Nahum Tevet: Orchestral Maneuvers

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Difficulties of Seeing

A good subtitle for Nahum Tevet's *Seven Walks* might be, to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty, *the Visible and the Invisible*. As our eyes scan back and forth over this crowded gathering of objects, and into and out of it, we constantly encounter obstacles and blockages, barriers and shields, obstructions and interruptions of all kinds. Everything within Tevet's tightly clustered assemblage appears to be standing in the way of something else; each element, whether it is a solid form or an openwork object, obscures our view, either partially or totally, of its neighbors.

Normally, when we want to see an object that is blocked by something else we change positions, either by moving closer or by finding another angle from which to view our subject. In *Seven Walks* the first option is impossible: Tevet has set up his installation so that we are forced to remain on the periphery. The elements are so closely positioned, the spaces between them so narrow, that it would be impossible for anyone, even a small child, to enter the installation without knocking over some of the precisely situated parts domino-fashion. Only with our vision—this sense that allows us to project ourselves into locations beyond our bodies—can we penetrate into *Seven Walks*. But even our purely visual entries soon encounter resistance; any line of sight is quickly thwarted by a tall panel, a corner we can't see around or a crack too narrow to peer through. These stoppages are the consequences of the proliferation of elements, and also of their mutual proximity: the artist appears to be fascinated with the consequences of placing forms very close to one another, with the condition of almost touching.

If we can't see these hidden zones by moving in closer, the second option, changing position, is somewhat more effective. As we shift to another vantage point on the perimeter of the installation, areas that were previously obscured come into view, and, as they do, other parts slide, inevitably, into invisibility. Even if we slowly move around the entire border of *Seven Walks*, halting at each step to look again, we will still be denied a total view, particularly because certain areas close to the floor in the very center remain unseen. We know these spaces exist, but we do not know exactly what occupies them. Does anyone? Maybe even the artist has forgotten exactly what he placed in these central enclaves. In theory we could send a camera-equipped drone to fly over the installation, but I'm not sure that even aerial video surveillance would result in a full visual survey of this piece. Some of it will always escape us. A similar play of hiding and revealing is also central to Tevet's recent small wall sculptures, which are constructed so that they present dramatically different appearances as one moves in a 180-degree arc around the artworks.

Tevet has been drawing his viewers' attention to how a person's physical relationship to an artwork affects experience of the work for a long time. In 1979, for his first exhibition in New York, he created *Installation for Two Rooms*, in which he filled two separate spaces at the Bertha Urdang Gallery with floor-to-ceiling wooden structures made from long 2-by-4s and sheets of plywood. Crucially, when you were looking at the installation in one of the rooms, the other half of the show was invisible. The artist consciously made a work that was impossible to see all at once. It wasn't only the phenomenological complexities that intrigued him, but he also wanted (as he has recalled to me) to frustrate casual viewers, and lazy art critics, who were in the habit of simply poking their heads into a gallery and claiming that they had "seen" the show. Another target was the camera, whose influence he wanted to counter by making sculptures that couldn't be easily photographed.

The fact that our view of *Seven Walks* will always be incomplete—and in a manner that is far more extreme than happens with traditional freestanding sculpture—seems to be perversely counter to the chief purpose of visual art, which is to make itself available to sight. Yet for the past 100 years, at least since Marcel Duchamp dismissed painting as too "retinal" and began presenting works of art that viewers had to complete in their minds, artists have often sought to deemphasize visuality, particularly since the advent of Conceptual art. Clearly Tevet does not subscribe to anything like pure conceptualism: not only is his work highly visual, it is, due to its subtle manipulation of shape and color, volume and void, light and shadow, among the most formally complex oeuvres of recent decades.

Rather than situate him in any relation to anti-retinal Conceptual art we should consider his work as belonging to the long line of art that partially withholds its own visibility. Think, for instance, of Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* (1916), Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920), Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped art such as *Package on a Table* (1961), or David Hammons's group of abstract paintings from 2007-2010 that were partly obscured with everything from plastic trash bags to large pieces of furniture.[1] Even apparently straightforward painters can be drawn to concealment: De Kooning, remember, believed that it was part of his job to "make the visible a little hard to see."

An Orchestral Art

Installation art takes many guises, incorporates many compositional strategies, from scattered chaos to repetitive modularity, from pristine emptiness to horror-vacui plenitude. If we had to choose one word to characterize Tevet's approach to installation, "orchestral" might be a good candidate, especially with *Seven Walks,* which achieves its effects much like a symphony orchestra. As we gaze at the piece there is a constant shifting of attention as now *this* group of elements seems to rise out of the ensemble, now *that* one. Then suddenly, a particular piece of the installation captures our eye, before it is reintegrated into the whole. Areas of

interest swell and diminish. The degree of complexity, the sheer number of visual tempos and harmonies—and disharmonies—is more than any viewer can consciously keep track of. Ultimately there is no choice but to simply surrender to the experience and let the waves of precisely organized forms wash over you.

As a composer/conductor, Tevet favors muted tones: *Seven Walks* relies almost exclusively on white, black and a tan hue that evokes natural wood or a very arid landscape, with only a sparing use of small units of bright orange or yellow. In his notes on the piece, Tevet explains that he wanted to resist the immediate solutions that bright colors offered, and also distance himself from the work of certain contemporaries, and a too obvious relationship to painting:

"I could have used color in order to organize the whole. However, I rejected the option that I called 'The Jessica Stockholder model', which for me is like enlarging a typical Abstract American painting (Hans Hofmann) into the entire room. I insisted on the 'sculptural' in *Seven Walks*. I did not want to put some 'visual order maker' in the monotonous chaos by a lively red here and a yellow painted object there because they could have served as an easy compositional device which is what I wanted to avoid."[2]

This mention of Jessica Stockholder, an American artist known for her sculptures and installations that make liberal use of bright colors and readymade elements, is a reminder that Tevet was not working in isolation. There hasn't yet been a comprehensive critical discussion of his work within the context of his international contemporaries, but certainly there are parallels—and divergences—to be seen with artists such as Stockholder, Martin Kippenberger (chiefly his furniture-based work such as the "Peter" sculptures of 1987 and *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's Amerika* from 1994), Reinhard Mucha and Doris Salcedo.

One of the most notable differences between these artists and Tevet is his avoidance of found or readymade objects: for several decades all the elements in his work—apart from the occasional mirror fragment—are things that he builds himself. This wasn't always the case. For a period in the 1980s he incorporated found objects into his sprawling floor-to-wall sculptures (*Ursa Major with Eclipse*, for instance, features a number of folding wooden chairs). The prevalence of the handmade, and the consequential avoidance of anything readymade, in Tevet's oeuvre is important not only because it marks his distance from Duchampian practice but also because it makes possible the nuanced variations of scale and color in his versions of functional objects such as tables, benches, cabinets, shelves, the hulls of boats.[3] This doesn't mean that he foregrounds craft and skill in the manner of sculptors such as Martin Puryear or Kathy Butterly. There is always a utilitarian, neutral, anonymous quality to his objects that situates them somewhere between the Bauhaus and Ikea. On the other hand he doesn't suppress craft to the extent of turning to fabricators or utilizing industrial materials and processes. It was in the middle of the 1980s that Tevet seems to have fully embraced the possibilities of the carpentry shop, taking an increasing pleasure—which, again, he is discrete about—in shaping and painting the many components of his sculptures and installations.

Much happened, in the world and in the art world, during the seven years that Tevet labored on *Seven Walks*: a century ended and another one began; Hong Kong reverted to China; Israel was convulsed by the Second Intifada; thousands of people died from a tsunami in Southeast Asia; the events of 9/11 threw the world into deeper uncertainties; the Web 2.0 emerged as the internet expanded into new, more interactive forms. As these and countless other events occurred, close by and on the other side of the globe, Tevet, ensconced in a former high school gym in Tel Aviv, continued to patiently assemble and adjust the ever-growing installation, the three-dimensional symphony, that eventually became *Seven Walks*. Can we detect any echo of these events in the final piece? Writing for *Frieze* in 2007, Ronald Jones found "implicit connections" between Tevet's works of the mid 1990s—the installations made just prior to *Seven Walks*—and the political strife in the Middle East, characterizing his art as "what happened when post-Minimalism was exposed to war."[4] It is one of Tevet's many virtues that he has never sought to herd his audience in the direction of any particular interpretation. My personal feeling is that Tevet's work is not about conflict in the Middle East nor any other historical events, but that contemplating them while keeping his work in sight and in mind can yield insights. Perhaps this is another way that his work is similar to a musical composition. As Jacques Attali has pointed out, music has the ability to subtly mirror, and often anticipate, vast social developments.

The Uses of Painting

Tevet's admission that with *Seven Walks* he wanted to emphasize the sculptural is interesting, since the dialogue between the mediums of painting and sculpture has been a recurrent feature from the very beginning of his career. Although he has rarely presented a work that was identified as a painting (an exception would be *Big Lying Painting*, a 1978 work in which narrow sheets of wood covered with paper and oil paint were turned into a long bench that extended from an interior to an exterior space) the conditions of painting, its materials and techniques and history, have been central to his art. This is most explicit in *Works on Glass* (1971-75), if only because they are single-plane, rectangular works hanging flat on a wall, but painting has been constantly on his mind, as can be seen from the title he gave to an important series 1984-1990 of floor sculptures: "Painting Lesson."

A pivotal work in Tevet's development, and perhaps his most explicit engagement with painting is *Page from a Catalogue (Cézanne) Eight Times 92x73*. Created in 1976 (along with several similar works) it consists of a 184-by-292-centimeter plywood support that has been covered with white industrial paint. Hanging on the wall it is, for all intents and purposes, a monochrome painting. Using a pencil, Tevet drew grid lines onto the white surface, dividing it into eight 92-by-73 rectangles. He derived the dimensions and divisions from a 1972 catalogue raisonné of Cézanne's paintings. In this book, numerous Cézanne paintings are reproduced in grids on each page. For *Page from a Catalogue, (Cézanne) Eight Times 92x73*, Tevet turned to one page and selected from it only the paintings with identical dimensions (92 by 73 centimeters),

and drew those grid lines on the white-surface plywood. Hung next to the painted plywood is a photographic enlargement of the source page from the 1972 catalogue raisonné. The French standard sizes for paintings, which were established in the 19th century, 92 by 73 is designated as “F30” (“F” stands for *Figure*, distinguished from P for *Paysage* and M for *Marine*). Apparently, Cézanne would frequently turn a canvas intended for a figure sideways and use it for a landscape scene.

If we consider the direction of Tevet’s work following *Page from a Catalogue (Cézanne)*, it is as if having reduced painting—embodied by the most exemplary of modern painters—to a blank surface determined only by its physical dimensions, the artist was able to begin working more extensively in three dimensions. (It is perhaps worth noting that Tevet’s only artistic training was as a painter—he studied privately with the Israeli painter Raffi Lavie.) This isn’t to suggest that Tevet immediately began concentrating exclusively on more sculptural work. Through the rest of the decade, he produced numerous wall drawings. By 1979, however, with *Installation for Two Rooms* he had, in effect, broken with the single plane in favor of structures that extended into space in multiple directions. And yet, to complicate matters, his sculptures of the 1980s often included gestural brushwork on their wood surfaces. As the artist has explained: “In the 80's I used acrylic in very painterly, ‘indexical’ gestures, something like showing a catalog of as many as possible ‘Painting's Clichés’.” In the 1990s these painterly touches disappear from his installations. He continued to apply paint—industrial, turpentine-based paint rather than acrylic— to all his wood constructions, but in a more anonymous manner, in the artist’s own words as “a professional house and furniture painter rather than an Artist (painter).”[5]

What then, we might ask, is the exact role of painting in Tevet’s work? If he is not engaged in “enlarging” painting into “an entire room” (in the way he characterizes Stockholder’s work), what exactly is he doing to it, or with it? Is his work an example of painting “in an extended field”? Some twenty years ago Tevet was included, along with Stockholder, Imi Knoebel, Polly Apfelbaum, Rudolph Stingel and nine other artists in an exhibition titled “Painting—the Extended Field” at the Magasin III in Stockholm. Obviously taking its cue from Rosalind Krauss’s influential essay “Sculpture in a Expanded Field,” this exhibition was, in the words of *Artforum* reviewer Daniel Birnbaum, “a demonstration of how painterly practices emerge in other genres, such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking, and installation. Painting no longer appears as a strictly circumscribed mode of expression but as a zone of contagion, constantly branching out and widening its scope.” [6] (Birnbaum described Tevet’s contribution, *Untitled 1995-96*, as resembling “the architectural model of an imaginary city,” likening it to Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.) In “Sculpture in a Expanded Field,” published in 1979, the same year as *Installation for Two Rooms*, Krauss argued that following the nomadic condition of modernist sculpture, postmodernist sculpture operated in an “expanded field” defined by its relationship with landscape and architecture, rather than the material-oriented medium specificity.

I'm not sure that Tevet's work, either then or now, is an instance of painting emerging within another "genre" (i.e., sculpture). Rather, it seems to me that he has established a practice drawing on multiple mediums (painting among them) in order to initiate precise (and multifarious) experiences for his viewers. There is a perceptual and participatory dimension to Tevet's work that displaces emphasis from the object to the experience. This is true not only of the installations, but also of the small wall sculptures, which are every bit as dependent on the viewer's choice of position and movement. This might seem to situate his work in a Friedian objecthood/theatricality debate, but ultimately Tevet's work easily escapes such binary thinking. If nothing else, it is simply too complex, especially in its orchestral mode, to be subsumed into the language of any single medium. He also has found a way to decouple painting from the circuit of commodification to which it is so often consigned. There's very little chance that any of the painted rectangles in his installations will become pieces of trophy art or vehicles of financial speculation.

Montage and Memory

Although its role is not so immediately obvious, there is a third medium besides sculpture and painting that is present in Tevet's work: film. Tevet has signaled his connection to cinema in titles of works such as *Sound for a Silent Movie* (1986) and *Man with a Camera* (1993-94). The latter title clearly is meant to evoke Dziga Vertov's revolutionary 1929 documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* (sometimes referred to a *Man with a Camera*). It makes sense that an artist as deeply influenced by Russian Constructivism as Tevet would also be attracted to Vertov, whose approach to filmmaking shared much with artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, who designed the titles for Vertov's 1924 film *Kino Eye*.

There is a passage in his notes on *Seven Walks* where Tevet alludes to the role that film plays in his work. After first comparing the "different events unfolding" in his work to "the way urban architectural landscape appears surprisingly with its lack of sequences," he then likens the panels separating different "areas" in his installation to "cinematic montage splices." More specifically, he explains, "I used the partitions in this work like cuts in cinema, after each cut (wall) the next scene may be a new one, a surprise, a break in the sequence."[7]

It's important to note here that montage, executed in dazzling, innovative variety, is at the heart of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. Interestingly, Vertov isn't the only filmmaker whose work resonates with Tevet's, whether through their use of montage or their depiction of the discontinuities of "urban architectural landscape" or both. There are certain sequences in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, for instance, where a walk through a city becomes, in the words of film critic Richard Brody, a record of "visual architectural dissonances."[8] Perhaps the most Tevetian of such sequences is found in the final seven minutes of *L'Eclisse* (1962) where a series of seemingly disconnected shots show us glimpses of a bleak, deserted suburban neighborhood in Rome, providing the film with a radically narrative-free ending.

Another innovative European film of the 1960s that Tevet's work brings to mind, albeit in a more literal fashion, is Jean-Luc Godard's *One Plus One* (1968), largely shot in a London recording studio divided up by large acoustic panels that resemble nothing so much as the thin wall-like wood panels that punctuate Tevet's installations. Even the colors of the studio (where the Rolling Stones are rehearsing and recording "Sympathy for the Devil") is similar to the kind of palette that Tevet favors. In Godard's film these dividers serve to isolate the individual musicians psychologically as well as acoustically; they also evoke, as do Tevet's painted-wood dividers, the realm of monochrome abstraction.

Despite these cinematic resonances it would be a mistake to interpret *Seven Walks* as a commentary on urban alienation or social discontinuity. For one thing, Tevet's work—all of it, not just *Seven Walks*—is invested with an infinite amount of artistic labor, an attention to minute differences of scale and color and proportion, that conveys the opposite of alienation. In this he is not only distant from Antonioni and Godard, but also from many contemporary artists with whom he otherwise shares structural affinities. Rather than evoking some dehumanized environment his work often speaks to us of shelter and dwelling, an impression that is strengthened by the appearance of symbolically-charged forms that resemble boats and books. There is a tenderness to his work, an inherent plea for us to act gently and move slowly, lest this subtle order be destroyed. One of the most important messages that Tevet's work may have for us is that there are, indeed, viable models for existence between the uncontrolled chaos and intransigent order.

The tenderness is embodied in the tables (or should we see them as empty pedestals?) with impossibly slender legs, and in the tiny boats, which could be the playthings of a child who has disappeared into the realm of adulthood but left behind these talismans of freedom, of leisurely escape, of imaginative play. All of us have known such objects, even if they are now only dimly vibrating images. Tevet reminds us that they once existed in the physical world and still do, invisibly, in our memory, and, perhaps, visibly in the realm of art. Somewhere in this labyrinth, in this real-world memory palace, a sense of intimacy and wholeness is waiting to be rediscovered, around a corner, on a hidden shelf, in an alcove of life that we haven't entered, yet.

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[1] See Raphael Rubinstein, "To Rest Lightly on the Earth," *Art in America*, tktk, 2011.
[2] Nahum Tevet, "Some Notes on the Making of 'Seven Walks 1997-2004.'"
[3] Thierry de Duve has argued persuasively on the importance of Duchamp for Tevet's early work, especially the "Works on Glass." See Thierry de Duve, "Handle with Care," info tkktkktkktk.
[4] Ronald Jones, "Nahum Tevet," *Frieze*, October, 2007.
[5] Nahum Tevet, "Some Notes on the Making of 'Seven Walks 1997-2004.'"
[6] Daniel Birnbaum, "Painting—the Extended Field," *Artforum*, February, 1997.
[7] Nahum Tevet, "Some Notes on the Making of 'Seven Walks 1997-2004.'"
[8] Richard Brody, "Cinema's Walking Cure," *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2016.