

Detachment: On the Space of Hilla Ben-Ari's Work
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And, suddenly, in this troublesome nowhere, suddenly,
The unsayable point where the pure too-little
Is changed incomprehensibly, altered
Into that empty too-much.

Rilke, Duino Elegies, The Fifth Elegy (translated by A.S. Kline)

A miniature two-dimensional, nude, boyish body; fleshless, lifeless and affectless. A kind of community of sisters, bound up one in each other in ties of dependence and mimesis, with no interceding parental figures, no authoritative external instance to pull the strings [Mechanized Flow]: undifferentiated, standardized multiplicity, without any rivalry or strife. In its demanding material presence, it's as if it took place in a non-temporal static space, where 'early' and 'later' are effaced, a space that evades temporality itself. The figures' outstretched arms transform the Jesus-like crucifixion posture reminiscent of ritualistic dance into a mundane and passive, even somewhat tired happenstance, devoid of Passion or pathos. Shifting the victim's gender and multiplying it transforms the single scapegoat – whether innocent or guilty – who takes the multitude's sins onto himself to save them in a Christian or proto-Christian perspective, into a communal group that defies the symbolical meaning, flattening the story outright. Even the appearance of blood and milk, which would seem to transform the arbitrary affinity between the members of the group into a blood-tie; even the excretions put on display, the abject that stains the body, thus signifying it as such; even they do not impose the torment. It is they who stand at the base of an imaginary transformation of the body into flesh, which enable us to speak of the body as animal and human. And still, despite all the stigmata and hemorrhages and gallbladders that are given an independent ontological presence [Gallbladder]; despite all symbols of life alternately filling and depleting being [Hibernation]; still, a silent, opaque screen is pulled over the Things and leaves the private in its seclusion. It's as if it were an abstracted, vague substantiation that blurs any invitation to intimacy.

It is a deceitful intimacy. The figures are tied with strings, or with their own hair, or by their own hands touching, even penetrating, each other, and they can thus be seen as having been present in each others' bodies from the days of yore, although it is unclear whether they're hurting or healing each other, or maybe establishing a specific body [Starkiss, Marionette]. Mechanical cooperation is neither sexual nor fertilizing, but it still has the

metamorphic power of allowing the body to expand beyond its outlines, to exceed its reserved proportions into exaggerated prosthetics which distort the Specific into an unknown, hybrid configuration [Diana, Trap, the Gathering]. As melancholy as this solidarity-filled totality is, it calls for another language. It would seem that the very particular connection between the work of the spirit and the work of the material defies intensified expression.

Hilla Ben-Ari's works are pregnant with tensions and contradictions. The materials' simplicity, and their inherent weakness, exposed as they are to the seasons' harms and to extinction, is consolidated through recurring gestures and surpluses into a solid, intensive and depressing texture; multiplicity and surplus are kept in place by harmonious compositions, shifting any leftovers into a precise, clean and integrative totality; their accrued weight cannot bear weight; the obsessive reproduction is the fruit of singular handicraft; the innocent materials establish an imaginary space of transgression; Their dryness becomes moist and fluid, transforming static performance into dance theater; the display lacks any off-stage, itself reminiscent of an alternately demanding and receding camouflage screen; and finally, the lacunae, the compressed (but not dense) spaces, so familiar and so alien, that do not orient any linear viewing. What seems like normative constraints or the shackles of fate can just as easily seem like powerful processes of coming-into-being that alternately connect and separate human and non-human elements, as if the boyish figure, innocent orphan, can be detached and transferred easily to new configurations, immune to the negation of its humanity and exposed bravely to the dangers confronting it, implicating thereby all of its physical fullness and ruling over.

You want to put the fragmented scenes back together, not to remain on the surface which fans out like an architectural plan [Regulator], to walk to the abyss, to the source, to fill the space stripped of shadows with narrative meaning. You want to distill the singular from the group, to identify nuance within the schematic and the stereotypical. You search for work's mysterious vanishing point, mentally flipping through mythic and biblical genealogies of female tests, of sacrifice, seduction, prohibition, guilt, a sort of *Totem and Taboo*, to explain the figures' situations. You want to be a mouth for the voiceless, to extract something akin to emotions from the faceless. You want to give them eyes, so they can have a gaze, so they can gaze back at you, wondering how the perfect coordination of their movements – a primordial, instinctive coordination – is not transmitted through the Gaze. But something stops you from doing this. Maybe the pact binding you with the same strings simultaneously demands that you stay detached, that you find some place within space that is neither distinctly 'inside' nor distinctly 'outside', that you take part exactly in this enigmatic juncture, where the lack of facial expressions, the white, the empty, becomes expressive in itself.

While Hilla Ben-Ari's works have been included – and not by chance – in group exhibitions that actively dealt with contemporary political and social issues; and while the mere holding of these shows reproduced the tensions of socialization which she documents or sets up in her work; something in her installations still carries with it a different specificity, an introspected, floating, quality that defies the Big Theme, something which is akin to rebellion, has its object in the very cultural demand for explication and a 'message'. Something that therefore transcends into a different zone of being, to which one should not hasten to give a stable, coherent meaning, a zone rooted in the ambivalent materiality itself, which simultaneously creates life and sucks life out, and which does so in a great silence of sublimation and ellipsis.

Here are two anonymous figures being drawn up from the abyss [The Deep]: a smooth, unblemished, whiteness, devoid of arms and feet, wrapped in a filigree of hyssop that seems to emerge out of the body itself. The stomach is more human than that of the wallpaper cutout figures; a rounded, almost breathing, belly, alive-dead. Unlike the 'land' figures, these bodies have mouths, noses, eyes, but they seem like they were suspended from a pole, highlighting the impression of Ben-Ari's detached material gesture. A gesture of detachment. All the figures, throughout her work, look like they were drawn from the sea, as if arriving from nowhere, no source, as if born into an artificial, architectonic, space, devoid of depth, time and perspective, sentenced to utter presence. The repertoire of detachment and its degrees is vast. You can detach leaves from a plant or a tree that is still standing tall, nurtured and nurturing. One can detach a single page from a book, leaving it completely bereft of life. One can be detached irreparably from the ground, and the detached can be repaired in a new space. But sometimes one can recognize in the detached nothing but material, nothing but what it is made of. The detaching that Ben-Ari activates in her work is a radical, existential detachment at its fullest. Not the Dialectics we know from contemporary Jewish history, along the junctures of Emancipation, Secularization, Diaspora and Zionism. It is the detachment of another generation, a second generation of Detachment, who has been born out of detachment and has seemingly lost the feeling of real or imagined freedom the preceding generation enjoyed. A generation bereft of Nostalgia since there is no distinct ground from which it was detached. At best, it can coalesce into a community of the detached, a fleshless bodily community whose eclectic landscapes and materials continually change.

A roving space by its very definition, Ben-Ari's circus [Starkiss], is therefore the apotheosis of shifting and detachment. It distills all the characteristics of her work thus far: 'low' materials, physical vulnerability, a precarious balance, the lack of an authoritative figure of Coach or Trainer, collective constraints, and what seems like chaos and then crystallizes into exemplary formations. But the experience of detachment is more sweeping, since here it envelops not only humans but animal, too. The becoming-woman – the group of women

suspended in gravity-defying, if not virtuosic, potency – seemingly occupies the same continuum of the Deleuzian becoming-animal, while the focus of being remains non-Anthropocentric matter. What takes place – violence, sacrifice – takes place on Things. That's where knowledge draws its inferior source from, and that is also where it stumbles upon the edge of life, with no language or memory. Animals in Ben-Ari's work are as vulnerable to the Void as Man is. And if she seems to draw on a regressive evolutionary genealogical element in her work, this is then a lacking and detached Evolution, like the perforated aluminum bodies.

Interestingly, matter itself is detached and becomes sad; it's a matter of detachment. But perhaps this is because it's so hard to listen to Ben-Ari's non-story outside of the known paradigms. But all the figures, whether wide or slim, effaced or hollowed, are submerged in matter. Ben-Ari chooses light materials that establish airy bodies, while through her recurring action the gradually accruing body of the works becomes more corporeal, heavier, and more cumbersome. As if its singular weight were pulling upwards while the creating spirit were pulling it down. As if the body's materiality cannot be transcended – while there is seemingly nothing but spirit, nothing but an idea which enslaves the body sevenfold. In the space of detachment, the ungrounded body could have moved freely, roamed anywhere. But lack stops the spirit in its tracks, stultifying the body's movement. Spirit and Body become one, then, not in flight but in cessation. Ben-Ari's elliptic silence is neither hiding nor evasion. It is the space of neutrality, the neutral splint of the detached.