished art and still continue to determine, as absent-present, the limits of the “palette” of modernist painting (in the industrial age). The power of Tevet's wall sculptures is in serially flickering, in the course of the miniaturized and varied recycling of “Painting Lessons”, the connection between the tools of the technician-housepainter and the hand of the card player-painter. The serially hidden-revealed-growing-interrupted-shortening-lengthening fan shapes, with no beginning and no end, also tell us that there is no hierarchy between the Cézannian “card player” and the Duchampian “housepainter”, and that art is the game of conversions between the two. They derive and interrupt, reveal and obscure each other, being born together and simultaneously, one as the substitute of the other.

Iconography in the Age of Iconoclasm

In Tevet's late wall pieces, the selective presentation of the works' details provides an opportunity, which had not been evident in his works since the 1970s, to call the images by their names: table, chair, boat, bridge, iron, book, magnet, gate, hole. But unlike the conceptual works of the 1970s, in the present works the images are clearly indexical and always closely linked with others—intermingling with them, deviating from them, taking off from within them, falling off of them, inverting them. Although the countless possible links that had characterized the large sculptural pieces have been vastly reduced, precisely in light of this it seems that the very selection of this or that link out of other similar ones, and its isolation-representation on the wall, endow it with a necessary, even critical being. None of these links is literary; they are the result of unexplained combinations, doubles, couples and situations, all we know of which is the fact that they have made it this far out of countless concatenations and replications in Tevet's overall system of production. In view of the systemic context of the Tevetian work, we are asked

to assume that it is possible to ascribe to the immediate readings of the images (boat, table, book etc.) an iconographic identity—that is, a seemingly customary identification that has behind it an iconology, a hidden and more complex knowledge; the image of the sealed books, scattered in many of the works, may allude to the existence of this secret, inaccessible knowledge.

The hole tears into its place, baring its defectiveness and meagerness to all; the iron forcibly flattens and levels its recipients; the boat pushes the water underneath it, cutting into it to make way; the magnet draws metals, forcing them to reduce and level distances; the legs of the overturned tables look like strange canine teeth protruding into the space. In every wall sculpture, each time separately, the image is isolated from the rest and finds its own distilled representation, which also exposes some of the pent up violence in Tevet's polished-looking works. This "passive aggressiveness" is mainly identified with acts of flattening, which can be attributed to the act of reworking sculpture as painting (especially modernist painting, which is known and typified by its spatial flatness). Yet this time, precisely because everything is more reduced, limited and distilled, we are invited to see the small-scale boats, bridges, magnets or tables, placed one next to or on top of the other as if before or after an event—like signs indicating transitional means and situations, like forms and images which are also equipped each with its inversion, its perforation and its labelling as "the end of the affair". Thus, we should add a sign of inversion, negation and exclusion to any way in which we have read, marked out and known the forms in these works. In other words, any iconographic aspect of them is overshadowed by a broad umbrella of an iconoclastic worldview.

The emblem and the paragon of this iconoclastic space, which every detail, name and identity positioned and heard in it is also plundered from, is perhaps the repetitive and round hole: a constant and absolute lack, which begins at every point and no point, and ends in the same way. In the context of the hole image, we might want to think of Haviva Pedaya's assertion, that when the faith that sustains reality disappoints, "a hole opens up in reality". Among the characteristic ways of reacting to this hole, she describes "a widening of the imaginary. But what becomes widened is not the imaginary itself, which is accessible to consciousness, but rather what detaches from the real, and is left wandering between the trauma and the meta-image which is inaccessible to consciousness (phantasm)".²⁵ This is a fitting description of the three rectangular holes torn out of the one and only body of the "bride" in the upper section of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*; it is the hole that imprints the sign of "meta-image which is inaccessible to consciousness" on the "full", the "classic", the unattainable medium of painting, desired and dreamed of by the bachelors in the work's lower section, who in their body-object embody "hollow" modernist painting. On the other hand, in Nahum Tevet the holes are everywhere: below and above, beside and inside the hollow bodies, grasped by every "beginning" and "end" of the production process, copulating potency with impotence, presenting the "inaccessible to consciousness" as assimilated into what is partly accessible to it. These holes are also a kind of metonymy for another recurrent formation in the works, that of a shape and its inversion, a shape and its silhouette, a shape and its reflection, a shape and its narcissistic

figure—which Freud, as we know, already aptly formulated as an essential idealization of the mimetic figure.²⁶ Thus, every copy, every inversion, every hole that ceaselessly haunt Tevet’s works—and elucidate the appointed times of the narcissistic figure in his wall sculptures, in its various incarnations—are “flying-stations”, through which and from within which the shape escapes any form of realization, formulation and demarcation. It seems that a distinctly iconoclastic space or a “hole” are also marked in Tevet’s work through the spacing maintained between one sculpture and another—whether in the time that passes between their making, or in the way they are displayed in the exhibition space or on the wall. The spaces between the sculptures seem to carve out for the viewer—a little like the walls in the large floor pieces—a place for the conceptual and reflexive activity that takes place in the undefined and endless field of the Tevetian work.

Out of all the artistic mediums, the conceptual and iconoclastic activity—which invokes an imagination unavailable for images, which is more suited to fluid and materially-diluted worlds, which is more connected to worlds steeped in a narcissistic worldview—is more amenable to photography, cinema and painting. Thus, when Tevet ties his sculptures to the medium of painting (and in the past also to photography and cinema, like for example in *Sound for Silent Movie*, or in *Man with Camera*) he does so also as a conceptual and iconoclastic gesture. The magnet, the boat and the book are an allegory not only of all the possible aggregate modes (solid, liquid, or textual/a-material) of this space, but mainly of the possibility of passing in it from one mode to the next—even if it seems for a moment that the material and the receptacles (in this case, the design, the clarity and the definition of the demarcation) are clear and stable. Yet because of its small scale, the isolation and scarcity of the images, and the clearer than ever delineations, the wall sculpture also presents a kind of autonomy (which, since it takes place in an indexical, parasitical, obviously dependent space, is not a real autonomy)—a moment of a more-delayed-than-usual stoppage in space-time, which by nature feeds on infinite returns to the beginning/end.

Virtuoso Bachelor

The small scale, the limited spatial capacity, the detachment from the ground and the hovering on the wall enable the wall sculptures to demonstrate more easily the nature of the inhabitants of the Tevetian space as borderless and free of the appropriation of a definite place and identity. Moreover, just as each of his large floor sculptures is characterized by a myriad of replicated items, so some of the wall sculptures are copied-replicated several times, as if reiterating the argument that these apparently discrete sculptures are merely parts, slightly-longer-than-usual suspended pauses, in the limitless range of his work as a whole. Sometimes Tevet recreates parts of larger sculptures made many years earlier, repeatedly steering clear of any chronological order and repeatedly seeking instead the temporal pulses of the beginning/the end that are embedded in the details of his works. In the wall sculptures the duration of these pulses lags a little, since any repetition of items and patterns from the Tevetian oeuvre demands full attention, being applied to separate and distinct sculptures, each on its own terms, rather than

disappearing among numerous other items and patterns.

“The pattern of the same items and works recurring over the years has not taken into account the passing of time”, remarks Tevet, “but it has enabled me to perfect the execution of the elements and attain a kind of virtuosity as a mature artist, who no longer needs to pursue the sensation of the new and the surprising”. It is not the kind of virtuosity that imbues a familiar style with refinement, sophistication and formal sheen through processes of mannerism and degenerative content. It is a mode of operation that offers a rehabilitation of the classical figure of the master, not as the continuation of a conservative tradition, but rather from a place that is made up of passing moments, fleeting attempts at redefinition, and coincidences (generating combinations of objects) that demonstrate a power of invention, a playfulness, and a honed artistic language. These capabilities become focused—thanks to both the concentration and meticulousness displayed by the artist, and the attention and discernment of nuances summoned to the scene by the viewer—when the sculpture, withdrawing and setting itself apart on the wall, exceeds the range of the replicated “bachelors” (in Duchamp’s terminology) to inhabit the realms of the “bride”. At that point, it also offers its own special version of the ancient (and almost forgotten) coupling of a pure conceptual approach with a virtuosity that might announce the reappearance of the persona of a maestro.

¹ Roland Barthes, “The *Nautilus* and the *Drunken Boat*”, *Mythologies*, Selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday, 1972, 1991), p. 67.

² Eli Friedlander has already identified this pattern in Tevet’s work: “First, each consists of essentially distinct elements. Second, the plurality and distinctness of its constituents is experienced before one has a sense of the totality of which they are the elements. Third, the elements give a clear impression of being planned and constructed, but they themselves do not seem to serve any further purpose.” Eli Friedlander, “A Measure of Discontinuous Multiplicity”, in Sarit Shapira, ed., *Davar Davar: Nahum Tevet, Works, 1994-2006*, exhibition catalogue (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2007), p. 194-200.

³ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977).

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Jersey: Aldine Transaction, 1995).

⁵ The object is presented at one time in relation to its practical possibility, and at another in relation to its cessation, to its optional representation, or to its representation in general (rather than in relation to the representation-implementation of something specific, such as smoking or painting).

⁶ For its further implications in Tevet’s later works, see Sarit Shapira, “An Apocryphal Modernism”, *Davar Davar*, note 2 above, pp. 212-234.

⁷ Thierry de Duve writes that Duchamp refers mainly to the painting of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, which exposed the modernist mechanical process of using standard industrial paint (instead of the organic and natural materials that characterized the paintings of the past). Thierry de Duve, “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint,” in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 147-196.

⁸ This text, which takes as its point of departure the assumption that Marcel Duchamp’s work deals in a profound way with the possibilities and legitimacy of the painterly act, relies on ideas formulated in Thierry de Duve’s essay, *ibid.* For a discussion of Duchamp’s work as a thematization of the basic actions of the medium of painting, see also Jean Baudrillard, “Aesthetic illusion and disillusion”, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York & LA: Semiotext(e), 2005).

⁹ The context of the present discussion, which sees Duchamp’s work as thematizing the medium of painting by way of referring to Cézanne’s painting, also enables us to see the found object *Hat Rack* (1917) as a covert allusion to Cézanne’s *The Card Players*. Cézanne’s painting attributes the pipes and the hats to the figures of the players, and suggests a pipe rack – a raised implement for their suspension. Duchamp, as it were, continues this move, by suggesting such a rack for hats; thus he both sketches another raising apparatus for the suspension of the cultural object, and continues to strip the players (a kind of gentlemen’s club, or a club for the bachelors in his future work) of their customary hallmarks. The link between this painting by Cézanne and Duchamp’s found object project seems to be traced in Tevet’s *Painting Lesson No. 5* (1985) [see p. 22]: behind the sculpture’s frontal image of a fan we see the image of “a magician’s hat”, whose shape recalls the hanging bottle rack, which looks like a game piece after the “card player’s” activity has ended.

¹⁰ On the modeling and special procedures of Nahum Tevet's linguistic apparatus in relation to its referents, see Sarit Shapira, "An Apocryphal Modernism", note 2 above, pp. 227.

¹¹ Situations abounding with reproductions and repetitions while implying primary moments of cell division in life processes can also be found in the choreographies of Ohad Naharin, such as *Anaphase* (1993) and *Telophase* (2005), whose names allude to biological terms denoting cell divisions of this kind. On other possible comparative discussions of Nahum Tevet's and Ohad Naharin's work, see "'You too, actually, have never finished a work' / Sarit Shapira in conversation with Nahum Tevet and Ohad Naharin", in *Davar Davar*, note 2 above, pp. 187-192.

¹² And in this frame of reference, the presentation of a form and its inversion may be perceived as a situation of revolt, which according to Freudian values, as we know, is structured into the chronology of the tribal genealogy.

¹³ The work *Painting Lesson No. 9* later became the "core" of the work *A Page from a Catalogue* (1998), with additional sculptural formations, which characterized Tevet's work almost a decade after he made it, developed around it.

¹⁴ "Nahum Tevet talks about his works with Michal Naaman", *Kav* no. 3 (December 1981), p. 3-5 (in Hebrew).

¹⁵ In the context of the present discussion, the cigarette images may be seen as Tevet's version of Cézanne's pipes, as well as other avant-garde elements that signified the suffusion of the artistic-playful space with matters and moods that distinguish it from the rest of reality.

¹⁶ Four or five wall reliefs from this series were shown in 1984 at the Israel Museum, as part of a "special project" curated by Yigal Zalmona, alongside one large sculpture, *Ursa Major (with Eclipse)* (1984), which also features the pattern from *Narcissus Ib* as the heart of the piece. All the quotes from Tevet are taken from conversations I had with him, April-May 2012.

¹⁷ I suggested that Tevet think about the raising of the sculpture from the floor as linked to Rauschenberg's work *Bed* (1955), in which an object designed to be horizontal was hung vertically like a painting on the wall (only to be immediately put back down on the floor in the second stage of the work). Tevet replied that he accepted this comparison, since Rauschenberg's work was very important to him. Rauschenberg, who in the 1970s saw Tevet's beds and glass pieces, also purchased five of his works on glass in 1975 for his private collection.

¹⁸ Haviva Pedaya, *Walking Through Trauma: Mysticism, History, and Ritual* (Tel Aviv, Resling, 2011), p. 196 (in Hebrew).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²¹ The memories of these works may have assimilated the collage reliefs of Alexander Archipenko, El Lissitzky or Kurt Schwitters. However, the context of the works of these founding fathers of the medium of painting is different, because they do not feature the same floor-wall sculptural procedure that characterizes Tevet's sculptures.

²² Edmund de Waal. *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 11.

²³ Repeating *Painting Lesson* as a complete body and focusing it within a larger piece may also be perceived as instilling the Tevetian oeuvre with the conceptualization of "Painting Lesson", with its various implications: emphasizing the full intentionality and effort during the production or construction of a "full" and constitutive system for the medium of painting, whose skill is acquired through organizing volumetric/sculptural elements; choosing to present the activity of painting precisely in its moments of learning, as a preparatory stage and as an apprenticeship towards it, as if Tevet was offering his own version of Joseph Beuys' statement, "We have not yet achieved [art]"; and presenting the "painting lessons" learned through objects-sculptures as echoing Duchamp's words about his early years of painting, before his readymade, as "eight years of swimming lessons". In other words, Duchamp declares the practice of painting only to later repress it behind the veil of the "found object", while Tevet perceives the experience of derivatives of readymades as an education and an apprenticeship towards painting as a utopian medium.

²⁴ See Michael Newman, "In the Postmodern Labyrinth," in *Nahum Tevet: Skulpturen*, exhibition catalogue (Mannheim: Kunsthalle, and Aachen: Neue Galerie—Ludwig Collection, 1986), pp. 7-19.

²⁵ Haviva Pedaya, *Space and Place: an essay about the theological-political unconscious* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), p. 339 (in Hebrew).

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), vol. 14, pp. 73-102.