

"Zaum", Supermatist legacy in Tevet's work

Saturday, June 02, 2007

Tevet said recently that in the *Painting Lessons* works, and earlier, the notion of historical art indexes was of crucial importance to the reading and evaluation of his studies in abstraction, whereas the new show is, *"all a world in and unto itself"*. Modern and modernistic tradition is no more a specific issue. It is just *there*, as an unavoidable immanent constitutive component of the work.



Friedlander in his essays on Tevet's works goes further and finds the discussion of Tevet's various language games obsolete altogether, from the start, because: *"it does not help make the situation more comprehensible"*.



Details from SOUND FOR A SILENT MOVIE 1986

I wholly accept this perspective, yet with one reservation - that the question of tradition in Tevet's work must not necessarily be an account of juggling with "empty shells" and "shadows of meaning", nor must it offer any pressing notions of identity and synthesis. All readers of Tevet, I think, including Friedlander, have noted at

some point the 'stage-like effect' of the sculptures and the sense of the theatrical resulting from various clashes between the 'doll house' scale and the 'actual, or 'real', or rather made to look real scale, add the fact we can't enter the sculptures; their being merely for view, non walk able. I should immediately add that in point of fact not one body in Tevet's work seems 'real' to begin with, even the real chairs; hence theater is very much a useful notion here, and the entire effort is to never let anything gain a grain of phenomenal reality. Yet the whole is, indeed, a Real situation in the world. We do *not* feel that we are watching either a stage model, or any decor props. For these reasons I find myself brooding on the legacy of the Supermatist stage. It offers an understanding of theatricality that is highly operative in the work of Tevet, and is contrasting to the one by which Michael Fried attacked the Minimalists back in 1967. It has certainly to do with the insistence on aesthetical distance so dear to Fried, as well as to Tevet: Painting, the plane, is never abandoned.



Details from SOUND FOR A SILENT MOVIE 1986

read into Friedlander words: " The spatial insofar as it is a dimension of being in the world". And this feeling, says Malevitch, is nonobjective,

To my best knowledge the issue of Supermatism in Tevet work, particularly the stage issue, has never been examined closely.

Quote:

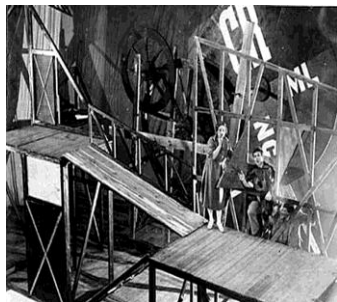
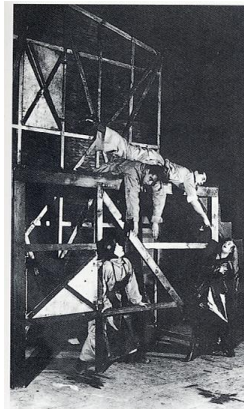
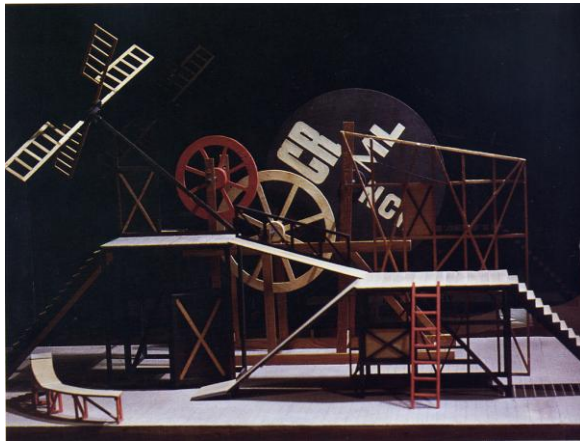
"Our life is a theatre piece, in which nonobjective feeling is portrayed by objective imagery"

Kazimir Malevitch in 1927.

'Feeling', the simple word chosen by Malevitch helps the intonation of what is the main content that *I*

that is, it is *not* representative, is *not* to do with *Re-Presentation*. This is crucial for Tevet; his first and last principle. And then Malevitch speaks of the "*portrayal via objective imagery.*"

But all that may well describe an artistic creation spanning a century. Why specifically the *theatre piece*? I wish to offer you some formal insights, yet I cannot resist a brief contextual note. It belongs in here, you'll see. As a rule, Tevet's context has been tenaciously described in purely artistic terms. But we're also to keep at the back of our minds the entire biography of an artist witnessing from within one of the hardest political and human clashes in this world.



THE MAGNANIMOUS CUCKOLD, Act 2, 1922 | Popova
THE MAGNANIMOUS CUCKOLD, Act 3, 1922 | Popova

Something pertaining to the context of birth of the Supermatist theatre is also telling here: a harsh and cruel political turmoil of accumulating uncertainties outside, and in the dark absence of a true possibility to make art socially useful, art chose to transcend everyday reality.

Tevet insists on a highly abstract art, here, in Israel, now. It has never been other than *Art for Art sake*, which is *very* certainly: A statement.

One can call to mind that during the Soviet Union's first half-decade there were more than 3000 theatrical organizations in Moscow and vicinity. Theatre was not only the vehicle of self discovery, it was *it*. Strangely enough, by the very one and same token, '*It*' might have



URSA MAJOR (with ECLIPSE) 1984

meant also that vanguard investigation of space seemed a promising project insofar as it was *not* a dimension of *being - IN- the world*. (And now I allow the use of 'IN' in a different sense than Friedlander's 'IN') A blasphemous thought, yet I do believe that any utopian activity withholds, fruitfully, its incessant dark negative, and so it is with Tevet, even if he does not share the revolutionary stance and instance of the 20's. His work, so I feel, embraces that negation - **positively**, in the sense that *Medium is the message* is **re** acknowledged to be necessarily the artistic modus of *being in the world*.



Two pieces, one in Paris, *The Rite of Spring* by Nizinsky, Stravinsky, and the designer Roerich, the other in St. Petersburg, *Victory over the Sun* by Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Matiushin and Malevitch set two aspects of avant-garde theatrical models. The *Rite* launched the vision of primal man and society governed by instinct and nature; that does not lead us into Tevet's world. In the other, in *Victory*, future is

PAGE FROM A CATALOGUE 1998

mechanized, is no longer dependant upon anything, not even the sun. That is already more interesting for my idea of Tevet whose scapes and vistas are devoid of light. (For sure the "Israeli light"...) The plot of *Victory* nonsensical opera involved the capturing of the sun and its enclosure in a square container. Whether Tevet creates *instruments for viewing* or, a 'theatre', his work is all about enclosures. I must add in Hebrew: לסגור שטחים should I remind also that within the multiple enclosure processes of this work there's the insistent hindrance and obstruction for camera work?

So where is it all happening – I say 'happening' and not 'takes place' in order to avoid any evocation of 'place', because Tevet's place is a *non-place*, a *Locus Solous*, much like Raymond Russel's – so, where is it all *happening* when the sun is locked in a square container and the multiplicity of enclosures makes the camera a useless tool?





Details from UNTITLED 95-96

The text of *Victory* was written in the "transrational" language of "Zaum", meaning *beyond the mind*, beyond logic. It was Khlebnikov's invention. Each sound had a corresponding visual idea behind it, representable by symbols on a surface. And this new language relied on neologisms, puns, and the free associations of sounds and images that diverted words of their predictable meaning, attempting to communicate, concretely and directly, some internal state of the speaker.

I truly like Malevitch simple word – 'feeling'.

In a conversation with Nahum about *Sound for a Silent Movie* he spoke of the insertion of the *magnets* and the letters. The *N*, the *R*, the *U* etc' were pieces of names of topographical directions; *North*, for instance. Somewhat reminiscent the *Zaum* language of *Victory*, in the universe of Tevet the name of direction at one's left when facing the rising sun does not indicate a thing, signifying disintegrates.



CORNER 1981-2



THE MAGNANIMOUS CUCKOLD 1921 Popova



NARCISSUS I 1984

Friedlander was very precise when he observed that actually, against all that has been repeatedly said; in point of fact there are never-ever 'reflections' in Tevet's work, literally none, nothing reflects, there's only the miming of reflection, the *theatre* of it, the exposure of that theatre, the baring of artistic devices, the stripping bare of the bride... That, I think, is the main feeling,

much like it had been once the impulse or the drive leading to the invention of the historical **Zaum**.



INSTALLATION FOR TWO ROOMS 1979

Both the objects manufactured for a Tevet work, and their arrangements and rearrangements in the work itself follow a typical "Zaum" production line. It is not that first one prepares the bodies, and then one plays with their placement. No: The preparation and the future possible placements are intrinsically mutually affecting, indeed working Zaum-like in stressing an excessive overdose of rhyming, parallelism of sounds, free associations of sound and images, all harnessed to the diversion of predictable meanings. This is the core of Tevet's activity: the arrangement dictates the vocabulary, ever newly shifting it, and the vocabulary in turn ever changes the settings. I find it strictly from within the Supermatist Stage, also from the Constructivist Stage, I should add, - much more than from Cubism for instance - that Tevet has learnt a useful lesson about transformations from word to object and vice versa.

Now, the original plan of Malevitch was to build for *Victory* a 3D stage set, but the lack of resources forced him to use backdrops that he painted himself. But 3D was nevertheless introduced into *Victory* because of the painterly stereometry created. In all of his work Malevich understood geometric forms as dynamically charged images that in turn could be broken apart to form a new pictorial vocabulary, and it is of importance to remember that Malevitch-the-painter moved into abstraction via the theatre, much like Liubov Popova who also moved from decoration to painterly stage, to 3D stage, to environment, to active stage structures, and Meyerhold too was once an artist painter and then an artist builder. In all these cases space has never been taken as a "*meaningful form, determined by a set of internal relations.*" That old notion of space, of spatiality and of making sculptures was banished from the revolutionary thinking of the 20's, and the question remains whether as yet any of us has offered a truly more advanced critique.

Tevets' **Painting Lessons** and later, the **Sound for a Silent Movie**, can be read as some painterly stereometry in reverse. In that regard let us think of the concatenation of the U shape/form/body.

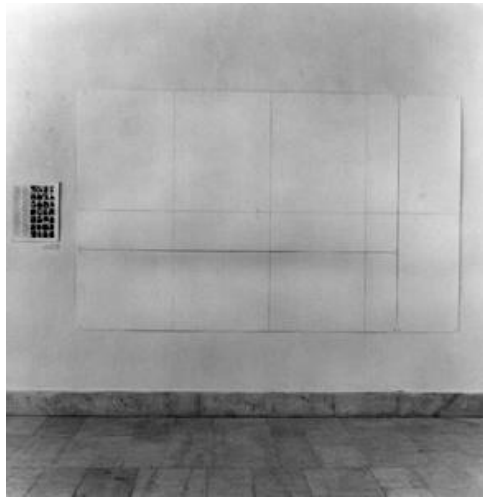


The word '*South*' broken to pieces brought the flat U letter, the funny repertory of which brought the **book** – an object, a volume. But the **book** could be obtained via the extruded negative of the inner part of the U shape, which means that the U reads either as a 'real' volume, or as a pseudo volume. That's a small illustration to the comedy of stereometry in reverse; one potential 2007 "Zaum". You can't really decide what you see, is it a U pluralized? Multiplied? 'Mirrored'? And then the U continued to populate. There came many **books**, and then, at a certain twist a **book** against a **book** created the **capsule**, a unified body opening a chain of wholly new concatenations.



Need I say that Tevet's entire *theatre for viewing* is inevitably about *you* and *me*:

I was thinking that even the early **Cezanne works** by evet, in the manner by which they toy with positive and negative space, posit the reproductions in a book, upon a wall, making a positive object from the non-object mark; the empty frame into a 'full' instant object, and yet further retaining it a non-object, because *it is* a flat monochrome painting after all, become clearer to me when I reflect on the Supermatist theatrical notion of stage as a dynamic volume. Cezanne is nowhere here; it's the platform - so to speak - at hand; it is *not* presentation, it is *not* representation, but it is *the* mapping of a **situation** – a par excellence Supermatist move.

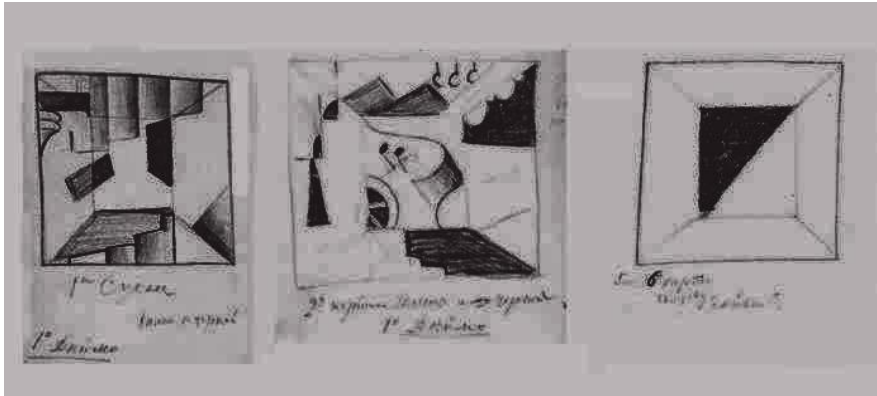


A PAGE FROM A CATALOGUE, 1976

And apropos the 'empty-full' Cezanne:

The set design for act 2, scene 5 of *Victory over the Sun*, 1913, has been known to become the emblem of Malevitch and the Supermatist movement at large. It is the famous square with the diagonal intersection half black, half white. In the earliest manifestations of Supermatist theory it was described a window: *"a window in the visible universe looking into a new reality"*.





VICTORY OVER THE SUN, Set design for act 2, scene 5 | Kazimir Malevitch | 1913



BUREAU ROOM | 1913 | Malevitch PORTRAIT MATYUSHIN | Malevitch 1913

Be it in *Victory* or in other Suprematist productions, it is the type of volume that not only negates the fixed value or identity implied by frame and by framing, it is the desire for the frameless in its highest ambition, as Konstantin Rudnitsky, the historian of Russian theatre wrote: in the way it offers the: *"murderous atmosphere of constant uncertainty"*.



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For Malevitch all matter, all life matter disintegrates into a large number of component parts which are fully independent. Consequently, in his late writing the notion of the *'additional element'* comes to mean the quality of any new visual environment bringing about a change in perception. This is further indication to the vital and necessary applicability of Supermatist principles in Tevet's work.

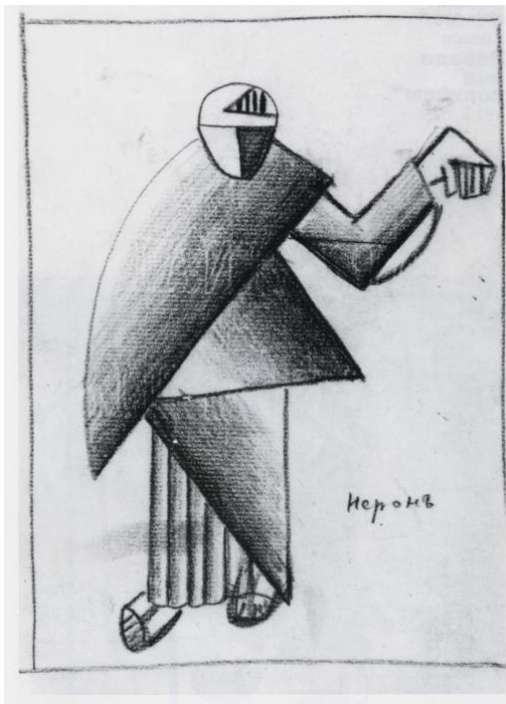
Anything to do with that opera *Victory over the Sun* emphasized mechanistic gestures, predetermined movements and the hard core physicality of the literal occurrence. In its essence it was all against the archeological-historical realism still dominant in the Russian theatre of the time. So instead of imitating phenomenal reality there has been suggested a real, concrete, on-stage, real time, real situation, the phenomenal physicality of which indeed *negates* expression to representation. That has been the biggest split suggested by Modernism at large: – Representation and Expression are divorced. I believe there's no way to approach Tevet's situational art without keeping this negation in mind.

Following such a concept of expression, 4 factors got, and are still getting today, an immediate crucial relevance:

1. **Improvisation.**
2. **Pantomime**
3. **Tumbling.**
4. **Muteness**

Improvisation marks Tevet's logic of production.

Pantomime points to the frozen echoes of Tevet's real bodily-eye moves.



NERON | Kazimir Malevitch 1913 | Costume designs for the opera "Victory over the Sun" | scenery by Alexei Kruchenykh, music by Mikhail Matiushin | pencil, watercolor, Indian ink on paper. The Theatre Museum, St.Petersburg.

Tumbling means also a trip, a roll about. Informally it means - to come to understand. The Hebrew word for *tumbling* opens a whole cluster of words relating to order and disorder: לפרוע, להפריע, הפרעה וכו'. ... **Tumbling** then, is Tevet's content.

Last, **muteness**: It may sum up what Meyerhold said in 1910: "*The point where the spoken word fails in its power of expression, the language of the dance begins*".

The impenetrability of the view has gradually increased in the later works of Tevet. The blockage arrived at through the multiple screens and screening reached such a density that surrounding them establishes the viewer as a peeping fool in front of a besieged locked city, or shall we call it a locked garden? Either way the political metaphor is inescapable – *we* are out. And the political aspect is interwoven with the abstract lesson: In the parable on the wolf and the vineyard, the wolf looses twice, he must starve to get in, and he must starve to get out. Once this is read as a parable on the panoptical, (the *all-seeing-eye*), one comes closer to the heart of Tevet's critique of transparency.

While in theory and ideology Supermatism advocated the labyrinth, the ever dynamic shifting of all meanings, their actual constructions are futuristically 'transparent'. Indeed one could say they propose a feast of the *All-Seeing-Eye*. They can be seen through most pleasurably - naively even - like skeletons, or primitive machines. By Tevet's apocryphal trajectory - - I use the very suitable term offered by Sarit Shapira - - this joy is replaced with the *exact* opposite joy: that of the opaque state of things. Indeed the installations of Tevet became larger, and expanded over the years *because* of the great pleasure taken in the opaqueness of **Things**.

In his acute response to early revolutionary theory and praxis Tevet points to the inherent *linkage* and *leakage* tied in the reverse of streometry and the inverse of transparency.

In a bad sense the condition of an apocryphal artist, our 'Post', or Post Mortem's condition, attests to merely academism, indeed the more or the less shrewd juggling with bygone concepts. But a serious chance for such an artistic position is embodied in the ability *to open* the texts and artistic indexes in reference both backwards and forwards. That is - relevance.

Tevet's apocryphal theater of screenings insist on the still and on the stillness of a painting; no matter by which bodily position his installations are perceived by, all volumes set for view, intricate and secretive as they grew to be, are ever receding back to plane, back to painting. This is also suggested by the name of one work; **Sound for a Silent Movie**: Silent movies were basically filmed theatre, that is: they kept the frontal sight of things. Many frontal sights made - a *movie*. You may change your bodily position walking around a Tevet piece, but you are always in front of it.