

Re-imagining nationalism? The Contemporary Artworks of Daniel Shoshan

In 2013, Daniel Shoshan (b. 1957) and his colleagues in the Art Espionage group (Sharon Yabou Ayalon, Alon Ben Lula, Keren Mor, Menashe Noy and Amit Matalon) downloaded a map of northern Israel and divided it using a grid into 1000 equal squares along a main route traversing Israel's northern regions, from west to east. The group members then travelled along the route and photographed a random photograph in each of the squares marked on the map. The digital images were sent to an art production factory in China where a set of artisan workers painted each of them on a small (30 x 40 cm) canvas. The resulting painted images were then exhibited as part of the "Readymade Centennial Exhibition" held at the Haifa Museum of Art in 2013.¹ Many of the canvasses were displayed in a close knit grid over three walls in one of the museum's galleries, while hundreds of other canvasses were laid one on top of each other on the floor in an adjacent gallery, forming a rectangular cuboid and obscuring most of the paintings except those in the top layer. The original map used was printed and laid on the floor between the two gallery spaces, allowing, or perhaps forcing the audiences to walk through it.



Image 1 (general view of the exhibition)

Many of the issues which preoccupied Shoshan and the Art Espionage group in this work, titled "Ha'Aretz" (the land of the nation) have been prominent throughout Shoshan's oeuvre. The political and aesthetic processes involved in the production of art, the visualization and obfuscation of place and identity, and the relations between east and west, have all figured prominently in his previous works. Ha'Aretz however, is Shoshan's first explicit engagement

¹ See the exhibition website (available in Hebrew only): Haifa Museums, <http://www.hma.org.il/%D7%AA%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%A9/976/%D7%9E%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%9F>, Accessed 8.11.2016

Much of the information regarding Daniel Shoshan's the artworks discussed in this essay has been gathered in numerous interviews and discussions between myself and Shoshan in 2014 – 2016.

with land and territory on a large scale, and it addresses more directly than ever before in his oeuvre, questions pertaining to the national land of Israel.

This essay takes its cue from Ha'Aretz and traces questions of nationalism and national identity developed throughout Shoshan's works, positing his complex aesthetic and political practices as an extended case study through which to understand the ongoing shifts in critical thinking and identity politics within the contemporary art field. The essay contextualizes Shoshan's work within post-structuralist thought and its deconstruction of grand narratives – especially those of nationalism, universalism and modern western art, and argues that Shoshan develops an alternative to post-structuralist critique based in the re-imaging of collective political structures, such as nationalism, as a basis for inclusivity and solidarity.

The Grid

There are many trajectories traversing Shoshan's oeuvre, but more than any other, it is the trajectory marked by the recurring grid in his works which brings together questions of visualization, relations of east and west in the discourses of art and identity in Israel, and the structuring of the land and the nation. Clearly evident on the satellite map included in the Ha'Aretz exhibition, as well as in the final display of the painted canvasses on the gallery walls and floor, the grid is a highly laden form in both the history of modern art and modern cartography, and serves, as the art historian Rosalind Krauss suggests, as the emblem of (western) modernism and universality.²

Shoshan's preoccupation with the grid can be traced back to one of his earliest large scale exhibition mounted in the San Paulo Biennial in 1989. The work in San Paulo was comprised of large canvasses marked with a faint grid which sported smaller and more painterly images depicting some of art history's most canonised images: a single chair, a blurred landscape, a female nude, abstract geometric forms and a small bowl. Mordechai Omer – the director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art at the time, who curated Shoshan's exhibition at San Paulo (alongside that of the Israeli artist Micha Ulman), contextualised Shoshan's work within early 20th century western modernism, and focused not on the grid but on Shoshan's depiction of

2 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1985, page 1.

Krauss' essay has been well received and has been used in numerous assessments of modernist and contemporary art. See for example:

Margarita Tupitsyn, The Grid as a Checkpoint of Modernity, *Tate Papers*, issue 12, Autumn 2009.

the bowl.³ In his text, he demonstrates the bowl's links to the work of Cezanne, Brancusi and Giacometti, and reads Shoshan's work as carrying on from these artists and their exploration of perception and its modes of representation.

In the only critique regarding the exhibition found, written by the critic and novelist Yotam Reuveni, Shoshan's grids, as well as other components of the works, are noted and understood as a part of the work's general "incomprehensibility" and geometric "coldness".⁴ The descriptions of the work are framed within Reuveni's seemingly genuine surprise to find such a young artist as Shoshan participating in a large scale international exhibition (Shoshan was 32 at the time), but maybe even more so, that Shoshan comes from the peripheral town of Beit Shean. As Reuveni himself notes in the review, Shoshan's hometown is not relevant to the exhibited works, and would not be mentioned had he been born somewhere else, but, as he reflexively adds "this is the way of journalism" and thus, he implies, Beit Shean must be mentioned.⁵

Although Reuveni does not explicitly analyse the use of the grid, or any other aspect of Shoshan's "cold" and "geometric" works, his remark about Shoshan's birth place and general uneasiness with Shoshan's works, may provide some insight not only into the reception of Shoshan's works within Israel's art field, but also into the use of grid throughout his oeuvre.

Beit Shean itself, where Shoshan comes from, is, as mentioned, a small peripheral town situated not far from the Israel-Jordan border.⁶ Often noted within Israeli discourse for its extensive archaeological excavations which have uncovered a large Roman-Byzantine city (Scythopolis),⁷ its Palestinian past as a small town (population aprox. 5000) by the name of Beisan, is like almost all Palestinian sites within Israel mostly missing from Israeli discourse.⁸

³ Mordechai Omer, *The International Biennial in San Paulo 1989: Two Israeli artists – Much Ulman and Daniel Shoshan* (Heb), pp. 20-23.

⁴ Yotam Reuveni, Micha Ulman & Dani Shoshan representing you in Sao Paulo (Heb), *Seven Days: Yediot Acharonot Magazine*, 1.12.1989, pp. 30-31

⁵ Ibid. My translation

⁶ See a discussion of Beit Shean's peripherality in: Lilach Lev Ari and Avraham Pavin, Social capital as a tool for the development of a peripheral region: The case of Beit Shean Valley, *Horizons in Geography* (Heb.), issue 66, p. 95-113, January 2006.

⁷ See for example: Amichay Mazar et al., *Excavations at Tel Beth-Shean, 1989-1996*, Hebrew University of Jerusalem Press, 2006

⁸ On the erasure of Palestinian memory from Israeli discourse see:

Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, Indiana University Press, 2015

One of the very few academic sources to discuss Palestinian Beisan is:

Mustafa Abbasi, City of Farmers and Merchants: Beisan in the Palestine Mandate Period, (1918-1948), *Journal of the Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, November 2015, vol. 14, issue 2, pp. 203-220.

During the 1948 war and preceding hostilities between Jews and Palestinians, much of the Palestinian population fled and/or was deported from the town, and the town's buildings were confiscated by the state of Israel. Some of the buildings were demolished and those which remained served, as was often the case, to house Jewish Holocaust survivors from post war Europe, and Jewish immigrants from North Africa.⁹ Later accounts of the town within Palestinian literature are scant, but Beisan is mentioned in various memory projects regarding the Nakba and its ongoing repercussions.¹⁰ Within Israeli discourse the town is commonly associated with peripherality, Mizrachi culture and poverty, associations projected on one of the town's most known residents - David Levi. Levi, a construction worker and local union leader, became a member of parliament in 1969 and later rose to prominence as a foreign minister and the deputy prime minister. Levi was one of the most vocal politicians in Israel of the '80s and '90s regarding issues of Mizrachi culture and its marginalisation, and became a symbol of the new and empowered Mizrachi identity – an identity which invoked much admiration as well as ridicule and racism.¹¹

Unlike many of Shoshan's later works, Beit Shean or Mizrachi culture did not play any explicit role in the San Paulo work, and aside from Reuveni's remark there is no mention of it or any other sites of the peripheral "east" of Israel, but rather a clear focus on western art history and its modernist emblems. The references to the canon of Western modernist art continue to appear prominently in Shoshan's works, often referring explicitly to Cezanne and to other early modernist artists, as well as employing abstract geometric forms associated with American post war art and especially Minimalist art. It is thus surprising to discover that the grid, the most emblematic form of western modernism, disappears from Shoshan works in

⁹ 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) pp. 226 – 228.

¹⁰ See for example the discussion of the Beisan region in Palestine Remembered:
<http://www.palestineremembered.com/BaysanTownsSnapshot.html>, accessed 8.11.2016

¹¹ The issues of racism has been most clearly articulated by Levi himself in what became known as "the Monkeys' Speech" in which he addressed his party members of racism. See the analysis of this case by the sociologist Sami Smocha:

Sami Smocha, The Ashkenazi Era in Politics has not come to an end (Heb.), Yediot Aharonot, 6.4.1992

On Levi's challenge to Israeli national identity see:

Hagar Salomon, The ambivalence over the Levantinization of Israel : 'David Levi' jokes, *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 20, issue 4, 2007, pp. 415-442.

1996, and is replaced in its role as a matrix for Shoshan's works by a geometric ornamental motif typical of Moroccan architecture and visual culture.

In an untitled work from 1996 for example, Shoshan embeds a small black and white painting/reproduction of a Cezanne-esque bowl, not unlike that of the San Paulo work, in such a geometric ornament, while in another work from the same year, he paints a small black and white image reminiscent of Cezanne's trees, again embedding it in a Moroccan geometric ornament. As ornaments such as those used by Shoshan are some of the most clearly recognised visual images associated with Islamic culture and the "East", and as in Shoshan's work they have replaced the emblematic western grid as a matrix for his western canonical images, it could be easily deduced that Shoshan's works have shifted from the "West" to the "East", finding alternative grounds in which to (literally) base themselves.¹²

Shoshan's shift from the western grid to the "eastern" ornament corresponds closely with the changes within Israel art field's during the 1990's and the political and cultural discourse of Mizrahi identity in Israel more widely. The mobilization of Mizrahi identity and its positioning as a political and cultural force to be reckoned with can be traced back to Israel's Black Panthers movement in the 1970's, and witnessed in the growth of popular Mizrahi music in the 1980's, the rise of several Mizrahi political parties (Tami in 1981 and Shas in 1982), and the initiation of the democratic Mizrahi rainbow coalition (HaKeshet HaMizrachit) in 1996 at the same time as Shoshan was transitioning from the grid to the ornament.¹³

Within the academic and cultural discourse, it was in 1989 (at the time of the San Paulo Biennial) that Ella Shohat published one of the first books to extensively explore issues of orientalism and the "East" in Israeli culture, focusing on its cinema. Titled "Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation" it served as a key reference point within post-structuralist discourse in Israel and its address of the "East".¹⁴ In Contemporary art, such a discourse gained prominence in Sarah Chinski's re-appraisal of the Israeli avant garde in

12 See an extensive issue of these issues in modern and contemporary art in: Mrkus Bruderlin ed., *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between non-Western, modern and contemporary Art*, Dumont Buchverlag, 2002.

¹³ See a discussion of the discourse of Mizrachim and Mizrahiut in Israel in the second half of the 20th century:

Hannan Hever, Yehuda Shenhav, Pnina Motzafi-Haller eds. *Mizrachim in Israel: a critical Observation into Israel's Ethnicity* (HEB), Van Leer Institute & Hakubutz Hameuhad Publications, 2002, pp. 15-28

¹⁴ Ella Schohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Univ. of Texas Press, 1989.

1994¹⁵, and more explicitly in 1997 in Meir Gal's now canonical art work - "9 out of 400 (the west and the rest)" in which he photographed himself holding 9 pages out of Israel's high school Jewish history reader – the only 9 pages, out of the 400, devoted to the history of Mizrahi Jews.¹⁶ In 1998, the question of the "East" gained access to national art institutions when Yigal Zalmona – head curator of Israeli art at the Israel museum curated a an extensive (albeit less critical) exhibition titled "Kadima: The East in Israeli Art in 2008" (in Hebrew Kadima means both forward and "the east"),¹⁷ while the works of contemporary Mizrahi artists were conceptualised on a large scale in 2002 by Tal Ben Zvi in an exhibition titled "Mother Tongue".¹⁸ These issues continue to be debated within and outside the field of contemporary art and as recently as 2014, Gideon Ofrat – one of Israel's most known art critics provoked a heated debate claiming there is no such thing as "Mizrahi art practices" and that all art in Israel is inherently "Western".¹⁹

Returning to Shoshan's works produced in the mid 90's and examining them more carefully it becomes obvious that Shoshan does not only shift his practices from the "West" to the "East", but explores the complex relations between them. In 1994 for example, in a work titled "Trampoline with Apple", Shoshan brought the grid, the ornament and a Cezanne-esque apple together, in an image painted on a large circular canvass harnessed to a circular metal structure reminiscent of a trampoline.

¹⁵Sara Chinski,. Silence of the Fish: The Local Versus the Universal in Israeli Discourse of Art. *Theory and Critique* Issue 4, 1993, pp. 105–122 (Heb)

¹⁶ Meir Gal, Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest), 25 X 33.5 inches, C Print, 1997. See the work on Meri Gal's website: <http://meirgal.squarespace.com/exhibitions/nine-out-of-four-hundred-the-west-and-the-rest-1997/5060044>, accessed 27.11.2016

¹⁷ Yigal Zalmona & Tamar Manor-Fridman, *Kadima – Orientalism in Israeli art*, Israel Museum of Art Publications, 1998

¹⁸ Tal Ben Zvi & Yigal Nizri, *Eastern Appearance / Mother Tongue: A Present that Stirs in the Thickets of Its Arab Past*, Babel Publishing, 2004. The catalogue in Hebrew, English and Arabic can be downloaded here: <http://www.hagar-gallery.com/Catalogues/catalogues.html>, accessed 27.11.2016.

¹⁹ Gideon Ofrat, There is no Mizrahi Art, in: *Giedon Ofrat's Shed*, <https://gideonofrat.wordpress.com/2014/03/06/%D7%90%D7%99%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%96%D7%A8%D7%97%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C/>, published 6.3.2014, accessed 27.11.2016

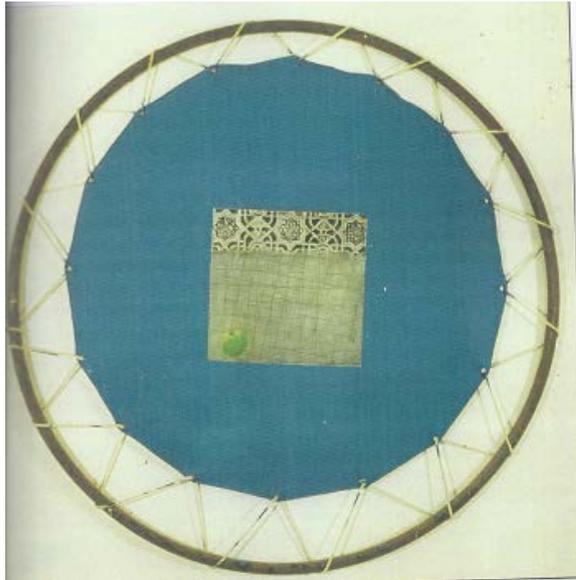


Image 2 (Trampoline with Apple, 1994)

Within the image there is a horizontal strip in which a complex geometric ornamentation is painted in black and white, while the bottom two thirds are taken up by a grid. In the bottom left corner, embedded within the grid lies the green apple. Unlike the grid in the San Paulo works however, this grid is not a single matrix of perpendicular lines but a doubled structure in which the second iteration of the grid has been shifted over and slightly turned. The superimposition of the two grids forms numerous polygonal shapes, and it is easy to see how a series of such continuous shifts might evolve to an ever growing geometric pattern – taking the grid from a singular, western imposition of geometric order, to the geometric ornaments of Moroccan architecture which are produced through a series of such shifting geometric matrixes. Indeed it is through the complex juxtapositions of grids that many "eastern" ornamentations are produced.²⁰ The Cezanne-esque apple painted over the doubled grid/ornament can thus be said to reside neither exclusively within the space of the grid nor the ornament, but rather in a space which belongs neither in the "west" nor the "east" but to their shared, as well as distinct, quests for geometric visualisation.

Identity, Narrative and Abstraction

The conceptualisations of third or hybrid spaces such as those formulated in Shoshan's Trampoline and Apple, are now commonly recognised as the work of Homi Bhabha, initially

²⁰ See for example the discussion of the making of ornaments in the reissue of the classic 19th century book "The Grammar of the Ornament": James Owen, *The Grammar of the Ornament: Visual Reference of Form and Colour in Architecture and the Decorative Arts*, Princeton University Press, 2016(1856).

published in 1994 (the same year Shoshan produced *Trampoline and Apple*) in his book *Location of Culture*, offering a more fluid conceptualisation of identity and place.²¹ Bhabha's work played a crucial part in the development and proliferation of post colonialist discourse worldwide, and was taken up in discussion of post-colonialism in Israel during the mid-1990's and the early 21st century. In the first comprehensive anthology in Hebrew to address issues of post-colonialism published in 2004, Yehuda Shenhav – the anthology's editor, and Hanan Hever, suggest that Bhabha's understanding of hybridity can be particularly useful within Israel to undermine the juxtapositions of East and West as categories of identity and power, and to offer relational readings of "judaisms" and "arabisms", especially in regard to the category of the "Mizrachi Jews".²²

Within the art world of Israel, the question of third spaces and hybrid identities came to prominence in 1994 in regard to the work of Asim Abu Shaqra, an artist whose identity and work have been claimed to be both, and neither, Palestinian and Israeli. Born in 1961 to a family of artists in Um el Fahm - a Muslim Arab city in Palestine/Israel, Abu Shaqra studied art and lived in Tel Aviv until his early death, at the age of 28 in 1990. His most noted works, both within Israeli and Palestinian art discourses, focused on the image of the *sabr* or *tzabar* – an image which had become a key cultural symbol for both Jews and Palestinians in the region. Within Israeli cultural and political discourse, the *tzabar* denotes Jews who had been born locally, while in Palestinian discourse it serves as a potent symbol of personal and national perseverance (*sabr* means patience in Arabic) as well as physically and symbolically demarcating the hedges of the now erased Palestinian villages and those missing from them.

It was Tali Tamir, an independent curator working with the Israeli field of art who first suggested that Abu Shaqra's work might be categorised as neither Palestinian nor Israeli, but as "Arab-Palestinian-Israeli". Using Azmi Bishara's socio-philosophical work on identities of Palestinians residing in Israel, Tamir elucidated how Abu Shaqra managed to fashion his art practice out of a plethora of sources, both Israeli and Palestinian, "local" and "universal" while creating his hybrid identity.²³ Tamir's employment of a hybrid framework to understand Abu Shaqra's work stood in stark contrast to the interpretation of Sarit Shapira – the prominent curator of the Israel Museum who suggested just a few years earlier, that the image of the *tzabar* in Abu Shaqra's work "inevitably [maintains] a dialogue with Israeli culture and

²¹ Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, Routledge Press, 1994

²² Yehuda Shenhav & Hanan Hever, *Trends in Post colonial Research*, in Yehuda shenhav ed., *Coloniality and the Post colonial Condition: Implications for Israeli Society*, 2004. Pp. 189 -200

²³ Tali Tamir, *The shadow of the alien: the paintings of Abu shaqra*, in Allen Ginton curator, Asim Abu Shaqra, Tel Aviv Musem Publishing, 1994, pp. 12-15.

terminology, and not with the (verbal or formal) definition based in an Arab-Palestinian culture."²⁴ Tamir's contextualisation of Abu Shaqra's work also contrasted that of Alen Ginton – another central curator of Israeli art working in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, who focused less on Abu Shaqra's "Israeliness", and more on the "western" nature of his work and wrote that "The identification of Abu Shaqra, a Muslim Israeli-Arab, with the motif of the crucifix, as his earlier sketches demonstrate, strengthens what previous criticisms of his work have already claimed – his assimilation within the tradition of western painting."²⁵

Tamir's reading of Abu Shaqra's hybridity also challenges the Palestinian discourse of his work which emerged a decade later and which saw his work as clearly Palestinian. In 2001 for example, Kemal Boullata suggested that Abu Shaqra's work goes back to the sabr's early 20th century iconography apparent in the paintings of Nicola Sayighh – a Palestinian Christian icon painter, and his student Zulfa al-Sa'di whose still lives of the sabr fruits had been exhibited in the Palestinian pavilion in the first Pan-Arab fair held in Jerusalem in 1933.²⁶ Tal Ben Zvi, an Israeli curator known for her work on Palestinian art, also defines Abu Shaqra's art as Palestinian, while emphasizing the specific cultural and political contexts of Palstinians who, like Abu Shaqra, are also Israeli citizens.²⁷

Tamir's reading of Abu Shaqra's work as opening up a hybrid space of identity has several merits when compared with other readings of his work. As Shenhav and Hever suggest nearly a decade later, it serves to critique the ideological separation of East and West, and of Israelis and Palestinians, and provides a space in which to develop a more ambivalent and dynamic understanding of identity and cultural practices. Despite these obvious merits, it seems the critical promise of hybridity evident in Tamir's writing and discourse of hybridity, has not been entirely fulfilled in Israel or elsewhere. Developing an extensive critique of the term and its reception, Amar Acheraïou demonstrates how the insufficient elaboration of the "third space" formed by hybrid structures, as well as the presentation of hybridity as a contemporary phenomenon rather than an ongoing historical practice, weakened its political and social impact and failed to make hybrid and other complex identities the historical norm rather than the contemporary alternative relegated to the identity of "others".²⁸

Focusing on the discourse of identity politics within cultural practices, Anne Ring Peterson goes even further and suggests that hybridity served to strengthen the structure of

²⁴ Sarit Shapira, *Tzabar in a pot: Asim Abu Shaqra*, Kav isse 10, Pp. 37-42. 41).

²⁵ Allen Ginton curator, *The Passion of Asim Abu Shaqra*, in: Allen Ginton, 1994.

²⁶ Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: from 1850 to the present*, Saqi Books, 2009. Pp. 183-203

²⁷ Tal Ben Zvi, *Men in the Sun*, pp. E34-E46, <http://www.men-in-the-sun.com/HE/catalog-d>, published 2009, accessed 29.11.2016

²⁸ Amar Acheraïou, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, Palgrave Publications, 2011.

essentialized identities by becoming a supplement to their existing binary juxtapositions, and by providing a "safe" and dedicated place for "others".²⁹ Peterson also suggests that hybrid identities have often become as essentialized as their binary counterparts, and rather than serving as a site of ambivalence and complexity, they have ossified into yet another pre-determined identity.

Shoshan's challenging of the binary juxtapositions of east and west in "trampoline" and others works from the mid-1990's, developed roughly at the same time as the discourse addressing Abu Shaqra's work identity began to emerge. However it was not until 2008 in an exhibition of his work *Intermittent Confessions* that his work was read within the framework of hybridity.

Composed of numerous geometric structures made of aluminium which encased black and white photographs of landscapes and bathers, *Intermittent Confessions* made for quite a dense installation both visually and politically. As in the *HaAretz*, here too, the vision of the audience was barred, and many of the images were literally displayed behind vertical or horizontal bars. But even without the bars, the images encased in the structures were almost impossible to view from a single aspect as they were placed at different heights, both on the floor and throughout the gallery space, and faced different directions, precluding the viewer from arresting the exhibition at any one point.



Image 3: *Intermittent Confessions* – general view

The content of the imagery also remained partially obscure and the landscape photographs encased within the geometric forms, depicted, as in *Ha'Aretz*, non sites marked by traces of decrepit buildings, overgrown vegetation and banal settings. The relations of these images to

²⁹ Anne Ring Peterson, *Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld*, *ThirdText*, Vol. 26, Issue 2, March 2012, pp. 195-204.

those of the bathers was also difficult to comprehend, and initially they seemed to occupy two discrete categories. Examined more closely, the photographs began to reveal some signs of their location and subjects, and in two of the landscape images for example, barely legible signs could be made out to designate the sites as either "parking for locals" or "parking for guests".

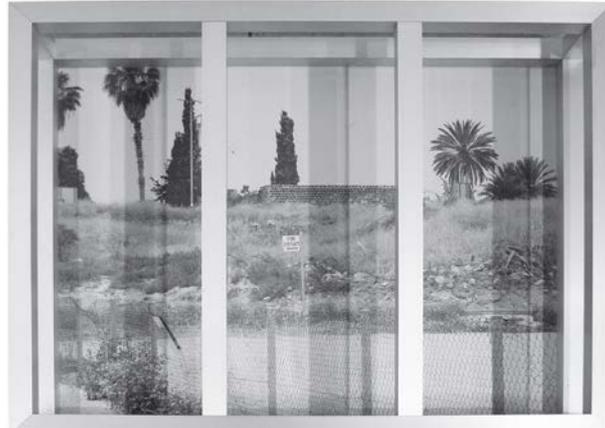


Image 4: Intermittent Confessions – detail, "Parking for Guests"

The complexity of these two particular photographs intensifies once we learn that they, along with all the other landscape images have been photographed in Shoshan's home town of Beit Shean, and portray the traces of the Palestinian Beisan. The remains of the building depicted in the "parking for guests" image for example, at the top of the hill, once served as a local mosque of Beisan, and later as the local archaeological museum of Beit Shean. It now lies in ruin 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 people who lived here and evokes their presence; the overgrown vegetation, the low angle from which the photograph is taken and the vertical bars across the image, as well as the metal fence in the forefront of the image however, distance the site from the viewers' immediate reach, marking the neglect and inaccessibility of the site and its histories today.

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 current town, as well as the Palestinian Beisan are barely visible in these photographs. Moreover, the photographs, which demonstrate some of the 19th century orientalist conventions of photography of the holy land, could easily be attributed to other

peripheral towns and sited in the region, and thus serve not only as decrepit "non-sites", but also as the predetermined sites of the "East".³⁰

The complexity of the images and their potential readings continues with Shoshan's bathers. Although each of the bathers appears in a distinct form – some are almost nude while others are fully clothed; some are only entering the water while others are nearly submerged – in none of the photographs are we given even the faintest clue as to the bathers' identity. It is only when reading the accompanying catalogue and the curatorial texts in the exhibition that we learn that they are Shoshan's brothers. As with the images of Beit Shean, Shoshan clearly conveys in his conversations the importance of photographing his own brothers and relays the incidents surrounding their photographing while recounting familial anecdotes. But again, as with the images of Beit Shean, the photographs themselves not only obscure their subjects' identity, but refer to an established art historical tradition – in this case an inverse reference to the depiction of female bathers – again distancing the work and its viewers from its immediate familial contexts.

Writing about *Intermittent Confessions*, Hagai Segev who curated the work's exhibition at the artists' gallery in Tel Aviv, clearly frames Shoshan's practices and identity within the discourse of hybridity. He writes that:

Daniel Shoshan's recent work reflects the hybrid artistic and cultural environment in Israel. He brings together several distinct entities, each originating in a different cultural arena, to unite them in a single work of art, creating a hybrid reality.³¹

Segev, who undoubtedly sees much aesthetic and political merit in Shoshan's work, as well as in the notion of hybridity itself, continues his essay by suggesting that "Israeli Hybridism" can be defined as "two identities or more that cannot co-exist in the cultural imagination, residing jointly in the same body"³², and thus suggesting that cultural practices, such as Shoshan's, offer a space in which to conceptualise that which cannot co-exist in the wider cultural space. Despite the critical role he attributes to hybridity, Segev sees hybridity not as a place of ambivalence and negotiation but rather as a stable unison of pre-given, binary identities pertaining to different cultures. In a text from 2006, addressing Shoshan's previous

³⁰ Numerous books and essays have been written on the photographic representation of the holy land. See for example:

Yeshayahu Nir, *The Bible and the Image: The History of Photography in the Holy Land, 1839–1899* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985)

Kathleen Howe, *Revealing the Holy Land: The Photographic Exploration of Palestine* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1997)

³¹ Hagai Segev, A restrained Poetics, in: Daniel Shoshan, *Intermittent Confessions*, Zoza Publications, 2008, pg.19.

³² Ibid.

installation titled "Rashida", which raised similar issues, Segev clearly delineates the binary divisions Shoshan's hybridity unites. He suggests that

Shoshan examines the culture he is a 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.³³

As Peterson and Archaiuo suggests, Segev's understanding of hybridity not only accepts but also propagates the existing binary divisions of east and west, to which professional artistic practise is relegated, and the Arab "East" which is devoid of professional skills. Segev's detailed reading of *Intermittent Confessions* continues his approach, assigning the work's geometric structures to the sphere of the western, the minimalist, the modern and the professional, while the photographs of Beisan/Beit Shean and of Shoshan's brothers present according to his reading, the personal, the emotional, the Arab and the East.

The complex relations of identity, personal and political narratives and forms of abstraction, and their binary divisions into modern/universal/western vs. narrative/"other"/eastern is not unique to the discourse of Shoshan's works. Writing about American minimalist art and the question of biography and narrative, Anna Chave makes explores these binaries, contextualising them in a gendered, rather than a post-colonial analysis. In her impactful essay *Biography and Minimalism* published in 2000, Chave suggests that Minimalist practices were categorically conceived as antithetical to the personal and the biographical, despite ample contradictory evidence. 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".³⁴

Unlike the "disencumbered" work of Carl Andre, continues Chave, artworks made by women artists such as Eva Hesse and Yvonne Rainer were often depicted as overly personal, with

³³ Haigai Segev, Daniel Shoshan – incarcerating or freeing culture?, *Tav+: Music, Arts, Society*, Issue 8, Autumn 2006, pg. 34.

³⁴ 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.

suggestions made throughout the literature that depict both artists as concurrently self-centred and overly reliant on colleagues' input. Within a discourse which valorised the a-personal and the abstract, such readings served to undermine the artistic merit and originality of the work produced by Hesse, Rainer and other women artists and stands in sharp opposition to the readings of works produced by men.

The marginalization of women and other "others" and the rejection of personal (and often also political) narrative is not of course not limited to American minimalism or other forms of abstract art, but as practices of abstraction are often considered the hallmark of western modernist art, the marginalisation processes at work within them have had a particular impact on the writing of art history, clearly marking the west and the "rest". Shoshan's works' which bring together abstract and minimalist forms with images and discourses of identity, land and charged political histories, and challenge their perceived relations, contribute to the unmasking of such binary divides and to the understanding of the power relations they structure. They thus build on, and contribute to the genealogy of contemporary artists which question the ideological apparatuses of abstraction, while mobilizing this critical history in rethinking the particularities of Mizrachi identity in Israeli art and discourse.

Nationalism , Universalism and the Grid

The political roles played by the practices and discourses of abstract art in various parts of the world have not been limited to subjective and gendered identity, but have also played a crucial role in the formulation of nationalism, and in the visualisation and obfuscation of its relations with art and culture. Writing about the grid in the context of Latin American art for example, Kaira Cabanas describes how artists in Venezuela and Brazil of the 1940's and 1950's "turned to abstraction as a means by which to achieve the universal" but ended up with work which "became a new iconography mobilised towards nationalist and official governmental ends"³⁵. Cabanas discusses various examples – among them Carlos Raul Villanueva's modernist, grid based, architecture in Venezuela which was conceived by the architect and understood by the public as an image of universalist modernism. However, it was Villanueva's very use of the grid and its close association with western modernism and universalism that made it conducive to promote a modernist and universal image of Venezuelan nationalism, turning the grid into a national symbol.

³⁵ Kaira M. Cabanas, *If the Grid Is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art*, Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 33, issue 3, 2010, pp. 365-383

Unlike artists working in the 1940s and 50s for whom universalism seemed to be (at least partially) an achievable goal, Shoshan's work and its use of abstract structures such as the grid is always already enmeshed within the complex relations of power and marginalizations embodied by such grand concepts as universalism. Although often poised as universalism's opposite pole, within critical theories and contemporary art of the 1980s and 1990s, nationalism (and other grand narratives) were deconstructed in very similar ways to those of universalism. In Israeli art, it was Sara Chinski's essay "The silence of the fish" published in 1994 and mentioned before, that most notably sought to deconstruct these two grand narratives, demonstrating that the universality and modernity of Israel's critical art discourse served as ideological apparatuses to promote and consecrate Israel's nationalist narratives.³⁶ As we have seen, it was critical analyses such as Chinski's, that allowed activists and artists like Shoshan to identify their work and subjectivity as based in sites and histories lying outside the euro-centric universalist and nationalist hegemony.

So why would Shoshan turn to the land of the nation and to nationalism in his latest work? And why would he do this using the universalist grid – a figure, which like nationalism has served to erase the identities and histories which interest him most?

A possible answer may come from looking at the similar strategies developed by Mona Hatoum, and Jaleh Mansoor's elaboration of them. In her essay titled "A Spectral Universality: Mona Hatoum's Biopolitics of Abstraction", Mansoor discusses several of Hatoum's works, including Kaffiyeh – a work in which women's hair was interwoven into a grid like Kaffiyeh - the head covering traditionally wore by Arab men which has come to symbolize Palestinian nationality.³⁷ Like Shoshan, Hatoum uses the grid throughout her oeuvre, and like him, her grids are charged with the particularities of her identity – both her national identity as a diasporic Palestinian and her gender.

Both these aspects are evident in another of Hatoum's work discussed by Mansoor - *Present Tense* (1996). In this work, the artist installed 2200 hand-made soap bars from Nablus on the gallery floor, forming, as in Kaffiyeh, an imperfect grid. Hatoum then uses the soaps as a matrix on which to mark the map of the Palestinian west bank as drawn up in the Oslo accords of 1993, by inserting pins along the myriad borders lines and territories devised by the accords. Like Shoshan, Hatoum uses the grid as a cartographic basis on which to sketch out a map, but charges the grid with a particular site of Palestinian craft and history, and with

³⁶ Sara Chinski, *Silence of the Fish: The Local Versus the Universal in Israeli Discourse of Art*, 1993

³⁷ Jaleh Mansoor, *A Spectral Universality: Mona Hatoum's Biopolitics of Abstraction*, October, Issue 133, summer 2010, pp. 49-74.

the bodily rituals of bathing, all literally embedded in her work within the emblem of western modernism.

Mansoor elaborates the particularities of Hatoum's grid in both these works, but rather than reading these particularities simply a challenge to the narratives of universalism, or as an internalization of the post-colonial logic which sought to impose the singular western measure of the universal to erase different identities and histories, she uses Judith Butler's work to argue that Hatoum's work restages universalism.³⁸ Like Irit Rogoff, Nikos Papastergiadis and other writers, Mansoor thus departs from post-structuralist theory and its focus on the deconstruction of grand narratives.³⁹ Like Rogoff and Papastergiadis, Mansoor doesn't overlook the crucial importance of difference or power relations, inherent in grand narratives and fleshed out by post-structural theory, but chooses to use Butler's renewed understanding of universalism, and to account for the construction of the universal by those historically situated outside their hegemonic boundaries. In "restaging the Universal" Butler herself explains this position well:

When one has no right to speak under the auspices of the universal, and speaks none the less, laying claim to universal rights, and doing so in a way that preserves the particularity of one's struggle, one speaks in a way that may be readily dismissed as nonsensical or impossible. When we hear about 'lesbian and gay human rights', or even 'women's human rights', we are confronted with a strange neighbouring of the universal and the particular which neither synthesizes the two, nor keeps them apart. Clearly, the 'human' as previously defined has not readily included lesbians, gays and women, and the current mobilization seeks to expose the conventional limitations of the human, the term that sets the limits on the universal reach of international law. But the exclusionary character of those conventional norms of universality does not preclude further recourse to the term... *The conventional and exclusionary norms of universality*

³⁸ Judith Butler, Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism, in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso Publishing, 2000. Pp. 11-44.

³⁹ Both Irit Rogoff and Nikos Papastergiadis have written about new forms of critical art practice as providing alternatives to pressing political and social issues, rather than simply deconstructing existing narratives and power relations. See for example:

Irit Rogoff, From Criticism to Critique to Criticality, *EIPCP: European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, 2003. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en> accessed 1/1/2017.

Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, Wiley Publications, 2012.

*can [expose] the limited and exclusionary features of the former one at the same time that they mobilize a new set of demands.*⁴⁰

Butler's reading of the universal as a performative concept mobilized through new sets of demands, offers a productive framework through which to read both Hatoum's and Shoshan's continued use of the universal grid even when historically they have had "no right" to speak under the "auspices of the universal" while maintaining their particularised identities and histories. As we have seen, both artists continuously include in their work particularities such as the Palestinian Kaffiyeh or the North African ornament which mark them as "other" and serve to expose the limited and exclusionary narrative of universality while at the same time presenting the particularities of the Kaffiyeh and the ornament as instances of the universalist grid, mobilizing, as Butler suggests, a new set of demands and restaging universality.

The retention of universalism in Hatoum's and Shoshan's works, despite the concept's highly problematic histories and politics and its exclusionary roles within the modernist art field, goes beyond the demand for a more inclusive version of universality (although that in itself would be a much desired achievement). Retaining such a grand narrative, I would like to suggest, a narrative which could serve, as was initially hoped, as a basis for a discussion of shared beliefs, desires and hopes, while also maintaining particularities and difference is a move which marks a prominent shift in the field of art and critical political theory. For after decades in which post-structuralist thought focused on the deconstruction of such grand narratives, leaving the discourse bereft of ways in which to discuss shared political and aesthetic practices, restaging such shared narratives (rather than simply reviving them) offers renewed possibilities of rethinking them in lieu of contemporary developments.

Such a move towards a rethinking of shared aesthetic and political practices, can be read in Shoshan's works not only in regard to universalism, but also in relation to nationalism. As we have seen, Shoshan's works revolve almost entirely on the figure of the "east" in its various configurations within Israeli nationalist narratives and identities – the peripheral "East" of Beit Shean, the "Eastern" identity of Mizrahi Jews and the "East" of Palestinian narratives and histories – demonstrating both their shared political struggles and their marked differences. Following in the footsteps of Judith Butler, I would like to suggest that Shoshan's practices not only serve to expose the exclusionary mechanisms of nationalism in Israel (of which there are many) but also to retain and restage the narrative of nationalism as a basis for shared aesthetic and political practices. It is in such a reading of his work that we can see why he retains the grid throughout his oeuvre, using it as an emblem of western modernism in the San Paulo biennial works in 1989, as a basis for the north African ornament in Apples and

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, pp. 39-40.

Trampoline in 1994, and as cartographic grid used in the national contexts of Israel's land in HaAretz in 2013. Viewing these works through such a framework we can see that in all these projects the grid is particularised through specific histories, politics and aesthetic practices both by Shoshan and his critics, but that it marks not only difference but also a keen interest in the production of a shared, or rather common vision of national identity politics and aesthetics, one which maintains differences and conflicts but offers a glimpse of solidarity.

So what would a common narrative of nationalism in Israel, based in Shoshan's works look like? This remains to be seen, both in Shoshan's own work and in the aesthetic and political practices of Israel more widely. It is perhaps telling that his most current project seeks to engage hundreds of people in producing a shared but highly particularised image of Ashdod, a large peripheral city in Israel in which the various identities and identity politics have managed to forge a complex but shared existence, one almost entirely missing from the cannon of art in Israel.