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On Becoming and on Sites of Encounter in the work of Daniel Shoshan

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Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger distinguishes in her writings on migration between three types of displacements. There are those she refers to as *inverted exiles* in which the "migration [is] towards an unknown [but] desired destination", *returns* which indicate "migrations towards a known destination" and *exiles* which stand for "movements of expulsion and casting out of a desired place".¹ But for Ettinger migrations of any type are not only geo-political events but also encounters of the self and others – processes of identification and difference sited at the threshold of the I and the non-I(s). Much of Ettinger's work revolves around the rethinking of encounters and of subjectivity on psychoanalytic levels, inviting us, as Griselda Pollock writes "to consider aspects of subjectivity as encounter[s] occurring at shared borderspaces between several partial-subjects, never entirely fused nor totally lost, but sharing and processing, within difference, elements of each unknown other."² For Ettinger this conceptualization of subjectivity-as-encounter seeks not to replace the constitution of the phallic logic of subjecthood-as-severance with a feminine (or as she refers to it) a matrixial logic of the self-as-encounter, but to coexist with it within an extended field of subjecthood. Such a reconfiguration of subjectivity, suggests Pollock, has ramifications which go beyond psychoanalytic thinking into political and social thought, allowing us to think of our encounters with others not only as complementing or threatening our subjectivity but as crucial aspects of subjectivity's very becoming. Ettinger's understanding of subjecthood, is also highly relevant for aesthetic practices and the encounters they facilitates between and amongst viewers and artworks, for it is in the border space of partial selves, neither severed nor fused in which aesthetic engagement, as well as subjectivity comes into being.

Ettinger is not alone in underlining the figure of the encounter in contemporary aesthetic practice. In recent years the art field has seen a substantial growth in curatorial, practice based and theoretical approaches which focus on the encounter with others in their attempts to rethink contemporary art. These approaches take many and varied forms – ranging from the emerging field of relational aesthetics, through Irit Rogoff's understanding of criticality as engagement, and onto the growing role played by Jean Luc Nancy's understanding of plurality as a being-in-common.³ Like Ettinger, these writers and many others are often interested in the juxtaposition of subjectivity, aesthetics and political thought, and (to varying extents) question the theorization of these issues in today's art.

This article wishes to contribute to this emerging field, by locating it within specific historical

¹ Ettinger-Lichtenberg B., The becoming threshold of matrixial borderlines, in Robertson G., et al. eds., *Travelers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, (London: Routledge, 1994). Pg. 38.

² Pollock G., Thinking the feminine: aesthetic practice as introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the concepts of matrix and metamorphosis, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2004, vol. 21, pg. 7.

³ See for example a recent survey and critique of the emerging discourse of relational aesthetics in: Martin S., Critique of Relational Aesthetics, *Third Text*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, July 2007, pp. 369 – 386.

See also:

Rogoff I., *From Criticism to Critique to Criticality*, 2003, at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en> (accessed 9/09).

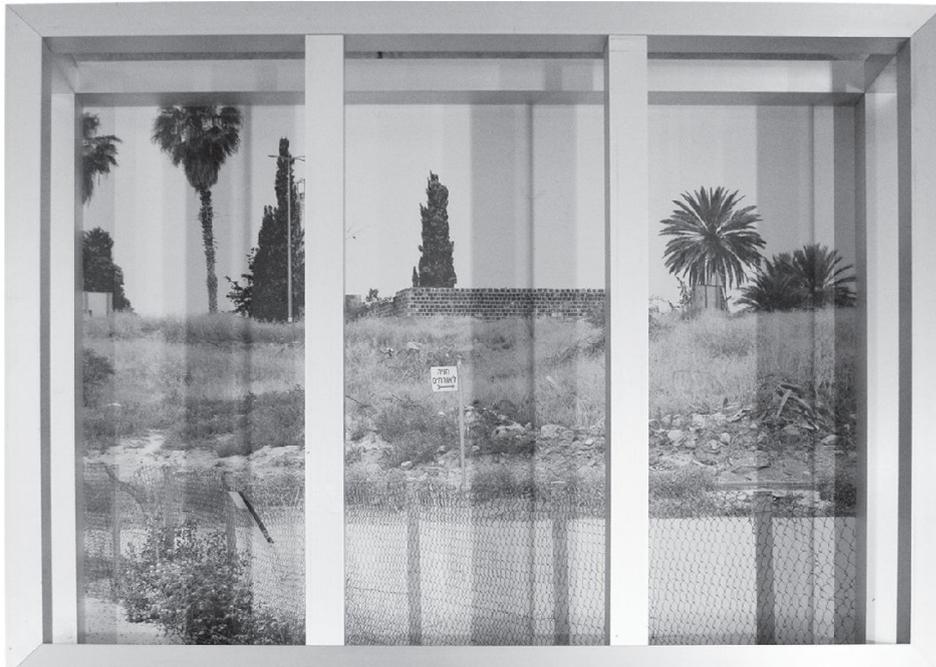
Nancy J. L., *The inoperative community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, (1983).

and political contexts, and examining the encounters of I(s) and non I(s) and the emerging of shared borderspaces in the work of Daniel Shoshan – a contemporary artist living and working in Israel. Shoshan's work addresses issues of migration, encounter, subjectivity and exile and is grounded in specific political and historical contexts – those of contemporary Israel as well as postminimalist practices and theory. Born in Israel in 1957 and exhibiting since 1984, Shoshan's recent work titled *Intermittent Confessions* (2008) included numerous geometric structures made of aluminium, inlaid with black and white photographs of landscapes and bathers, and installed quite densely in the gallery. The aluminium structures, which show a clear affinity to minimalist and post minimalist art, encase the photographic prints, often partially obscuring the images with vertical or horizontal bars – a recurring theme in Shoshan's work. Even without the bars however, the images are almost impossible to view from a single aspect. Placed at different heights, both on the floor and on the wall, and facing different directions, they can be seen fully only if one moves through the crowded gallery space, turning, kneeling and even tiptoeing amongst the structures. This viewing process precludes the viewer from arresting the exhibition at any one point, and stops the images from forming coherent series, turning the gallery into an incongruent array of sites.



Intermittent Confessions – general view

The content of the imagery also remains partially obscure, at least at first glance, as the landscape photographs often depict nondescript sites marked by traces of forgotten ruins, signs and overgrown vegetation, and their relation to the images of the bathers is not immediately palpable. In two of the photographs, we see abandoned landscapes and empty lots marked off by wire fences and signs. Stating “parking for locals” and “parking for guests” respectively, the signs demarcate the role of the empty lots, but also allude to the structuring processes at work within the landscape, underlining both the traces of human activity and the felt absence of human presence. This is not a “natural” place which we are witnessing in all its natural glory, they seem to declare, but a layered and marked site, which distinguishes between visitors and locals, assigning them different loci and different roles.



Intermittent Confessions – detail, "Parking for Guests"

The complexity of these and other landscape photographs in the installation intensifies once we learn that they have all been taken in Beit Shean – a small peripheral town situated not far from the Israel-Jordan border and which is also Shoshan's home town. Beit Shean is known in Israel for its extensive archaeological excavations which have uncovered Scythopolis – a large Roman-Byzantine city now located underneath the modern town. By the first half of the 20th century however, Beit Shean, or Beisan as it was known then, was a much smaller Arab village of approximately 5,500 people, who in 1948 fled the village following the growing hostilities between the Arab and Jewish population at the end of the British Mandate in Palestine.⁴ The village's buildings were confiscated and many demolished, those remaining serving to house Jewish Holocaust survivors from post war Europe and from North Africa. One of these buildings can be seen in Shoshan's photograph - *Parking for Guests*. Perched on a hill, the decrepit stone building, which once served as a local mosque and later as the local archaeological museum, now lies in ruins after being set alight a few years ago. The conspicuous hill top location, as well the cypress, date and palm trees, suggest that this was once a focal point for the communities which lived here, while the overgrown vegetation, the low angle from which the photograph is taken and the vertical bars across the image place the site beyond our reach – a place of memory and loss rather than one of communal activity.

⁴ As with all historical literature addressing the Israel-Palestine War of 1948, there are widely conflicting accounts of what happened in Beisan and its immediate environs during the war and preceding hostilities. For further details see:

Forman G., *The transformation of the 'Emeq Yizre'el / Marj Ibn 'Amer and 'Emeq Beit Shean / Ghor Beisan: changes in population, settlement and land tenure due to the Palestine war and the establishment of the state of Israel*, M.A. thesis, (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2000).

Morris B., *The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem revisited*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Kadman N., *Erased from space and consciousness: depopulated Palestinian villages in the Israeli-Zionist discourse*, (Jerusalem: November books, 2008).

Shoshan's work addresses his personal biography in a complex and seemingly paradoxical manner. For although Shoshan himself strongly conveys the crucial role growing up in Beit Shean has had on his life and art in personal conversations, and identifies himself in many respects as a Beit-Shean'er, the town itself is barely visible in his images, and its photographs could easily be attributed to any peripheral town in the Mediterranean or Middle-East.⁵

In many ways Beit Shean emerges in Shoshan's work not only as a town geographically situated at the border of Israel and Jordan but as a borderspace in which traces of others and of self, of I(s) and non-I(s) are neither fused nor severed but shared, and emerge through complex and often fraught (and missed) encounters.

Shoshan's exploration of shared borderspaces continues with the images of bathers. Depicting men bathing in the sea, the photographs confront us with Shoshan's seven brothers. The subtle images are linked but varied. Some of the men photographed seem almost nude while others are fully clothed, some are entering the water while others are nearly submerged, and some are photographed at a distance while others still are depicted close up. But in none of the images are we given even the faintest clue as to the bathers' identity. As with the images of Beit Shean, Shoshan clearly conveys the importance of photographing his own brothers in personal conversations, relays the events surrounding the photographing event, and recounts familial anecdotes. But again, one may only learn of the subjects' identity and significance through the curatorial texts in the exhibition and catalogue.

The juxtaposition of minimalist forms such as Shoshan's aluminium structures with personal and biographical practices was not prevalent in the minimalist or postminimalist art and discourse of the late '60s and early '70s. Indeed both the art and discourse of the time often revolved around the de-personalisation of art making and viewing, what Hal Foster described as the "sever[ing] of art... from the subjectivity of the artist" and the opening up of "a new space of object/subject terms".

Anna Chave, whose essay *Biography and Minimalism* (2000) addresses the juxtaposition of minimalism and the personal agrees with Foster that minimalist practices were often conceived as a-personal, but suggests that this is less a trait of the works themselves and more of their reception by the minimalist field of art – a field which often worked to deny the crucial role biographical concerns played in minimalism. Discussing the work of Carl Andre for example, Chave comments that

...as early as 1968 he [Carl Andre] prepared a self interview for the catalogue to his Mönchengladbach solo show, replete with Whitmanesque paeon to his native Quincy, 'City of granite quarries and ship building yards great uncut blocks of stone acres of steel plates.' Yet Dan Graham would characterize Andre's art around the same time as "disencumber[ed] of the weight of personal and historically evolutionary determination".⁶

Chave establishes in her essay a consistent link between the a-personal nature of some

⁵ Several conversations between the author of this essay and Daniel Shoshan were held in the first half of 2008.

⁶ The quote is taken from Hal Foster's essay "The crux of minimalism", as it appears in Anna Chave's essay:

Chave A., "Minimalism and biography", in: Broude N. & Garrard M. D. eds., *Reclaiming female agency*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pg. 387.

minimalist works, such as Andre's and their rapid canonization within the field of minimalist art. These works, she suggests, stands in sharp contrast to the more "personal" and "biographical" minimalist works which were often produced by women, and which were deemed less original and of inferior aesthetic quality because of their biographical nature. The minimalist field of art says Chave, depicted artworks made by women, such as Eva Hesse and Yvonne Rainer, as both self centred and overly reliant on colleagues' input. At the same time works produced by male artists such as Robert Morris for example who benefited greatly from his close personal relations with Rosalind Kraus and Yvonne Rainer, and in which he exhibited his nude body, were perceived as neither self centered or derivative but as accomplished and "non-personal".

The differing and gender based reception of minimalists works offered men and women operating within the field markedly different trajectories. Regarding the work of Eva Hesse Chave writes for example that

... a selective construction of history [one which omits the personal and relational aspects of an artists work] was never available to Hesse, whose critical fortunes have all along been colored by attention to her biography. ...The erasure of artistic subjectivity that seemed such a radical prospect to certain male artists in the 1960s could hardly portend the same for their female contemporaries, for whom erasure was almost a given.⁷

Although since the late '60s, various artists, amongst them quite a few women, have used minimalist practices to address personal and biographical concerns, perhaps the most notable of whom is Mona Hatoum, the juxtaposition of personal and minimalist practices continues to be an intriguing issue, and one which is highly relevant to Shoshan's work and the current field of Israeli art.

The theoretical discussion of the field of minimalist and postminimalist practices and discourse has been rather limited and is only now beginning to attract more theoretical and curatorial attention. A recent exhibition and catalogue on postminimalist art published by the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art is thus a notable addition to the rather limited literature available, and sheds some light on how practices of minimalism and postminimalism are being conceptualised in today's art discourse. Adi Englman who curated the exhibition and wrote one of the essays in the catalogue titled *Post-Minimalism: 'It is what it is': on the quest for content and sites of meaning*, elaborates the use of postminimalist practices in Israeli art both in the '70s and today.⁸ Referring to the work of Robert Pincus-Witten who first coined the term postminimalism in the early '70s and who wrote about some of the Israeli artists included in the exhibition, Englman defines postminimalism as "the artistic current which was, at once, the successor and the most pungent critic of 'pure' American minimalism", highlighting postminimalism's break with the minimalist tradition and its rigid conceptualisation of the object and of objecthood, as well as its continuance of some of minimalism's most basic tenets. "Following the neo-avant-garde minimalist tradition which emerged and crystallised in the first half of that decade [the '60s]" Englman continues, "the postminimalist expressions too were based on a set of principal reservations and negations: negation of referential contents, negation of expression, negation of emotion,

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 392.

⁸ Englman A., *Post-Minimalism: 'It is what it is': on the quest for content and sites of meaning*, in: Avital L. et al., *The Adler collection and Israeli post-minimalism in the seventies and in contemporary Art*, (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Art, 2008).

negation of image, negation of illusionism, negation of the subconscious, negation of the optical, and negation of the metaphysical."⁹

According to Englman then, Israeli postminimalism continued to shun referential content, imagery or expression, and focused on linguistically oriented practices, such as those found in Joshua Neustein's work, on "concrete", process based and ephemeral practices such as those of Benni Efrat, and on the "home made" and "amateurish" approaches of artists such as Pinchas Cohen-Gan. Englman's reading of postminimalist Israeli art, could of course be challenged, and the referential contents of minimalist practices such as those of Nahum Tevet for example, may be elaborated.¹⁰ But, as Englman is one of the very few researchers addressing the minimalist and postminimalist art field in Israel, her claims in which the canonisation of non-referential art is advanced while approaches which address the personal, the political and the historical within minimalism are marginalised, may have a substantial impact on the understanding and structuring of this field both historically and in the following years.

Taking these issues into account it is interesting to examine Shoshan's reception in the Israeli art world. Reading the reviews and more scholarly accounts of his works, one is surprised by the scarcity of references to minimalist and postminimalism practices; it rapidly becomes evident that Shoshan's reception has been based less on the works' art historical contexts, and more on Shoshan's cultural identity as a Mizrachi Jew.¹¹

Mizrachi, literally an "eastern", is a term used to denote Jews whose family had immigrated to Israel from Arab speaking countries (such as Morocco where Shoshan's family came from), and to differentiate their cultural identity from that of the Ashkenazi Jews, who originated in Eastern and Western Europe. Historically Mizrachi Jews have been marginalized in the financial, political, social and cultural spheres in Israel in a myriad of ways, both explicit and implicit, and although in some respects the situation has improved in the last decades (there are many more Mizrachi politicians for example, and some aspects of Mizrachi culture have become more widely acknowledged), the economic, social and cultural marginalisation of Mizrachi Jews in Israel continues.

The presence of Mizrachi culture, history and artists within the Israeli art world and art history also remains limited, and it is perhaps within these frameworks that the labeling of Shoshan's work as a "Mizrachi" work of art – a work which for better or worse, attempts to come to terms with the identity of a Mizrachi artist living in "western world" and engaging with "western" art practices may be understood.

Hagai Segev for example, the curator of *Intermittent Confessions* described Shoshan's identity and practice as follows:

⁹ *Ibid*, pg.114.

¹⁰ Brest G. & Ginton D., I don't have any plans, only intuitions – a conversation with Nahum Tevet, *HaMidrasha*, vol. 9, June 2006, pp. 192-217.

¹¹ See for example:

Gautier S., *Rashida – Installation*, (Jerusalem: Artists' House, 2004), in http://www.art.org.il/he/exhibition_info.php?id=58, Dec. 2008.

Segev H., Daniel Shoshan, incarcerating culture or setting it free, *Tav Plus – a journal for music and art*, vol. 8, (2006), pp. 34-37.

Romberg O., *In Search of an Israeli art*, (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation, 2006), in: <http://www.slought.org/content/11343>, Dec. 2008.

Shoshan examines the culture he is part of from two different, seemingly adversative perspectives: the eastern one (or should we call it Arab) and the western one, by which he had acquired his professional skills and from which he works as a professional artist.¹²

Segev's binary opposition of eastern vs. western culture and of personal identity vs. a professional one seems to be grounded in essentialised conceptualisations of both identity and the art world, and overlooks the subtle and complex networks of meanings Shoshan's work performs through a sharing of always partial and partially unknown I(s) and non I(s). By employing what Ettinger describes as a patriarchal model of subjecthood in which differing subjectivities are either fused or severed, Segev limits his understanding of both the subjective and aesthetic encounter offered by Shoshan's works, and provides us with an account, which although grounded in specific historical and political conditions is less than productive.

Consider for example an image of one of Shoshan's brothers depicted partially submerged in the sea. Wearing a head cover which attests to his religious adherence – an image which despite the significant portion of religious Jews in Israel is still relatively uncommon in current art – the photograph connotes the often more traditionally religious Mizrachi cultural practices and the Jewish custom of "tvila" – the ritualistic Jewish bathing. But as with all of Shoshan's images, this photograph does not simply refer to Jewish customs or Mizrachi identity, nor does it merely juxtapose them with the vast iconology of bathers evident throughout "western" art history; rather it presents us with an image which is neither or both "western" and "eastern", minimalistic and biographical, local and dislocated. Shoshan's image-structures not only embrace some of the dichotomies found in the discourse of Israeli art and minimalism, but also, and more importantly, challenge the grounds in which these dichotomies are based. By dislocating the work from its immediate biographical grounds, yet constantly tracing it back to the local and the personal, Shoshan's works manages to precariously perform an identity which is at once singular and plural – indicative of its own histories and those of others.



Intermittent Confessions – detail

The issues of Mizrachi Jews and their cultural and political identity can also be witnessed

¹² Segev H., pg. 34.

in Shoshan's images of Beit Shean, as the town is not only known for its ancient history and the role it played in the Israel-Palestine war of 1948, but more recently as the home town of David Levi – Beit Shean's former workers' union leader who became a member of parliament, a foreign minister and the deputy prime minister. Levi was one of the most vocal politicians in Israel of the '80s and '90s who addressed, as well as personified, issues of Mizrahi culture and its marginalisation, and became a symbol (sometimes inadvertently) of the new and empowered Mizrahi identity in contemporary Israel – a symbol which invoked much ridicule as well as racism. But as with the images of the bathers, Shoshan's images of Beit Shean are always over-determined, and are as much, or as little, a part of minimalist practices and "western" art history as they are of Shoshan's biography and Israel's conflictual histories.

Going back to Griselda Pollock's account of Ettinger's work which stresses its relevance not only for the psychoanalytic sphere but also for the aesthetic and political fields, we may now be in a better position to understand Shoshan's work more fully. Like much of Ettinger's work, Shoshan's aesthetic practices are highly reflexive, but not directly critical of either the art world or the fraught political sphere of Israel. Shoshan's work does not "expose" the inherent lacuna in minimalist readings of the personal (as Chave does), nor does it overtly critique the systematic sidelining of Mizrahi culture and the obfuscation of Palestinian histories (as other contemporary artists in Israel and elsewhere do). Indeed what Shoshan offers us is not so much a critique of existing conditions but an expansion of them. Like Ettinger, Shoshan expands the field of subjectivity by closely following the emergence of the self through its encounters with others and otherness, and like Ettinger his practices also seek to extend our understanding of aesthetic and political encounters, while contextualizing them in the specific and highly complex sites of Beit Shean and Israel more generally. Operating on subjective, aesthetic and political levels, Shoshan's work is thus able to offer us insights into the field of art in Israel and its reckoning with minimalist practices, as it explores the artist's own biography and that of Mizrahi and Palestinian others. It is in the juxtaposition of these differing levels of knowledge and experience that Shoshan's work is at its most productive juncture. For rather than simply presenting them for the viewer to analyse, or formulating them into a coherent structure, Shoshan's work allows us to witness the encounters through which they themselves become; encounters which are always incomplete and often perplexing, but which offer us an all too scarce a chance to engage with others' otherness and that of our own.

