

Painting is a Miracle / Naomi Aviv

The roar of the big city grew louder and louder in the ears of those going downstairs to “Alon Segev”, Maya Cohen Levy’s gallery. The large canvases shimmered in orange, light blue, black and white. The visual activity grew denser and more powerful and spread through the exhibition space like the disturbing ripples of sound which we seem to hear when we look at the restless paintings of Munch. Sometimes a painting can offer the viewer the illusion of a live soundtrack. The iron poles quivering on the canvases tried to hang on to something and had to make do with the electrical wires passing through them like the tremolo of a mandolin. The rails on the bridges looked no more promising or hopeful, being also sawed into by squealing rusty strings. And all this visual buzz surrounded the viewers, its meaning seeping into their bodies and consciousnesses, where it lay like a sin and stirred the din of human hubris, and where it raised the Tower of Babel and the Twin Towers from their ashes, and where it ploughed and outlined utopias and dystopias, bound together in a relation of dialogue and variation, rhyme and metre.

The series of scintillant and humming pools, both real and illusory, which was shown at the Tel Aviv Museum in 2000, the drawn pools or those peeled from Archer paper, are also not as quiet and idyllic as the one in Bialik’s “The Pool”. You can feel the brush lashing against the water’s surface again and again like sharp raindrops. The brush, the tearing and the cutting by hand are replaced in the pool series by the blade of a knife, which continues the brushstrokes and mimics them meticulously – in a systematic and dynamic manner never before seen in Cohen Levy’s work – while cutting into the water’s flesh and lacerating the paper’s skin, tearing into layer after layer of its delicate membranes. The drive towards the depths of the paper seems compressed with a special energy, linked to the strong urge to reach, through all the layers, deep within the water, the image of a drowned woman. Once you’ve become aware of that image-shadow of a woman, the whole painterly effort, the whole process of cutting, acquires an urgent meaning of exposure and discovery. Yet, on the other hand, the effort to add layer after layer of a curtain or a lattice may be designed on the contrary to conceal, to drown, to hide that image in order to protect the intimacy, the privacy, the secrecy ^(figure 1). Again and again the pools reveal the crucial role played by light in all her work: the light breaking out from within the blots; the light gleaming like an unplanned moment which filters through between one structural layer and another due to the painting movement; the small leaves of light which seem to react to what is happening on the surface, liberating it from the gesture’s automatism; the slippery light which transfers us in an instant from what seems like an expressive line to impressionist painting.

All of Maya Cohen Levy’s works are characterised by an intricate spectacular appearance dense with streaks of paint. They are always dotted and buzzing with repeated splashes of accumulating or decreasing paint. Since she turned to the sunflower, and then to the palm trunk, the thatch, the honeycomb ^(figures 2-5) – everything has been teeming with virtual orders which are simultaneously organic and geometric. And from the moment she discovered the golden spiral, that cosmic order governing the organisation of the sunflower seeds, Cohen Levy discovered Islamic ornamentics. It was there that she found the counterweight to the tradition on which she had been educated as a painter, a Western tradition, of course, with an initial personal preference for the American abstract. The subject of one of her terrifyingly complicated ornamentics series is trees which are seen upside down. The tree trunk extends its branches downwards, as if they were roots. ^(figure 6)

It is interesting in this context to recall the fascinating working method undertaken by Piet Mondrian until he arrived at geometric abstraction, and to follow the development of abstraction in *The Apple Tree*

(1912).^(figure 7) Compare the shape of the leaves which recur as a regular pattern. Now that he is dead, the great Mondrian, we can say it's an ornament. Only now. He himself, and Kandinsky before him, were worried most of all that after all their efforts to arrive at pure forms deriving from an inner spiritual source, and in light of their revolutionary achievements, some fool would come along and say that what they were doing was decorative. Well, this fool did come along: in 2001 Markus Bröderlin curated an exhibition called "Ornament and Abstraction" which was shown at the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, and was accompanied by a historical study and a thick volume of the same title.¹ "Ornament's influence on the genesis and development of abstract art was more profound than is generally recognized", says Bröderlin in the introduction to his book (p.18). "Ornament and Crime" was the title given by the architect and cultural critic Adolf Loos to his famous article from 1908, and it is uncertain whether culture has managed to free itself totally from that taboo which was set, unjustifiably, against anything which deviates from the functional and dares to appear as decoration.

Cohen Levy treats the surface of her work as a body or an object from whom its inner logic should be extracted. The surface as a scarred face, which was formed according to a system or a miraculous law which organises the black seeds in the sunflower according to numerical relations. The trunk of the palm tree also grows its leaves in ascending numerical progression or in a growing golden spiral. Cohen Levy has found a similar regularity in the mysterious patterns of the honeycomb or the single leaf. Her language thus learned to express the dialectic relationship between culture and nature, in her spiritual (Hegelian) bond with nature and the way in which its rules have been embodied in ornamentics for thousands of years.

Alongside the desire for order, Cohen Levy also reacts to the surface of the canvas or to the emulsion texture of printed photographic paper, desiring to simultaneously break down and actualise the cosmic order embodied in every organic surface, to lay it bare and cover it, to tear it apart or assemble it cell by cell and thus frustrate that same desire. The peeling or the covering/exposing are not arbitrary. They always relate to the photographed and printed image. The peeling is a kind of action-painting, and the linkage between it and the image (the pattern which, as mentioned above, represents some kind of internal order) recalls the linkage between a text and its translation (in Cohen Levy's case it is a kind of calligraphic translation) or between a text and its meaning. In the works whose subjects are patterns from Islamic ornamentics, the pattern, which is also the primary image, collapses again on itself^(figure 8). This makes more apparent the formalist practice which forgoes the given ornamental primary pattern, the practice of a shaded (drawn) or peeled (subtracted) pattern which clashes with the surface and shatters against the illusion while producing a kaleidoscopic magical deception.

The glance follows with astonishment the dialogue between Abstract Expressionism and the minimal language of Zen, between the abundant which holds the emptiness; the glance is swept by the flow of the hand over the canvas, the hand which, while highlighting the primary pattern, already marks another pattern, supplementary and different, diagonal and inverted, doubled or displaced, shifted or distorted; the glance flows and is swept by the layers of layers, by the entry and exit points in the surface, in and out, by this multifaceted Rashomon, by her conceptual and illusory concerns, by the passages from one painterly language to another while keeping the means of expression concise, restricting them to a line or a gesture of a certain kind which creates all the wealth. Through her knotted exploration of images as the embodiments of a utopian order, through the dystopian deconstruction and the construction and so on repeatedly – appear Cohen Levy's great love for beauty and her restless desire to touch "the thing itself", at that moment when the mental and the physical join together to achieve calm. It is the wandering glance which follows her stubborn hold on the concrete that discovers her strong yearning for the sublime. The movement between scepticism and longing, between the here and now and the spiritual, embodied in the light breaking out between the touches and in fact dictating the working process, this is the deepest movement in her work.

Artists in the last two decades have found in the ornamental paradigms not only a way to deal with expressions or representations of beauty and the sublime, but also a way to relate to a founding moment in modernism and express doubt over the dominance of the Western heritage as well as over social positions and political concepts. The ornament that Tzivi Geva began developing in the 1980s by using representations of a keffieh, a backgammon board or lattices ^(figure 9) allowed him to put on the table his “Amos Oz-like” anxieties, the anxieties relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict felt by a member of Kibbutz Ein Shemer which borders Arab villages. Geva’s interest in the paradigmatic relation between the grid and the ornament became linked to another aspect – also autobiographical – his affinity with his father’s work as an architect, his frequent visits to his office as a child, his internalisation of the models that the father designed and built, the grid and the shutter and the architectonic detail linked to the modernist-Israeli type of construction. Another example is Dganit Berest, who connected the ornament/grid with the scientific-concrete issue and with the tension between nature and culture, by means of a formalistic disintegration of the works’ surfaces into esoteric shapes of fractals; one of her peaks in this context is the work *The Conspiracy of Nature* ^(figure 10).

Predictably, an exploration of the ornament can also be found in the work of Roy Rosen, coming from the virtuoso connection between the hand and the eye, and from his encyclopaedic ability to adopt, for every topic, a different artistic genre based on the potential of perpetuum mobile. Rosen, like Cohen Levy, deals with order by messing it up from an ironic point of view vis-à-vis the “logical” automatism which is created (with a kind of illogical logic), while at the same time making a challenged attempt to achieve an “exact breakdown” or an “accurate distortion” ^(figure 11).

In the international arena of the last two decades, which saw the return of the ornament, we should mention one of the British “Sensation” artists and the winner of the prestigious Turner Prize, Chris Ofili ^(figure 12), and the American Philip Taaffe ^(figure 13). For both, the ornament is a systematic painterly practice combining pleasure and subversiveness.

Aporia

Many articles have been written about Maya Cohen Levy’s art. And yet, a number of topics arising from her work have never been discussed or commented on. The feminist issue, for example. Yet this article as well will hardly touch on it, perhaps because, in establishing her identity as an artist, Cohen Levy dedicated the biggest effort to the attempt to study and discover the authentic self in a wider professional context; perhaps because it is impossible to dissociate the discussion of sex and gender from her complex relationship with the memory of her mother, Rina Levy, whom she remembers as the mythical character of “the painter”, and with whom Maya had forbidden herself to “compete” as long as she was alive.

The important role played by painting in Cohen Levy’s life gives rise to reservations about terms which are too easily associated with “the feminine”. For example, the use of the word “obsession”, which is identified with women’s craft; an identification meant to bestow on the work some kind of a sweeping seal of approval of so called authenticity, while disregarding the great anguish and sense of being persecuted that obsession causes in those who suffer from it. It is doubtful anyway whether pathological obsession can generate cognitive, self-aware works of art. For similar reasons, other obvious terms in the context of her work, such as “trance”, “meditation” and “Sufi dance” are also rejected out of hand, because they obscure the ethos of physical, concrete, “proletarian” work entailed in her practice. On the other hand, alluding to the great effort and dedication involved in the production of the work may encounter resistance, especially

in Cohen Levy herself, because they do not guarantee the quality of the work, and in cases in which this effort is emphasised, it feels as if the essential has been covered up and obfuscated.

But Maya Cohen Levy, echoing her mother's model, is busy painting almost at any time and in any situation, and the few respites she allows herself are dedicated to drawing. Her drawings, spreading on the paper like an entangled, fine and delicate seaweed ^(figure 14) or like a forest of nerves both teeming and calm, have been chosen to stir and strengthen the aesthetic sense in wonderful poetry books and literary periodicals. These drawings seem to be produced and drawn by themselves. They are self-generated. They enchant and hypnotise with their flow of natural rhythmic energy. And they maintain a clear link with Cohen Levy's painterly language, while still enjoying an autonomous status.

In these drawings I have found respite from many moments of aporia² which took over me particularly in the first stages of my acquaintance with Cohen Levy's paintings, but also later on. I experienced the height of confusion and disorientation in front of the Islamic ornamentics, which received an especially complicated logical treatment. Some of the works in this series looked like a Borgesian map laid over with another map and another and another, all the maps visible one through the other and branching out one from the other, like a net of simulacra (Baudrillard), emotional and conceptual, factual and metaphorical, signifying and decoded, calculated and abstract. Any simple attempt to follow the primary pattern which Cohen Levy copied or adapted from the detail of an Islamic ornamental structure or architecture (which generated an abundance of lines, colours and labyrinthine geometrical shapes), suffered amazement but also a clear sense of defeat or stalemate. This embarrassing state of intellectual collapse before what has been undoubtedly built methodically and rationally reminded me of this wonderful term, aporia, a current expression representing the emotional and mental landscape generated for instance by the encounter with the cybernetic world, that circular and boundless web³ brought to mind also by "Urban Landscapes", Cohen Levy's latest series of works ^(figure 15).

Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens⁴

Maya Cohen Levy says goodbye to her studio, located above a car repair shop in Tel Aviv's industrial district. From its north-facing windows she can still see the pair of Azrieli Towers, the arrogant buildings which have replaced Shalom Tower as the symbols of new urbanity in 21st century Tel Aviv. In the last few years, Cohen Levy has dedicated her work to the dynamics between the I and the environment which tends to erase the I, especially under the conditions of a dense and technological urbanity.

The Azrieli Towers have been added to Maya Cohen Levy's limited dictionary of images. The Azrieli pair comprises one circular and one triangular building, two of the primary shapes from which abstract geometrical ornamentics has developed. The urge to make ornamentics was studied in the doctoral thesis submitted in 1908 by the German psychologist Wilhelm Worringer⁵ (the same year in which Adolf Loos published "Ornament and Crime"). Worringer distinguishes two types of ornamentics: vegetal and geometric. According to him, it is actually the abstract style which is planted deeper in the human soul, since it expresses empathy with cosmic, divine, infinite nature.

Cohen Levy does not become attached to an image unless it is constructed according to a rule or a system, while gradually charging it with metaphorical meanings until it becomes a symbol. In recent years, the cylinder and the triangle welcoming those entering Tel Aviv from the south have taken over her work. The works' surface has been replaced by the grid of reflective windows which cover the two buildings and

replicate themselves in perfect symmetry. In one of her latest works from the series of peeled black-and-white photographs (not yet exhibited), one building is reflected in the other even before Cohen Levy starts complicating the existing patterns with additional layers of peeled patterns (figure 16).

Cohen Levy photographed the towers during day- and night-time, and then painted and drew, peeled and perforated, until she constructed a model from them for an outdoors sculpture which is still lying on a chair in her studio with a simulation of an airplane about to shatter into it. The towers become a public space charged with attributes and haunted by phantasms (Baudrillard), as “panopticons” (surveillance towers), as what Foucault calls “heterotopias”, “kind of effectively enacted utopias”,⁶ whose “role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled”. These are postmodern Towers of Babel which are annulled precisely by their own aura. Soon we won’t really notice them, we will only recognise them by the aura which surrounds them as a photographed object. It is an aura which accumulates in our consciousness; it is precisely the capturing of their image in more and more cameras and their endless replication which give them their aura.⁷ In Cohen Levy they have turned into two vertical energy fields, whose sell-by date has been planted in them from the moment of their birth, like the replicants in Philip K. Dick’s book *Blade Runner, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

To the Azrieli Towers, Cohen Levy added two loaded and energetic key images – a bridge and an electricity pylon. Both the bridge and the pylon are characterised by qualities of conductivity and transfer, and both are engineered (like skyscrapers) from a set model which recurs and is reminiscent of the first model of the Eiffel Tower proposed by two architects (figure 17). The model was rejected because of its extreme minimalism in favour of a similarly structured 300 meter high tower, with ornaments added to its metal frame, and the result – the Eiffel Tower we know today. The Azrieli Towers, the bridge and the electricity pylon complete the series of painted urban landscapes exhibited in August 2004 at the Alon Segev Gallery, which offer a sharp look at the electronic age and the culture of globalisation underpinned by cybernetic technology.

Alongside them in the same exhibition was shown a series of small works in the technique of decollage,⁸ photographs printed on photographic paper in which the artist “covered” the photographed image with a Stanley knife. By means of replicated subtraction and cutting up of the same primary shape, Cohen Levy “builds” in them a kind of screen or lattice made of what looks like the representation of a short and laconic brushstroke (it also looks like “eyes”, “leaves”, “seeds” or “swarms of tiny fish”). This lovely series, which Cohen Levy began exhibiting as early as 1988, is entitled “The Peeled Photographs” and is characterised by a fresh, political, and distinctly contemporary appearance. As mentioned earlier, Cohen Levy peels the images by removing small areas of emulsion, thus exposing the paper underneath. It is interesting to linger for a moment on the massive manipulation exercised by Cohen Levy in her decollages; a manipulation whose subversive effect is foregrounded when she treats photographs from the social and political realm, photographs which she sometimes replicates from the press and from television and which she sprinkles with spinning peeling patterns: sunsets with Apache helicopters, palm trees whose tops are wrapped with fabric or nylon (which were given the ironic title “The Wandering Jew” because they were uprooted from the Lachish region and emigrated to Tel Aviv), cars on fire after having been bombed in counter-terrorist operations, shadows lengthening like the trunks of palm trees, a Madonna doll-figurine bombed in Sarajevo (entitled *Eye Witness* because its eyes have been torn out), and that unforgettable colour photograph of a sweet boy holding a dusty plastic bouquet of flowers in one hand and a broken fan in the other, items saved from his destroyed house which is seen in the background. On this photograph Cohen Levy spreads-peels an explosion of “eyes” or “leaves”. When these are shown next to each other –

the pretty boy, his gaze expressing shock, anger and innocence, a gathering of clouds reddening in the sunset above Jerusalem (*End of the Day*) and a row of migrating bird in a smooth and cloudless turquoise-blue sky – the resulting montage harbours a dark meaning. The gentleness and poeticism of this hairline cutting pattern rhyme and compete with the shapes of the tiny birds, until it becomes unclear which is the bird and which is the eye-shape of the cutting-peeling.

The Extraordinary Representative

It is not long before Cohen Levy settles into a new studio in the same industrial district, but from its window the Azrieli Towers are no longer seen. They have “moved in” and taken over the walls of the new place – large, spacious, bright and tidy. This is where Cohen Levy created some of the new black-and-white series of Tel Aviv’s “Extraordinary Representative”.⁹ Outstanding among them is a dizzying series of large decollages (125x188 cm) on black-and-white photographs, whose very production required an ambitious operation. Before the operation went underway, Cohen Levy built a model of the towers and of a helicopter casting its shadow on them from a meticulously planned angle. Then she hired a helicopter, and had the pilot study the model and learn the angles at which he was asked to fly in front of the buildings. Participating in the flight were herself and the photographer Avraham Hay, both armed with cameras. Down on the ground stood her daughter Danielle, trying to capture the events in her own camera. Everything was also documented on a video camera. On the table in the studio were piles containing hundreds of photographs of Tel Aviv’s “extraordinary representative” and its dark shadow. From among them she chose the images to be enlarged. The image is stubbornly concrete and no less stubbornly screened. Not only do the screens that she tears-subtracts from the image not obscure it, they actually sharpen the image, make it more distinct and charge it with a critical “text”. This effect is reinforced in the case of a series of works dealing with the same subject from different perspectives, as in these large decollages. The patterns of rhythmical cutting-peeling reinforce the urban buzz and give the photographic sheets a sensual material texture. As mentioned above, the peeling also creates an ornamental pattern. This pattern billows on the surface like flames, like fireworks, like a Van Gough whirlpool. The urge to complete the Rashomon of gazes on the same subject, to add-subtract another layer of photographic peelings, is insatiable. It is about an enormous excess and a desperation.

Alongside her focus on the Azrielies, Cohen Levy is working on a small series of decollages for a new book of poetry by Puah Harshelg (work in progress, untitled as yet), this time decollages of stills from a film called *Young Adam* (Director: David Mackenzie, Britain 2003). The exposition to this movie shows the figure of a naked woman who drowned in turquoise-coloured water and whose identity and connection to the film’s plot will only become clear at the end. Cohen covers the photographs of the figure she isolated from the film with peelings which focus on the woman and create on her body the pattern of a tree whose roots are as tangled as the snakes growing out of Medusa’s head (figure 18).

This series brings us back to those pools exhibited at the Tel Aviv Museum in 2000, and to the figure of the drowned woman with her arms stretched above her head. This image is reminiscent of the dive taken by the body and earth artist Anna Mendieta, a dramatic, tragic figure immortalised in hundreds of performance pieces and sketched in earth and water (figure 19). The image of the drowned woman has been taking shape as a symbol in Cohen Levy’s work since the 1980s, when she made the series of paintings “Dance Structure” (figure 20), which frequently showed a circle of archetypal women (the series was shown in 1989 in the exhibition “Objective Three Dimensional” at the Ramat Gan Museum as well as at the Tel Aviv Museum in an exhibition for the winners of the Young Artist Award). Another version (from 2002,

shown the same year at Arie Kilmanik's Print Workshop), a black-and-white etching of a peeled multi-layered pool, clearly shows the same figure ^(figure 21); around the torso there are lines marking two circles as breasts, a circle signifying the belly and under it the pubic hair. A closer look at the figure definitely recognises a skull. The woman's body as a face (and as a skull), and of course the image of the woman in the water, bring to mind Magritte and his figures whose faces are veiled with white sheets, an image usually related to a founding autobiographical event – his mother's suicide by drowning herself in the river and the discovery of her body by her family with a nightgown wrapped around her face. Magritte was 14 when it happened.

During another visit to Cohen Levy's new studio, in January 2005, the eyes fall again on another new series of gigantic decollages in black-and-white: the Azrieli Towers at night and at daytime, from above and from below. And next to them, on the table, some small colourful decollages containing helicopters – assault and evacuation helicopters, Apaches and Herculeses and crosses and gun-sights. Undoubtedly, Cohen Levy's recent works show, alongside her deepening meta-plastic gaze, also her more and more acute engagement with contemporary life. This is also true in general for art today, which offers, more than ever before in the last thirty years, an interpretation of the human condition, its misery and happiness.

Polishing the Mirror

Maya Cohen Levy's iconography consists of a series of symbolist images which invite a literary reading. Her technique is that of action painting, comprising of short, laconic gestures which accumulate into screens of lines as in the technique of "hatching"¹⁰. Cohen Levy builds the paintings' narrative as a construction which emerges for the viewer from the unpainted white space; this is the theme of presence and absence, a dialectics which has received psychoanalytical interpretations in the spirit of Lacan.

Cohen Levy studied art during the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. Her teachers probably included some conceptual and minimalist artists who hadn't yet digested the permission to return to lush, psychologistic and mythologistic painting.¹¹ Thus, her first paintings from the beginning of the eighties are mythical scenes of moonlit rituals that seem to take place at the entrance to a temple. The scene is "guarded" on both sides by poles courtesy of Jackson Pollock ^(figure 22), while in the middle huddles a group of figures, perhaps animals perhaps human beings, which are sometimes replaced by ravens. These paintings may be associated with the movement that heralded the return to painting and was known by names such as "Neo Expressionism" and "Transavantgarde". The "transavantgarde" released art from the diet imposed on it by Conceptualism and Minimalism. Suddenly it was allowed to paint dreams and nightmares and to insist on symbolist or archetypal meanings, as in the paintings of the Italians Clemente, Chia and Cucchi or the German Anselm Kiefer. Although the philosophical tenets of conceptual art continued to seep through, artists at the same time found themselves more involved in humanist subjects and in popular culture. There was also a renewed interest in illusion, narrative, decoration and various artistic concerns which had been pushed aside by the conceptualist doctrine. This change suited Maya Cohen Levy, as it did painters such as Tzivi Geva. Geva was able to free himself by means of this new legitimacy from the shadow of his brother, the conceptual artist Avital Geva; whereas Maya was able to carry on from the point where her mother stopped painting, at the end of the 1960s.

We should remember that "the return to painting", which was part of the postmodern tendency, occurred two decades before the end of the millennium, confused years – both in Israel and in the international art

centres – characterised by a loss of trust in the ideologies of both the left and the right. Alongside the new expressionism there also developed a total scepticism formulated by French thinkers such as Baudrillard and Derrida. The new scepticism, which replaced the self-conviction of the modernist vision, found a natural resonance in Maya Cohen Levy's feelings, even though she defines herself as "a believer" who advocates an endless process of "polishing the mirror" until it reflects the "divine" or "the origin". Or as the sixth-century Muslim scholar and commentator Ibn Arbi suggests, "until your own reflection can be recognised in the mirror". Here we see the linkage between Cohen Levy's faith and the Sisyphean process entailed in the act of "tearing the curtain" and weaving it, which recurs in her works. In this she seems to be following Derrida, who contends that faith can be reinforced only by permanent doubting or through a systematic search for the cracks between the words; only through these cracks can the faint ray of light of reality or meaning penetrate.

The plastic language developed by Cohen Levy is based on the thematic breaking up of patterns which recur on the surface (the basic definition of an ornament). The principle of repetition, the salient feature of her work, can be read in two opposite ways which explain her acrobatic walk between polar opposites and contradictions. On the one hand, vanity of vanities, all is vanity, the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be, according to the pessimistic version of the principle of eternal return (Ecclesiastes); on the other hand, all that has happened had already happened in the past and will happen again, for the universe (time itself) is fundamentally cyclical, a view adopted by Nietzsche as the basis for practical hope. If it was good once, and it *was* good once, then the good will return. The repetition in Cohen Levy's work can be read as an act of repeated prayer which organises the daily routine and orders life. It also plays a part in the dialectics between the transcendental and the immanent, between faith and the quest for the metaphysical on the one hand and the immersion in the internal on the other.

Every work, claims Derrida, is an act of translation (metamorphosis) and reading, since the passage from theory to practice entails an act of "betrayal" or "transformation" of the rich idea which is conceived and contemplated in our mind. The act of creation is not a documentation or replication of the "original" idea. To make art in the postmodern age, that is, to create something from nothing, means to undermine any notion which consecrates the essential, unequivocal, logocentric One. This subversiveness is designed to free us from the presumption of having one narrative, one mythology or one truth, suspected of authoritarianism or even tyranny. This displacement of the simultaneous relation between the act of painting and the reading of painting, or the meta-painting, is assimilated into Cohen Levy's work naturally and authentically. Her sober view of reality does not presume to be clear and unambiguous. On the contrary. It is transparent because it is relativistic. Cohen Levy believes in the multiplicity of meanings that can be extracted from every "word" in a given "text" when we examine this word in its syntactical context and mark the white space that it produces like a permanent shadow, surrounding it from all sides until it breaks down or collapses like the wall of Jericho.

The Story of the Eye

Cohen Levy's first encounter with painting was at the age of 3-4, when she sat silently before her mother, the painter Rina Levy, and her easel, and after a while went over to see her portrait on the canvas ^(figure 23). She remembers that moment, in which she seemed to have recognised herself for the first time, on her own,

taking up the entire canvas, detached from the mother's body, as a lucid and enchanted moment. She looked with amazement at the two blue lakes flowing forth where the eyes should have been, and was dumbfounded.¹² More than eyes, it was a gaze. An inquisitive, amazingly precise gaze, which still radiates with extraordinary power and still tells the story of art. To a large extent this is the story of the gaze and of ethos. The first gaze that Maya Cohen Levy laid on her painted portrait recalls of course the "mirror stage" which describes the development of the child's selfhood in Lacan. In conversations I have had with the artist, and in which I have asked her to delve more into that significant moment, I could get from her no verbal description of that encounter. Nevertheless, she kept repeating that it had been "strong", and she was in no doubt that this had been a founding moment in her relationship with painting.

The Levy family household, an anti-religious house, was steeped in the sacred atmosphere of painting. Nevertheless, Maya did not dare to start painting until she was already 12 years old, after the death of her mother who was in her mid-thirties. Painting had filled the mother's world, and her talent shone through when she was still studying at the High School for Art on Kalisher street in Tel Aviv, where years later her daughter would also choose to study. This was the heyday of Arie Margoshilsky, the legendary teacher and director of Kalisher, who did not forget his talented student even after she finished her studies and started a family and fell ill with an incurable disease. He never forgot her and she never forgot painting. On her sickbed, during the last five years of her life, her husband would put a palette and some paints in her hands and hold a new stretched canvas in front of her, and she would paint expressively. On her deathbed the admiring teacher Margoshilsky would come and replace the husband, standing by her side and holding up the canvas for her. Until the day she died. She was as total as Frida Kahlo, as committed as Van Gough, as devout as Pinchas Cohen Gan. In the diary she left behind she documented some thoughts about painting and art as well as a few pages telling her story as a child in the holocaust who had to hide in a basement for a whole three years. Not a word about the family she raised. Painting was her life. She seems to have lived and worked as someone who had heard "the calling" and replied "here I am". As someone who was forced to accept a "calling", to fulfil a "vocation". As we know, every "calling" comes at the expense of those close to the one "called". The Bible tells of quite a few who were "called", including some who tried to refuse the "calling" in vain. Moses tried to refuse, Jonah tried to refuse, Jeremiah begged to be exempt from it. Jesus acceded to it, and while he spoke to the multitudes, his mother and brothers stood outside and wanted to talk to him, but he replied: "Who are my mother and my brothers?... Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."¹³

As mentioned above, Maya Cohen Levy was captivated by painting's charms as early as the age of three or four, yet she refrained from painting. It may be that the painting which was revealed to her as a miracle also turned out to be an enemy, that which robbed her of her mother. She could have used painting as a tool to plough her way into her mother's heart, she could have used painting as a way of flattery or as a tactical means of getting closer to her mother, but she didn't. Perhaps because in a family in which painting has the status of a Moloch, one Great Priest is enough.

Today, on the verge of her fiftieth year and twenty-five years after she finished studying painting and started to exhibit, Maya Cohen Levy is a painter whose seriousness, artistic piety and unbiased commitment are a rarity. She could easily be considered one of the great priestesses of Israeli painting. Her expressionistic instincts mean that her story lends itself to be told from an autobiographical angle.

Her paintings are woven with light and shadow like lace. Perhaps the shadow is the shadow of her mother. It is a sheltering and protective shadow, as much as it is threatening. And there is great terror (and the moon) in her painting. As mentioned earlier, she started by painting nocturnal scenes which show androgynous archetypal figures lit by the crescent moon and eclipsed by black ravens. The shadow recurs in all her paintings like an obstinate theme. It takes the shape of a raven ^(figure 24) or a dark and barely distinct

blot (of a drowned woman) underwater in the pool series.

This shadow changes its shape and rolls like a Hercules helicopter casting its shadow on a skyscraper (figure 25). Sometimes the shadow is a kind of black hole thrown onto the painted image as if it were a ball packed with energy threatening to hit the building or the pylon and wreck them (figure 26). Or perhaps those black holes that frequently appear in her paintings are a version of those blue lakes painted by her mother instead of eyes. In this context we should mention Cohen Levy's series of small decollages entitled "Eye Witness", which was exhibited in the Alon Segev Gallery in August 2004, and includes photographs of a broken doll from the bombed city of Sarajevo with two gaping black holes instead of eyes (figure 27). The eyes, fundamental shapes in Cohen Levy's work, are also the painting's "inner eye", that basic element out of which her paintings are "knitted", that eye whose endless repetition produces a gaze-from-within and a gaze-from-above, and a rhythm and a tune. A roar.

The Myth about the Origin of the Myth

The philosophical project of Derridean deconstruction has in the last two decades of the 20th century permeated into literary criticism, architecture, art and cultural studies. Ten years ago you could even buy a suit which highlighted all its seams and allowed itself to have frayed lapels and hesitant lines, and was defined by its designer as "a deconstructionist suit"... Like the hero of Molière's play "The Bourgeois Gentleman", who wanted to learn the aristocratic ways and discovered that he has been speaking prose all his life, and didn't even know it, we all practice deconstruction even if we don't call it that. Deconstruction merely reports on the way our brain operates at any given moment. The plastic language developed by Maya Cohen Levy is fluid and constantly flickering: between the concrete and the abstract, between the act of painting and her observation of that act. Her action is indistinguishable from her observation of that action. Every image that appears in her work is destined to be repeated, and every repetition reinforces the image and clarifies it (and also whitens it, for the image is outlined precisely against the emptiness, where "there is no painting"), but at the same time the repetition also puts it in question. The resulting picture is a picture of a broken down image in danger of total collapse.

Derrida did not express only the breakdown of political ideologies at the end of the 20th century, but also the manner in which this disintegration itself acquires meaning. This is also how he reads the demolition of the Tower of Babel, an act which undermined the totalitarian desire for "one language and the same words". Not only does the act of deconstruction have meaning, it has a positive one: "Deconstruction is on the side of the 'yes', of the affirmation of life", said Derrida in an interview given in August 2004, a few months before his death, to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, as if echoing Nietzsche's call: "Say yes to life!"

The fixed meaning of the text, claimed Derrida, of any text (a painting is also a text), breaks down with every attempt to expose it or to translate it. This unavoidable contradiction reflects a deep fissure in the basis of the Western world. The need to doubt the absolute truth should not be understood as a recommendation to throw away religion and social values, but only to examine them and take into consideration the existence of another, different gaze. Language cannot produce a gaze which is unequivocal; the unambiguous, according to him, is ethically and aesthetically tainted.

Ethical and aesthetic is Cohen Levy's devotion to complexity, to looking at the space around meaning. Her pendulum motion between different dichotomies is wonderfully harmonic. Harmonic and coherent. So is

her attitude towards the contrasting couple of nature-culture and her comfortable movement between East and West. Cohen Levy is committed to this double gaze in the same way that she is committed to art. It is a kind of genetic code. For the daughter of “mixed” parents, matters are entangled, that is, woven into each other like a lattice, a grid or an ornament. Her artistic language exists in the movement between the “western” grid and the “oriental” ornament. Between the mother born in Ashkenaz and the father born in Afghanistan. Between the socialist materialism she absorbed in her parents’ house and her propensity for the spiritual and transcendental. Between her study of art (and later Eastern philosophy) in Tel Aviv and her continuing education in India, China and Japan, where she acquired Zen Buddhist practices of calligraphy and traditional painting (Sumi), between her interest in Ibn Arbi and the Zen Kuans. Between her hold on reality and her weaving of illusion. To Ibn Arbi as a source of spiritual inspiration (there is no God without a world) should be added another Muslim source of inspiration, in many ways his polar opposite, Jelaluddin Rumi, a 13th century mystic and poet, who in one of his lines implores the reader: “I did not write these lines for people to wear them or repeat them, but for people to put them under their feet and fly with them.”

Jelaluddin Rumi’s sensuality and flight bring us back to Cohen Levy’s treatment of the image, which never ceases to metamorphose in her work, and to the paradigm of deconstruction which according to its inventor can already be found in the story of the Tower of Babel (*Genesis* 10-11). Her works with and about the Azrieli Towers as the symbol of a monumental building project show a warm and sensual touch, which charges these structures with electromagnetism and an optic kinetic appearance which creates unity between the image and the technique. Nevertheless, their experience as a critical text should not be ignored. As mentioned above, they are painted by means of a deconstructive gesture consisting of short and separate brushstrokes – as in the material elements of any writing, leaving between the letters and around them white spaces which allow us to recognise the word or the letter. It is the spaces or the gaps between the brushstrokes that mark the image. That is, Cohen Levy paints the “no-tower”, the negative of the structure. The eternal repetition of the “no-tower” confirms its potential absence and suggests that in the very construction of every haughty tower is hidden also the drama of its collapse. Her painting motion in each of her works on the subject is cyclical: the same subject, the same idea, each time from a different angle, and each “round” on the canvas and each layer references the previous one. As mentioned above, her act of painting is itself a deconstructionist act which breaks down and builds the painting’s meaning out of the sum of all the layers, the marks and the spaces between them.

The philosophy of deconstruction is realised in the interval between the Tower of Babel and its collapse. Derrida’s essay “The Tower of Babel”, explains the translator Michal Ben Naftali in the foreword to the Hebrew version, is “a representative, paradigmatic and exemplary deconstructionist essay.” This philosophy gives an ars-poetical status to “Babel the place and Babel the figure”. Derrida writes that the story or the myth of the Tower of Babel may be “the myth about the origin of the myth, the metaphor of the metaphor, the story of the story.” Ben Naftali: “Deconstruction seems to return here to the origins, to its own origins. But only to discover that the root of the tree hides itself from itself, displays an illusive place, an event forbidden to exist.” From here Derrida embarks on a deconstructionist dynamics based on countless readings of the short, fragmentary and enigmatic Biblical text. He breaks the text down to its various layers and voices and reweaves the voices while leaving space also for the enigmatic, the entangled and the illusive. “We must acknowledge the fact that the subject cannot know all the conditions which underlie him, his thought and his experience.”

Reality in a State of Collapse

Here is the entire story of Babel in a few verses: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words... And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, Because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”¹⁴

The story of the Tower of Babel tells of the descendants of Shem’s desire to build themselves a city and a tower which will reach the heavens and cancel the border between earth and heaven. And then, when they fulfilled their great vision, God came and in symmetrical contrast to the vision and the desire destroyed the phantasmatic tower, dispersed the descendants of Shem, scattered them all over the earth and split their tongue into many tongues. Since then we need the translation and interpretation of every word uttered in a language we no longer speak.

Ostensibly the story describes a wondrous act of creation expressing the creative powers of man, who wishes to use his technological capabilities to reach upwards. What was so terrible about the sin of the people of that generation that they had to suffer the heavy punishment of being exiled to the four corners of the earth? A simple reading of the sentence “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words“ on its own may consider the uniformity and unity which pervaded the earth as a positive move. But commentators have taken this sentence apart and extracted from it enlightened humanistic notions advocating pluralism. Notions, moreover, that point to the fact that the terrible sin was the implementation of a monolithic uniformity which leaves no room for the “other”, which leads to the rejection of the “other” just because he does not toe the line with the regime’s way of thinking. As it was said, “The Torah is all poetry, and the beauty of poetry is when the voices differ from each other, and that is the essence of the melodies, and whoever swims in the sea of Talmud will see different melodies in all the different voices” (*Shulchan Aruch*).

But we should remember that the sentence “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words” was deconstructed countless of times long before Derrida. For instance, as part of a debate about the question of tolerance in the Jewish tradition. In an erudite and fascinating article dealing with the issue of pluralism vs. paternalism in the scriptures, Aviezer Ravitzky compiles a number of works which support and even praise pluralism, without ever hearing about postmodernism. Here is a short sample of Ravitzky’s words: “In the 1870s, one of our great teachers, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (The Netziv) of Volozhin, described the menacing mythological figure of a homogenous, tyrannical and oppressive human society, wishing to erase any personal features from the face of all its members and hostilely smother any possible deviation from the collective line. The Netziv emphasised particularly that this society suppresses the freedom of thought and speech: ‘Since the views of all human beings are not the same, they were afraid that people would deviate from this [accepted] view and have other thoughts’, and so ‘they decided to kill those who had other views!’”.

“As a guarantee for the maintenance of ideological collectiveness,” Ravitzky goes on to explain the Netziv’s words, “This community also denies its citizens’ freedom of movement and residence – ‘they used to watch that no one left their settlements’ – not letting anyone get away from the control range of the

central regime. This society's totalitarian nature is embodied most of all in a giant surveillance tower standing in the city centre. Whoever sits at the top of the tower can 'observe the whole population from it'. From this tower 'inspectors and supervisors' are sent everywhere to secure unity and centralisation, and under their command 'generals' are ready 'to punish the violators' and throw them into the fire.

"The Netziv from Volozhin was not talking about 1984 or any other apocalyptic model, although 'The Ministry of Truth' in George Orwell's book, as well as 'The Thought Police', 'The Thought Criminals' and other motifs in his book fit his words perfectly. The Netziv was not talking about an apocalyptic model, but rather about the mythological model of The Tower of Babel. Accordingly, he was not challenging a specific dictatorial ideology but rather the danger of any unifying ambition as such: 'Now the whole earth had one language and the same words' – not because of [the content of] their words the Lord rose [against them], but because they were the same, whatever they were... their 'same words' became their downfall, because they decided to kill whoever thought differently. But it seems that his words about the typological sin of the members of that generation went even further than that. For here we are no longer dealing merely with a negative argument – against the persecution bred by intolerance (John Lock), but also with a positive argument – in favour of plurality as such (John Stuart Mill). The sin represents a violent rebellion against the nature of creation (against the diversity of views), whereas the punishment – being scattered over the face of the earth – was designed to restore the true nature of creation. 'Blessed be the Lord knower of secrets, that not all views are the same', wrote the Netziv several times in his Talmudic commentaries as well."¹⁵

The Lacemaker

Her serious demeanour, her total dedication, her orange hair and her blue eyes. Her hands, holding the Stanley knife like the skilled hands of a lacemaker. Her patience. Her pedanticism. Her persistence. Her repetitions. The attempt to break through all of these lead, as I said, to more and more moments of aporia. It was a long process. Perhaps even a senseless one. As futile as peeling off a layer of emulsion from a photograph just to reach the paper underneath. "Why did he choose variations? What lay behind his choice?", tries the father in Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* to understand one of the forms which Beethoven was attached to at the end of his life. The memory of the book and its structure – with its seven parts, in which the subjects, the characters and the events get repeatedly entangled with one another to create a polyphonic musical piece – came to the mind of this writer, astonished at Cohen Levy's work.

Once he called me to his room. The variations from the Opus 111 sonata were open on the piano. 'Look,' he said, pointing to the music (he had also lost the ability to play the piano), 'look.' He kept trying to explain something important to me, but the words he used were completely unintelligible and seeing that I didn't understand him, he looked at me in amazement and said, "That's strange." I knew what he wanted to talk about, of course. He had been involved with the topic a long time. Beethoven had felt a sudden attachment to the variation form toward the end of his life. At first glance it might seem the most superficial of forms, a showcase for technique, the type of work better suited to a lacemaker than to Beethoven. But Beethoven made it one of the most distinguished forms (for the first time in the history of music) and imbued it with some of his finest meditations. True, all that is well known. But what Father wanted to know was what we are to make of it. Why did he choose variations? What lay behind his choice? That's why he called me to his room, pointed at the

variations and said: 'Now I know'.¹⁶

Naomi Aviv,
Winter 2005, Tel Aviv

- Naomi Aviv is a curator of Contemporary Art

Notes

1

Markus Bröderlin (ed.), *Ornament and Abstraction. The Dialogue Between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art*. Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2002.

2

Aporia. A term from Classic rhetoric, derived from the Greek word *aporo* meaning “impenetrable” or difficulty of passage (*a-*, without + *poros*, passage). The term denotes entanglement, confusion, doubt and difficulty; wonder and amazement before a complex problem; confronting an open question with an awareness both of the complexity of the issue and of the fundamental importance of pursuing a solution. Socrates and the other ancient philosophers tried to evoke the philosophic spirit in young men by awakening their *aporia*. One of the Socratic dialogues in Plato’s “Meno” demonstrates the term. In the course of a dialogue in which Socrates tries to generate knowledge, which Plato believes resides in our consciousness before our birth, he leads the learner to a state of *aporia*. The interlocutor admits that he has “lost his way” and doesn’t know what to ask or how to proceed in order to get to a meaning or a conclusion. For Plato, this is an essential and necessary state that you have to genuinely arrive at before you can achieve knowledge or comprehension. Aristotle also assumed that the “reconciliation” with this state of logical exasperation can lead to an alternative solution, and this was, according to him, the principal concern of philosophy. The term “*aporia*” was dealt with by many philosophers after the Classic Age, including Wittgenstein in “Philosophical Investigations”, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida.

3

See the illuminating article (published on the internet) by Nicholas C. Burbules, the prominent philosopher of digital media: Nicholas C. Burbules, “Aporia: Webs, Passages, Getting Lost, and Learning to Go On”.

4

Genesis, 11.4.

5

Wilhelm Worringer, in: Markus Bröderlin (ed.), *Ornament and Abstraction. The Dialogue Between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art*. Fondation Beyeler, Basel 2002, p. 18.

6

Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967), *Heterotopias*," http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault_heteroTopia_en.html

7

See "The most photographed barn in America" mentioned in Don DeLillo's book *White Noise*: "... We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were 40 cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot... All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides – pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence... "No one sees the barn," he said finally.... "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." ... People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced by others. "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura... An accumulation of nameless energies." ... The man in the booth sold postcards and slides. "Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. It literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."

8

Decollage – the opposite of collage; instead of constructing an image from the sum of all the parts of an existing picture or from parts of it, the picture is created by means of cutting, tearing off or any method of reducing an existing picture. The artist most identified with this unique technique is the Italian **Mimmo Rotella**, who in Rome in the 1950s created collages and phonetic poems inspired by **Kurt Schwitters**, and later on, in the 1960s, joined the Parisian group the **Nouveaux Réalistes**. Rotella exhibited the 'torn poster' decollages for the first time in 1955. In the 1970's Rotella created a number of works by working directly on advertising pages of magazines and using solvents, reducing these either to the state of the imprint (*frottage*) or simply destroying them (*effaçage*).

9

Tel Aviv's prominent extraordinary representative used to be the Shalom Tower. Today it is the Azrielis. The "Extraordinary Representative" is an oxymoron coined by the philosopher Daniel Shabetai Milo in order to explain how our brain rescues itself from the eclectic nature of each moment in our lives and of each entity in our world. In a new book he is in the process of writing, *Trop*, Milo reformulates the idea that almost any concept is made out of apples and oranges; every image, every thought or emotion are too varied to acquire a stable and distinct identity. How can you distinguish one supermarket from another? Therefore, in order to comprehend the "mess", the brain creates a federation of all the elements comprising it around one of them, which is, paradoxically, different enough from the other members of the "pile" but is still identified as one of them. We shouldn't generalise? The brain does nothing but, and it generalises by means of the exception. Thus Paris *is* France for millions of tourists and French people although there is no place more anomalous than Paris in the whole country. In 1889, the most uncharacteristic monument in Paris was The Eiffel Tower. In time the tower *became* Paris. This alchemy is the Extraordinary Representative. Therefore, the Azrieli Towers can be considered the Extraordinary Representative of Tel Aviv. This idea was first proposed in Milo's 1989 article "Paris and the French Desert". He formulated and developed it in his book *Clefs* (keys, 1993). A spectacular example of the Extraordinary Representative can be found in his article "Pour Narcisse. Traite de l'amour impartial" (for Narcissus. On Impartial Love, 1995), in which Milo claims that Freudian narcissism is based on a distinctly non-narcissistic figure. "All human beings are narcissists, they are all unjustifiably self-centred and self-obsessed, all except Narcissus. While we are subjective by definition, self-biased because this is how we are programmed, the objectivist Narcissus falls in love with a perfect creature, and he doesn't even know that the image reflected on the surface of the water is his own". All of Daniel Shabetai Milo's books have been published in France by *Les Belles Lettres*.

10

Shading the surface with close parallel or crossed lines. A technique used by artists for printing and etching.

11

From the point of view of the eighties, Maya Cohen Levi landed straight onto the ship of postmodernism and encountered founding ideas. The first voice said: There is nothing in today's art which cannot be found in yesterday's art. An artist in the eighties can demonstrate work in the tradition of Expressionism as well as doing neo-Expressionism; he can represent post-Constructivist work or indulge in symbolist work; he can be abstract; he can make literary, narrative, theatrical art or declare a position espousing bad painting or pure art or "unmanned art", as in "unmanned aircraft". It is a world flooded with signs and signals, busy and overflowing with information. It is hard to distinguish between reality and the symbols or representations of reality, between reality and fiction, between the true and the false, between the natural and the artificial. Reality is complex beyond any ability to take it in or comprehend it. It is difficult to establish hierarchies, values, order. While the art of the seventies wished to be original, concrete, objective, structured, integral, intellectual, stable and essential, the art of the eighties wanted to be provisional, fragmental, chaotic, glamorous,

emotional, artificial and technological. It reflected subjectivity, did not shy away from senselessness and did not at all insist on logical continuity or coherence, nor on ethics, aesthetics, ideology or politics. This is what it is and this is what can be declared about it. Contemporary art moved to the surface. If there were any complaints about a lack of meaning, the art of the eighties was happy to declare it. One of the baroque qualities of the postmodern condition is hyper-reality and hypertrophy – the excess or the outpouring of definitions and terms designed to describe art. Post-modernism, post-contemporariness, super-modernism and neo-modernism as well as transavantgarde and post-humanism. Jean Francois Lyotard describes it in his book *Principles and Paradoxes* as “the erosion of the last signs of mythology” and Baudrillard as “the de-legitimacy of grand narratives”. According to Baudrillard, hyper-realist reality reflects a world of representations have lost their origin, yet function as if they themselves were the origin. There is also a shift from the stage of production to the stage of self-reproduction. The life of art is short and there are artists for all times. Countless television programmes show dozens of channels simultaneously. Bonito Oliva, to whom we owe the term “transavantgarde” and the launching of the Italian artists who represent this tendency (Clemente, Chia, Cucchi, Paladino) wrote: the transavantgarde is well aware of the semantic catastrophe of the language of art and of its corresponding ideologies. It therefore moved the image into a new relationship between drama and comedy, between myth and everyday life, between tragedy and irony, in a condition of openness and greater, uninhibited freedom of expression. The new transavantgarde lets the image ride without asking where it comes from and where it is going. It is a new neo-Mannerist sensibility. Italian Mannerism, which institutionalised the ordered and rational world of the Renaissance in the 17th century, has returned as a model for contemporary art. That is, the process recognised in European art and begun in the Renaissance marked the shift from the transcendental to the natural; from what was hidden and hinted at to what is stated on the surface; from God to man. The shift represents the birth of the artist as we know him today; a subjective, independent creator, and no longer a medium between sublime powers and man. The dichotomy between words and things was revealed. Between what really exists and what is merely an image. A dichotomy between the natural and the artificial. In fact, the entire history of modern art is a long sequence of positions relating to this unavoidable opposition. Art today has returned to art’s pre-conceptual understandings, to the old expectation to please the eye. Contemporary art externalises the subconscious and expresses everyone’s common fears. Through the creation and emptying out of symbols, through oppositions and through the doubling of contradictions, it neutralises them and frees us from them. It is a world in which everything fuses – the present with the past and the future, the autobiographical with what was shown yesterday on television. Art, like the Freudian struggle between Eros and Death, subsists on the contradictions it produces.

12

Foucault insisted that both utopia and heterotopia relate to a form of place and location. He referred to both as “a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror”. I would like to quote here a relatively extensive passage from his writing on the issue, because it serves to explain the experience of immense magical deception accompanying our fresh, initial gaze at the self portrait reflected before us. “The mirror is, after all,” writes Michel Foucault, “a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.” Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec.

<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

13

Mark 3.31-35; *Luke* 8.19-21.

14

Genesis 11, 1-9.

15

http://www.pluralismisrael.com/maagar_maamarim/maagar_maamarim2a.asp

16

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 161.