

(and, yes, also to that of the technical reproduction which is spreading everywhere), the time has come to abandon – once and for all – the heteronomous logic which underlies the (essentially ideological) conception of a national, ethnic, or class “authentic” art. However, if in the final analysis we also abandon the logic underlying the demand for “new” authenticity – that is, if we give up the autonomy of art in the sense of an art that rises up against the inauthentic in its sense as heteronomous – then it will also be possible to already completely give up a concept of authenticity of any kind. And that will be the final triumph – truly a matter for concern! – of the culture industry.

Does there exist an authentic Israeli art/culture? The question, on the face of it, sounds groundless, or, more precisely: essentially ideological. If we accept the principle of historical adequacy, what can be “authentic” art in a society which has been heterogeneous since its beginnings, which is characterized by such a distinctive disparity between the ideological and State pretensions of its establishments and the actual cultural practices of the various groups living within it? Where what is being spoken about is “origin” authenticity, we can only speak about ethnic outcomes, which are essentially non-Israeli, for they were born as an act of cultural blending between the life of the particular Jewish community in the particular “Exile”, and the dominant non-Jewish culture surrounding it. The “*Mizrachi*” or “*Ashkenazi*” authenticity – each a hybrid creature in itself – essentially contradicts the Israeli authenticity in the sense of a Zionist product. If, on the other hand, we are talking about “new” authenticity – or, alternatively, about what Umberto Eco has called “the culture of discoveries” – then in the Zionist context this was certainly essentially epigonic; indeed, what existing authentic tradition could it have adopted as a foundation for its “ascent” if not the (non-Jewish) traditions that have existed for hundreds or thousands of years in the West and the East? As everywhere else in the world, “high” art, which rests upon the “new” authenticity, is perceived by the vast majority of the public as foreign. The ethnic culture, by its very definition, is not “authentic”, except for members of the particular ethnic group only, in the best of cases – to the others it may be attractive in the sense of “the exotic”; most frequently, it too has already

undergone the processes of reification, fetishization and faking of the culture industry. The religious culture, based on a developed ideology of “origin” authenticity, is not an authentic expression of the experience and consciousness of the secular person, despite its increasing attempts to convince him of this (and his already not-so-rare readiness to be so convinced, as it appears). Nonetheless, there is a Hebrew literature, and an Israeli art, there are Israeli plays and Hebrew songs, there is Israeli pop and Israeli rock, Israeli Hassidic songs and Israeli *Mizrachi* songs, there is Hebrew poetry and Israeli dance and Israeli films and Israeli sculpture – and there is even an actual pretension to “Israeli folklore”, Israeli “folk songs” and “folk dances”. There is also a fear of the pollution of all these by “foreign” influences such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Macdonalds, as the President of the State of Israel put it recently. True, all these exist. Only we don’t need to think that they are “authentic” beyond their being the products of those who create them, who are obviously Israelis. A society which was constituted in such “inauthentic” circumstances as the State of Israel cannot be expected to create an “authentic culture”. And if, nevertheless, we adopt the principle of historical adequacy, we can say that at most this society is capable of creating an authentic expression of its own structural inauthenticity. And it seems that there is no need to feel particularly bad about this state of affairs: in an era when art for a long time now has not been grounded on the national logic of its production and its sites of consumption, in an era when the means, the forms and the contents of artistic practice are subject – for better or worse – to the logic of globalization

unity among “the nation”, and actually to create a “melting pot” for the host of heterogeneous “Exiles” gathered together in the State of Israel. As already noted, this intention became distinctly ideological (i.e., became an apparition), from the moment when a real disparity opened up between the declarations in the State/public sphere and the various actual practices in the private sphere. Again, we are not speaking of an absolute separation between the private and the public (such separation does not exist anywhere in the world, and certainly not in Israel). We are speaking of the objective disparity that was created between the proclamation of the model of the “New Jew” – whose culture and modes of behavior, which are derived from this proclamation (or briefly, what it is customary today to call “his identity”) join together into some kind of *Sabra* “Israeliness” – and the private cultural practices which refuse to obey the imperatives of the new. And from the moment when it became clear that the “melting pot” ideal was less innocent than it represented itself as being (and, in fact, also served as a quite dominant factor in the increasing power-struggles taking place in the Israeli cultural field), it became the distinctive object of attack in the *Mizrachi* discourse of identity. We are speaking here of the tension among ethnic groups that has existed in Israel during all the years of its existence, but has gained impetus in the past decade, an impetus that has increased in strength as the influence of the taboo of “the security problem” has weakened. Beyond the correspondence that exists in Israel between class and ethnicity (and despite the fact that in the final analysis we are speaking about a socio-economical disparity), in

recent years this tension has taken on a distinctive ethnic hue, with “the *Mizrachi* identity” becoming crystallized as an antithesis to “the *Ashkenazi* hegemony”. Without pausing here any longer over the fundamental fallacy entailed in this conception (as hinted above), it is clear that it relates directly to the Zionist discourse of “authenticity” and seeks to subvert it: where the Zionist “melting pot” ideology – in its imaginary status as an “*Ashkenazi* hegemony” – is perceived as “new” authenticity, which serves particular ethnic interests, “origin” authenticity – in its status as “*Mizrachi* identity” – attains to a distinctive oppositional role against the cultural establishment and the power hierarchy that constitutes it. Needless to say, this trend too would not have been possible as long as the sting of protest was neutralized by what-may-not-be-appealed-against: the “national unity” that feeds on the “security problem”.

By the way, it is in this very context that we must interpret the statements being made recently by representatives of the Palestinian minority in Israel about “cultural autonomy” for Arabs who are citizens of Israel. It is very doubtful whether such a demand could have been put forward in the era preceding the “peace process” (and, as a sequel to this: before the discussion on the issue of a “Jewish state” as opposed to “a state of all its citizens” – which only several years ago could not have even been conceived of – attained to public legitimization). Certainly there is no need to say very much about the status of “origin” authenticity in the discourse on the identity of the Palestinian population in the framework of the Zionist state.

relevant to our subject, although we must be precise in this context too: the trends that led to the increased foregrounding of the inner contradictions did not begin in the period of the peace process, but years earlier; however, there can be no doubt about the accelerating impact that the process had on this issue, especially since the initial crystallization of these very trends had already involved a degree of slackening of obedience to the dictates of the taboo and the consensus of the traditional Zionist ideology.

One of these oppositions actually touches the very core of the secular Zionist ideology. I refer to the entry of religion into the Israeli (political and cultural) public sphere. Zionism, from the outset, had “got along” without any difficulty with the intentions of the National-Religious movement, even when the latter – after the 1967 Six-Day War – began developing paths of its own and giving a religious interpretation to the outcome of the war; after all, the ideology of “the Whole Land of Israel” had already existed before, for several decades, in its secular version, and there are still people who claim that this version is not merely the esoteric platform of an extreme faction within Zionism, but is actually the very essence of Zionism. However, as has already been noted, as long as the various currents “respected” the undisputed monopoly of State Zionism as the dominant ideology in the State of Israel, Zionism was quite tolerant towards them and even made use of some of these currents for its own needs. The picture changed entirely when the ultra-orthodox (*haredi*) religious movement entered the Israeli public sphere, no longer, as in the past, with modest demands in the realm of State finance for its institutions and organizations, but with a

declared insistent pretension to have a real influence on Israeli politics as a whole. In doing this, it based itself on what it, more than any other section in the Jewish-Israeli public, had to offer: “origin” authenticity. And as it turns out, it indeed hit the soft belly of many among the secular population, who had always lived with the vague, uncomfortable feeling that their “Jewishness”, rather than being defined by “Jewish values” (i.e., positively), was determined by a history of persecutions and an ideology of the “need to unite” (i.e., negatively). The polemics about “the full wagon” were not only the battle-slogan of the self-confident religious, but also definitely a distinctive symptom of the neurosis of secular Zionism, which to this day still scratches its head and asks itself what is the foundation of the “authenticity” of self-determination as an ideology that has pretensions to gather together all the Jews of the world under its wings. The culture-war that is being waged in the Israeli society in recent years is not being conducted in a symmetrical fashion, at least when we look at the representations of the discussion in the public sphere: the objective dependence of the *haredi*-religious public on the secular-Zionist organization of life does not translate into a subjective independence of the secular public from some “origin” authenticity that orthodox Jewry has appropriated a monopoly on for itself. The culture-war is thus being conducted principally in the determining conditions of the neurosis of “authenticity”. And from the moment that the “new” authenticity lost its glamour, no one any longer speaks about religion itself as a neurosis.

The other opposition relates to the pretension of the Zionist ideology to impose a cohesive

co-opt on a massive scale the entirety of Jewish history, a history which thus turned into a continuous pageant of persecution, distress, suffering and destruction. It is enough to examine the monopolization of the memory of the Holocaust, the modes of use of it, and the outcomes of the banalization of “the rupture of civilization” in everyday life, to see the extent of this ideological instrumentalization in the Israeli political culture.

Indeed, for many years, the “security problem” ideology managed to preserve the matrix of Jewish-Israeli “unity” without any real cracks – as an undisputed consensus on the boundaries of reflection about the manner of existence and the form of development of the Israeli society and its State-political framework. This is not to say that a critical culture did not exist, that sharp polemics were not conducted, and that difficult crises did not arise from time to time; but it was always clear to everyone what the boundaries of the polemic were, what ideological taboos must not be broken, and the willing obedience to the unwritten codes of the boundaries of reflection and dissent was always integrated with a well-assimilated awareness of “the security problem”, “the Holocaust” and an eternally hostile “world”. Again, beyond the real historical and immediate circumstances which could shape the particular character of the Israeli political culture, we are speaking here about the great willingness of the vast majority of the Israeli public to surrender to the reflection-sterilizing imperatives of this culture, to accept its hidden censorships without excessive hostility, and to merge most fervently into the circles of “unity”, “common fate” and “mutual guarantees” that this

culture created, molded, and crystallized for them.

We can learn how successful the “security problem” ideology was in its work of unification from what happened at the particular historical moment when it seemed, if only for a brief while, that the “problem” doctrine was losing something of its indoctrinational force: we don’t have to believe that the political steps which in the early ‘90s began to move the wheels of Israeli-Palestinian interaction were indeed intended to institute a real peace to understand that they contributed to a significant weakening of the “unity” effect which is nourished by the ideologization of “the security problem”. It is no accident, therefore, that the figure who symbolizes the activation of the process on the Israeli side, Yitzhak Rabin, was quickly represented as a “traitor” and as the “murderer of Zionism” by groups on the Israeli right; and it is even less accidental that only a very short time after the elimination of this figure, the discussion was diverted from the murder itself to the domain of “the rift in the Israeli society” and the issue of “the unity of the nation”. Several months later, during the election campaign, the members of the assassination victim’s party avoided mentioning the assassination (there was talk of not “angering” the Israeli public), and it was the candidate of the rival party who repeatedly recited and ground to a fine powder the slogan of “security”, which finally won the elections. At the same time, it was actually the temporary slackening of the hold of “the security problem” which made possible the exposure of a little of what *actually* lies concealed behind it – the contradictions and the oppositions that are astir in the Israeli society. Two of these are most

orientation). In the nature of things, since the period of the *Yishuv* [pre-State Jewish settlement in Palestine], the Zionist discourse on authenticity has lacked a real basis in this particular sense. Nonetheless, these motifs also arose in the Zionist discourse, though with the requisite modifications. Zionism was in fact obliged to give up the qualities of “tradition” in the sense of an ancient rural-agricultural way of life; in its place it sought to produce such a “tradition” in the sense of the authenticity of the “new” – the Zionist-Hebrew agricultural ethos – and therefore rested upon an ideology of a new connection with “Nature” – “the Conquest of the Wilderness”. And since the Zionist experience (which had no past) did not grow out of the (Western) logic of transition from a feudal-agricultural to a capitalist-industrial mode of production, but sought on the face of it – at least at the beginning of its path – to organize itself directly on the basis of its host of socialistic-collectivistic views, images of life in the “bourgeois” city (which didn’t quite exist yet, to tell the truth) served as an antithesis to the new agricultural Zionist ethos, not however in their sense as a progress which is threatening in its alienation, but as a kind of continuation of the “Exilic” decadence that is neither pioneering nor “new” in its being and its intentions. Zionism’s authenticity was “the new”; but the new of Western modernity was decadent; in this perspective, the ideology of “origin” authenticity was a necessity for it: return to (agricultural) “Nature” as an act of renewal, return to the (Hebrew) “Land of the Forefathers” as an act of historical legitimization, and the synthesis of the two – “Conquest of the Land” (the *chalutz*, pioneer) – as an act of “primal” authenticity.

Needless to say, the competitor for the authenticity – the person who had dwelt in “the Land” for centuries, and in a traditional manner – was obliged to undergo an ideological integration, at first by way of romanticization, later by way of demonization and exclusion.

From the time when the separation between the collective-ideological images of authenticity of the State/public sphere and the authenticity of the private life-worlds occurred in Israel (on the background of the heterogeneous mass immigration in the decade following the establishment of the State), there arose more urgently the need for a general Jewish-Israeli solidarity which could be able to “unite the nation” and to sweep under the carpet of ordinary consciousness all the contradictions, oppositions and real foci of conflict in the developing Israeli reality. In this context too, it turns out, the conception of “unity” was constituted by way of negation: the external threat (both actual and imaginary) to the Zionist collective rapidly crystallized into a “security problem” ideology, grounded principally on a fetishization of the real anxiety prevalent among the Israeli population. It should be made clear that the relevant question in the context being discussed here does not touch on the actual reasons for the growth of this anxiety, but first and foremost on the heteronomous uses made of it, or, in other words, on the instrumentalization of anxiety for needs which do not relate to the state of anxiety itself, and certainly not to its elimination. On this issue, the Israeli political culture did not stop at mobilizing the concrete threats to the Israeli public, but also took care to

relevant expression in the State/public sphere of “here”, despite the resolute pretension of the ideology of this “here” to represent, if not the survivors themselves, at least the “lesson” of what they had gone through.

On this background, State Zionism found itself captive in a real contradiction in relation to its ideology of authenticity: in its striving to create the authentic in the sense of the “new”, it was unable to lean upon considerable portions of the Israeli society during the State’s first years; on the contrary, the authenticity of these was definitely perceived as the object of this society’s ideological resistance. On the other hand, in its search to mobilize for itself the aura of legitimacy of “origin” authenticity, it had to abandon the distinctively secular-modern foundation of its socio-political intention, to “return to the origins” and to formulate/shape the act of constituting the State and the right which justifies it as a teleological process of “Return to the Land of the Forefathers”; this process, more than it was grounded on a historical outlook, contained an implicit religious element (although not so religious as to undermine the legitimacy of the Zionist project itself). Indeed, a large degree of artificiality (i.e., of absence of “natural” historical circumstances, or, if we like: of inauthenticity) characterized the establishment of the Jewish nation-state: its constituting ideology actually drew not a little of its driving strength from its negativist elements (i.e., it based itself principally on the perception of the “Exilic” Jew as an object of persecution and oppression, so that the persecutor automatically became the source of the identity). On the other hand, when the ideology came to create a positive foundation of identity,

it found itself pulled into the religious-mythical (which is not surprising, for in seeking to avoid an external definition of identity by way of negation, religion indeed appeared as a sole possible factor for the creation of some common denominator, as abstract as it might be, among the host of Jewish collectives dispersed throughout the world – and this on the premise that an ancient Canaanite outlook, no less mythical in its rationalizing character, was out of the question for the Zionist perspective itself). Yet it is not only on the ideological level that one can point to such exceptional (contradictory) elements – the real circumstances of the establishment of the State were a historical precedent in several senses: Israel, it would seem, was the only modern nation-state in the world whose territorial site was determined before the actual historical collective that was to populate this territory had actually come into existence, let alone become crystallized. And behold: what had been created as an abstract idea, as a platform for future eventuations – i.e., based on an orientation to the “new” (the secular-political ingathering of the Jewish people) – in fact based itself on the authenticity of the mythic “origin” (adherence to the biblical territory).

As already noted, the Western sociological discourse on authenticity has been accompanied by a degree of ambivalence towards the transition from traditional society (the rural-agricultural organicity of which served as a kind of paradigm of the authenticity of nature and tradition, “origin” and “primordially”) to modern society (the contractual-administrative character of which simultaneously symbolized progress and alienation, experience of liberation and loss of

Exilic subject, the one whose right to exist as such had been categorically negated and denied him once and for all, had to come (in practice, be brought) to Israel so that Zionism could strip him of his (“Exilic”) identity, to knead and remold him anew. Whether the person, this subject, wanted this or not, one thing is clear: here, in a collision pregnant with ramifications, the concept of authenticity as “origin” clashed with the concept of authenticity as “new”.

This conflict did not receive official expression: it was clear to both sides – and for many years, as noted, also to those who chose not to live in Israel – who held the primacy in determining both the playing-field and the rules of the game of shaping the new “identity”, or, more precisely, of the ideology of identity and of its dissemination. At the same time, the conflict was not resolved by itself, and thus it happened that from the moment of the establishment of the State of Israel and the crystallization of the society living in it, there began a clear separation (at times polar) between the expressions of the ideology of authenticity in the State/public sphere and the heterogeneous expressions of identity that do not conform to the explicit intentions of the State ideology, which prevailed (and still prevail) in the private life-worlds. This is not to say that one of these rules out the other. On the part of the private individual there certainly was no necessary contradiction between an affinity to “Exilic” life-ways and culture-forms and a sense of real belonging to the Zionist collective. On the part of State Zionism, the matter was more complex: it had always been markedly tolerant and “generous” towards the life-cultures of the various Jewish ethnic groups, with their

traditions and customs, as long as these did not threaten its hegemony, i.e., as long as they did not pass beyond their charming but also harmless status as “folklore”; on the contrary, the existence of this folk culture could also be interpreted as a kind of expression of the success of the “Ingathering of the Exiles” project (the twin of the “melting pot” ideology and a necessary condition for its realization). However, the moment these “Exilic” factors were perceived as in any way undermining the self-image of Zionism and disturbing its declared “way”, this tolerance immediately disappeared. In this particular sense, those who claim that it was “the *Ashkenazi* hegemony” that eliminated the *Mizrachi* [“Oriental” and *Sephardic*] culture from the Israeli reality and robbed members of the *Mizrachi* ethnic groups of their identity are mistaken. Nothing was a greater threat to State Zionism than the *Ashkenazi* “Exility”: indeed it was in the new Israel that Yiddish was persecuted as the most dangerous rival of Hebrew, that the life of the East European *shtetel* became the most distinctive symbol of the “Exile” and of “Exility”, and that the *Ashkenazi* Holocaust survivors became a factor of the first order in proving the justice of the Zionist way, i.e., the actual embodiment of that element the identity of which has to be negated (for if not, its extermination is assured). Empathy was not in evidence there. Once more, this is not to claim that the Holocaust survivors who arrived in Israel did not assimilate the ideology dominant in their new country. But one may definitely state that their private life-experience, which was decisively shaped by what had happened “there”, did not attain (and in an obvious sense could not attain)

industry in particular. The concept of authenticity here therefore points to the negation of the false, which may be defined – or at least made perceptible – relatively clearly by means of what in its essence is not definable in advance, since it is non-conceptual and not-yet-known, that something which ceaselessly seeks to elude its fixation as concept or precedent. In this sense, of deviation beyond the self-evident actuality, without retreating to the known historical past, there also exists an *authentic* contemporary art: the art which answers to the criterion of historical adequacy, i.e., the art which creates new forms, means of expression, and meanings, and does not essentially go back and process or recycle the old, the familiar and the conventional. This is no small matter, for it is in fact an authenticity of this kind that is likely to stand in polar opposition to the actual needs of those who are supposed to come into contact with it. Yet this is exactly what we are discussing: since the general heteronomy indeed carries out its manipulative action, the authentic work is incapable of bursting the barriers of reified consciousness in any other way than the “shock” (to use Walter Benjamin’s term), a way which on the face of it is opposed to “nature” and is unable, in this status, to operate on the basis of a routine aesthetic “pleasantness”. The authenticity of the autonomous art work is essentially confronted with the lack of authenticity of the reified consciousness.

Authenticity in Zionism,
Authenticity in the Public
and the Private Domains

The question of authenticity has occupied the Israeli society – or, more precisely, the ideology that constitutes this society, Zionism – since its beginnings. The reason for this lay most of all in the centrality of the negativistic component in the ideology, that which based the creation of “the New Jew” on the foundation of a resolute negation of the Exile. In retrospect, it is impossible to determine clearly what Zionism wanted more: to *solve* “the Jewish problem”, or to *dissolve* it, for one could hardly say that in its actual encounters with the subjects of this “problem” its attitude to them was particularly empathetic. A degree of haughty patronizing (in the best of cases), and of demonstrated disdain, which at times found itself adopting elements of anti-Semitic imagery (in the worst of cases), characterized the approach of State Zionism to “Exilic Jewry” in general, and to the actual “Exilic Jews” in particular. The paradox was that both sides in this historical interaction were incapable of existing without one another: the immigrants to Israel were obliged sooner or later to adopt the Zionist ideology as the legitimization for their “right to exist” in the new country; but also among those who gave up the option to actually live in Israel, there crystallized various modes of “Zionist identification” with the State – in the sense of an “insurance policy” for any kind of emergency. From the side of State Zionism the paradox was even more concrete: it demanded the negation of the Exile, but accompanied this negation with a no less resolute demand that the

Comte, who in his old age turned to “the religion of humanity”, a ritualistic mixture of humanistic religious faith (based on the principles of Christian ethics), a positivistic theory of knowledge and a personal and social harmony based principally on emotions of brotherhood and love. What these thinkers have in common – whatever their particular perspectival paradigm – is their basically ambivalent attitude toward the modern society, an attitude that ranges from supportive acceptance of progress to concern about the contamination, as it were, of some human authenticity (which is close to “nature”) by that very progress itself.

Authenticity in Art

The issue of authenticity aroused a special polemic in the context of art. I am not referring here to the distinction that has been current for generations between “high” (authentic) art and “low” art, for if we relate to the categories of “high” and “low” as indications of social sites, then in the early modern era, and most distinctively in the Romantic period, it was in fact the “low” – in the sense of “folklore” or “popular culture” – that attained to the aura of the authentic, that is, as what had not yet been influenced by the “artificial” constructions of modernity. It was no coincidence that the opponents of the French revolution in Germany thought at the time that the revolution was opposed to “nature”, or the organic development of the “nation”, because it skips several “natural” historical stages. This organicity rests on the conception of a gradual, unhurried and unforced development, and in this sense, the authentic – as the most

prominent characteristic of the conception of an organicistic society – entailed not only an element of primordality, but also a dimension of continuity, and possibly also of “eternity”. Richard Wagner, for example, frequently spoke of “the instinct of the people”, and saw myth as the authentic, “eternal” expression of this instinct; in *The Ring of the Niebelungs*, the figure of Siegfried embodies an authenticity which is close to nature, which is betrayed by “bourgeois” scheming and cunning that were born out of ancient *hubris* – the denial of love, the adoration of Mammon and the violation of contracts and vows. In Wagner’s work, as we know, this leads to the necessary decline of the domain of the gods.

If, however, we distinguish “high” art from the “low”, in the sense of what Adorno called the culture industry, the issue is no longer an authenticity of proximity to a natural (and “eternal”) primordality, but a distinction between the new – the “primal” in the sense of bursting the boundaries of the existent and the known – and the recurring standard reproduction of the familiar, the comfortable, the pleasant and the soporific, an industrial mechanism of production of culture-products, which marvelously suits the capitalist logic of modern mass consumption and the manipulative ideology that attaches itself to it, the ideology that constantly proclaims the “service to the client” that it as-it-were provides according to the “wants” of the client himself. Adorno argued that in their great moments the authentic works of autonomous art indeed contain a moment of unreified consciousness, an element of intransigent subjectivity towards the ideological heteronomy of “the universal blinding context” in general, and of the culture

was the most distinctive) were characterized both by a psychic withdrawal from reality to “the inner self”, and a mental-cultural longing for “the past”. One may draw an analogy between the institution of the Hellenistic “Golden Age” in the Italian Renaissance and the German Romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages, except that whereas the former serves principally as a future-oriented model for the creation of a “new man”, the latter functions as a criticism of the present which stems from an anxiety about the future and a retreat to the past, to “the good old days”. The old days, it should be said, had not been so good; this legendary time was created, as a rule, in the minds of those who were afraid to take responsibility for the future. But in the context under discussion, this image of the “old” in its status as “good” is relevant because of the ideological motifs that were operative in shaping it: since the present is perceived as a deceptive fake, the past is imagined as authentic; what has been distorted, on the face of it, is some “true” origin, something primal – innocent in its character and honest in its orientation – which has not yet been infected by the artificiality which uproots the “natural” from its naturalness. What in Marx’s writings appears as a future task of liberation, as an end that has not yet been realized – man becoming a “species-being” – is projected by the regressive orientation upon some vanished primal past that “the human species” has alienated itself from in the course of civilization, a past to which man must “return”. Indeed, to the same extent that Romanticism (the German variety, mainly) contained moments of refusal of actuality, and at times even a really revolutionary transgressiveness, it also, out of this same refusal,

contained distinctive elements of conservatism and reaction.

The central issue underlying these orientations is also discernible in the important social doctrines that were created in the course of the 19th century, and it is no accident that sociologists so different in their intentions as, for example, the German Ferdinand Tönnies and the Frenchman Emile Durkheim, were troubled about what was essentially the same thing: Tönnies’ not-only-analytical distinction between the social types of the *Gemeinschaft* and the *Gesellschaft* is analogous to Durkheim’s obsessive preoccupation with the question of social solidarity; the typological contrast that Tönnies makes between the human collective which lives an “authentic” life, a traditional (mainly rural) life based on organic relations of affection, friendship and brotherly commitment, and the modern urban social structure which is essentially founded on an alienated interaction of formal contractual relations and on the rationalistic-legalistic ordering of all of human existence, is not far from Durkheim’s basic worry about the potential for *anomie* that he sees as implicit in the life of the new age. And to the same extent that Max Weber interprets “the disenchantment of the world” as a necessity not to be condemned in the all-encompassing process of rationalization of life in the West, but also as a source of the discontent that is increasing in the face of the constantly more powerful “iron cage” – the bureaucratic administration mechanism which is penetrating more and more spheres of human existence – so too, finally, there is an undermining of the strong rational optimism and the firm belief in the Scientific Positivism of Auguste

circumstances, that is, towards the regions of doubting that what is is also necessarily what *ought to be*, points to the potential for fraud inherent in this individuality which is so proud of itself but lacks the requisite reflection about the contextual conditions that constitute it, and in this sense it may prove to be captive in a false consciousness. The question "Who is to decide what should be?", which generally arises in this context, is no less ideological than the insistence of the subject of false consciousness on the authenticity (that is, the "distinctiveness") of his experience/consciousness: by adhering fetishistically to the unquestioned validity of the individual consciousness while ignoring the conditions of the whole within which it exists, this remonstrative question conceals an especially sophisticated kind of affirmation of what is; the defense of what seems to be individual for the sake of the (no less imaginary) conservation of the autonomy of the distinctive is deceptive with regard to the very possibility of changing the conditions (and with them the consciousness) and it thus fixates the "authentic" consciousness in relation to the deceptive actuality. Indeed, in a world where the mechanisms of mediation are increasingly coming to dominate everything, there is an increasing loss of the immediate capacity to muse about the status of these mechanisms (let alone to appeal against them), and with this a vanishing of the subjective need to reconstitute that very capacity. In this particular sense, therefore, the concept of authenticity is likely to appear as a kind of regulative idea which serves for criticism of reality, but to the same extent it may function as an especially efficient ideological means of conserving this reality.

Authenticity in Sociology

In sociological terms, the question of "authenticity" has from the start been bound up with the issue of the transition from traditional society to modern society. And in this context too the discussion has always been tinted with a distinctively ideological hue. The fact that the new life-modes that were becoming crystallized in the framework of the society of citizens and the nation-state were progressive modes in comparison to the absolutist and feudal structures that preceded them was not sufficient to dim the growing awareness of the forms of oppression and subjugation immanent in these new modes which were unknown until that time. The slogans of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, which served as a value matrix of the new (revolutionary) age, actually foregrounded the growing disparity between the normative intention towards reality, on the one hand, and the manners of its realization, on the other: the "bourgeois chill" and the alienation embodied in the new egoistic culture and the sophisticated legitimization of exploitation were based on a well-formulated ideology of imaginary individualism, of reverence for private enterprise and worship of the "free" market forces. Indeed, beside the (Marxian, Nietzschean) criticism of the bourgeois-capitalistic society, already at an early stage of the modern era – the beginnings of which may be seen in the great revolutions (the Industrial and the French) that took place in the second half of the 18th century – there began to arise clear tendencies of conservative (regressive, to a known extent) opposition to the new age's intentions. These orientations (of which Romanticism

Authenticity, Ideology and the Israeli Society

Moshe Zuckermann

The concept of authenticity is an essentially ambivalent concept. On the one hand, it aims to designate the true, in the sense of "conforming to the facts", i.e., as correctly representing the actual state of affairs. On the other hand, in also pointing to the moment of credibility, it implies an awareness of the danger of potential faking and fraud. In this sense the authentic serves as a kind of code-word of defense against the inauthentic, about which, so it seems, we know inestimably much more than about what we want to defend: our sense of the fake may be much more concrete than our sense of "the true" (let alone the "immediate" experience of this "true").

It thus appears that the concept of authenticity insists on something that is "there" without our being able to be in unmediated contact with it, but also insists on a constant vague suspicion towards the mechanisms of mediation that permit the mediated contact with this something, a suspicion that feeds on a hidden feeling that these mechanisms, however necessary they may be, distort, falsify, and, who knows, perhaps also manipulate our consciousness in the service of forces that are interested in the continuing existence of the false. When this suspicion rests upon a nostalgic longing for a particular biographical

past which is gone and can never return, or even on a longing for some primal past of "humanity", "society", or "the nation" as a whole, it is liable to take on a distinctively ideological character. It becomes fetishistic in the sense that it shifts the act of relating to present reality to the sphere of defense against this reality, and adheres to this sphere without giving any real accounting to itself as to the meaning of its stubborn refusal of what actually exists. At the same time, it is also clear that most people do not at all develop this suspicious attitude towards the mechanisms of mediation: on the contrary, their personal experience of reality, and the particular consciousness that takes shape in relation to this reality, attain to a status of "authenticity" by dint of the individuality that is attributed to them. The ideological dimension of this familiar pattern stems from the fetishization of distinctiveness which arises from it: it makes no difference at all what the nature of the circumstances (social, political, cultural) is in the context of which this individual consciousness constitutes itself, as long as it be that of this particular person, who "declares" it as his own; the fact that this very consciousness is liable to be revealed as a concrete manifestation of an incapacity to deviate consciously beyond the existing

Anyone who wishes to read realism, or symbolic realism into this, must know better than I the nature of still life. What I see in the painting is neither reality, nor its symbolic traces. What I see is what's absent, and in this sense the painting is a screen; an ultimate screen of illusion whose witnesses refuse to forget, whose dead cannot die, and whose survivors walk among us always seeking satisfaction for their insult. If the protocol of an open trial is a realistic picture, a still life – then call this painting realistic.

Shva Salhuv

bears wonderful fruit – fruit that you must know how to pick and roll in the sand so its thorns drop off, and only then split it open in one single blow and let the fruit emerge like a sweet tangerine-colored dream.

These sabra hedges were cropped down, and in their place, barren ornamental trees, quick to grow and shade, were planted around the new houses that were built there – the Arab village *Agir* was totally wiped out.

When Dani Karavan took out the old painting, it emerged in the room's space like an unanticipated prickly pear. Thus it appeared. Bewitching in the glory of its colors, in its mourning.

Karavan learned how to paint on the kibbutz from reproductions of works by Italian painters. From them he learned the 'Golden Section', a composition that organizes the space so as to "present" the thing. A Renaissance triangular perspective, strictly applied to the components of a Palestinian being – sabras, a jar and a black cotton coat; a being that was cut off during a war.

The oil colors had not lost their vitality, only life had. Lives were lost and on their ruins others begun. Karavan erected a monument for life lost; a memory stored in the attic for nearly 50 years, and seemingly forgotten. As if anyone could forget those people who were driven out of their homes, out of a world whose beauty instantly catches the eye in the sandy-golden light. But in the absence of light, it is as if a sand storm blinded the sun's eye, and let things shed all the intensity of their colors, their inner light. And the sight is still and forsaken.

Asim Abu-Shakra reminded us of the offense of the stolen symbol – the sabra – in the series of displaced, uprooted sabras that he painted in the late 1980s. Karavan knew this was a plundered symbol already in the 1950s. He left it amputated and yearning for its owners.

*Deserted Still-Life, 1955**

What do we see in the painting. A severed, succulent, prickly sabra-“limb”, its orange, ripe fruit next to it; a tattered black coat on which it is placed; a black jar filled with aquamarine water. The background – ochre sky.

Dani Karavan says that if he could paint what his eyes saw he would have painted a very long procession of Arab refugees being driven away from their village – leaving behind the home, the fruit-laden sabra hedges which had become a living fence, functioning both as border and as ornament; the water jugs; their lives that had changed in a war rendering them destitute. “Deserted Still Life”, he wrote on the back of the painting stashed away in his attic since 1955, a painting that had never been exposed.

What his eyes saw, he could not paint.

A young artist, just beginning his career – what his hand could draw were only elements. Basic-bodies into which he cast the reality he sought to render still for just a moment; to stop the constantly flowing events in time – to create but one still instant. Still life. And from this flow he selected the elements with great care, as if for an iconographic chronicle: sabra, jar, well-traveled coat. None of these elements is natural. All down to the last one are products of a culture, and grouped together in this fashion, they symbolize its destruction.

When I was a kid we used to eat prickly pears, the sabra fruits, in the summer until we thought we would burst. The transit camp (*ma'abara*) was surrounded entirely by sabra hedges. Like everyone else, I assumed that the sabra grew in the wild, and only later was I to learn that it is a highly domestic plant; that you plant it and trim it and that it's like a pet which protects and

* See ill. on p. 56.

fulfillment, of baskets and asparagus. In all of this, the pioneer and the worker are a kind of theatrical show, something unreal which, exists only in its rhetorical echo. Garbuz lives in a multivalence of smashing myths and of indirectly helping to build them. In the past, he dealt with the “pioneer” as a “foreigner”, the Arab as a “foreigner”, and today he paints the new immigrant from Russia who plays music in the street.

In the present exhibition, Yair Garbuz bridges between awareness of the past and awareness of the present. Aesthetically, his works are connected to the “Poverty of Material”, the Tel Aviv aesthetics that assimilates sensitivity in the spirit of the “New Horizons” movement. On the other hand, his works challenge hegemonic aesthetics and conduct a discursive relationship with it. His works in recent years are paintings, in mixed media, on canvas, in bright colors – green, blue, lemon yellow [see ill. on p. 72]. They conduct a dialogue with the works of David Goss exhibited on the wall opposite them. He talks of a reality conveyed as if through a screen – “a kind of closed ward”, says Garbuz. “My painting today looks like a peeling fresco, on the border of illustration, painting which in its most extreme form is ‘not Israeli’. It ‘flies’ back to the Czech source. Here, finally, there is a past”.

There are two people in me: one of them invents, stands back, and transcends, and her voice says to the other person, the implementer: "Do this. Good. Not good. Do it differently. (What are you doing tonight?)". The second person is a heavy duty worker, with swollen hands and tired legs. It is difficult to continue without that same assertive and strategic voice that knows where we appear to be going and more or less why, and decides on a few minutes' rest. These are the relations of employer and employee, and the worker rebels and finds ways to do things differently.

All my imprints, even if they are very personal and the product of my imagination and personal filter, speak about other people too. I am people. I want to work with intuition, imagination, and anger – these are my ingredients. I have stopped looking for order. I am no longer interested in analyzing what I see with my eyes and what I show in my work. I have ceased speaking on behalf of a gender, the outsider, the works manager, etc. My works are no longer a transparency of a given environment, "site specific".

I know that I will not change political reality but, maybe, I will succeed in creating a different experience, opposed to the aesthetic, seemingly "sensitive" experience, of the Israeli bourgeoisie.

Yair Garbuz, in total contrast to Sigalit Landau, talks about everything – except for the "dive" into subjectivization, the action of the individual in a fixed time framework. Since the late 1970s, he

has given expression to the complex network of non-hegemonic voices, among which may be heard hegemonic rhetorics that have been turned upside-down. In the series *Ha'Aravim Ovirim BeSheket* [*The Evenings (or: The Arabs) Pass Quietly*] (1980), he added a collage of texts and pictures: *Ethnic Groups in Israel, Eastern Appearance, Black Laborer, New Horizons, Support of the West*, and *Racist Picture from Good Materials* – and images of earthenware jars, photographs of refugees and immigrant camps, pictures of Israeli settlement in an abandoned Arab village, scribbles in a sugary folkloristic Mediterranean style, or in "good taste". Black colored stains cover parts of the work; a kind of violent censorship of the photographs and texts, especially those that relate to *Ethnic Groups in Israel*.

Even before this, in the exhibition "If Not a Giant – Then At Least in His Garden" (1979), he used the remains of photographic cut-outs originally exhibited as part of a didactic presentation at the "Orient Fair". He planted himself into the photographs beside an immigrant camp and a tent, in a combination of nostalgia, art, documentation, mythology, epic, and communication.

Garbuz told me that he once wrote a play composed entirely of stage directions without offering the play itself – how much content comes over in stage directions only! In his 1986 exhibition at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion in Tel Aviv, he shows a film in which his wife Margalit watches an "Arab film" without showing the film she is seeing. Garbuz describes episodes from his childhood in which Ben-Gurion's voice is transmitted over loudspeakers at a workers' rally – an extended saga, a continual rally of

existence. Here, as in the old world of tragedy, the individual's challenge, even if it addresses an absurd world, Landau says, signifies a refusal of alienation.

Conversation with Sigalit Landau

The artist is not a theoretician, and doesn't give an up-to-date accounting of the state of art. I live in touch with the world's fissures. A container is an object that belongs to reality (global commerce). I decide on an effective action with regard to it and, based on this decision, the container turns into the boundaries of the world for a predetermined period of time – a couple of months. I co-ordinate formal decisions, processes that will bring about the interaction: materials of choreography, sweat, melancholy, and humiliation. If only I could be complacent, like part of my audience, and believe that art is a simple matter of definitions and implementations. The key word is "empathy" – not only with reality, but also with myself. I want to turn the place into another reality for the viewer who comes open-minded, with instincts of orientation. I employ choreography (in the past I was involved in dance) by means of which a kind of passage to intimacy in space and movement is created. From the moment that you enter the container, and only from that moment, you see the work – your movement and your gaze are individual, and your commitment is personal: this is art for individuals; not for the organized group tour, or an orderly parade through the

"exhibition", wineglass in hand.

My body is a tool that does not always belong to me, and even if my back breaks, the dancer goes on. In a triumphal march one doesn't show suffering, and in the city people generally deride the person who behaves in a tribal way. The basic law is well known: what you produce with your own hands will not make you rich – find someone else who will do it cheaply. When you push someone to the limit and exploit him, the last thing that he has strength for is to get organized – he is neglected, exhausted and busy surviving. How extremely can you experience reality? How extremely does man know reality? I need to be invaded in order to start to work; to enter a certain, not easy, physical spiritual state.

I have not felt the need to follow in the footsteps of other Israeli artists. I believe that you also need to talk from another place. I do not understand how I am to integrate here when I come from another mental place. The source of the idea of the container is from the experience of a trip to Berlin: I saw foreign workers living in one, and I did a sketch that served me later in my work. What I did to the material on the technical-professional level did not, at first, seem possible. No single artisan was willing to enter such a complicated and difficult venture and so, in the end, I did the work by myself with limited physical help. I heated the floor of the container to 400°C (with an oxy-acetylene blow torch), and I beat the metal with a cold hammer on a hot hammer; essentially, this is embossing work.

art, and dissociate themselves from its institutional contexts.

Landau submerges herself in the physical action and its mental implications, and in this sense, she creates an individual space of total identification which abolishes hierarchy of any kind, including the distinction between spiritual work and physical work, and between object and subject. Sarah Breitberg-Semel wrote that Landau's work never contains an "other" to whom one attempts to show sympathy, from a moralistic approach, on the basis of his otherness. Landau simply changes into an "other": "Her action and her aesthetics seem to be born from the identities of others. Her self is invaded by others and contains them as part of itself".¹²

Inside the small container [see ill. on p. 75], the floor rises into an iron mountain, an anthropomorphic mountain which is also the hump of a giant – a sublime, volcano-like landscape, surprising, breathtaking, made of rusty iron which becomes distorted in the inner space of the container and assumes a catastrophic meaning of charged fantasy ("a reproduction of sublimity for the poor, like intimacy for the rich", as Landau puts it). In the history of modernization, iron aroused human fantasy with its strength as a powerful skeleton of construction that bore a promise for the future – to redesign the world. The iron here is not a construction but the surface of the floor, stretched and hammered, at a temperature of 400°C, into a "mountain". This volcano-like mountain also

signifies the decline of nature, on both the physical level ("the Trans-Israel highway" as a metaphor for the disappearance of nature) and the spiritual level (a process which began with Hegel). In Landau's container the iron undergoes a displacement from a modernistic industrial vessel, to a mutation of the industrial, a hybrid of cheap labor power.

The containers are disciplined, uniform: at urban sites they stand in rows, functional for the time and place. On the one hand, there is a separation between outside and inside, not only on the level of the internal space, which becomes landscape, but also in the separations between head and body, between the brain and the nervous system that moves the body (for instance, the spectator puts his head into a space separated from the base on which he stands). On the other hand, there is some consolation in the triumph of the will over the technical impossibility (tradesmen refused to execute the work because they didn't believe that it was feasible), and the heart expands on seeing the achievement of the artisan who imprints the traces of his existence in the material: this is not a work of industrial metal processing, but a work of metal beating, like the manual work of an artisan who creates a concave pot from a flat plate.

Landau's containers turn into monads of miniature total worlds, yet they contain a spark of optimism: they preserve a testimony of the struggle that enlarged the surface, a remnant of an individualism which may perhaps return into

¹² Sara Breitberg-Semel, *Friction – Body I – Language I + You*. The Venice Biennale, 1997, Israeli Pavilion (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1997), p. 61.

Conversation with David Goss

I am aware of the problematics of my existence – always in the wrong place from the historical point of view – white in South Africa, *Ashkenazi* in Israel. This awareness creates a situation of non-belonging. I am skeptical about everything.

On the face of it, the attempt to act politically in painting is a paradox – a struggle that is not connected to concrete reality. Nevertheless, I feel that painting allows one to avoid conventional definitions. I believe in painting, a stand that is perceived in certain circles as romantic or anachronistic.

In my work, I seek to create a voluntary dialogue, so I do not use total installations that activate all of the senses. I prefer a democracy of the gaze, and not situations from which there is no escape. I want to give the viewer the chance to choose for himself how to experience my work – a longer or shorter gaze, for instance. Television and commercials are powerful media and I have reservations, on the value level, regarding “total impact”. That, perhaps, is why my works are of small dimensions.

I use the freedom permitted by post-modernism to convey contents. I have always been attracted to figurative painting because I believe it allows different levels of interpretation. Sometimes interpretation on the most direct level does not distort the message, and I accept it. The understanding of art helps, of course, to interpret additional levels.

A number of my works deal with the individual as a productive force, as a cheap work force. There is nothing that can stand against the magic of capitalism – maybe only religion. In Holland (in the framework of a student exchange program), when I painted *The Abulafia Family From Egypt*, the Dutch identified the painting as a group portrait of a Turkish family. My alternative to the extreme situation of exploitation, in the framework of capitalism, is not a utopian alternative. I am too pragmatic to be a Marxist. I know the “minds” of the functionaries in the Finance Ministry, am aware of global economic strategies, know that people believe in them as in religion and that you cannot change that. I see the possibility of my action in the limited sphere of a control particle, a toothpick in the giant cogwheels; maybe this is also something.

The painting of David Goss limits itself lovingly to the boundaries set by the history of art, and it works within them, like an amplifier, in the controlled encounter of his work with the reality. Sigalit Landau, on the other hand, has an ambivalent attitude to art. She is aware of art as an elitist consumer product and she tries to avoid the split created by the museum institution. Sigalit Landau’s containers are placed at the rear of the museum, with their backs to it. They ask questions about art’s – and the museum’s – range of vision, boundaries, and validity, and their very placement is an act of representational dislocation. The containers, two industrial pieces, make perceptible the ambivalence of the affinity between art and life, connect with the validity of

that they have a strong need to prove that they are the owners of the land, the owners of the place. They are not ready to listen to all the voices but the voices reach them anyway.

David Goss, too, is well aware that the option of building a total aesthetic system exists, and he avoids doing so consciously. In small pictures that are colorful in an unusual way, he composes delicate sets of cultural and social associations. When he showed *Strategic Lettuce* [see ill. on p. 71] at the Kibbutz Gallery in Tel Aviv (curator: Tali Tamir), one of the critics wrote (derogatively) that David Goss had painted a twin figure to that of *Natasha on the Tractor* (Socialist Realism). The urban contexts of the Zionist ideal of Hebrew work (which emerge in Aviv's film, too), the fine local contexts woven by David Goss into his work, escaped the critic's gaze.

Goss views his subjects from above, from a point of view that perceives them as if hovering: human, busy, close to the ground. This gaze as-it-were photographs the figures, and does not create personal contact or subjective relationships. David Goss paints people who look like foreign workers from nowhere and from everywhere: Turks, Thais, Palestinian Arabs – it's difficult to tell. These unidentified foreign workers absorb local contexts which, originally, played no part in their existence; nor are they aware of the strange affiliations that the locals create with regard to them: *The Abulafia Family* [see ill. on p. 70], painted in Holland, was perceived by the Dutch as actually dealing with the imaginary space between Turkish workers in Holland and the tradition of Delft porcelain – in

the spirit of the connection created in Tel Aviv between *Strategic Lettuce* and "Hebrew Work". The Abulafia Family is perceived by viewers in Israel as a family portrait of Palestinians, filmed with a night photography device – hence the blue hue of the painting. Each place accords its own context and its own "foreigners" to the painting. Maybe this is because David Goss tells the story out of love of painting, over time – slow painting which has an iconic dimension, on wood, in color, with scratching and piercing. His painting is sensitive to the weave of clothing, to textures, to gestures, to the entire pictorial world which retains an affinity to the past, despite the photographic-reproductive nature of his work. At each and every site, these pictorial layers are "imposed" on a different body of cultural concepts. At the same time, Goss's painting clearly addresses the flagrant decorativeness of the displaced. Like the television screen, he penetrates into the center, the heart of the consensus. The phosphorescent colors of his paintings strike the spectator – *The Abulafia Family* (1993) in blue, *Strategic Lettuce* (1995) in strong green, and in the center, bright red, deep blue and two strips of radiant yellow; *Local Resident* (1996-1997) in blue, red, green, and yellow – with the color of lettuce, earth, textile. Color combinations that are impossible in the view of the elitist canon, with a mighty vitality in the concentrated little square of painting, undergoing transformation: if we are not yet confused, the transformation is towards the sublime.

were immediately cut and Thai workers were imported. The murder – which was the first in the *Intifada*, symbolizes what later became a characteristic response all over the country – the importing of foreign workers to take the place of the Palestinians. There are those who say that even without the murder, relations with the Palestinians were too intimate. This closeness bothered members of the *moshav*. The process was unavoidable. Following the murder, the first Thais were imported to the country and Shekef was one of the first to receive them.

The relations between Israelis and Palestinians, as described in the film, are ambiguous. On the one hand, these are relations of mutual understanding and family connections but on the other hand, of fear and hostility: “the Palestinians were in our veins,” “the *moshav* has become the promenade of Beit-Aiwa”, people say in the *moshav*. One of the men, a Jew of Iraqi origin, talked about the strong tie between his family and the mother of one of his Arab workers. She was familiar with their customs and preferences and showed concern for his needs. Yet when, after acts of destruction of property in the *moshav*, some of its inhabitants set out on a retaliatory action, he was among them. The Jews are divided in their attitude to the Palestinians as are the Palestinians in their attitude to the Jews and there are many contradictions in the attitudes of individuals toward the other group.

It was important for me to include the three nodes in the film: the Israelis, the Thais, and the Palestinians. The Thais live

in Israel as they would in any other place. They have no specific attitude towards the place, and because they do not express themselves in words, their physical existence is powerful. First there is physical intimacy in their direct work with the soil. Second, their vocal presence is strong. Their songs are sung in the vineyards and the packing sheds. When you approach their living quarters, you hear music from the radio. It occurs to you that here we have the elements of a classical picture of Zionism – a woman picking fruit and singing a fervent song about working on the land. But the fact is that this is a foreign woman worker and the song tells of woes and sorrow. One of the songs is about the impossibility of escaping the social conditions to which she was born.

The group of Thai workers in Shekef lives in relatively good conditions. The Thais are not exorbitantly exploited, they are paid for their overtime. However, it is precisely because I did not present severe distress that problems of identity emerged: Who is the foreigner? Who is the local? The one who was born here? Does the land belong, as it was once customary to say, to whoever works the land? Another problem relating to the status of the Thais is contained in the clause in the contract that they are required to sign, prohibiting them from having children in Israel. The problem lies in the principle: that one group of people allows itself to decide such a thing for another group of people. Maybe it is precisely because the Israelis are immigrants

the social and historical factors that gave rise to the contemporary situation in which the foreign workers replace the Palestinians in the work place in Israel. The question of the foreign workers in a specific concrete and local context builds a network of conditions and sensitivities that are unique to Israel, here and now.

Aviv does not deal with generalizations such as “human destiny” or “the human condition” because, in the context of the foci of contemporary distress, these general concepts blur and confuse the ability to reflect actual conditions. The layers in the filmscript with its three foci expose different life pictures of three partners in the same reality. Importing foreign workers constitutes deferral of the discourse, or avoidance of the Palestinian problem. The system of avoidance is not geared to answering urgent questions but postpones them, while developing internal abscesses. The pastoral exterior of the lush green and rustic tranquility does not blur the uncertainty and the internal conflict which may end in catastrophe.

Nurith Aviv tells stories through film, slowly exposing the scenes, through hues and shades of sounds, night sounds and day sounds, sounds that penetrate the closed spaces of other sounds, and undermine the denial of the mutual physical connections that exist in this space. The camera reconstructs the body language, the gradual change in the scenery, from an arid desert-landscape to the green that flourishes in the glasshouses, and tells stories, painful, funny, sad stories – about the place of the father in the family cell and about its collapse, about the place of the mother tongue and about its rejection, about the “exile” that exists here, on the

Palestinian side and on the Israeli side, and about the ambivalence and the dualities in everyone’s relations to everything. Aviv is certainly aware of cinematic rhetoric, dramatization, spectacular effects, and the totality that carries the spectator away, emotionally – and she avoids using them. Her starting point is not the manipulative power position of the film director, and the goal is not one of moral simplicity, such as recruiting the spectator to act on the right side. Nurith Aviv provides the opportunity to listen, gaze, absorb, locate, sense, the complex situation from which the testimonial acts and the portraits are built. She first addresses the biographic level in the interviewees, and then develops a biographic level in the reception frequency of the spectators.

Conversation with Nurith Aviv

The choice to make a film at the *moshav* [agricultural village] Shekef was based on spatial considerations – a choice of a landscape where desert life still exists (the *moshav* is relatively young), a choice of the physical proximity between the *moshav*, the Arab village of Beit-Aiwa and the lodgings of the Thai workers, a choice of the sound space: five times a day the voice of the *muezzin* is heard in the *moshav*, mixing with the voices of the Thais and the Israelis. I knew immediately that in terms of space, time, and sound, this was the right place.

Only later did I hear about the murder. The Palestinians had worked in the Israeli *moshav* until Eli Cohen, a *moshav* member, was murdered. The murder has not been solved to this day. Ties with the Palestinians

satisfaction from reflecting the apparent authenticity of autonomous life enclaves, despite their attraction, nor does he seek an exotic anchor point “of those who don’t belong” even if they are “photogenic”. In an urban space that has become dispersed, it is tempting to drift to ideas of straying (such as the “wandering camera” approach to “filming foreigners” so common in the graduation work of photography students). Kratzman is aware of his place as a press photographer, and he is honest with himself with regard to locating the failings of the media: the hastiness, the statement that is not built on contact over an extended time period. He does not pretend to present a characteristic image that will contain the intolerable complexity of the situation. In this exhibition he shows a portrait that did not “put on a pose” – a very intimate moment of encounter with death, a moment charged with meanings from the pictorial tradition of art history [see ill. on p. 76].

Conversation with press
photographer, Miki Kratzman:

As a press photographer, my commitment does not end with achieving what is considered to be a good photograph. I demand of myself to take a stand, to say something specific.

Foreign workers and their families have their own rules, their own ceremonies, and they run their lives detached from the general framework. I haven’t penetrated the bubble of their lives. They are strangers to me. I am a stranger to them, and when they notice that I am taking a picture of them,

they “put on a pose”. I feel that my photography is patronizing, and I am not at one with this. I have taken many pictures in the surroundings of the foreign workers but I am still not satisfied with the photographs as a completed work that says something. This is a very complex reality, and I cannot be content with photographs of detainees or beauty queen contests; even if they appear to you as good photographs, I feel that they distort the situation.

I am satisfied with only one of my photographs, the picture of a dead foreign worker who fell from a building in a work accident. Work accidents such as these are common. They send the corpse back to the home country, together with two thousand dollars, and there the story ends. I am going to present the photo of the dead worker without the aestheticization of museum presentation – unframed and without drawing pins pressing the photographic paper nonchalantly to the wall. This photo will be pasted directly to the surface, and through it will pass the roughness and the bumps of the wall – like a funeral notice.”

Nurith Aviv’s film *Makom, Avoda* [see ill. on p. 73] develops its concrete human statements by presenting three components, rather than one. The film does not focus on the foreign workers as distinct from the social discourse in Israel, or as a global problem. Nurith Aviv deals with the three points of the triangle: Israelis, Palestinians, and foreign workers, all three crucial to the story – it is impossible to see the one without seeing the other two. The triple presence confers a view of

connection to nature – nature in man, and nature outside man – belong to the pre-capitalistic experience that has disappeared never to return.

Ernest Mandel, in his book *Late Capitalism*, talks about the present era in terms of multi-national capitalism spreading to areas not commercialized heretofore.¹⁰ Frederick Jameson talks about the psychological and ideological implications of the current stage of late capitalism, the impossible totality of the contemporary world system, “the universal conspiracy of blindness” which masks mechanisms that become even more and more complex.¹¹ It seems that all the oppositions are absorbed back into the global system of which they are parts – there is no possibility to present an effective resistance space or a critical or aesthetic distance between them and the total system. Indirectly, the oppositions serve the systems that they oppose. Jameson called for the creation of a new political art that would deal with the global space of multi-national capitalism, and shake off our regional and social confusion (represented by postmodernism, which unconsciously copies and serves capitalism). The absence of orientation in the winding space of our times cancels any ability to struggle.

The current preoccupation with the issues of society, ideology, and political culture involves questions raised by Jameson and the sphere of thought that he represents – the structural contradictions contained in his thinking. (If the

global system gradually becomes more and more sophisticated and more and more hidden, and the most modern thinker is trapped in the wings of the complex webs of this transparent discourse, where is the Archimedean point that will enable the formation a new perception of cognitive and moral space?)

The work and thinking of the Israeli artists of the 1990s exhibit high involvement in the discourse. The third part of “Pictures from Work Life” focuses on a certain aspect of the discourse that is touched on briefly here – the representation of foreign workers and immigrants in Israel.

Miki Kratzman and Nurith Aviv work in the medium of film and photography associated with the mass communications media – Kratzman works mainly as a press photographer, and Nurith Aviv, cinematographer of narrative and documentary films, has directed three documentary films, the most recent of which, *Makom, Avoda* [Place, Work] is soon to be screened on European television (Arte) and on Israeli television (Channel 8). They are constantly confronted by the complex challenge of dealing with the foci of social distress while avoiding the common failing of journalistic reportage: of becoming entrapped in the stereotype of the victim – exhausted and desperate, or heroic in his capacity to withstand adversity. In many cases, the attempt to avoid the stereotype and to tell a story of life ends up in a sterile colorful niche, for understandable reasons. Miki Kratzman gains no

¹⁰ Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*. (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 18.

¹¹ Frederick Jameson, “Post-Modernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *Left Review*, No. 146, July-August, 1984.

is being held), these intense faces, painted in oil on canvas, are conductors of a whole life experience. Like a photograph, perhaps, they contain the same encounter with a slice of reality, as if transferred in their entirety from the web of the past to our present day: with the authenticity of a very specific human experience, the art work bridges the gap of time and space.

Nimrod Eshel tells us that his father admired Nachum Gutman and even envied him slightly – for Gutman, “the man with the beret,” with a clear head, was capable of painting “beautiful and pleasant things in these crazy times”. In the midst of the struggle for “Hebrew work”, Gutman painted Arab workers resting in the field. He, as well as other artists who were not involved in physical work, were enchanted by an idealized physicality in the persona of the Arab, and, at the same time, they idealized spirituality in the persona of the *Hassid* – the Hebrew worker was not dealt with in depth by them.⁷

When Nachum Gutman did deal with Hebrew work, in 1946, “this was due to a commission from the Secretary-General of the Histadrut to illustrate a book on the subject of “Hebrew Work”.

Like Vincent Van Gogh’s “work boots”, the portraits of the 1920s are like slow reconstructions of the life contexts to which they belong; the missing object – world that existed long ago,

when they were painted. The still-life object, is perceived as a hint of some kind of all-pervasive reality. It was in this spirit that Martin Heidegger interpreted Van Gogh’s work boots (painted in 1887).⁸ However, Meyer Schapiro, in his interpretation of the same work, raised the hypothesis that Van Gogh painted the boots in Paris. Can an artist living in Paris identify with “peasantry” in Holland with any degree of credibility?⁹ Art interpretation is sometimes overly punctilious but the question of the general principle still remains: Is it at all possible to create a credible affiliation to a world which is not part of your own world? Is it possible to join the life reality of a different social stratum, from the outside – the life of a foreign worker, for instance?

Artists and Foreign Workers in the Nineties

In our contemporary world, the collapse of dichotomies such as essence and appearance, authenticity and artificiality, signifier and signified, seems to distract the artistic discourse from the authenticity of art, from the real source of first-hand testimony – to the virtual world experience of the simulacrum (an identical copy which never had an original). In this respect, “the aura” of the 1920 portraits probably belongs to the past. It also seems that these portraits, in their

⁷ This distinction is made by Dr. Gideon Ofrat, “The Image of the Pioneer in Israeli Art”, (1982), reprinted in his book *Hanging Gardens* (Jerusalem: 1991) under the title “The Rise and Fall of the Pioneer in Israeli Art.” pp. 334-378.

⁸ Martin Heidegger. *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935).

⁹ Meyer Schapiro. “The Still Life as a Personal Object”. in: Marianne Simmel (ed.), *The Reach of Mind: Essays in Honor of Kurt Goldstein*, (New York: Springer) 103-109.

contained no superlatives in both its language and its subject matter, dealt with the details of concrete reality and the fine psychology of personalities – almost all of them lonely, skeptical, and detached.

As for A. D. Gordon, the pioneers of the 1920s were not accustomed to the superficial interpretation of his thinking, so prevalent today: the perception of “work” which they learned from Gordon did not make a difference of value between physical work and spiritual work. “For me, at least, it is clear that the basic renewal of life, as of the human spirit, is not just a false dream, and it will come about only with the merging of the work movement and the spiritual movement into one movement of fundamental renewal,” (A.D. Gordon, “The Writers and the Workers,” 1921).⁵

Brenner’s perception of man and the world and A.D. Gordon’s thinking were both individualistic in their intention; they dealt with the spiritual condition of individual alertness in the face of the routine and the conventional. The writings of Brenner touch on the uncertainty of human existence and on man’s situation as essentially a lone individual. For Gordon, too, man’s loyalty to his “self” as a whole forms the foundation of his aspiration to establish relations with his surroundings, and therein lies the source of creativity.

If the thinking of Brenner and Gordon, each taken separately, serves as our starting point, there is little reason to be surprised at the rarity of worker-artists portraying a group-work choreography in which there is no expression of the subject. Nor is there reason to be surprised that “direct” portrayals of the individual and his unique facial expression are so prevalent. Survival in the harsh reality of day-to-day life demanded a constant personal struggle on the part of these young people who had placed “their souls in their hands.” Not a few took their own lives; they are buried in a small cemetery at the foothills of the Gilboa mountains. Something of the fragile existence of these people who chose so demanding and difficult a path for themselves is conveyed in the paintings – in the delicate system of relationships between being a worker, an individual in a restricted private space, and day-to-day life in a group. The portraits from the 1920s and 1940s by Yehoshua Issak-Eshel [see ill. on pp. 65-66], or Bezalel Tzuri [see ill. on p. 67] (a member of Tel-Yosef from 1928),⁶ were created by the worker-artists alongside their daily work, under stressful conditions. They did not pretend to represent something to the outside world, and they did not form part of an explicit ideology of the collective. For me, coming to these portraits from a distance of nearly 70 years (in the same place where the present exhibition

⁵ A.D. Gordon. “The Writers and the Workers” (1921), in *Selected Works* (Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1983), p. 298.

⁶ Bezalel Zimbalist-Tzuri was born in Troki, Lithuania in 1909. In 1927 he immigrated to Palestine and attended school in the Ben Shemen Youth Village for about one year. In 1928, he joined Tel-Yosef and worked in the fields. He taught himself how to paint, attending only regional art classes. He died in Tel-Yosef in 1996.

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the Work Regiment with their sunburnt faces and their direct gaze. Something in the dryness of the paint conveys erosion, tenderness, and the fringes of a dream, like the torn armor of determination without which surviving was difficult.

Art critics of the 1920s were not pleased by the fact that the worker-artists “do not tell us anything about the life of the new ‘Hebrew worker’, and there is only one picture in the entire exhibition (Tennenbaum’s stonemasons) portraying the life of the pioneers. Apart from this, the portraits of pioneers do not reveal anything about ‘Hebrew work’” (from a review by Mordechai Avi-Shaul of an art show at David’s Tower in Jerusalem in 1926).³

The portraits summarily dismissed by Mordechai Avi-Shaul because they “do not tell us anything about Hebrew work”, succinctly expressed the world in which the worker-artists lived. The modest portraits constituted an intimate space, located outside the scope of conventional Zionist propaganda. They represented a different space, perhaps even opposed to that presented in the Zionist posters of the 1920s.

In the literature of the period, we find expression of the modest, credible gaze that appears in Issak-Eshel’s portraits: “We shall not always know how to bring to life that which is hidden within our souls. But there are times when a mere touch of the magic wand can awaken the modest hidden spring [...]. The life of the commune is

of necessity filled with such moments [...]. Certain privileged individuals are able then, with their brushes, their paints, or their violin bows, to create life, while we, to the extent that this creative power still burns and bubbles within us, can pour it out in a glance. A single, shining, wordless glance, heart to heart, unmediated and unintended, [...] ties one heart to another with strings of purity and mutual understanding”.⁴

The unique personality and thinking of Y.H. Brenner and A.D. Gordon had a profound influence on the members of the Work Brigade. Even though Brenner and Gordon were intellectual adversaries, their appreciation of each other was beyond dispute. In the dining hall of the Work Regiment in Ein Harod (where Brenner’s sister, Batya, lived), a photo-portrait of Brenner (preserved to this day in the Ein Harod archives) hung permanently on the wall, as well as a picture of A.D. Gordon. In answer to a question posed by a guest as to why the portrait of Brenner was hanging in the public space of Ein Harod, one of the members answered: “Because we loved him” (item in the Ein Harod archives).

Yosef Haim Brenner was already well-liked and admired as a teacher at the Herzlia Gymnasium (during the period of the First World War). His students were among the founders of the Work Regiments, and Brenner went out in his students’ footsteps to teach Hebrew to pioneers between Tiberias and Migdal (end of 1920). Brenner’s writings, which

³ Mordechai Avi-Shaul, “The Exhibition at David’s Tower, Jerusalem”. *Haa’retz*, 4 April 1926.

⁴ Tzvi Schatz, “On the Border of Silence” (1920), in *The Lexicon of Contemporary Jewish Culture*, ed. Avraham Shapira. (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1991), p. 373; Schatz was killed in 1921, together with Y.H. Brenner.

dimension (c.g., Yosef Zaritsky). The modern city was described as an uninterrupted continuum of urban flow; a quasi-organic system in which the persona of the artist symbolized Man *per se*, in whose art this urban organism is reflected and recreated. The art of the 1960s and the “*arte povera*” of the early 1970s expressed additional manifestations of Tel Aviv’s “modern city” ideal.

In the third phase, the 1990s, and in opposition to the above-mentioned tendency to depict a structurally uniform city, a conflictual structure emerges in urban development – the space populated by foreign workers. The settlement of “foreigners” in the area of Tel Aviv’s old Central Bus Station constitutes the extreme manifestation of the rift – the discontinuity – in the seemingly uniform (initially heterogeneous) urban texture of the “modern city” ideal. It is as if this urban space is gradually being erased from the map of the city, and does not belong to the public space: respectable citizens do not enter it, and there is no dialogue between it and other parts of the city. Gradually, in the public conscience, the existence of this area has become a “no-man’s land”, signifying the collapse of normalization and control over the public space. Between these three phases, there exists the tension of schism and change that characterizes the fundamental shifts in Israeli society.

Worker-Artists in the 1920s

The artists of the 1920s were existentially, spiritually, and ideologically involved in “work,” as exemplified by Yehoshua Issak-Eshel who combined the worker’s consciousness with the artist’s being. Among the members of the “Work Regiments”, we also find the poet Avraham Shlonsky¹ who expressed pride in this double identity in a poem to his mother: “And among the builders, your son Abraham, poet and road-paver in Israel.”

Yehoshua Issak-Eshel (father of Nimrod Eshel, a leader in the 1951 “Seamen’s Revolt”) was about 12 years old when he came to Israel from Russia in 1910.² He studied at the renowned Herzlia Gymnasium with his good friend, Nachum Gutman, and with his life companion, Shlomit Golomb. The couple joined the Work Regiment in Tel-Yosef together, and got married there. In 1921 he was sent by the Hashomer organization to Berlin, together with two friends, to acquire a military education, with the goal of preparing commanders for the future Hebrew Army. Concurrently with his studies at the Military Academy, he studied painting with Lovis Corinth (1922-1923) and from then on never stopped painting. With his decisive brush-strokes, he painted portraits of the members of

¹ Avraham Shlonsky, “Dress Me”, *Collected Works: Poems*, vol. 2: *Gilboa* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim and The Hadera Paperworks, 1971), p.15.

² Yehoshua Issak-Eshel was born in 1898 in Russia to a family which owned a farm. His mother died when he was 12 years old and he was sent to Israel. He lived in a boarding house in Jaffa and studied at the Herzlia Gymnasium. In 1920, he joined the Work Regiment and when the Regiment was dismantled, he joined the stone quarriers’ cooperative, and moved to Tel Aviv. He died of a heart attack in 1966, a few days before he was about to be awarded with a work prize.

Pictures From Work Life

Galia Bar Or

The place of “work” in the history of art is highly charged. At different periods of time, the portrayal of workers reflected the forces of repulsion and attraction that characterized the relations between social classes. In this respect, art dealing with workers, or with still-life such as work boots or tools, and all that these imply, has always been intrinsically political.

The artists, who usually did not share the workers’ way of life or living conditions, strove to express, on the one hand, an unmediated connection with physical work – the praxis, and on the other hand, the harsh realities of poverty and the experience of material and existential deprivation – the subject. Over the past two centuries of Western art, the descriptions shifted from the idealization of work – the ultimate expression of the partnership between Man and Nature characterized by exoticism and the picturesque – to empathic descriptions of workers as victims of exploitation, expressing moral dissatisfaction, political dissent, and conscientious objection.

In the first half of the 20th century, the worker was portrayed (by Fernand Léger, Diego Rivera, and others) as epitomizing the technological and political evolution that was taking place at the height of early modernization. The image of “the worker” in their art was that of a

member of a conscious proletariat, actively participating in the shaping of society.

The present exhibition, “Hebrew Work” (a key concept in pioneering Zionism referring to the ideal of Jews partaking in manual labor) relates to three historical and artistic phases of the description of “work” in Israeli art. In the first phase, the 1920s, the discourse focuses on pictures by worker-artists depicting stonemasons, builders, and workers in the field. Their art addresses work on the intimate level – the individual as a worker and creator in the social context.

In the second phase, the 1950s (which is dealt with in detail in the essay, “Hebrew Work’: The Disregarded Gaze in the Canon of Israeli Art” in this catalogue), we find the impulse of certain artists to show the experience/reality of the worker without being full and active partners in this experience. Naftali Bezem, Moshe Gat, and Gershon Knispel went out to the steel mills, immigrant camps, and Arab refugee settlements, and painted social images that went against the dominant focus of social consensus. In contrast, during this same period, the ideal of the modern city, Tel Aviv, emerged; the urban scenery as a conglomerate of light-washed roofs, cranes as a sign of the dynamics of the modern under construction, and antennas as realization of how the technological assumes a poetic nature-like

in the art work – to the creation of a “constellation” which reorganizes images with their faces to the present. A whole expanse of works – from both outside and inside the canon – waits to “gaze back at us”. The present project stands alert to halt for a moment in the race of ongoing time, and to interpret the gaze returned to us by the place that was repressed – that was excluded from the bounds of the Israeli art canon – out of the acute and fragile context of the present: that of Israel at the close of the nineties.

modern man to regain the ability to register impressions and convert them into experience. In the space of Benjamin's thought there is room for the story-teller: "It [the story] is like the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids, shut up air-tight, and have retained their germinative power to this day".⁶⁵

On this background I return to muse about the social-conceptual artists. They, and the Israeli artists included in the canon since its inception, appear to me beautiful and flawless. Something is missing, without doubt – the shadow, the dark side, the denied part of the Jewish-Israeli identity. Walter Benjamin once formulated an appropriate sentence: "Today [the bourgeoisie] live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity".⁶⁶ The Israeli bourgeois art canon is untouched by infections. It is "healthy", there is no hump on its back. It refuses to absorb a basic experience of its identity which it fears like an infectious disease – the basic experience of refugeehood, of "otherness", of the victims of war. There is almost no family cell which does not have its victims; but the Israeli art canon resembles someone who joins a cult, changes his name, and believes wholeheartedly that he is starting a new page and erasing the past.

Artists such as Naftali Bezem and Avraham Ofek, in contrast, experienced refugeehood, separation and rupture of identity on the biographical level, and their trail-blazing work

sought to give expression to this. Their works tell of an experience that has been repressed from consciousness for many years, the experience of refugeehood that has been eliminated from the canonical image of the Israeli. Figures of the kind that appear extensively in the works of Ofek and Bezem – awkward, heavy figures which look as if they are floating in spirit in a different place and a different time – have never constituted a focus of identification and imitation in this country.

This repression of memory has a price, which is reflected in the figure of the native-born Israeli. Something in his personality looks flat: he is arrogant, impervious to the distress of others, and resolves conflicts by force. The belated interiorization of the basic experience of refugeehood, as a component of the private identity, has moral implications: this is a step that has a personal-biographical character, which cannot be made from the outside, from a critical perspective. Several of the social-conceptual artists of the seventies – Gechtman, Gershuni, Cohen Gan, Neustein, Haim Maor – are today attempting to operate from this place of otherness.

The taking of a position that is articulated by means of a personal narrative is a subversive action. Today it is widely claimed that academic positivism destroys the concept of experience, and in this sense the narrative genre deconstructs the ostensible objectivity of the dominant discourse, and accords significance to the past by exposing its topical aspects – the essential aspects

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Story-Teller", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 90.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

canon – which tends to always privilege one kind of art over all the other kinds (abstract painting in one period, installation works in another) – is ruled by modernist perceptions that have a repressive foundation. The evolutionary conception of art – which decrees that only one art trend expresses the spirit of the times, better than all the other trends – has been the major premise in the art world of the past two centuries. The question “What is correct?” still continues to nourish processes in our multi-dimensional world, in which different states of affairs subsist beside one another.

Critical art – which today is a central force in leading circles of the intelligentsia – seeks to expose deep structures of social control that are implicit in patterns of canonization and representation, and analyzes modes of construction of identity. Everything is converted into an agnosticism and struggles between opinions and positions – not for truth values but for control of the field, for the power that produces a hegemony. On the face of it, nothing remains for the individual but to change his way of seeing, in the course of a continuous deconstruction of the function of authority. In the world of the global village – in which there are no longer tribes, or a forum of co-believers who together process experiences in time – such critical art, it may be assumed, is perceived as more “correct” than other kinds of art. Collective identities are no longer passed on from generation to generation by a dynasty of story-tellers – and critical art, as it were, becomes the only option in an era of the collapse of ideologies, and of identities structured by discursive means.

However, the picture described by the propo-

nents of critical art is too schematic, and it too, in its own way, becomes hegemonic, and risks blindness to the inner dynamics of what is happening around us today. Certainly it does not relate to the specific context of the reality in this country, where a portion of the population rushes in droves to the museums of local settlement history, while another portion makes pilgrimages to the graves of holy men, to listen to stories of redemption. These two trends, which are growing here beside one another, expose the separation between the global-cultural meta-conception and the courses being marked out by underground currents of needs and passions.

In 1970, in a series of murals at the People’s House in Kfar Uriah, Avraham Ofek told of a journey which was both private (Ofek came to Israel from Bulgaria when he was 14) and collective (the village was founded by a group of refugees from Bulgaria). Ofek’s painting deals with the immigrant’s supreme effort to hold on to a family unit, an ox, a tree-stump, a new reality, and to strike roots in a small village on one of the desolate hills in the Jerusalem region. The subject is the fundamental experience of refugeehood and absorption, which is common to the decisive majority of the population of Israel. The power of the murals at Kfar Uriah seems to draw upon the tranquil yet profoundly penetrating inner strength of the story-teller.

Walter Benjamin spoke about a criticism which creates a reintegration, a return to life. He spoke about modern man who has lost the ability to experience, the man of the masses who has lost contact with the environment and has developed mechanisms of impassability and denial. In his writing, Benjamin sought a way to enable

understand that this is a different generation of artists". He was very enthused and said this with a great feeling of respect, a feeling of astonishment that here was something he had never seen before.⁶³

The young artists who led the social-conceptual art movement in Israel were perceived as the spearhead of a new and authentic direction, which was perhaps the subject of dispute but was considered as avantgarde. In their own eyes and in the eyes of their beholders, they bore an identity of a just and beautiful "New Israeli", in the spirit of the youth movements of the Israeli left. They were ideologues in their actions, and they almost did not touch upon their own biographies. Their social messages were sometimes blatant – but not one of the conceptual artists performed a profound analysis (like that of Hans Haacke, for example) of an entire hegemonic social structure while treating its cultural, economic and urban implications.

In the final analysis, the conceptual artists did not consolidate a systematic project, and not one of them made the issue of "Hebrew work" or

"Arab work" the core of his art (nor warned against the social fallacies which later made possible the extended exploitation of Arab and foreign workers in Israel). They did not cross the lines, and did not address the truly non-hegemonic social body – development towns, new immigrants. They did not expose problems of ethnic disparities, and despite their political involvement they did not take in the profound social meaning of the political "reversal"; their messages were to a large extent beautiful, detached, and anachronistic. In a manner similar to the state of affairs prevalent to this day in the Israeli left, concern with the Israeli-Arab conflict was more accessible than involvement with the troubles within the Israeli society.⁶⁴

As for social realist painting – it did not triumph for long, despite the renaissance it won in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, the United States and Italy. In Israel it is not recognized to this day, not even in its historical role, and it is still perceived – from the point of view of the present – as dealing with materials that belong to the past.

The changing hierarchalist structure of the

⁶³ Haim Maor, "Interview with Yona Fischer", *Studio 40* (January 1993), p. 16.

⁶⁴ Ariela Azoulay presents a more radical view of the activity of the social-conceptual artists in the seventies. She also claims that this activity has remained outside the canon – it has no place in the prevalent story of Israeli art; see Ariela Azoulay, "An Art of Needs", *Avital Geva: Greenhouse*, The Israel Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1993, ed. Gideon Ofrat (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993), pp. 109-122; I place an emphasis on the people involved in shaping the canon no less than on the story that it tells. In the first half of the seventies, Yona Fischer was the most prominent personality in the Israeli art establishment. He provided a place for the social-conceptual artists, documented "Activities", and emphasized the affinity of these artists to one of the charismatic – and undoubtedly canonical – figures in Israeli art: Itzhak Danziger. Such affinities are involved in the canon by a genealogical connection.

joined Arab workers at the Israel Museum, reconstructed the place where they slept at the Billy Rose Pavilion and slept there himself, and in 1975 proclaimed a day of mourning for “Hebrew Labor” – was represented by *Notice of My Own Death* (1975); Moshe Gershuni – who had touched on a political biography in *Orchardry* (1974), and in 1976 chanted an Israeli song in the style of a *muezzin* from the roof of the Artists’ House in Tel Aviv, incorporating witnesses’ accounts of mistreatment of Arabs in the Occupied Territories – was represented by a drawing titled *A Delicate Hand* (1976). A selective choice of works made possible the domestication of the participating artists to the orientations of the canon. Besides this, the eclectic grouping of the artists only contributed to a blurring of the messages: in addition to artists of the fifties, the exhibition also showed “Pop Art” (Siona Shimshi, Ran Shechori, Igaël Tumarkin and others), “Naïve Art”, and “Mixed Trends” – a title given to the presentation of various artists from the seventies, such as Michal Na’aman and Joram Rozov. An inner dynamics of domesticating “soft” oppositional elements reconfirms the hegemony.⁶²

Nonetheless, the social-conceptual artists were not discarded by the canon as the social realist artists were. Although they did challenge the boundary between art and politics, and were rejected as “not art” by the Tel Aviv Museum, they were not dismissed, as the social realist artists were, on aesthetic grounds within the range of the prevalent art language, for not

measuring up to “artistic values”. The social-conceptual artists were received in another place, at the Israel Museum, and were active – with the assistance of Yona Fischer – in “Open Studio” projects (curator: Yona Fischer, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1975) and in other activities around the museum’s peripheries. Fischer, who had so finely expressed the direction of the canon in 1959 (“no longer the *credo* of a person to whom the contents and meanings of his words are more precious than the form in which they are said”) now welcomed the social-conceptual orientations and became an encouraging and energizing factor for artists throughout the country. He received encouragement from Willem Sandberg, formerly Director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (in 1959 Fischer did his internship at the Stedelijk, under the mentorship of Sandberg, who became an advisor to the new Israel Museum in 1965). Thus, for example, Fischer describes Sandberg’s enthusiastic response to his meeting with Avital Geva:

I remember that we were sitting in Avital Geva’s apartment, and Geva picked up a pencil and made a drawing to describe something, some project he wanted to do. Sandberg watched with great curiosity at how Geva made the project perceptible with his pencil. After the meeting he said to me: “The way he holds the pencil and makes a line and shows something that begins in one place and ends in another is different. I

⁶² See: Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media and the New Left* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1977); Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, *New Left Review* 82 (1973).

the exhibition, for example, was any mention of Ofek's murals at the People's House in Kfar Uriah, and also absent (not by accident) was the intensive side of the social-conceptual activity of the seventies. The "Artist-Society-Artist" exhibition teaches us about how oppositional forms that hint at an essentially different social order are pushed to the peripheries of the culture. Art trends that threatened the "common sense" of the hegemonic canon – works which did not address the context of the desired space of exhibition and recognition, and related explicitly to the political-social reality – were excluded from the discourse. Despite their extensive social activity, artists such as Gerard Marx, Joshua Neustein, Gabi and Sharon (Gabriel Klasmer and Sharon Keren), Avital Geva, and Dov Or-Ner were not represented in this exhibition.

A more complex procedure of "exclusion from the discourse" centered around the participation – or rather the distancing – of Avital Geva from this exhibition. Geva's work *Books*, which was to have been displayed, was returned to Ein-Shemer on the grounds that for technical reasons it was impossible to introduce the work into the museum's galleries. After several artists, headed by Gideon Gechtman, expressed a sharp protest (to the point of threatening to withdraw their works from the exhibition), the work was shown in the plaza outside the entrance to the museum. It is interesting that in the introduction to the chapter "Mixed Orientations (The Seventies)" in the catalogue, it is said about Geva

– whose work was not included in the catalogue list, and whose name did not appear in the catalogue as one of the participating artists – that "he is perhaps the only artist in the seventies whose works mostly bear a character of protest similar to that of the fifties. His store of images is closed to ambiguous interpretations, and he prefers the single, trenchant image, on the assumption that this acts more quickly and is more efficient. His concepts about art are often measured with the eye of a politician, with this aim – to break down the wall between politics and art, and to think about art in terms of political efficiency. His position is in constant dispute with artists of his own generation, who see the way his work is developing as a slow but inevitable sliding to beyond the boundaries of art, as undefined as these may be".⁶¹

On the other hand, that exhibition constitutes a fine example of how the hegemonic culture system domesticates alternative values while sterilizing their radical content and adopting them to its bosom. Oppositional trends which contained aspects that suited the hegemonic line were made to harmonize with it and were assimilated into it: thus, for example, painterly aspects only were selected out of the totality of one art project or another: Pinchas Cohen Gan – an artist who at that time was involved mainly with "activities" – was represented in the "Artist-Society-Artist" exhibition by a series of works titled *Analogical Work on Computers* (1977); Gideon Gechtman – who

⁶⁰ Marc Scheeps, "Foreword", *Artist-Society-Artist: Art on Society in Israel 1948-1978*, ed. Sara Breitberg (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum, 1978).

⁶¹ Sara Breitberg, "Mixed Orientations (The Seventies)", see note 31 above.

rations, perhaps even of complaints; at any rate – artistic expressions. If we were to help the Israeli Arabs this would also advance us in our art, and would perhaps also serve as a basis for cultural co-existence.⁵⁸

In the 1982 interview, Bezem regretfully summed up:

I believe that we could have found a language of our own. Because we didn't have the courage, the will and the intentions, we didn't arrive at that. In the exhibition of the twenties we saw that a potential existed. The kibbutzim had the halls, the culture-houses, the intelligent proletariat – they could have sought this. But they wanted to belong to progress and the avantgarde, exhibiting the most crazy things – all from a desire to belong. To belong to whom, for God's sake? Here was a place to be special, to be original and to contribute something real to this miserable world.⁵⁹

Conclusion

An affinity exists between the social painting of the fifties and the orientations that stemmed from it – the work of Avraham Ofek, for example – and the social-conceptual art of the seventies. Not only did both trends deal with society and reflect a deep concern with the human condition; but also both did not see the museum as a

central focus – neither on the level of institutional authority nor on the level of the activity taking place in the field. The deepest wish of the social realist artists in the fifties was to connect the art-works with life, from their place in the People's House of the immigrant village, the dining hall of the kibbutz, the local post office or a small public square. Likewise, Avital Geva, a leading figure in the group of social-conceptual artists of the seventies, saw the museum as a representative of a closed-circuit language that is nourished by inner interests of political power mechanisms, a language which does not allow for a relevant discussion on questions of identity and society. Geva operated at sites that are not identified with museum activity, in a system in which the peripheries nourish a dynamism of ideas and permit expansive work in an environmental, regional context, with links to political, ecological, and social aspects. In the mid-seventies his work became directly political, a strong and "practical" response to the social and political rupture.

The "Artist-Society-Artist" exhibition (Tel Aviv Museum, 1978) – immediately after the political "reversal" of 1977 (the swing to the right which brought Menachem Begin's Likud party to power for the first time), and a few years after the rupture of the Yom Kippur War – asked itself questions such as: "Are there Israeli artists who have given expression in their works to the social and political life in this country in the past thirty years? Are there Israeli artists who care, who protest about social phenomena?"⁶⁰ Absent from

⁵⁸ "Israeli Art", *Tevai* 1:1 (April 1966), pp. 57-59.

⁵⁹ Interview with Naftali Bezem (note 44 above).

rately, and all of them together, are dealing with it; perhaps this is a sign of the beginning of its decline".⁵⁶ His impressions from his journey to Europe and Spain focus primarily on the works of Goya and El Greco. The crisis that Bezem went through in the second half of the fifties is linked to the revelations about what had been happening in Soviet Russia (the "Twentieth Congress") and the loss of faith in the capacity of painting – that realist painting which Bezem had developed in the early fifties – to bridge the gaps of language and culture. In 1982 he spoke about this in another interview:

Today I think about all this differently. I think that it's impossible to influence and change historical events of any kind, social ones in particular – one can't communicate with the needy in the painting language, while those who do understand and love the art are not social cases. [...] I felt that my connection with the public was non-existent, just as Picasso's connection with the public at large is non-existent. It exists only with a particular public. [...] Ardon showed us Kandinsky, Klee and Picasso, but he did not direct us to Persian, Arab, Indian art – the worlds of the East are a complete world, and we might have been able to contribute something in this direction, towards a blending with Africa and Asia. [...] It would be ridiculous for a painter in Israel to start painting Cubism, not because he can't do it and doesn't understand it, but

because it hasn't grown from him. Only a genius, or two, invented it. This is a very difficult experience. I'll give you an example: if we were to hold a visiting exhibition in Egypt today, it would offend the entire Egyptian people, because we are trying to imitate the painting shown a year ago in Greenwich Village in New York. In Egypt today there are Egyptian poets whom we should bring here and listen to modestly, to discover that there are thinking minds and sincere feelings, and their hearts are bleeding no less than ours. And we have the right to speak with them, we have the right to speak with them in painting too. The exhibition of Israeli painting in the twenties would have spoken to them – I'm not saying that we have to remain like that, we do have to develop, but there was a breach, a breach in development, an intellectual breach.⁵⁷

In a discussion hosted by the periodical *Tvai* (in 1966) on the topic of "Israeli art" – where the participants were Zaritsky, Bezem, Itzhak Danziger and Abba Elhanani – Bezem had argued for a Jewish-Arab context in Israeli art:

There can also be an Israeli-Arab art. After all, there are Israeli Arabs, and I would welcome it if there were a development of Arab painting of a high standard, with an artistic Arab framework, which would express the feelings of the Arabs. I would want to see in their work expressions of aspi-

⁵⁶ Naftali Bezem, "A Brief Note from an Impression-Packed Voyage", *Ofakim* (February 1959), p. 96.

⁵⁷ Interview with Naftali Bezem (note 44 above).

was to be the secretary. We wanted to work together to produce a truly realistic painting, accessible to everyone, in the Western world as well. The idea was supported by all the members. The entire idea took shape within three months, and its fall was just as quick.⁵³

Following his visit to Italy, Bezem published his impressions in the periodical *Ofakim* ["Horizons"]. Even though the plans he had made with his Italian colleagues had not been realized, he returned strengthened: "I discovered that today there can exist a great and exciting realism, which can be modern and at the same time socialistic – something which many have expressed doubts about because the experiments carried out in the socialist countries were unable to convince us or to serve us as a guide". Bezem spoke with enthusiasm about the art critics he had met – who were friends of the artists, helping them with information and theoretical support – and concluded with a local message: "We, who intend to create an independent and original culture of our own, should learn to look at our country, its inhabitants and its problems, with a realistic outlook, and should work in its light in the art of painting as well".⁵⁴ In one of his interviews in the local press, Bezem said that all his works were a preparation for a mural:

I see my works as fragments or studies, as preparatory work. The drawing *Itzik Wittenberg*, for example, which appeared recently in *Massa*, is not an end in itself. It is meant to be a part or fragment of a painting on the Holocaust. The same is true of the paintings *The Ma'abara* or *The Worker in the Swamp*. For myself, my works do not satisfy me in terms of the artistic demand. I'm thinking of beginning a series of more serious attempts. I think I've reached a conclusion which will lead me to a higher level of realism.⁵⁵

The murals were planned as complexes of interlaced figures, like an arabesque of a number of stories, some of them shocking and emotionally charged – like the Holocaust, the transition camp, or, later, the massacre at Kafr Kassem – and all of them together projecting a powerful experience of human suffering, both individual and social.

In 1959, Bezem again published travel impressions in *Ofakim*, but this time he reported on a personal crisis and his questionings about his own path: "The art world today is under the sway of completely abstract painting. [...] You get the impression that the public is displaying a real understanding of the abstract, that it has ceased fighting for its very existence. Each artist sepa-

⁵³ Interview with Naftali Bezem (note 44 above)

⁵⁴ Naftali Bezem (note 42 above).

⁵⁵ Naftali Bezem, "Painting and Its Audience in Israel", *Lamerhav: Massa*, 14 January 1954; the commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Vilna Ghetto, Itzik Wittenberg, gave himself up to the Gestapo after the Nazis threatened to execute 20,000 Jews in Vilna if he did not do so. He was tortured to death, and the Jews in the city were sent to be exterminated.

to avoid the “Socialist Realist ‘fallacy of Aragon’”.⁵¹

The Italian periodical *Corrente* unified artists and writers of all trends (with emphasis on realism) in the struggle against Fascism, until it was closed by the authorities in 1940. In 1942, artists who remained connected with the *Corrente* group signed a manifesto that placed the blame for art’s divorce from life on the Italian painting of the previous generations, and made “the Picasso of 1937” (*Guernica*) the leading artistic personality.

The Neo-Realist movement was a central force in Italy during the early post-war years, and had supporters not only in the fine arts but also in literature and the cinema. In June 1952, the first issue of its organ – the film and literature periodical *Realismo* – appeared. The Neo-Realists sought creative means of bridging the traditional gap, characteristic of modern Italian culture, between art and the masses, and sought a broad language of communication that would not eschew criteria of quality. Various organizations came into being; the most important of them – the “New Art Front” – was founded in 1947 by twelve leading artists. The “Front” posited a common ethical basis: recognition of the artist’s moral responsibility. Its manifesto displayed an interesting perception of art, history, and the human factor: “Art is not the conventional face of history; it is history itself, which cannot exist without people”.⁵² The Front’s declaration of solidarity received international recognition at the 1948 Venice Biennale.

After the Italian Communist Party’s secession from the ruling coalition in those years, the affinity between it and the Neo-Realist artists increased. For a short while this was an organizational advantage – but with the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the consequent crisis in the Italian Communist Party, the Neo-Realist group was faced with a dead-end and soon disintegrated, and the periodical *Realismo* closed down as well.

At the Venice Biennale in 1950 (which was called “the Biennale of Realism”), and also in 1952 and 1954, the Italian Neo-Realism was strongly represented. Only in the late fifties was it evident that realism was “dead” and that the future belonged to abstract painting. Naftali Bezem met with Italian realist artists when they were at their peak, about two years before the group disbanded. At the 1954 Biennale, Bezem exhibited five large drawings in black-and-white, which aroused interest among the Italian artists:

They received me with extraordinary friendliness, in light of the five drawings I exhibited at the Biennale. I was unknown, I didn’t have a penny, I fell ill, and they helped me. They accepted me and invited me so nicely; I had never felt so welcome before. Guttuso took me to Rome, and from Rome to Florence, and in every place artists from the group were waiting for me. We all shared the view that Soviet painting was stifled by political and bureaucratic institutions. We had marvelous plans, to establish a center and a school and traveling exhibitions – I

⁵¹ M. de Micheli, *Realismo e poesia* 45:1 (February 1946).

⁵² L. Ferrante, *Arte e realtà* (Venice, 1952).

these meetings also had a practical character, for some of the artists took social art projects upon themselves: Moshe Gat went out to the steel mills to paint the workers, and Knispel painted Arab refugees near Nazareth. Knispel recently told me that in those days he believed that this art language would become a common language for bridging the gaps and speaking with the refugees, Jews and Arabs alike.

Realism Outside Israel,
and Naftali Bezem

Realism, in all its various forms, was without doubt a leading force in the world after the Second World War. From this perspective, Kolb read the map of international art correctly when he sent Naftali Bezem's realistic works to the 1954 Venice Biennale. But in Israel, despite the interest taken in the new trends taking shape in Europe, there was no readiness to listen to the nuances of these new trends, and hence no serious attention to the distress that colored the soil of their growth.

As early as 1925, Jose Ortega y Gasset had written his famous essay "The Dehumanization of Modern Art",⁴⁹ which describes modern art as essentially unpopular. This unpopularity is not something temporary, for the public will never become accustomed to it. Modern art will always divide the public into two: a tiny, refined minority that reads its language, and a decisive majority that does not understand it and feels inferior and humiliated. Modern art scraps every-

thing that is human and preserves only the pure artistic elements. Gasset's essay shocked art circles world-wide, which did not believe in an art based on an essential severance from life, man and society. The poet Aharon Almog, a member of the *Likrat* group, spoke about similar things in the Israeli context:

As a consequence of most of the poems that appear in the literary supplements and other literary forums in our country, the masses have lost interest in poetry, and apart from the "poet" and his coterie, nobody reads the poems. [...] Is this the "young" poetry's response to the miserable transition camps on the one hand and the magnificent villas on the other? Is this how we must sing at a time of shameful desertion from human values?⁵⁰

The Second World War exposed even more troubling aspects on the ethical level of modern art: for example, the distinct lack of social interest displayed by famous French artists who during the Nazi occupation had joined a State tour organized by the authorities. In contrast, the group of Italian realist artists sought ways of expressing the oppression, and the artist Renato Guttuso even drew scenes of massacre perpetrated by the Germans upon Jewish hostages in North Italy in retaliation for the actions of the partisans (of whom Guttuso was a member). An Italian underground bulletin called on its readers "to avoid naturalistic interpretation of realism, so as

⁴⁹ Jose Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Modern Art", 1925.

⁵⁰ See Amos Levin (note 43 above), pp. 58-59.

essence that generates it.

These artists never belonged to one single art movement. They were graduates of different intakes at Bezalel, who did not necessarily know one another, did not carry a declared and distinctive banner, and did not compose an ideological manifesto. There were mutual influences, there was a common ground of growth, and there was also a division into internal sub-groups.

Gershon Knispel was the initiator of gatherings of artists and like-minded friends (who tended towards the left on the political map) in Haifa, and one of the participants at these meetings was Yosef Maoz.⁴⁸ Maoz had made friends with the young artists while they were students in Jerusalem – they at Bezalel, and he at the Hebrew University. They continued meeting as a non-permanent forum, and were involved one way or another in the disturbances that took place in Haifa in the years 1954-1957. Members of the forum included Knispel, Gat, Ofek, Tzabar, Borstein (Marian), Zvi Millstein, Avraham Braunstein, Menachem Gefen,

Yehoshua Kupershtuk, among others.

The group did not get involved with party-political discussions; they considered diverse aspects of culture and society. Most of the artists lacked a theoretical background, and Yosef Maoz (who dealt with history and literature, and whose life experience had already included political activity – which he had consciously abandoned, turning instead to teaching) contributed information and theoretical contexts to the encounters. They would meet in the rich library of the Haifa Museum, leaf through art books, discuss Giotto, Goya, Käthe Kollwitz (the “sentimentality” in her paintings, they felt, did not suit the kind of painting they were looking for), Mexican art, Byzantine art, folk art, political caricatures in the Russian journal *Krokodil*, Ben Shahn.

Besides their “antipathy” (to quote Knispel) to Socialist Realism, the members of the group also rejected the refined, quasi-Parisian “Tel-Avivian” art, which did not suit the new framework of sensitivities that was crystallizing among them. According to Knispel and Maoz,

⁴⁷ From the interview with Naftali Bezem (note 44 above): “Ardon opened a first window for me into the history of art in general, and of modern art in particular. He had been a pupil of Klee and Kandinsky, and he explained their work with such genius that for three years, one might say, I lived in a state of ecstasy. He implemented the Bauhaus teachings he had learned, and turned this, one might say, into an interesting and dramatic lesson of the first order. Each of his lessons was an unforgettable experience. The most impressive exhibition was Picasso’s *Guernica*, which Ardon prepared with us, the pupils. It was an exhibition of analysis and explanation of details – the lamp, the bull and the horse: an explanation of the sources Picasso had drawn on and of how he had developed these themes – forty segments. In the center was an overall view of the *Guernica*, two meters in size. That was the most beautiful didactic exhibition I have seen in my entire life. We took part in preparing it, and that was a marvelous lesson”.

⁴⁸ The information that follows is based on a talk with Yosef Maoz at his home in Haifa, 28 December 1997.

of the time is described as follows:

It is not by chance that the dominant mode of expression is that of the abstract. It is not by chance that most of the present generation has fled to places of hiding. This generation, for the most part, has forgotten. Those who remember are very few. Marian is one of them, and he breathes in his memory, where the past gives a form to the present. The mark of this century is engraved in his painting, together with traditional Jewish instruments of the lost hope which in his work has crystallized into a handwriting.⁴⁵

On the plane of the art language, the Soviet Socialist Realism of the Stalin period is based on Central European academic painting as influenced by Impressionism (the aristocratic heroes being replaced by Communist workers and warriors). In contrast, the non-Soviet social realism – European, South American and North American – is post-figurative and severed from the academic tradition. It encompassed various artists from various generations, for whom the human condition was close to their hearts.

In a review of the “Exhibition of Soviet Graphics” that was held at the Artists’ House in Tel Aviv in 1956, Kolb criticizes the naturalistic dogmatism of the works exhibited, and adds: “True realism begins at the moment when one cracks this shell [of external reality], and the artist’s imagination, making use of the appro-

priate means, reveals the reality in all its depth and its complexities in a dynamic, visionary-suggestive manner. Let us recall Goya’s words: ‘Imagination abandoned by reason begets monsters’. If we change the lesson of this sentence, we get: ‘Reason abandoned by imagination begets dry, inaccurate protocols’. Indeed, Goya said this as well: imagination, coupled with reason, is the mother of the arts and the source of their marvels”.⁴⁶

The social artists of the fifties were all pupils of Mordecai Ardon at Bezalel; they had absorbed the principles of drawing (Ardon saw drawing as the basis of painting) and had learned the special way that Paul Klee (Ardon’s teacher) had developed to bridge between the logic of the internal and the structure of the external. Every day, with Ardon, they viewed a fascinating didactic exhibition of *Guernica*, which was on permanent display at Bezalel.⁴⁷ Most of them had been members of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement (Knispel, Ofek, Bezem, and other artists I have not yet mentioned: Ruth Schloss, Dan Kedar, and others), and experienced the everyday events of the period on the level of the political discussion. All these, with different emphases, created a unique weave of forms of expression.

Visually, these artists attempted to develop a painting language which would raise the unique phenomenon – with all its authenticity and particularity – to a level of condensed essential representation of a human and social situation. Their language actually aspired to unify the external-realistic portrait with the complex

⁴⁵ Avigdor Arikha, “Marian’s World of Symbols”, *Mevot*, 1 March 1955.

⁴⁶ Eugen Kolb, “The Exhibition of Soviet Graphics”, *Mishmar*, 16 November 1956.

time: "Maxim Ghilan is no less faithful than his ideological opponent to the view that accords literature distinctive social goals. We must prefer the complex human being to a vague and abstract idea of 'social man' which finds expression in the social-realistic literature".⁴³

In Quest of a Language of Others

Gershon Knispel, Avraham Ofek, Naftali Bezem, Pinchas Borstein (Marian) – all of them young Holocaust refugees – had experienced the immensity of the social crisis in the form of the destruction of the family unit. They bore within them the inner disruption of language, of culture, of identity, having experienced the meaning of life in the shadow of the fragile borderline between survival and death. Their painting does not idealize or deal with a fantasy of the "New Man". On the contrary: it probes the fissure line. Their painting is not ideological in the justifying sense because they had experienced a complicated biography that demanded a complex and conflicted concern with personal identity. To them, the refugees in the transition camps were not foreign and alien. Bezem tells about the time when he taught painting in the deportee camps in Cyprus:

I was sent by the Jewish Agency to teach painting in the refugee camps, for nine months. I conducted my art teaching as I had learned it from Ardon. I set up a school

for Holocaust survivors, with whom, for some reason, I could identify emotionally: I had the feeling that I had been rescued by chance before them, and could therefore understand them well; and they very much wanted to paint. I'll give you an example: when we started studying at six o'clock in the morning, the entire class was already waiting for me. We had to stop at eleven o'clock because the heat was unbearable. We held the class in tin sheds, and so we worked from six to eleven and did lots of things, like printing and producing a book of lino-cuts on the subject of the camps. Each pupil contributed a page.⁴⁴

The realism of the young artists who were graduates of Bezalel thus had nothing whatever to do with Soviet Socialist Realism or with a stereotyped figure of man. We might add that their realism also had no affinity with the social realism of the writers of the Palmach generation: the soil they had grown from and the sources of their nourishment were different. In their realism there is a kind of quest for a language of traces; at the same time, it possesses a historical consciousness: it reflects the imprint of the present in its concrete effect on both people and landscape, beside flickerings from the past, extremities of memory, the beginnings of a confrontation with the shock of discovery. In an article that Avigdor Arikha wrote in 1955 about the work of Pinchas Borstein (Marian), the spirit

⁴³ Amos Levin, *Without a Line: The Way of the "Likrat" Group in the New Hebrew Literature* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1984), p. 59.

⁴⁴ Yael Sekely, "An Interview with Naftali Bezem", 1982, Ziffer House Archives, Tel Aviv.

Man” which it promoted – both as a world-view and as an art trend – were bankrupt. It is interesting that the critics of Socialist Realism were joined by artists who were close to the Communist Party and who championed revolutionary thought: they found no interest, either artistic or social, in the reproductions of Soviet painting which they saw in *Ogonyok*, a weekly which reached many homes in Israel.⁴²

The distinction between “Socialist Realism” and the “social realist” line reflects a difference in the conception of “ideology” of these two orientations. The conception that found expression in Soviet Socialist Realism was that of an ideology that justifies, that idealizes the present state of affairs, camouflages its flaws, diverts attention from what requires reform and establishes what in Marxist terms is called a “false consciousness”; hence, indirectly, it supports the central governmental power. The “New Man” – as a utopian vision as well – is an inseparable part of this orientation. The conception of ideology held by the social realists, in contrast, actually involves the exposure of contradictions in the relations of production. In this sense, ideology exposes conflicts at the base of society, in the belief that the consequences of human action in the historical-social reality can also be changed by humans, and that the reality has to be seen as it is, without any vain incantations. Naturally enough, those

who held this conception of ideology turned to specific depictions of the human figure in its historical, social, and class contexts.

The failure of the dogmatic, academic Socialist Realism with its messages of justification did not weaken the resolve of the social realist artists in their quest for a language which could successfully express the human complexity and deepen man’s grasp on life. In this context, it is important to recall the Israeli literary scene of those years. Writers of the central generation of that time focused on a literature of war and national revival – but there were also circles, such as the “*Likrat*” [“Towards”] group (young authors and poets, such as Natan Zach, Maxim Ghilan, Yehuda Amichai, Benjamin Hrushovski and others), that rejected the general preoccupation with the national ethos and placed their emphasis on the world of the individual in society. In the epigraph of the manifesto which opened the first issue of their periodical pamphlet *Likrat* (1952), they printed William Faulkner’s speech on receiving the 1950 Nobel Prize (“I decline to accept the end of man”).

Discussion about Socialist Realism also arose in the *Likrat* group. Maxim Ghilan criticized the tendentiousness of Socialist Realism, saying: “We demand fidelity to reality – a fidelity of expression, not of reflection”. On this, the researcher Amos Levin remarked after some

⁴² On the rejection of “Socialist Realism”, see one testimony among many: Naftali Bezem, “Realist Painting in Italy”, *Ofakim* (January-March 1955), pp. 77-84: “the experiments carried out in the socialist countries were unable to convince us or to serve us as a guide”; see also: Gershon Knispel, “The Official Packaging: The True Face of Socialist Realism”, *Studio 8* (February 1990), pp. 20-23; Aryeh Rothman (note 31 above), Batia Donner “The Artist and the Engineer of the Psyche”, *Propaganda and Vision* (exh. cat., Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1997).

talig-collectivist call for depiction of the “Israeli” life-experience of the New Israeli. Kolb’s call articulates a sober vision, free of phraseology, involving uncompromising confrontation with hard facts that lie outside the bounds of the consensus. What a distance there is between his words and what Haim Gamzu sees as the goal of Israeli art:

We await the expression of the sensations of the new man in Israel. Our movement of renewal is connected, so it has turned out, with land, with working the soil, with a nature which does not easily submit to authority, a nature that frequently rebels and longs for the desert of yore. [...] Then, then may the future appear, wearing the marvelous and transparent veil of an ancient past, and a new reality will then be revealed before us, [...] festive in its everydayness. Then we will succeed in bringing to expression the Jewish realism, the Israeli realism, as a combination of vision and reality, a reality from an ancient world and the vision of a world born with the dawn. [...] The impressions of an Israeli artist today are fresh, optimistic, suffused with faith in the purpose of his life. It is in this atmosphere of blending the present with the past that man in Israel lives; it is in this atmosphere that the artist in Israel lives.⁴⁰

In contrast to Gamzu, Kolb told his readers about the concentration camp, simply, without any idealization of the victim. He spoke about the condi-

tions in which human solidarity collapses: this is human nature, and it has to be spoken about even if it is much nicer to tell different stories, and if not – it is better to remain silent. That, too, was what he expected of the artists. Kolb exhibited Bezem not because he painted a unifying collective image, but because he exposed a dialectics of identity and of a complex local reality.

Bezem, Shimon Tzabar, Gershon Knispel, and other young artists who were active in the early fifties, did not seek the one “New Israeli”; they sought a multiplicity of human images: “When we speak about the masses of the people and about social art, it is our duty first of all to see all the inhabitants of this country as the subjects and objects of art – the new immigrant, the Arab worker and peasant, and the youngster who was born in this country”, wrote Shimon Tzabar.⁴¹ The point of view in their art was directed to rejected corners in which a different Israeli experience was taking shape, corners which did not find expression in the canonical art. These artists believed that the heterogeneous dynamics of the national actuality was not receiving appropriate expression, and that it was necessary to seek suitable means to express it.

Socialist Realism and Social Realism

In those years, the literary and art circles in this country (like their counterparts in France, Italy and many other countries) held the view that Socialist Realism and the figure of the “New

⁴⁰ Haim Gamzu, *Painting and Sculpture in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Eshkol, 1951), p. 62.

⁴¹ Shimon Tzabar, “On the Path of Israeli Painting”, *Lamerhav: Massa*, 19 July 1951.

especially when we stand him next to Jews of the Diaspora". Kolb then turns to a psychologist – a pupil and friend of Freud, Dr. Moshe Woolf – who answers him with a rhetorical question: "You are looking for the new and uniform psychological type in our country, who has arisen in such agitated days? To my regret, I cannot present him before you. The *distress* [the emphasis is in the original text] in which we have been living for so many years, both politically and psychologically, is what prevents this". The pressure "blanks out all the contrasts. It encourages the growth of increasing tensions in social life, until even the existing types become severed from their uniform base and take up positions against one another. The psyche is badly wounded, and is to be touched with great caution".

Kolb listens to Dr. Woolf, and scenes from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where he had been incarcerated only several years before this, rise before his eyes: "I see a sick scene, a recurring one for all who have been in similar circumstances: how friends turn into enemies, how resentment and jealousy glint in the eyes,

how each entity suddenly disintegrates and all things wear a horror until they become unbearable". Don't forget, says Dr. Woolf, "that among our new immigrants there are thousands for whom such experiences are still blood of their blood, bone of their bones". Kolb responds, after a reference to Plato, that it might be better if psychologists were to govern the State. The article concludes with Dr. Woolf's reply: "Don't go so far! But the politicians have to be better psychologists. For then the personality – the human being – would receive more consideration and better treatment on the background of the political and social circumstances. Gorky wrote the sentence 'Man is all'. That is over and gone. But man must at least become something again".³⁷

Eugen Kolb³⁸ – art critic of *Itim* and correspondent for *Mishmar* – was appointed Director of the Tel Aviv Museum in 1951. In his nine years as Director of the Museum, Kolb promoted art which "lives and studies the Eretz-Israeli reality", and supported "original means of expression in the spirit of the time".³⁹ We should not confuse Kolb's demand for an expression of the reality with a nos-

³⁷ Eugen Kolb, "Is There an Eretz-Israeli Type?: An Interlude with the Psychologist M. Woolf", *Mishmar*, 14 September 1947.

³⁸ Dr. Eugen Kolb was born in Sopron, Hungary, studied art and philosophy in Munich and Vienna, worked as an editor in a large publishing house in Hungary (where, among other things, he edited an art lexicon), and joined the Hashomer Hatzair movement. After his liberation from Bergen-Belsen he was a correspondent in Geneva for the *Mishmar* daily, and he immigrated to Israel in 1946. He joined the activities of the "Circle for Progressive Culture", made friends with the poet Avraham Shlonsky, and wrote in *Itim* and *Mishmar*. Kolb was Director of the Tel Aviv Museum from 1951 until his sudden death in 1959. In 1958 he inaugurated the Museum's new wing in the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion, which he saw as the crowning achievement of his activity.

³⁹ From an interview with Kolb in the first issue of *Basha'ar* [the periodical of the Kibbutz Artzi movement], 1949.

in concrete social-historical research. This way of thinking may perhaps explain the absence of detailed historical study of Israeli art, and the historical “gaps” left by the exhibitions in the museums.

Arthur Danto, who surveyed the autonomist conception of art, claims that like “the fair sex” – the comparison is his – art, in this approach, is raised onto a pedestal that is ornamented with useless values, in order to neutralize it politically and to suppress the potential subversiveness implicit in it, the threat of a fresh, new gaze at existing social arrangements. Modernist autonomy implicitly backs the existing social order of a patriarchal culture.³⁶ It is important to note that “the autonomy of art” is a complex concept, one of the meanings of which is accentuation of the aesthetic dimension which is irreducible to any other dimension, including the social dimension. On this view – which is characteristic of the Frankfurt school, among others – the acme of art’s politicality lies in its being an end in itself, free of any alien interests; as such it designates the possibility of a different world. But Danto claims that a disinterested purpose is impossible: anyone who declares that his art is autonomous is *ipso facto* making a political statement.

Thus, for example, the “turn to autonomism” in Zaritsky’s work (1945-1947) actually occurred during the peak years of social and cultural tension. We can therefore interpret this turn as a conscious choice of introversion, in a kind of counter-response to the general trend of social

engagement.

My aim is not to argue here in favor of one art trend or another, but to trace steps in the development of the art canon, to examine its guiding principles and its spheres of avoidance. Bezem, and other artists in the fifties, gave expression to the distress of that time. They were classified as illustrative artists concerned with “Socialist Realism” and guided from the outside (the communist Soviet Union?), and were excluded from the canon. Today, and not only on the question of art, we are being flooded with a second and third derivative of conflicts which were already imminent at that time, suffering which was repressed then and not given expression. Something of all this is finally rising to public discussion – for there was a reality in those days, in the fifties, and it found representation in art. There may have been good reasons for avoidance of the discussion in real time – but at a safe distance of forty years, may the time not be ripe to look once more at the works of artists who dealt with the personal and social rupture in the fifties?

The Psyche is Badly Wounded,
and is to be Touched
with Caution

“Where is the New Man?” Eugen Kolb asked in one of his articles. “After all, it is a necessity that here, right before our eyes, new psychological types will have arisen, forged on the lap of the renaissance Jewish people!” With perhaps a jot of irony, Kolb adds: “The New Eretz-Israeli Man is now a fact, [...]

³⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 1-21).

