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How we bent a rod into a bow, how we stretched a tendon-string

Body, Construction, Lacuna

Hilla Ben Ari's works, whose creation involves multiple mediums, do not confirm to monolithic definitions of any one medium or form. Nevertheless, the pulse of her latest works can already be detected in her early artistic practice, and her wide-ranging projects form an impressively consistent ensemble. The focal point of her recent video installations is clearly rooted in the tension between a skeletal structure and a body pushing beyond its outer limits. Such an encounter between a corporeal entity (mounds of material) and a metal construction (perpendicular wires) was explored by Ben Ari at the outset of her career. That early encounter, in which an internal, mental sphere was echoed by an architectural landscape, reflected central expressive qualities that continue to characterize her oeuvre as a whole.

The tension between body and construction, which is held by an internal skeleton, is equally central to the complex installations featured in numerous local and international exhibitions. Ben Ari has created stunning kaleidoscopic installations composed of multiple parts, which repeatedly challenge both structure and space in new and original ways. An intimate, closeup examination of the details reveals the depth of their emotional and visual power. These installations (such as *Regulator*, 2005) featured young female figures reproduced as papercuts, whose exposed and vulnerable bodies alluded to the reproduction of readymade components by functional, mechanical apparatuses. These figures were grouped and arrayed in various arrangements ordered by a serial logic, so that the reproduced girls became elements within a complex structure. Their schematic, stereotypical, flat and seemingly conventional representation was revealed, upon closer observation, to

camouflage signs of injury to the vulnerable body and to its intimate parts — traces of pricking, binding, and ejaculation.

The name of one of her exhibitions, *Falling in Line*,¹ poetically captures the tension between body and system and sheds light on the layers of linguistic and cultural meaning embedded at the core of Ben Ari's work. The coupling of the words "falling" and "line" relates the reproduced figures to circus acrobats and, by extension, to works such as Aviva Uri's *Acrobat* (1958): life and death on a line. At the same time, this title is concerned with the systematic ordering and fitting of disparate elements into an existing framework. Ben Ari's work is suspended in the space between these poles, like a body attempting to balance itself as it teeters over the abyss of the symbolic order, the order of language.

The titles all underscore the performative dimension of the works. *Falling in Line* relates to an action unfolding in space, as do *Flying Buttress* (2005) or *To Hold* (2001). The emphasis on the body serves as an axis of meaning that determines the coordinates framing the installations. Other titles, such as *The Left Shoulder* (2008) or *Deer Ear* (2009), relate to specific body parts. The word play (deer, dear, ear) lends a grotesque meaning to the deer's moving ears, and the same grotesque quality also "attacks" the amputated limb (or at least the optical illusion of one) in *The Left Shoulder*. This quality is further amplified when the diversion from the normative system is coupled with a Sisyphean attempt to cooperate with this system at any cost, imbuing the works with a subterranean energy directed at survival.

The existential dimension of the struggle to survive is communicated by additional titles such as *Hibernation* (2007), a term that describes a radical reduction in energy output under extreme climactic conditions by lowering the body's temperature to its absolute minimum; it is similarly evident in *Mating Flights* (2009) — which, by contrast, centers on a burst of energy erupting in a dance of fertilization. Other titles, such as *Dawn* (2011) or *Dusk* (2011), similarly refer to the realm of transformation and transition.

A retrospective gaze points to two other Israeli artists who explored the human figure as a schematic papercut: Pinchas Cohen Gan and Micha Laury. Prior to their engagement with

A joint exhibition with Maya Attoun at Galleria Marie-Laure Fleisch, Rome, in 2011. ¹

this subject in the late 1960s, the human figure was virtually absent from local avant-garde art — a fact that raises numerous questions given local Israeli culture's deep concern with place and identity. The human figure forged by Cohen Gan and Laury appeared as a generic male everyman, yet a careful examination of the works by both artists reveals a violent physical trauma and a head injury (Cohen Gan suffered such an injury in a terrorist attack, while Laury was injured in the army). In both cases, the depicted everyman appears alone on the paper support and is positioned in relation to the surface of the earth and to a subterranean dig, and the materiality of the paper is an essential part of the works.² During this period, grotesque figures also appeared in the works of Michael Druks and Yair Garbuz; in these two cases, however, the figure is a woman whose body has been ravaged by time, and whose sexuality appears exaggerated and unrestrained, in the spirit of playwright Hanoch Levin's female characters. Several decades later, in the 1990s, Meira Shemesh's beauty-queen series featured girlish figures marching in a parade-like formation, accompanied by older women sporting purses as status symbols; yet these women were not subjected to a schematic logic (reserved in Shemesh's work for her unborn babies — (nameless, sexless creatures that multiply in a state of reproductive inflation.

Such reproduced papercut figures seem to frequently represent a state of speechlessness, shock, or a certain lacuna — a term whose etymological origins refer to a cavity, depression, or missing portion, and which was chosen by Ben Ari as the title for one of her works (2012). Additional titles related to this state of speechless are *The Mute* (2014) and *Naamah* (2015), the name of a mute figure to which the artist recently dedicated a major work. The lacuna camouflages itself within the gestalt of the decorative reproduction, which is didactically embedded in the figures featured in instructional illustrations, in the innocent papercut produced during children's games, and in stereotypical figures used for marketing purposes. It has been widely discussed in both the psychoanalytic and the legal discourses as an essential, underlying gap or absence, and has been assimilated as such into Ben Ari's work: the act of multiplication creates empty sub-spaces that can be described as a sort of vacuum.

In the mid-1970s, Cohen Gan developed his cutout figure by relating it to systems of knowledge,² culture and history, to technological changes, and to the stream of information. Later on, however, this figure once again delved into the trauma of the past in a psychological, cultural, social and political context.

Ben Ari's elementary figures do not even have the privilege of resting upon the earth: they glide or fall through space. In the video installation *Dusk*, for instance, a figure appears suspended in a state of continuous presence, neither here nor there, between heaven and earth.

Locationality, Video, and Performative Sculpture

In her video installations, Ben Ari avoids doubling and schematization and focuses instead on a single figure that is projected onto a wall or screen, thus preserving the flatness of the papercut. The projected figure is presented in a single, unchanging pose, frontally or in profile, as if frozen in place — so that one may momentarily mistake the image for a still photograph. Further observation, however, reveals slight movements, blushing, the subtle contraction of a muscle or tremor of the skin. The shift to video allows Ben Ari to focus on extreme psychophysical states, performatively extending the limits of both body and psyche, structure and texture.

Ben Ari's transition to video installations, which marks a shift to focusing on a single figure, also involves a concern with locationality. The actual human figures that are naturally part of this medium are each characterized by an unmistakable genetic makeup and specific body language. In this context, Ben Ari's figures are related to a structural skeleton that seems to tie together a number of local artistic projects — such as the work of Efrat Natan, which is concerned with the body as structure and is rooted in the biographical context of the kibbutz environment. Yet in contrast to the motifs familiar from Natan's work — the tent, the mosquito nets hanging over the metal cots of the kind used in the kibbutz children's house — Ben Ari's constructions are stripped of mythical resonances and of the aura of place. Her figures hardly make contact with the ground; their legs are thin, and their tremulous bodies are bound, hung, or held together, or else curve backwards as if avoiding direct contact with the earth, suspended in midair. The essential fluidity of their identity and the avoidance of contact with the ground are both imbued with an ephemeral quality, as opposed to signs representing a totalitarian view of "place". In contrast to the term "place," the term "locationality" is open to relational movement, to the intersection of temporal axes and to the impact of antagonistic elements, while eschewing the mythification of biographical details. Ben Ari's construction is reminiscent of transitory buildings, contemporary mutations formed by the movement of immigrants and refugees, disintegrating vestiges of the myths

of progress, functionalism and nation-building; it is this context, in turn, that gives rise to biographical forms. In this sense, one may identify in Ben Ari's work a dialogue with the oeuvre of Wolfgang Tillmans or Isa Genzken. Genzken's discourse of locationality involves explorations of various spheres, architectural forms, and materials identified with technology and the legacy of modernist construction — Bauhaus architecture, concrete, and steel. Parallel to the creation of her sculptural works, Genzken has also created series of abstract monochromatic paintings, which resemble the painterly, textured concrete or iron surfaces of her sculptures.

Ben Ari similarly created works containing metal textures, yet these are not oil paintings on canvas but rather photographs, scans, and prints on paper. She then used the prints to create rolls of paper reminiscent of iron poles, which lean against a wall or reach up to the ceiling. This strategy, however, does not amount to the creation of another simulacrum; much like Genzken, who challenges the divide between sculpture and painting, Ben Ari inquires about the relations between structure (construction) and texture (skin). The texture of the iron surfaces scanned and printed on paper appears both sensual and vulnerable, as if the metal plate had shed its skin, or as if it were a cutout (time chunk) of the shed skin attesting to the gradual corrosion of a material once treated as the foundation or skeleton of a future building. This seemingly minor sculptural act makes a difference: the positioning of the rolls of paper as if they were the remainders of supporting beams shifted the perception of the gallery space during the exhibition of the video installation *Naamah* — transforming it from an elevated space associated with high culture — the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod — into an ephemeral space seemingly subject to a process of construction or destruction.

Naamah

Hilla Ben Ari's minimalist sculptural works touch upon choreography and movement, music and sound. The video installation *Naamah*, and additional installations inspired by mythology (*Diana*, 2004) or a semi-historical "legend" (*Lucretia*, 2013), focus on archetypal female figures trapped in situations that involve both physical and emotional challenges, as well as the crossing of lines between the roles of victim and persecutor. In some instances, one is led to think of matriarchal structures whose logic obeys a different order — one that nourishes selflessly, is attentive to nature and to emotional and social margins, and has an

antagonistic dimension that is amplified into vengeance or teams with anticipation of a change. Ben Ari reactivates such mythical scenes from a gender-related perspective, while anchoring them in the culture of the body, in ceremonial contexts, and in the arena of theater.

The theatrical context is especially significant for the project *Naamah*, which is based on a play³ and was filmed in a site overlooking an open stage, alluding to the stages that Ben Ari herself installed further uphill. This open stage, which was constructed in the 1930s by members of Kibbutz Ein Harod and Kibbutz Tel Yosef, now stands abandoned at the roadside, constituting a realm of memory to the theatrical culture that was central to the early development of the Zionist socialist movement. The playwright, Nahum Benari, had participated in the construction of this open stage and in the establishment of the nearby Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod, and was one of the thinkers who formulated the concept of the “united kibbutz”: a vision combining rural and urban living, agriculture and industry, labor and intellectual life. Benari’s brother, who is Hilla Ben Ari’s grandfather, was one of the founders of Kibbutz Yagur, which was part of the same movement, and where Ben Ari was born and raised.

During her preliminary research in the Ein Harod archive, Ben Ari discovered Benari’s forgotten play, *Tubal-cain: A Primeval Play in Five Acts* — a commentary of sorts on the midrash concerning the biblical story of Tubal-cain, the ancestor of all metalworkers.⁴ In this play, Benari engages with a number of questions concerning stories of genesis: the initial organization of a congregation; the revolt against the legacy of helplessness and the dependence on heavenly constellations; activism; and intergenerational relations. The two stages constructed by Ben Ari for the exhibition *Naamah* were charged with an additional allusion to beginnings by the simultaneous presentation of another exhibition at the museum, which featured the painting *Upper Bitaniya* by Arie Allweil, one of the leaders of the mythical group of pioneers who founded Bitaniya. Ben Ari and Arie Allweil’s images of structures on the barren hill are separated by close to a century, giving rise to a new interpretive perspective concerning Benari’s play. Hilla Ben Ari was captivated by this

Nahum Benari, *Tubal-cain: A Primeval Play in Five Acts* (Tel Aviv: Histadrut Drama Department, 1951)³ (in Hebrew). There is no source attesting to its performance at the Ohel Theater, yet it is mentioned in the Wikipedia entry concerning this theater.

See *Agadat Bereshit: midrash agadah al sefer Bereshit* (Solomon Buber edition, 1894), as well as⁴ *Parshat Bereshit in Midrash Tanhuma* (Warsaw)

forgotten text, which was written by her great uncle, and chose to reincarnate it by staging it as a commentary of her own, thus creating an intergenerational dialogue that is also an act of redemption. The connection forged between her construction and the open stage gives rise to an in-depth dialogue related to Greek theater, to the play's archetypal themes, and to a gender-related interpretation.

The critical play written by Benari concerns the changing of the guard between the generation of kibbutz founders and the following generation in the aftermath of the 1948 war and the Second World War, in which many of the founding members' parents perished. Having experienced the loss of his young daughter early on, and later losing many members of his extended family in the Holocaust, Benari embedded much of his personal experience in the play, changing the roles of the different characters and shifting the emphasis of the original midrash. In his play, the mute Naamah is the one who feeds the starving congregation and guides Lemech, her blind father, as he aims his bow and arrow while hunting. When he discovers that, due to his blindness, he has just killed his forefather Cain, the giant Lemech clappes his hands in repentance and applies them to his daughter's head, unintentionally crushing her to death. Naamah's death thus replaces that of her brother Tubal-cain, who is crushed by Lemech in the original midrash.⁵

When the congregation asks Tubal-cain: "What are they digging?" one man answers: "Our legs are standing on graves," while the conservative Hanoch proclaims: "How we bent a rod into a bow, how we stretched a tendon-string." Building on the obvious Freudian affinity between Lemech and Oedipus (see Gideon Ofrat's essay "Yuval and Tubal"),⁶ Ben Ari elaborated a gender-based interpretation, which compares and contrasts Naamah and Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, thus creating another affinity with Greek theater and mythology. Benari's play focused neither on Lemech nor on Naamah, but rather on her brother Tubal-cain, the first metalworker and the inventor of the bow. The howling of animals is refined into a musical tune by Yuval's violin, while the thunder of production and the pain of war are forged into the iron string in Tubal's bow. This duality of creation and destruction, which is tainted by the hubris of the Tower of Babel and the discomfort of sin and guilt, was the main concern explored by Benari, who championed the expansion of

Genesis 4, 23: "for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt". ⁵
See Gideon Ofrat, "Yuval and Tubal," gideonofrat.wordpress.com ⁶

agricultural settlements to include metal industries. The image of the metalworker is similarly central to the writing of Uri Zvi Greenberg, who was closely affiliated with the members of Ein Harod during its founding years, and whose poetry portrays metalworking as true labor involving weight, heat, and powerful energy. This identification with metalworking had an additional intergenerational connection: like many of the pioneers who emigrated from Eastern Europe, Arie Allweil, the painter from Bitaniya, was the son of a metalworker; the painter Moshe Kupferman's grandfather was also a metalworker. During Benari's early years on Ein Harod, where the ideal of agricultural labor was modeled upon the writings of A.D. Gordon, the dialectical relationship with the metal string took on new meaning.

This image of a metal string is highly compatible with the material and thematic spine of Hilla Ben Ari's work, and her engagement with the play exceeded is interpretation and the acquisition of information about the place and about Nahum Benari's life. The abbreviated scenes she enacted on the two stages dialogue with the play's underlying structure, which is also the underlying structure of her own work. As she probed the play's passionate tone, Ben Ari identified the lacuna within — the shock, violence, and silence. Against the background of cyclical transitions between day and night, dawn and twilight, she focused, as is her habit, on an arc — a concave form resembling the arc of the firmament or a convex form that may be hollow or act as a container, thus representing the tension between two points of contact and the extension of both body and soul. This form also appears in *Keystone* (2014), which is concerned the final stone used to complete the arch and support the stones on both sides; the removal of the keystone would result in the collapse of the entire structure. This stone thus alludes to the relations between the individual and the group, which are given special attention in a number of the video scenes in choreographies of a standing and collapsing group; these relations are also attended to in several "mass" scenes, in which she used a large number of kibbutz members from Ein Harod, who fill the frame from one end to the other without leaving any space for breathing.

Engaging in a multi-disciplinary collaboration, Ben Ari worked with Yoni Niv, who composed a new musical piece for this project. The orchestra, like the chorus in Classical theater, is integrated into the structure — supporting, responding, and accompanying in a sometimes muted tone.

The instruments were filmed with an emphasis on a “functional” fragmentation of the body: the belly as echoing chamber, the head as wind instrument, the bow’s string as extension, the drum’s leather as a scratch; a crude form of playing, of producing sound from the body as “the living sound box of a soul” (Bialik), a soft, keening moan, still without a melody.