In Conversation: Hilla Toony Navok, Eitan Ben Moshe, and Leah Abir

In preparation for the exhibition "Releasing a Butterfly," at Alon Segev Gallery in Tel Aviv

Conversation / Leah Abir September 5, 2015

A. Bunkers
Leah: Tell me, how did your exhibition come about?

Eitan: I invited Toony to work together, after we thought about this idea of a joint exhibition for some time. Once in a few years, I get this craving to do something with someone else. I don't mean that in the sense of a group exhibition. It is more akin to the dynamics of a music band.

Toony: "Collaboration"

E: I would call it an encounter. A two-person show is more of an encounter than a group exhibition. This act of choosing to work together with someone is important to me since I often think that my art tends to withdraw into itself, which makes me feel claustrophobic. I think you can see that in my recent works in particular, by the way. The sculptures I'm showing in this exhibition are of my most introverted works. Relative to other works, they seem to be very reclusive and escapist. I built bunkers, this time.

T: I agree. I think these sculptures are self-containing units. They contain everything they need in order to exist.

E: I remember you told me that sometimes the hands that appear in the sculptures seem like the hands that made them.

T: And you said that my drawings reminded you more of your own sculpture than of mine.

E: That’s right. I would also say that the aesthetics of my light boxes is closer to your sculptures than to mine. I can easily see many similarities – the synthesized space, the neon-like colors, and the aluminum.

T: I guess we have complementing relationships between drawing and sculpture. I always begin with a drawing. I let my hand move around intuitively, and through this movement, I start thinking and deciphering some moves that I later apply to sculpture. A bit differently, this time, naturally.

טוני נבוק, "מקורות (זריחה)", מראה הצבה, 2013



[1]Toony Navok,
“MEKOROT (sunshine),” installation view, 2013

איתן בן משה, פרט מתוך "Cubes Crystal", קופסאת אור, 2012 **[2]**



[3]Eitan Ben Moshe,
“Crystal Cubes,”, Lightbox (detail), 2012

L: Toony, your drawing process also includes a second step – the constructive phase, where your actions are akin to sculpting. I think this is the common element between your drawings and your sculptures. Your drawings have a sculptural quality – you sculpt by putting things on top of one another, or juxtaposing different elements.

T: You're right, but in terms of the process, I begin with a drawing and only later start working sculpturally with whatever comes out. I'm not satisfied with the drawing by itself. I always feel the urge to wound it, alter it, and turn it upside-down.

E: So what you are saying is that your drawings act as foreplay to your installations.

T: Yes, because ultimately, my sculpture work is not about handling materials. Sometimes, during the preparation of a drawing, I'm reminded of the manual work sculpture requires. However, at the end of the day, working manually on my sculptures is only the end of the process for me, which comes after a long period of gathering objects.

E: It's actually the other way around, in my case. I take my time sculpting until an image is generated, and then it takes me a relatively short time to translate it into a light box image, for example.

L: Speaking of introverted sculpture, it is interesting to note that you both are ultimate studio artists, living in a post-studio era.

E: We do go outside occasionally, you know, but the studio serves as the core. I can only create in a place in which I can dwell for a long time.

T: I need my studio door locked; I need music around me, and a stock of soda water. Only under these conditions do I feel free to do whatever I want. When I moved into my present-day studio, I only started feeling comfortable with it the day they installed a new lock on the door. I locked the door, sat down and told myself: now you can begin.

איתן בן משה וטוני נבוק, "לשחרר פרפר", קולאז'ים דיגיטלים, 2015 **[4]**



[5]Eitan Ben Moshe and Toony Navok,
“Releasing a Butterfly”, digital collages, 2015

איתן בן משה וטוני נבוק, "לשחרר פרפר", קולאז'ים דיגיטלים, 2015 **[6]**



[7]

B. Butterflies
L: Let's talk about the title of the exhibition, "Releasing a Butterfly."

E: Two things about butterflies: 1. since butterflies are almost blind, they mate on hilltops to be able to find each other. 2. One method African hunters have to catch rhinoceros is to follow butterflies, who need the salt rhinoceros tears contain.

T: I have to say I don't really like butterflies that much, Eitan. They are too pretty. Too lovable.

L: Butterflies make us think about something colorful and pretty, but I believe most butterflies are actually gray, aren't they? I guess it's a species with many underdogs.

E: Like moths.

T: Butterflies signify fragility and beauty. I find that a little annoying and unexciting.

E: I don't really relate to butterflies as a concrete being, but as a light and elevated element, one that is not affected by gravity. It solves a motoric problem very easily.

T: They have no need for resistance. Like leaves, they drift along with the wind.

E: I know some people who are like that.

L: That's very rare. So how did you come up with this title?

E: Associatively. My sculptures enclose some butterflies in them, and when Toony talked to me about her collage drawings and the way she makes them out of two halves of previous drawings, it reminded me of the symmetrical aesthetics of butterflies. There is also something comforting about these drawings, as opposed to the heaviness of my sculptures, which are not "butterflyish" at all.

L: Sculptures are always heroic to some extent, don't you think? Eitan's sculptures look somewhat like trophies, due to their size and the plinth they stand on.

T: I think we both play with some degree of glorification in our sculptures – they are grand, bigger than life. At the same time, they are punctured, and it looks as if we squeezed all the juice out of them, exposing their impotence.

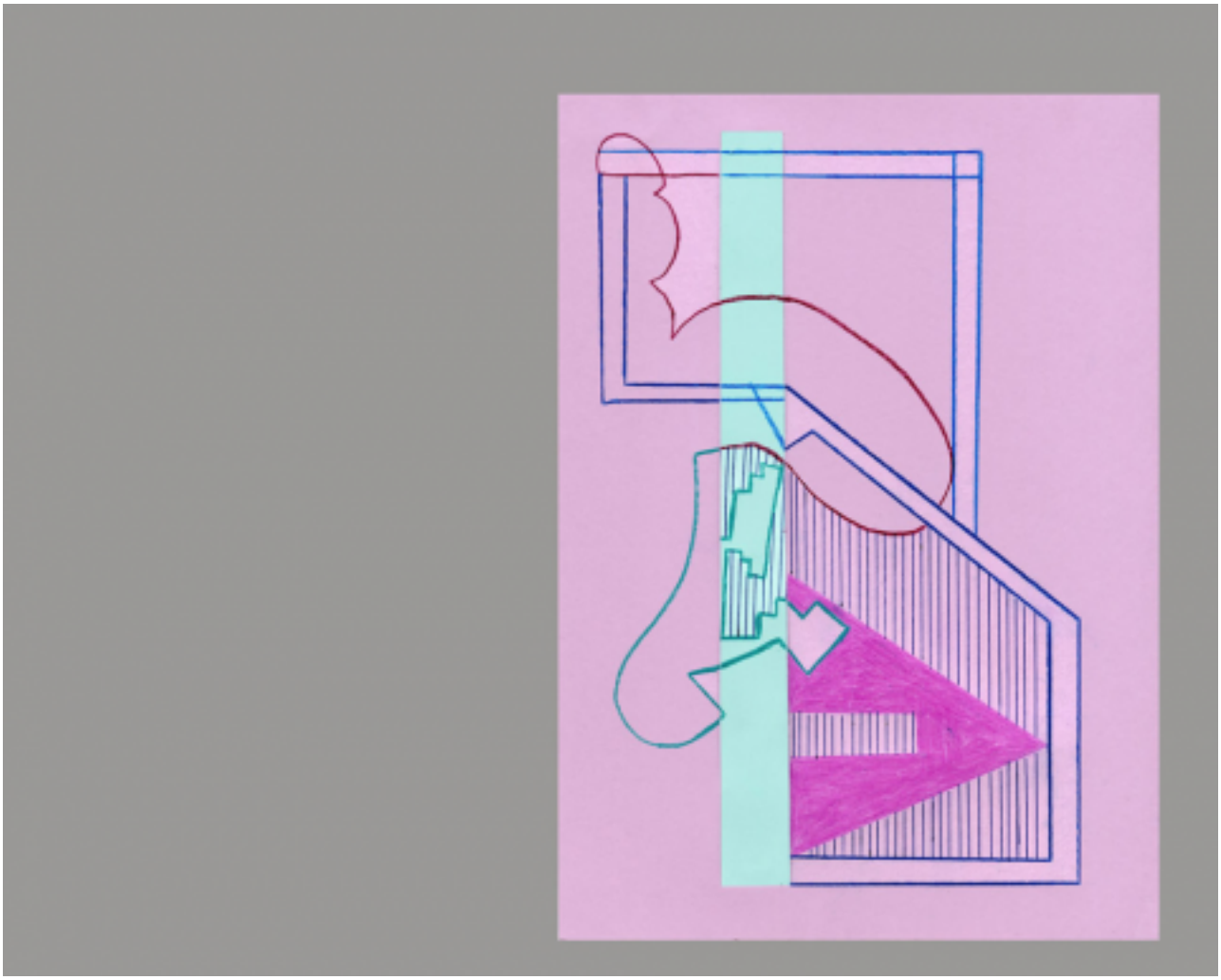
E: Imagine a junkie getting up in the morning. He wears a white jumpsuit, takes a shower, combs his hair and goes out to the streets in a satisfied posture, as if he's saying, "It's all good today." But you can clearly see he's a junkie. There's no point in hiding it. Something about the way he walks states that even clearer – he is doomed. No chance for redemption. Still, he is inspiring. I'm talking about an actual person, by the way, that lives across from me.

C. Give it to me as it is
L: I think there are many similarities in the impulses you both have in your process, or in your position towards art making, but these impulses seem to originate in very different references or interests.

E: I've been saying lately that for me, it's no longer the medium that is the message, but rather the artist that is the medium. I feel like a medium, as if constructing an environment, or putting together a group of sculptures, is communicating another space of existence. In this sense, I feel I'm more mystical than Toony is.

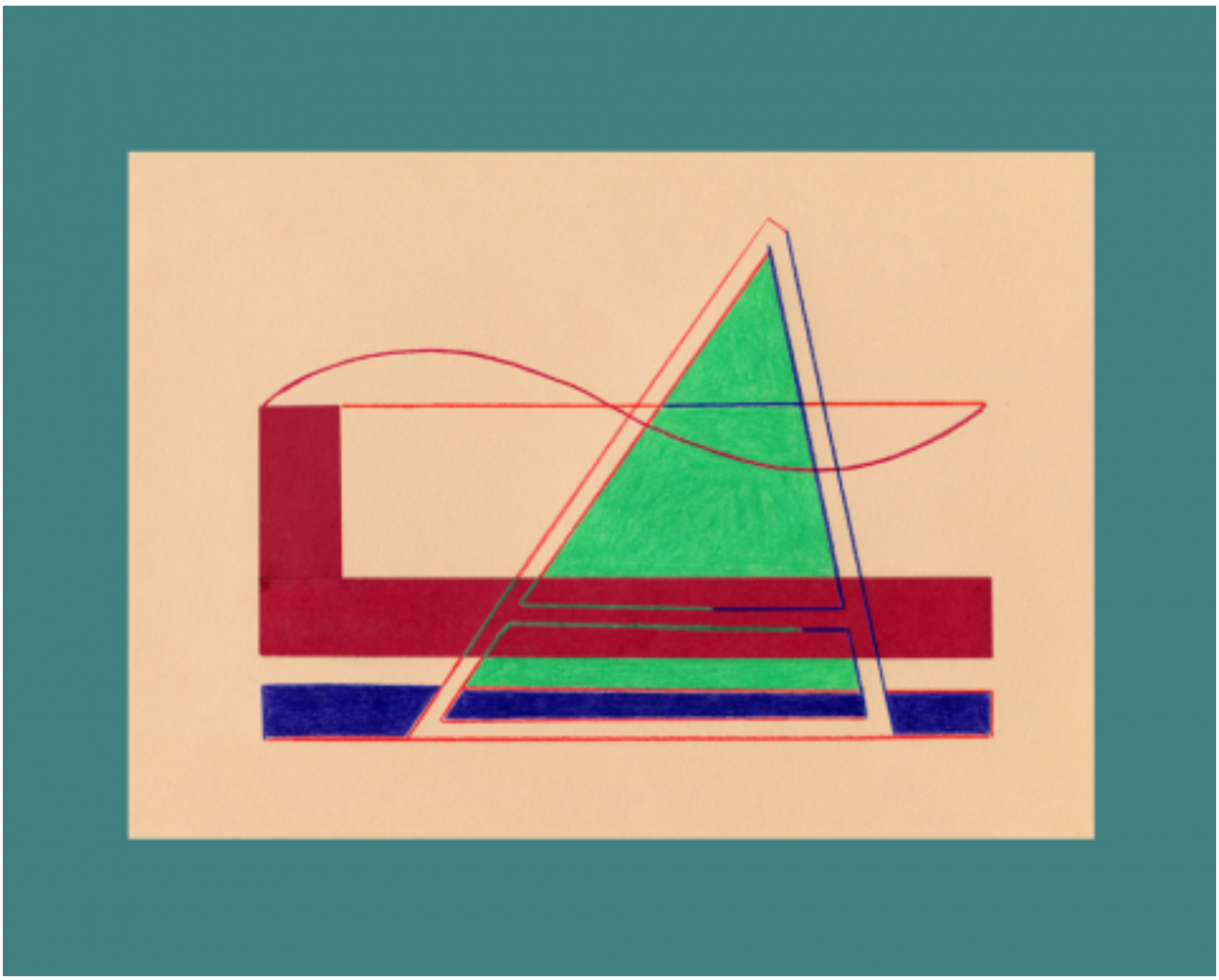
T: That's not nice! You're the kind of artist that produces something out of nothing, using nothing but his hands. You work hard and you like that hands on approach. It is true that my work is more about composing and connecting, and there's almost no manual labor in the classic sense. I feel guilty for it at times, I admit. I try to make up for it through drawing, through the hand movements of drawing. In fact, in my exhibition at the CCA in Tel Aviv [“Rounding Up the Hours,” 2015] I think I let go of the notion that every artwork needs to come from sweaty labor. In the "Calendars" I showed there, which are assortments of scanned drawings, I shed the weight of having to use craft in my work at any cost.

טוני נבוק, "שעות עגולות", רישומי לוח שנה, 2015 **[8]**



[9]Toony Navok, “Rounding Up the Hours”,
drawing calendars, 2015

טוני נבוק, "שעות עגולות", רישומי לוח שנה, 2015 **[10]**



[11]

E: For me, even when I produce a digital print for the light boxes, I'm never satisfied with the result until I spill something on it, paint it, or cut it. I guess I'm slightly stuck in the anal phase. Like you, I feel guilty, but for opposite reasons.

T: I know. Good thing we are doing this show together! You bring in classical sculpture, where the artist is the only person allowed to touch the work – the person that makes it – while I use so many professionals to do the work. On the one hand, that makes me have to know exactly what I want, but on the other hand, I rely on other people, I allow myself to listen and learn from them.

E: Maybe that’s why we like each other so much. She is more clean and cold, while I'm…

T: I don't think I'm clean and cold

E: I knew that would freak you out

T: I do find this concept of cleanliness, or sterility,interesting, because it has to do with the way mass-produced design relates to the body, the way it is alienated from the body.

L: You're interested in the eye more than in the hand

T: Yes. The objects that surround us tell us something about ourselves – the gap between who we are and who wish we were.

E: That’s spectacle you’re talking about. I'm less concerned with that. I feel like your work is very much about the relationship between spectacle and surface, and emotions. You use spectacle only

as the first layer, on the literal level. That's why your work may often be interpreted as dealing with consumerism and style. The "calendars" are a good example of that.

T: I agree. You can call it a visual subconscious. The "calendars" function in the exhibition as signifiers of a utopian possibility, but, in fact, it's a threepenny utopia.

E: An A4-paper-picture-of-a-sunset-someone-printed-and-hanged-in-a-garage-utopia.

T: The thing is, I actually get to these garages as part of my process. These people prepare the work together with me. For me, deciding on which a professional to work with means choosing a collaborator, with whom I produce the work without him knowing it. Sometimes, when people who helped me produce the work come to see the show, they are stunned. They had no idea that what I've ordered from them will end up becoming an art piece. I never declare myself an artist when I order the objects I work with.

L: What do you say you are?

T: Sometimes I do confess, but only at the end of the process, and only if we formed a relationship during it. Usually, I prefer watching professionals work in the most genuine and mundane way, practicing their profession. I want to get the service any other consumer would get, and I want my works to contain this basic truth of ordinary consumption. If someone makes a bench for me, I don't want him to know it will not be used for sitting. Give it to me as it is.

E: I like that.

T: Sometimes I do want to alter the objects, after a while. Actually, even though the objects in my work look ready-made, I always rework them - I paint the the objects, put together different combinations, and produce something that looks like a ready-made but it's actually of my own making.

E: I take pleasure in whatever I can make by myself.

T: I'm not at all committed to making things by myself. Sometimes, when I'm working on a show, I find out that there are things I don't know how to do, like drill. I tell myself I have to learn how to do that, but then the exhibition closes, and I realize I don't know what I was thinking.

E: You don't know how to drill?

T: No. I don't have to. If I actually study the material, I would fall in love with it and…

L: Become Eitan!

T+A: Yes!

T: Falling in love with the material will lead to restrictions; I need to stay above it so I could have the freedom to choose any material that's out there. But while I'm letting go, and involve other people in the making of my work, you're holding all the cards! You're saying, I'm the only one who knows how to do this!

E: That's true. I'm the worst.

T: You are! I think it should be the other way around - let the world make it instead of me.

L: Toony, it's not only that you don't make the objects yourself. You also choose objects that are being independently and constantly manufactured, without having to depend on anyone in particular.

E: Maybe I'm yet to internalize about seven decades of Art History. I might be stuck in the beginning of the 20th century; the kind of artist that smears paint on his face, takes a picture, and that's that.

For me, sculpting is a genuine physical necessity. I want to stir, scrape, break, and smash.

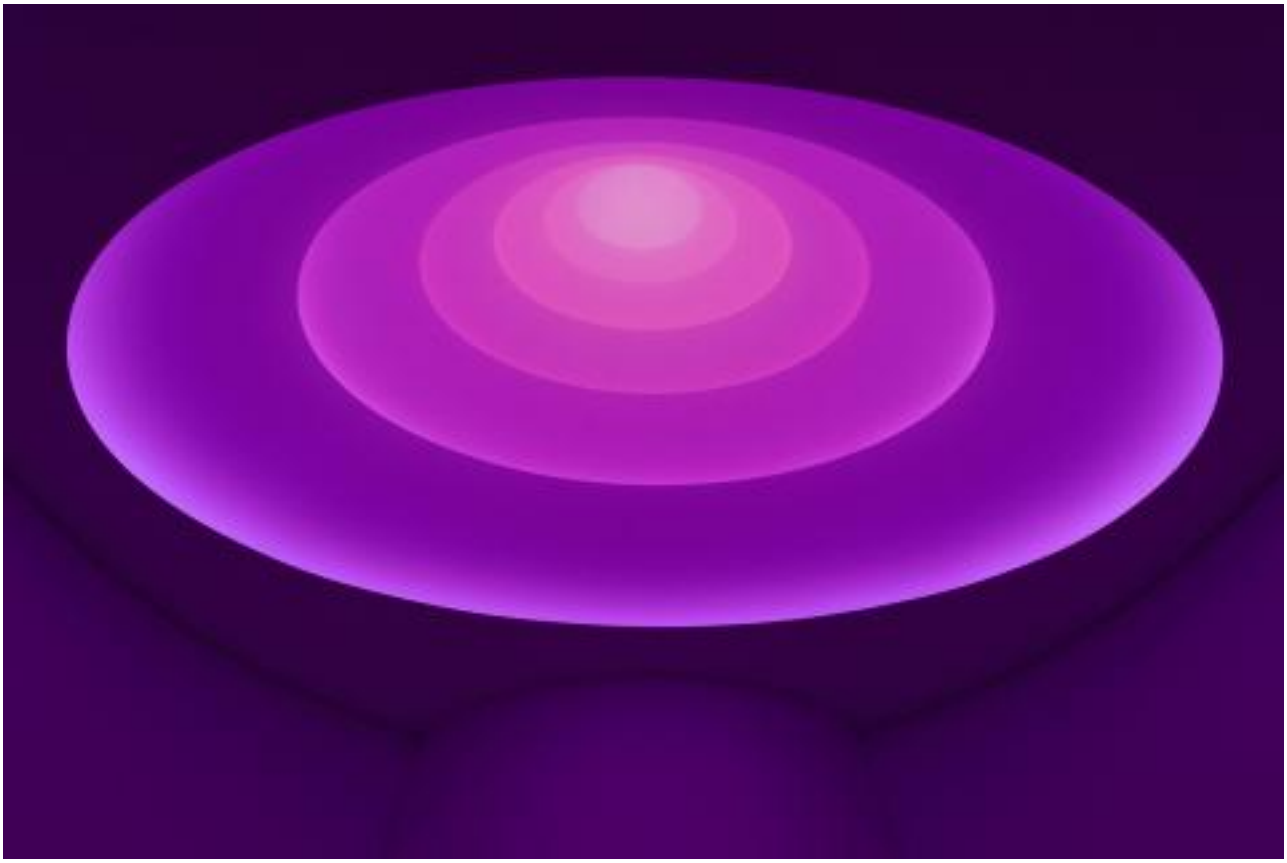
D. Spiritual Spasms
L: I think there are two types of origins for the dramatic aspect of your work: the drama of the craft, with its accidents, disasters and triumphs, and the drama of construction and display.

E: But on some level, neither of us produces a very personal kind of art. I don't think my art is very personal.

L: How does that correspond to what you've said earlier about yourself? Do you mean that your works are not psychological?

E: Spirit is not psychology. What I define as spiritual space is a very lonely place for me in the local art scene. While I can still like works by painter Yaacov Mishory, a true inspiration for me would be James Turrell. Spirituality, the holistic - this is what I'm interested in outside art. I'm very much involved in Buddhist and New Age perceptions, and have been for a long time. Even though it's not obvious when you look at my work, it's always in the background. I enjoy art that shows strange and wondrous worlds... it goes without saying, that dealing with these kind of conceptions in a broken and violent place like Israel gives it a totally different spin.

James Turrell, installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013 **[12]**



[13]James Turrell, installation view,
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013

T: I could also see my work as spiritual, in the context of abstraction. Abstraction entails the kind of spirituality that has nothing to do with New-Age perceptions. Spirituality, for me, is taking a step beyond reality, or detaching something from its concrete reality and turning it into an abstraction, thereby creating transcendence through the most basic and functional things.

E: But I feel like spirituality in your work is very shielded by humor and parody. Moreover, I believe everything is spiritual, at some level. Take the person preparing Falafel on the street and take Rothko. I don't think there's a vast difference between their spiritual essences. But some people aim at it, on purpose, because they believe in it.

L: I think it's important to note that Rothko produces **spiritual objects**, in his perception. That is, the objects are meant to cause spiritual transcendence and that intention is there in their making, as well as in their presentation.

E: Yes, that helps me be clearer about this. When it comes to my art, I have no interest in making things unless I feel they can take me away to some other place, and later, I hope, they could do the same thing for the spectator, but I have no control over that.

T: I can identify with that statement. The spiritual experience I'd like my viewer to go through is to identify something in the clearest and most familiar way, and then, for a brief moment, to notice the other possibilities it entails.

L: There is a gap between these two perceptions. In your work, Toony, I notice a greater attention to the situations of spectatorship and display. As an artist, you do take the viewer's place. Obviously, the artist is always an engaged spectator, or the first spectator, but your work accentuates the status of viewership in particular. I wonder about Eitan, and the kind of spectator or type of viewership he imagines. For example, your decision, few years ago, to place your sculptures outside, in various places in the public domain - I see that as a step towards making an actual use of the object, and as an experiment in what effect your sculptures can have on their surroundings. Maybe it even has to do with these objects' possible function in the world, for other people.

איתן בן משה, "הפנינה", מחלף חייל השריון **[14]**



[15]Eitan Ben Moshe, “The Pearl”,
at Heil Hashirion interchange

E: Did you know that a homeless person recently moved into the sculpture I planted in Heil Hashirion interchange? I guess my sculpture provides him with shading, because it blocks the interchange from the east, and - he now has a contemporary artwork in his living room.

T: I think both of us relate to the secular and the sacred in our work. I think that once this combination works well, the viewer can move between these two poles.

L: Correct me if I’m wrong, Eitan, but I think most of your production is focused more on the object, the thing itself, rather than on the way it translates into or refers to the world. When you say, I’m doing this out of an impulse, waiting for a moment of transcendence or displacement originated by the object, you express some hope that you're making will affect the viewer, however, you’re not focused on spectatorship or the state of observation. The latter, I think, is very dominant in Toony’s work, in contrast to yours. I dare to say this point leads me to the question of how critical your work is, or if it is meant to comment on something else in the world at all.

E: I don’t think my works are critical. The way things are going in the world, I don’t really care about that, in some sense. On the other hand, I can see the outside world infiltrating into the works, whether I like it or not. For example, I’ve had a few people tell me the environment I live in, the Southern part of Tel Aviv - its aesthetics and dynamics - is present in the things I make. Maybe one reason I’m comfortable living there and having my studio there, is that this area has something relatively open aesthetically. The visual codes there are relatively chaotic (that’s changing with time). It’s an unstable environment. Very different from the area around Nachmani street, where you live, for example.

T: I think the aesthetics of South Tel Aviv has stabilized, only on a different type of aesthetics than the one in the center of the city.

איתן בן משה וטוני נבוק, "לשחרר פרפר", קולאז'ים דיגיטלים, 2015 **[16]**



[17]Eitan Ben Moshe and Toony Navok,
“Releasing a Butterfly”, digital collages, 2015

[18] איתן בן משה וטוני נבוק, "לשחרר פרפר", קולאז'ים דיגיטלים, 2015



[19]

L: Everything there is either under construction or under demolition. In the center of Tel Aviv, in contrast, you find a very determined kind of visual codes – marking a line, placing a bench, etc.

E: In the two street corners below my apartment the municipality didn't plant trees, and that really annoyed me. When I called to complain about it, they told me, we have no plans for planting trees in the area. One day, on Yom Kippur, actually, I went out of my house, took a crowbar with me, tore out two Akerstein pavement tiles and planted a young Ficus tree that I pulled out of another tree nearby, and that was that. In the morning, city inspector came to the lottery stand nearby, took out my plant and planted a municipality tree instead, and another one in the corner across the street. That's South Tel Aviv for you. It's all about improvisation. Fixing the hole I made in the pavement, probably seemed more difficult to them than simply planting a new tree. This story is also connected to the sculpture "implants" I used to make, where I made use of peripheral areas in terms of municipal plans and regulations. Toony, I found your reaction to my teasing about spirituality very funny. I always tell people that they might not be spiritual and they always get defensive, "That's not true! I went to a Vipassana retreat!"

T: I only meant it in the sense of diversion; spirituality as the possibility to create a shift. Don't be fooled by materials! He gives you matter, and it supposedly means it's spiritual. I think the opposite is true. I'm interested in finding the spiritual in Plexiglas and PVC. Please don't hold on to materials!

L: Eitan, don't you also practice that dance?

E: Butoh, of course. Leah, did you know that Toony went to a Butoh meeting with me once?

T: I watched. It was a beautiful moment. A rainy night on a rooftop, dozens of weirdos dancing slowly in silence, with Eitan in the middle. I almost slipped.

E: I have spiritual spasms. Usually I'm in a very earthy and low state. My sculptures - they are spiritual spasms.

E: Prophets

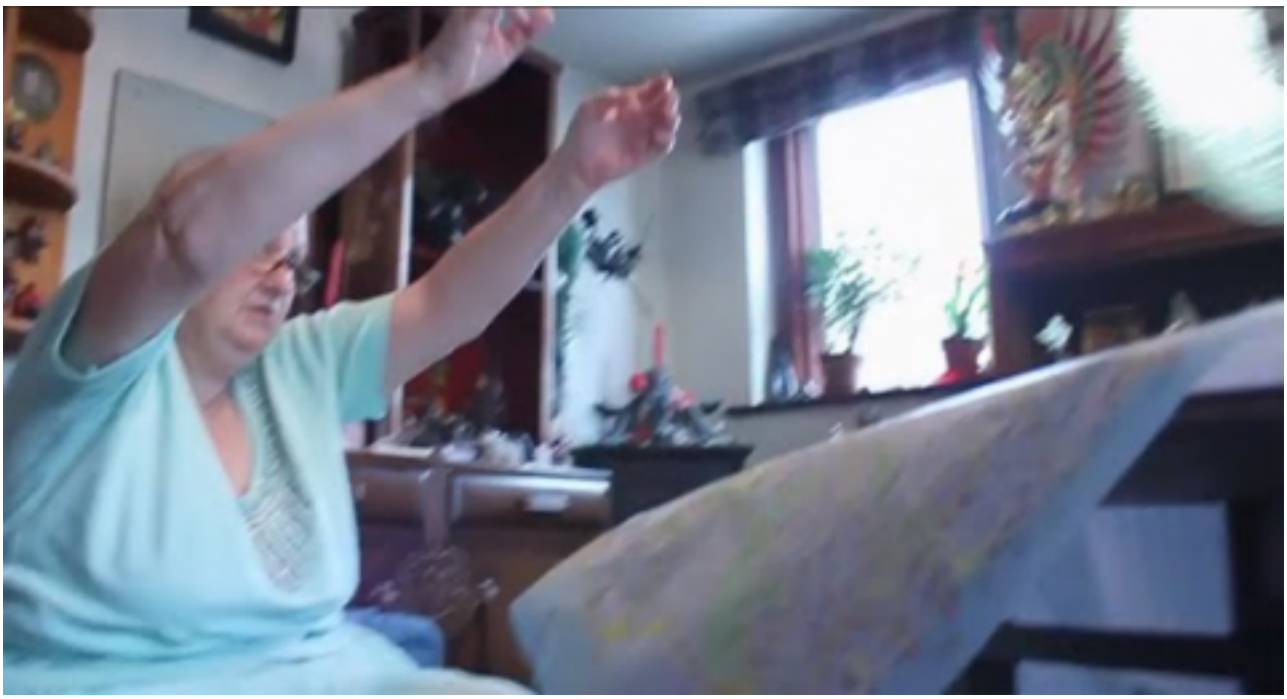
L: I wouldn't say I'm looking for transcendence in art. I'm more interested in complicating things; it is ambivalence I'm looking for. Art can allow you these moments of freedom, because that's what it is eventually - you can move inside the space of art without being accused of anything and without being committed to anything. That is a critical moment, in my eyes. The best movies, books, and artworks, to me, make you go outside, after reading or watching them, equipped with a new lens to see the world through. Even if it only holds for one day, it's enough.

T: I saw an exhibition in Frankfurt a month ago, about prophets in art [20]. They showed Schiele, and all kinds of old bearded artists.

L: Eitan, Can you identify with the position of a prophet?

E: Maybe. I can see something like that in my "Ozone Flutes" film. I wouldn't turn down a career in prophecy. I think some energies from the future show up in the works. It's like sometimes when you get up in the morning and feel this day is going to end badly. You can feel it in your bones. It happens to me a lot.

איתן בן משה, סטיל מתוך "Flutes Ozone The", וידאו, 2012. **[21]**



[22]Eitan Ben Moshe, “The Ozone Flutes”,
video still, 2012

T: Do you sometimes feel it’s going to end well?

E: Yes, I suggest you two hold my hand and walk with me towards the light.

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