

**Sarah Breitberg-Semel interviews Tamar Getter
following her works;
Boulevard Central and *The Asiatic Company Building 03***

I went to the studio of Tamar Getter with the intention to talk with her about *Boulevard Central*, her recent wall piece shown in the projects floor at Zman Le'Omanut Gallery. I thought that discussing this condensed work could provide an all-over view of the path she has been following in her recent wall works. The new route of her work can be dated to 1992 but its earlier beginning was in 1976 when Getter, then in her twenties and highly responsive to Conceptual Art, at its pick influence at the time, mounted her multiple perspective studies of *Tel-Chai Yard* on the walls of the Israel Museum.

On her return to wall works, the early collage aspect of her paintings has been thought into a three dimensional space.

I knew the *Boulevard Central*, based on *Nordau-Garten Stadt* by the architect Alexander Baerwald, in its planning stages. Getter intended to do a set of blindfold drawings, 7 versions of the central boulevard worked from Baerwald's utopian scheme. For the left wing of the 3 walls piece Getter planned a chalk handwritten story, a fictitious letter by architect Baerwald to a lover called Louisa. For the right wing a giant caricature – the motives her Israeli public is by now familiar with. In the actual work, under each boulevard there was added a female nude torso with an elongated neck, it too drawn blindfold. That woman with her breasts stripped, supporting on her suggested head those sham boulevards made me recall Carmen Miranda. It seemed as though this woman was to carry on its missing head the flawed dream of utopia. I was moved by this addendum, the instance by which the load of utopia was seated on the head of a naked woman, on the concrete human body often ignored in utopianism. I thought it was fit for Getter to have contemplated such an association.

Getter's early paintings showed a fragmentary world made of photographs and chalk drawings placed on class blackboard-like support. It developed within the post conceptual crisis of painting; others termed it "Death of Painting". Internalizing the readymade legacy into her work Getter chose to continue painting, resuscitating by its gestures historical photography, and hackneyed models of utopia. Her semiotic strategy preoccupied with modernism at large, questions the possibilities for a meaningful contemporary painting, draws on the cultural-historical Israeli context.

In recent years, the wall work years, her work discloses a radical removal of the author-work romantic notions, divorcing the painterly touch of its assumed subject, offering instead restrictive preplanned work procedures, and semi-mechanized gestures. She performs a free use of techniques, and of styles, demonstrating a robust denial of any formal vow in order to re-look-at and examine the case of the bound to fail painting.

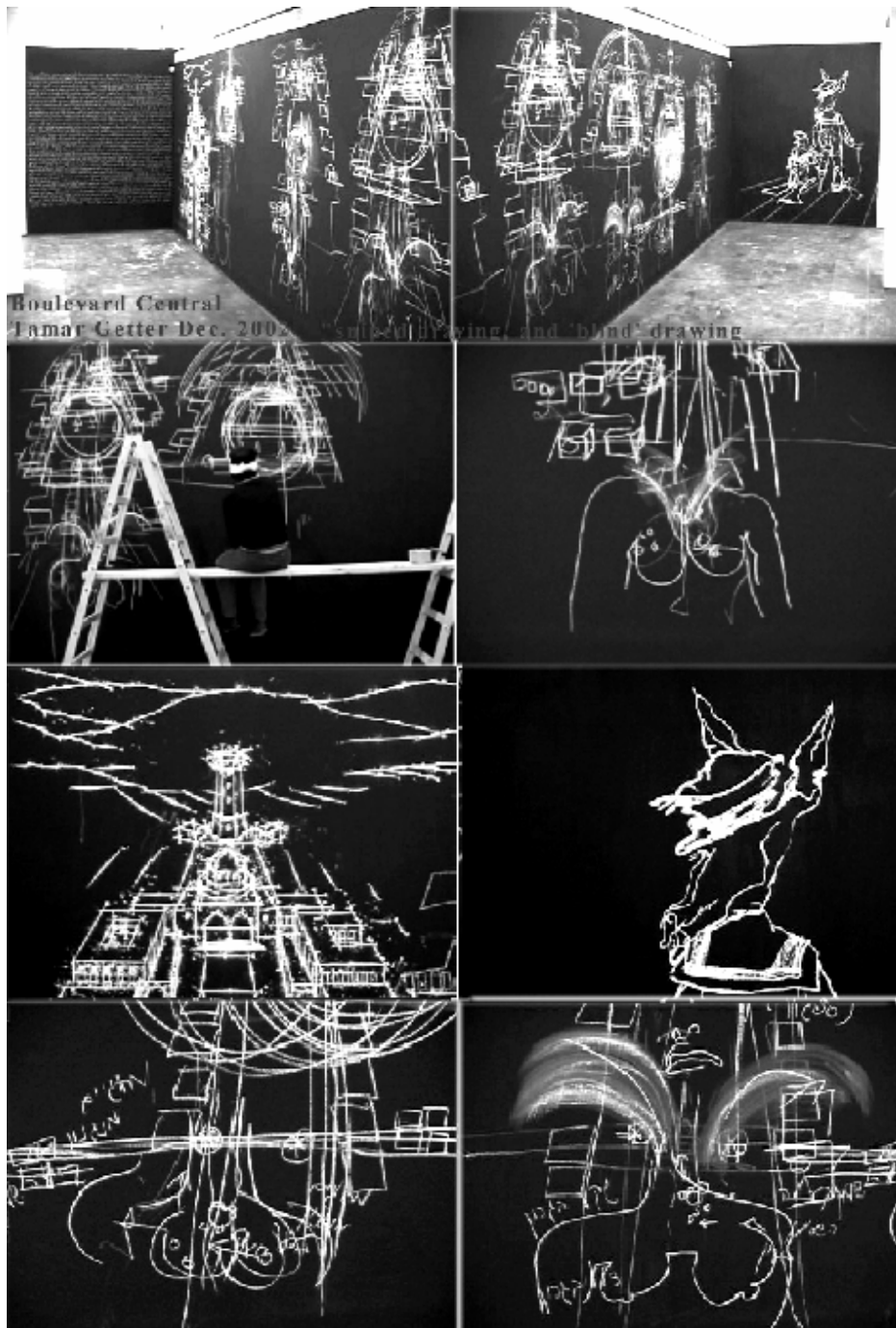
Getter's painting assignments, notably the extreme bodily constraints it involves such as her choice of hand work for the making of huge geometrical images, tying her body to a made-to-order body size enlarged spirogyra thus forcing it to produce exact geometrical shapes, or her choice to draw symmetrical images blindfold as in the case of Boulevard Central, capitalize on the friction between the nature of the utopian model, a rigid predetermined whole, and the live human situation; singular, breathing, open, unexpected.

The viewer of Getter painted walls experiences that immense clash, grotesque and full of pathos, emanating from the futile-absurd energy put into the purposely impractical execution of the images. A strange association between discipline and freedom is made apparent as the vigor of the act of drawing, its real time and occurring, is made to be seen by a new perspective oscillating between the ideal perfection of forms and plans, and the reality of the body itself stamped in the clownish struggle to perform them correctly. The in between space is where Getter's painting happens.

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A shorter version of this interview was published in Hebrew in Studio No. 142 April 2003.

² Getter's 1974-8 cycle was shown at her first one-person show at Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Tel-Chai was a small Hebrew-pioneering commune of young revolutionary Russian Jews. It is located in the upper east Galilee, built on the ruins of the Palestinian Talcha after the British occupation in 1918. In the year 1918 Tel-Chai and its surroundings were conferred to the French occupation zone. In 1 Mars 1920 the Arabs attacked Tel-Chai and most of its young members (8 in number) got killed in the fight. Tel-Chai acquired a national legendary status.



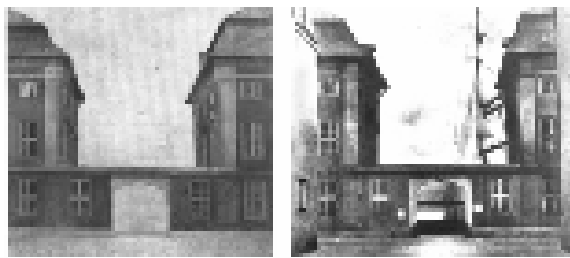
BOULEVARD CENTRAL general views and details
 Nordau Garden City | **Alexander Baerwald** 1920

Sniped drawing and blindfold drawing
 December 2002

In her studio I was encountered with a project altogether new to me and with Getter running around among giant paintings, lifting, carrying them from here to there. A new project means a non-stop two months work. In her hand alternately scrapers, squeegees and the sponges by which she works on plywood in oil-tempera technique. The new piece is bound for a group project at Weizman square in Holon. Unlike most of her recent projects, it is not a wall work.

The 24 paintings will be first installed in the square shops, and later, the piece in its final phase, with added 7 series of photographs, will be shown at the Ein Harod Museum of Art.

The paintings show an old European building, an empty space arrested between its two identical sections. One and the same building reappears in the many paintings.



Sarah Breiberg-Semel:

Why, how come these European paintings all of a sudden?!

Tamar Getter:

They are based on two paintings called The Asiatic Company Building done by Hammershøi in 1902. I like immensely both his paintings and the name: The Asiatic Company Building.

As a member of a society that has built itself on the edge of Asia, the name must have caught your attention. Asia is too often non-existent, dismissed almost from the modern art world. I presume the building belonged to one of the colonial companies

trading with the colonies, as was the Britain East-India Company. They had such buildings in the harbors, as a matter of fact, quite similar to this simple building that you portray.

That's true, and more, as now we are the destructive rulers of the old colony. The aspects of the suggested 'symmetry' I find intriguing, haunting. Indeed like the *East-India Company* also The *Danish Asiatic Company* was an armed mobile settlement company. I cannot dissociate it from my artistic fascination with Hammershøi's treatment of the building's rigor symmetry. The mute, calm, formal perfection of his painting is an explosive thing for me. Clearly Hammershøi is not preoccupied with the history of the gigantic looting of Asia. But it is unavoidably in my mind.

...I like the gate to the port.

As always, there are many different versions of the same painting, two paintings, in fact.



I am doing it 12 times, six with the gate shut, and other six - open. They will be installed in the small shops of Weiznan Square with a portrait of a shop worker or a passerby attached to each. On second stage I shall photograph the entire installation in the square; some sort of a Copenhagen grafted on Holon, and show the photos series too.

So it is again a multiple perspective project?





Yes, only here it is the locations and modes that are altered. The image itself remains one and the same.

The process involves the making of paintings after reproductions (from a book), and then photos after paintings. There's an extra series of photos in which I am seen going upstairs in different locations in south Tel-Aviv. Not downstairs, but up...

This too goes into the final project, 54 units all together.

Is this project a beginning of a new phase in your work?

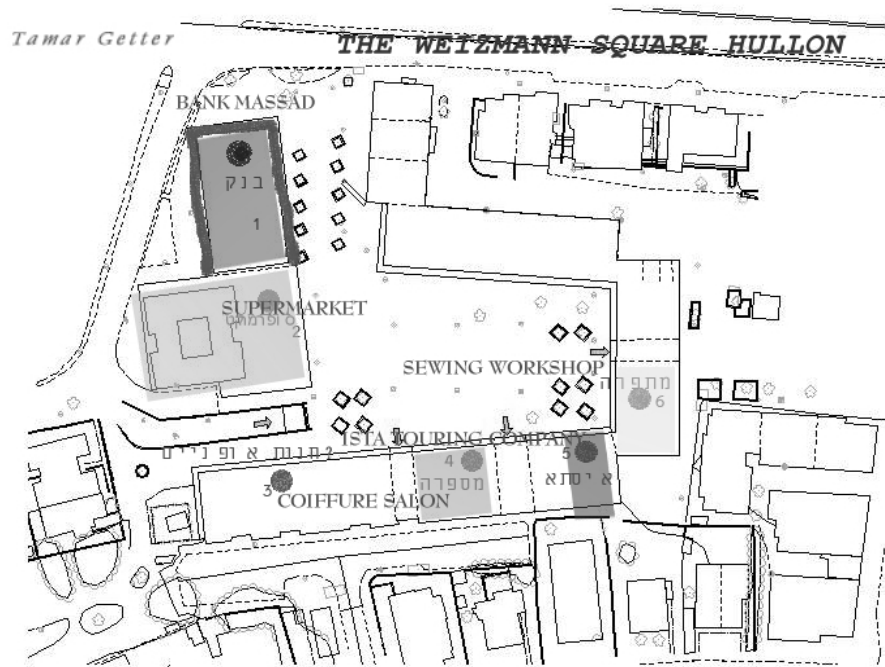
Not necessarily, the Weizman Square conditions working on panels. There are no suitable walls there and the shops are small. As I developed the concept I got to like it: in a sense it's a chain merging history and places, a sort of mise en abîme scenery.

And what about these photos in which you go upstairs, where to do you climb?

To nowhere, just going upstairs.

Where does the painting open to?

The gate in the painting opens to a port, I presume. The painting - nowhere.





Your stairs scenes brings to mind Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Stairs" of course, and Richter's late response to it as well. You chose to change the direction – mount, and not descend. The fast body gesture, upward, dressed, suggest some boldness, opposition, insistence. I would have liked to understand better this choice and comment on your predecessors, also why did you switch from their medium – taking the inversed passage from painting to photography, for the portrayal of what you call "going no where"? In one or two photos of this series you practically run into nowhere...

Well, 'nowhere' could be just as well 'anywhere'... 'busy', going 'out', or 'in'... or 'there'.. whatever...

The woman ghost-like ephemeral quality in their paintings speaks for some eternal desire unfulfilled; a 'she', or 'she the painting' is ever on a descend and will never 'arrive', will never be embraced... But it isn't only Richter, or Duchamp, it's the classical muse story. 'She' isn't merely coming, but coming into being, emerging... materializing... I thought if muse is 'she' let her be herself. Why change? It's perfect as it is. But then, as woman is no object of desire to me it felt odd, I could only use my own body, dress, and change the

direction. And then, 'up' and 'down' aren't such a difference when you think of it, it's perpetual, and perpetually evasive both ways, only in order to appear a 'she' to me, I must look at my back side.

Within the entire installation of *The Asiatic Company Building 03* the back-self portraits stairs scenes are the only deep perspective scenes. The rest are all flat and flattened facades, rigidly blocked 'dead-ends'. There are several ways therefore for reading it, and I leave it for the viewer's choice. Both Duchamp and Richter reflect the photo-graphically mediated vision to emphasize the reproduction aspect, I think. For who's the 'author', or 'master' of that lady? Their old revived song both irons and ironies the romantic vocabulary. I did pick the camera for that same reason. For the mise en abîme structure of *The Asiatic Company Building 03* it was just the right thing to do.

I have never heard of Hammershøi before. It's quite a different choice than to refer to Richter or to Duchamp. What has brought you to work with this scarcely known painter, certainly no figure of importance in the modern discourse, and why copy specifically him 12 times?

It isn't a copy, I mark. It's more of a tracing work, in fact. In 1996 I landed in Copenhagen on my way back from Tokyo where I did *Double Monster*, a work which meant a 4 weeks literal struggle with the symmetry of Uccello's Chalice. I was tiered, immersed still by all those measures and measurements of the chalice. I did not want to think of or to see any art at all. But out in the streets it was freezing, so I entered the museum to warm up a little, keeping my eyes on the parquet alone. When I raised them it was a Hammershøi that I first saw; there stood the painted building, artlessly painted, exemplary prosaic, symmetrical, perfect in size and scale, humble. I said oh'! It felt like that old encounter, in my youth, with the Tel-Chai scheme. (2) They were closing. I just had the last minute to buy a booklet on Hammershøi. It's a special one. You see, it is a correspondence between two contemporary artists, a



Finnish and a Swedish, trying to understand why are they taken by a painter who in 1902 was so firmly fixed in a negative picture of modernity, why in spite of it they felt he was

modern. It is a modernist pain that they sense and discuss. It's a beautiful correspondence. For instance they suggest that Utopia in its highest solemn aspect is located deep in the guise of the distressingly trivial. They show how the beauty of Hammershøi emerges from the hopelessly dull. I recalled Hammershøi when I studied the austere architecture of Weizman square.

Wait, but when you paint a Hammershøi 12 times, mechanically, not in oils and brush but by scrapers, squeegees and sponges, it's no more that thin beauty he's after. It is an altogether different thing.

Of course, Hammershøi has been a trigger of something. I work with strongly diluted oil-tempera. The squeegees literally shave the material of the support leaving only a minimal layer. It is an exceptionally thin painting, chalky and ultra dry, but inherently different from his thinness.

I have no particular inclination for the 19-century obsolete idiom. Hammershøi modifies a certain feeling, a very clear ethics with respect to the prosaic-ness that I identify in my own gaze at Tel-Chai - no mystery, I think, this first, it is mundane, some bare 'is-ness', a faith that things can be seen once you truly, artlessly look. No 'beyond'. But of course it is a very different thing. My painting is processed by staining over, by stamping and by countless erasures. These gestures are the content I push to the foreground. Repeating the process 12 times is to bring these gestures further out. The building (the image) is made superfluous on the one hand, but on the other hand it is the gesture that levels it up. It is quite similar to what I do with Baerwald's boulevard. It is the same thing. I do not find the words 'copy' or 'deliver' very helpful. There is no much difference from the Tokyo project as well; what is brought into attention is an act, a repeated gesture. I wish to act upon a stoppage, a delay.

...don't you like these quick scraper smears? I plastered it all as though I was putting low fat cheese on a piece of cracker... pity it's not eatable - - -

Indeed, very low fat, and it isn't the Hammershøi painting. You make a use of its form. Hammershøi did a painting, not a scheme of a building. The ethics that you have been mentioning translates into your language?

I work on Hammershøi's symmetrical bare scheme, no regard to volumes, no chiaroscuro, the 'depth' is the effect of scraping that blows up the lines.

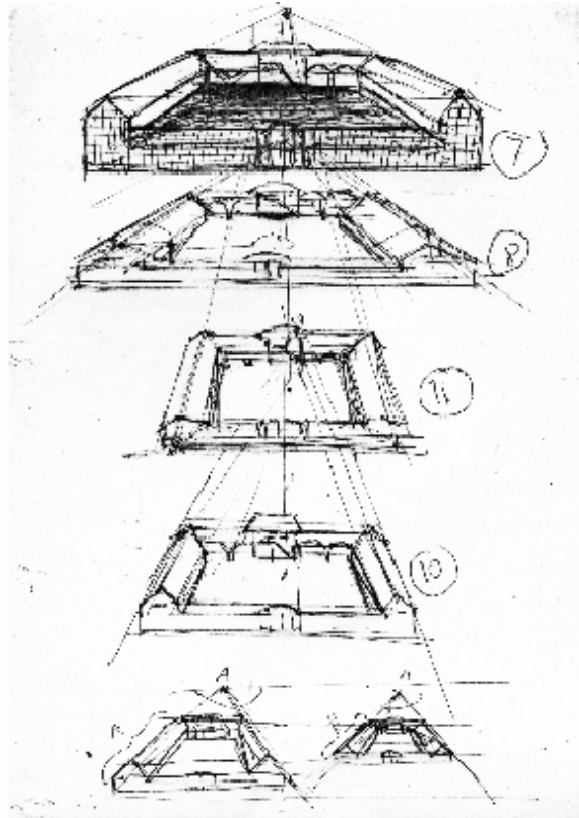
--- My father once told me that 'Getter' in old German means plasterer. I must be following my ancestors...

Plaster painting gained a high status in modernism; the scraper is the tool of the 50's.

But no more than a dead-pun in my work, I hope it is apparent.

There lived here once a painter called Katz, do you remember him? He was skilled in quickie painting. His use of scraper was awfully mechanical; an empty rhetoric right on start! So, I aspire to "become" such a Katz. The tools are coarse, quite impracticable with respect to the tradition addressed in spite of. The choice to work with such tools is a choice to work under a constraint, both technically and stylistically.

Let us consider your restrictive language later and talk now about repetition. Why is it necessary?



There are dozens of versions of Tel-Chai yard in early works. With Baerwald's boulevard you did 6 versions, in the present project 12 times the same building, twice the Uccello Chalice in Tokyo, 10 boys in the U in Gustave in Ein-Harod, 20 in the 20 New Hooligans in Haifa, 5 Cary Grants in Fit to stand the Gaze of Millions, and so on and so forth. As the work deals with spatial estimations, approximations, and transmitting, it is necessarily about repetition. Procedures are fronted, not the uniqueness of a single picture. The work lives by its multiplicity. It is a matter of withholds, to linger at a threshold. To work blindfold, use scrapers squeegees, chalk-line plumb, spirogyra, all these tools enable the suspension that I am after. I create situations in which the 'know how' aspect of traditional painting is made irrelevant, better - secondary.

Let us consider one of your constraints – blindfold drawing. Allegedly it is a Surrealist technique meant to free the subconscious. You use it quite differently when you repeat blindfold 6 Baerwald's boulevards?

Wake me up at night and in the dark I draw for you a Tel-Chai... You'll see that all lines will meet almost correctly, and a circle as well may close on its starting point... I have tried it. With very simple regular forms it works.

It means that...

It means that I refer to mental images like a face of a beloved person... such appearances. Where is it? Only painting (art) can explore such images.

Suddenly you sound so romantic... And what do you mean by 'to linger at a threshold'? Painting immanently withholds.

Perhaps it is some sort of a reconciliation of destiny and daily life, or the incidental and the imagination. Paintings are inviting entrances, locked. I want to be 'there', inside, but I am here. It's always a feeling of knocking your head against a wall.

What happens then in front of the wall, with your eyes covered, how it affects the opening of a painting?

In the dark I am alone with my body and with the memory of the scheme: Here I go with the chalk, now I go down, now I know: here enters this block of buildings, here's the place of the square, that block goes in here... The idea is to move towards the memory, pull out the symmetrical structure. Blindfold functions like a lead; it magnifies the gesture, it introduces it. I do not think it is a Surrealistic technique. I cope with a very clear knowledge of what I am going to draw. I'd say it is quite the inverse of a Surrealist technique. It all starts with a given complete knowledge of thoroughly studied and analyzed forms.

Eventually when you shut the eyes all that perfect knowledge, memorizing, analyzing, all result in 6 different distortions of Baerwald's pure utopian boulevard. They do resemble each other, but they are in fact 6 huge errors.

Think of it as of the case in my video work Journal of a Blind Girl (based on Hanoeh Levin short story). In the story the badly injured blind girl uses her last powers in the attempt to learn from her own mistakes; where and on what did she stumble, to prevent further nasty falls. And that's why she stumbles again. She is defeated by her own knowledge.

I can't tell you that my drawings are about these or other buildings... It's more how I confront that which is not painting at all... that which painting cannot fixate. Art negotiates with its 'other'. That's the main issue. Painting attacks radically the status of our knowledge and the memory as its foundation. In this sense to draw blindfold twins Levin's girl, likely it is to re-stumble where constructing by memory is impossible.

Your painting is so learned, and in so many spheres of knowledge. It is hard for me to see why it should be summarized under ‘radical attack of our knowledge’. To me it introduces a paradox that does a great deal of its magic: Thinking of Boulevard Central what I find above all is the immense energy by which the boulevards were drawn. It is a strange blend of knowledge, futile energy, and some sort of a reverberating barrenness. There is something grotesquely vital about these unruly drawings. What I see is a strange combination between lust for knowledge, a will to power, and a declaration of great impotency. For me this is an unusual appearance of despair. Rather than materializing in, say – the figure of melancholy, in your work it appears in a storm of adrenaline. Like in classical farces, perhaps. I am very curious to learn what drew you to Baerwald’s scheme?

By ‘attack on knowledge’ I refer to the actual act of painting, its ‘what next’... Doing a painting poses immediate questions to the one who does it. As for Baerwald, I like in his scheme what I like in all utopian schemes and plans; they are objectified dreams made to look implemental. Such pictures transfix themselves in our memory. They are more than pictures. They appear alike in many minds, in different places and times. They do not really belong to individuals.

By Levin story memory is the last thing to relay on.

It is so maddening not because we can not remember what we want to remember, we *do* remember very well, the trouble is that remembering has got nothing to do with the flow of events. We remember in the ‘wrong’ place, desynchronized. It is in fact more radical even, since it is an excellent memory, in Levin’s story, that brings about those falls, again and again, precisely in the same spot, on the same obstacle. More falls – one can say - this is the sole production of the blind girl. The discovery thereof is in that the rule seems suddenly no consequent of knowledge, or of understanding. Strangely enough it seems not to be a fruit of experience either! It is born, rather, from the unexpected, randomly, by chance. One hits upon a rule. I think art has some say in a zone of this sort – because it occurs, and reoccurs.

I think of Levin’s story as a model. We fancy that we build something, advance, and in my work I relate to that which ever erases, ever reveal the here and now. Present time is what the blind girl bumps into, and it is also what painting bumps into.

This description is opposite to any notion of utopia. It is a dispiriting description. Nothing is ever learned, you say. The discourse relating to your works has offered the term “Death of Utopias” as a way to approach it. Does it correspond to the flawed utopias resulted by the blindfold drawings, or is it to be understood otherwise? There has been also an association of your work with the Zionist utopia.

Prevailing interpretations took indeed to the formula of 'the dream and the wake', as though a requiem to Zionism was my subject. But to like or dislike Zionism is not the task of a painter, I think, nor can it describe my interest in Utopia. Great reformers enchant me. But painting starts after you've given in, I feel. Total calculations aiming to solve the problems of humanity offer what George Perec had so well put, and I have been quoting him so often; the "no place", he said, is the final effect of every utopian plan. It is suffocating. In utopia everything has its place; by this it annihilates every place. Its totality is terrible, but at the same time it excites because it is a deep expression of human desires. Also I can not forget that I have been born here, and not in Berlin... To have become a painter in Israel, think in and talk Hebrew, was made possible, for good and bad, also by this inconceivable Zionist utopianism. I may hate it, but I can't deny it.

My paintings, however, are preoccupied with arriving nowhere, I think.

What's between the 'no place' of Utopia and the 'nowhere' of painting?

Thank you, you give me a chance to get clearer. So again, it has to do with suspense, I think. As procedures become the center of attention all is variegated; an aspect, a fragment supersedes the wholeness of a plan. It is to project difference, alternation, into that which denies, which gives no room for any type of differentiation. I put the error in place of perfection.

One can say you quarrel with the idealized, which is the nature of all idea fix. But you do admire perfection.

You can insist on the fragmented only when you are a chronic slave of beauty.

The partial, the postponed, the ever newly revised is the locus of your work. Could you please relate more to the prevailing reading of your work, how then do you understand the question of utopia with relation to painting?

I am thinking of Hammershøi: The feeling is that his buildings follow no identifiable ideology, no set of national 'values' for instance. He has got nothing 'to sell'. An experience of void governs them. It is a zone where loss, meaninglessness, death, is fully acknowledged. Where there is no expectation for any consolation, remorse or nostalgia there begins something to flicker. His prosaic gaze sets a measure that is dear to me. It's a no yearning position. I accept loss. Unlike the historical Baerwald, the fictive figure of the Boulevard Central story is a man who lets go. He writes to his lover Louisa, *we lost the circle, and we lost the line...* He laughs at the sweeping idealism of reformers. If we

lost this and that, he says, at least we are left with symmetry... He calculates in Louisa's ears, you see, I made her up too. And he says explicitly that he has no wish to build anything. You can say he wants nothing. He wants to play. He's an artist, if you will, serves no master.

This is your Baerwald.

Yes. For the occasion of the Zionist ideologue Max Nordau's 70 anniversary he was called to submit a work plan for a garden city.

Is it the future Tel-Aviv?

I think so, yes. He arrived with a simple primitive scheme - not with a plan - and with a bizarre dramatic piece. This, by the way, is an historical fact. I learned about it from a fascinating German study of the grand utopias of the 20th century. I made up my story and the entire project around a refusal to enlist. Great reformers are not really builders. They talk about the should be building.

I remember you painting the *Tel Chai Yard and the Ideal City*, and that entire cycle when you were in your twenties. With 25 years old you had your one-person show at the Israel museum, and three years before you were drawing there on the wall the multiple perspective studies of the Yard of Tel-Chai. Were you thinking that early with the same terms?

I think this was the attitude. All starts with 'as is'. Nothing is more foreign to me as discussing my work through that awfully sentimental prism of a 'ruins painter', bah'. With, without art, my life, and history – anything – no promise was given and there are no delusions. To think only as if there had been once some nice Zionist idea that has gone *kaput* and now, supposedly we are all awakened... No, it is not my cup. Neither do I feel close to - say - Kaspar David Friedrich, whom otherwise I admire. What does one learn from his ruins? One is always encountered with some mythologized, capitalized Time. This too is not my experience. Boulevard Central is a kind of graffiti, it offers no sublime.



1.1 - Urbanismo, la più radicata circolarmente e ispirato molto (1900), modello per l'urbanismo militare del futuro, giunto alla sua forma d'insieme, l'architetto di Sion e nelle pagine a fianco presentate: dalla parte, dei quartieri per i soldati, della polveriera.

It is the opposite of ruin, what you deal with, I'd say. You deal with something that is more powerful than any actual habitat – with its complete plan. I wonder whether it is possible at all to describe what you do with regard to utopian plans in terms of ruins.

These are no plans.

All right – schemes, complete schemes, you deal with that moment of complete thought put down on paper. Drawings of Ideal cities offer a thing profoundly complete unlike realization, which is necessarily 'dirty'.

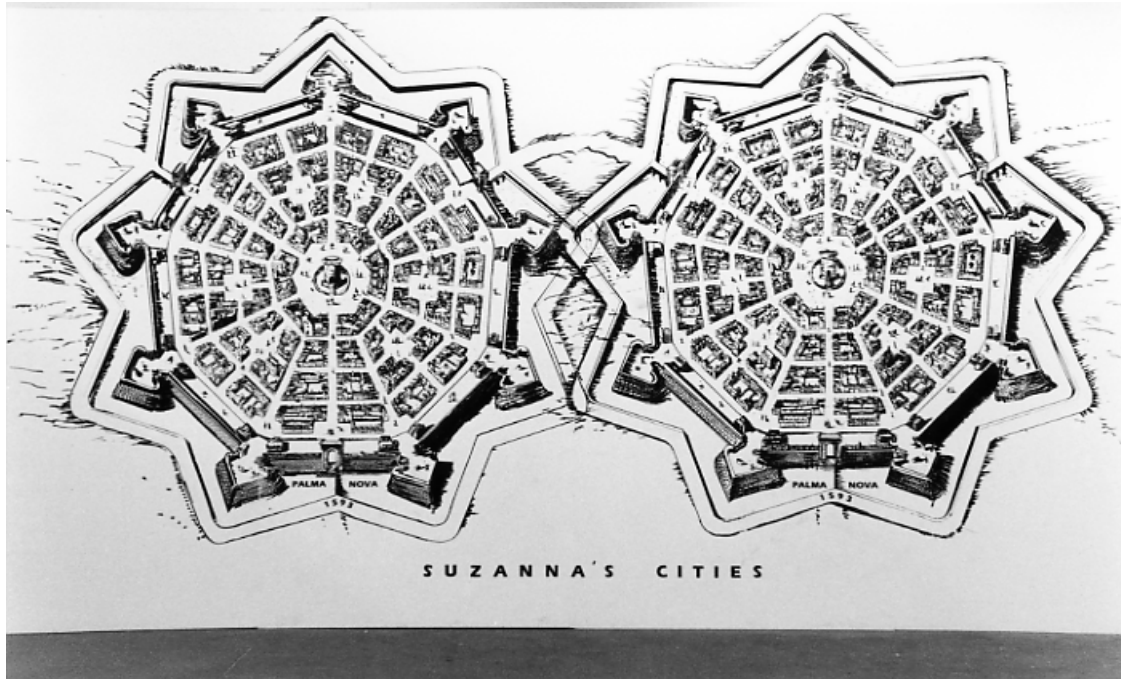
As I enlarge the original drawings in hundreds of percentages, they part and divide. I am put in the zone of invention. I start fabricating. For instance for the ideal city scheme that I used in *Suzanna's Cities* (Strasbourg 93) every single building was another invention. In the two cities there are around 1600 buildings. The same applies with Baerwald's Garden City. In the *Militia Dreams* (Washington 94) I used again drawings of the Renaissance planner Scamozzi. His barracks are quick scribbles. By enlargement they got even less readable, in fact altogether incoherent. I solved it with a friend's help. We compared the models carefully till we could reconstruct that "plan". In point of fact we reinvented it, building after building, just like in *Suzanna's Cities*.

To the eye it appears perfectly symmetrical, just a double blow-up of the original drawing.

All these buildings are pure fantasy, no two lines are identical. There's no 'architecture' in my paintings, but merely a fantasy about architecture. Moreover, I put little figures in *Suzanna's Cities*, and dogs too.

I never noticed that!

Nevertheless they are there. Tel Chai as well I populated with poultry and with dogs.

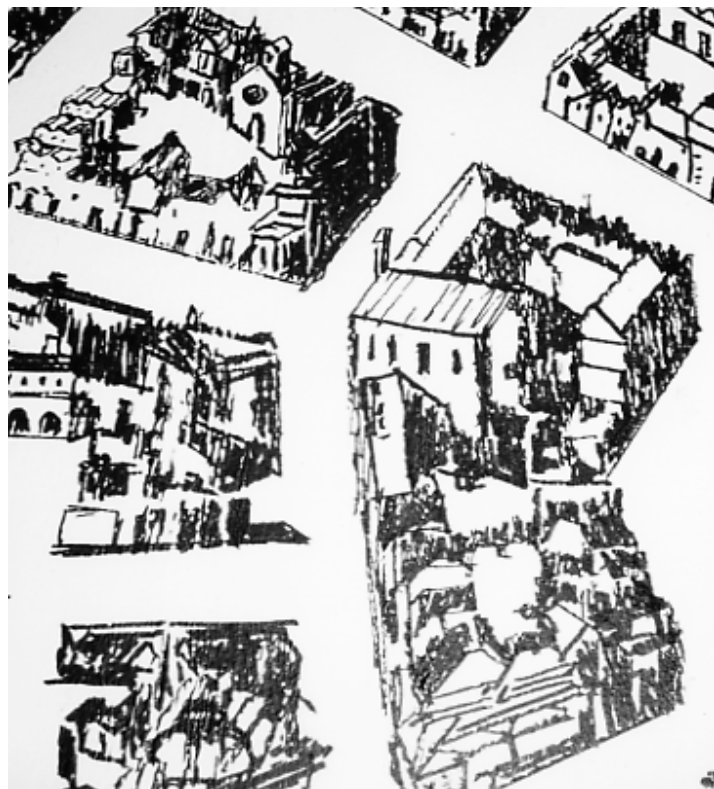


1993 - LA LAITERIE Strasbourg, France. Nov. SUZANNA'S CITIES
4 walls installation (within the Israeli-Palestinian Show)

I think your former description of the relation between blindness, learning, knowledge and the unexpected has clarified this aspect. I would like to ask you about symmetry, why is it the basis?

As symmetry is a state of balance where nothing can be moved, and everything is connected, it is part and parcel with utopian planning. Symmetry belongs with the divine, this is all famous. It's the fantasy of achieving total control over things. One desires absolute control because it is not given to us.

And what you do with it - -



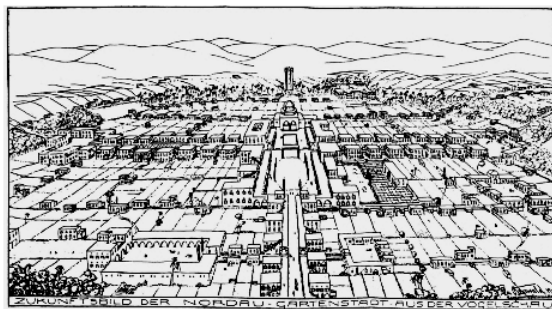
I create a fool who is not let in Plato's party, the one who makes absurd scenes behind the door.

And is he/you let in eventually?

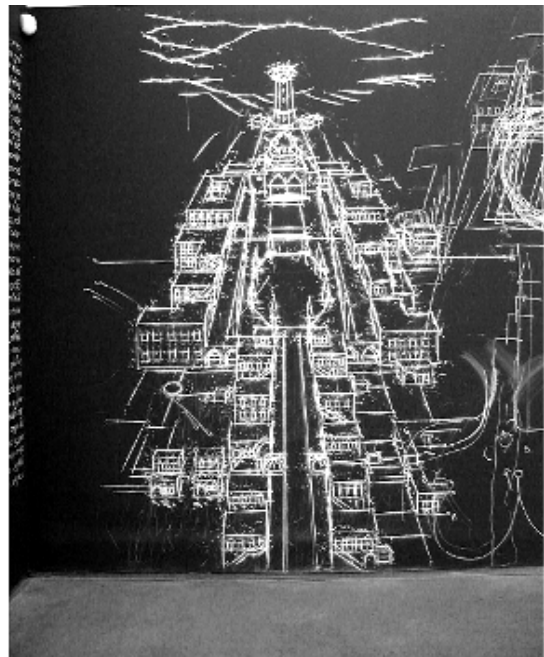
No. I am thrown out. It is connected with what I said earlier, that painting arrests. I show and magnify the gap between the images (of symmetry) and their flawed or capricious bodily execution.

Is that to converse reason over passion into passion over reason?

No. It is not to produce a judgment. It is to exemplify a certain border you are encountered with when you reflect what is painting.

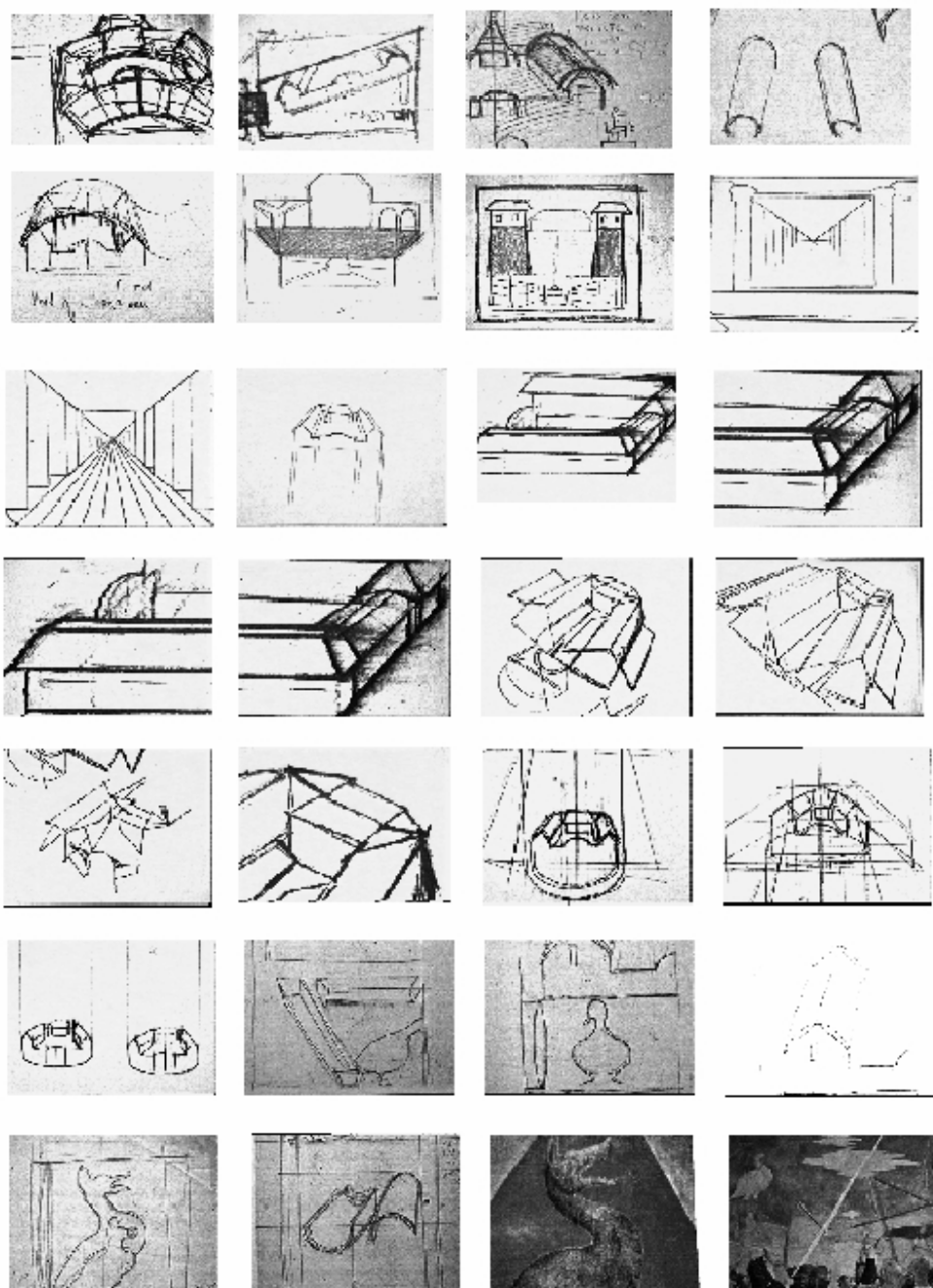


Baerwald's plan NORDAU GARTEN STADT 1920



Getter BOULEVARD CENTRAL

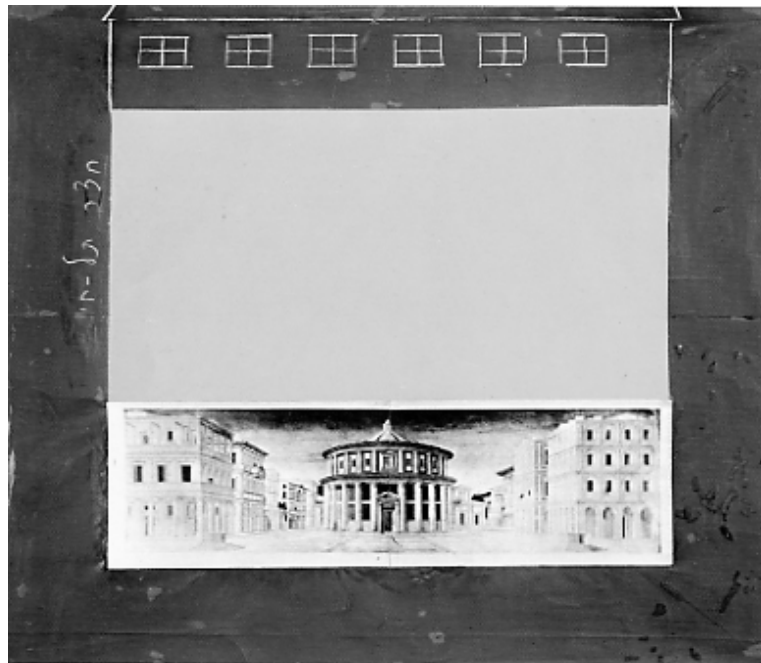
central wall left side
Sniped drawing and blind drawing
December 2002



Tel-Chai cycle drawings 1974-78

The Tel-Chai works refer to a place that had become a token and a symbol of national heroism. Your prosaic rendering of the building and its simple yard inverts if not totally obliterates any notion of heroism. One can not say the name ‘Tel-Chai’ without recalling how you shifted its meaning. I say in that shift the work occurs.

It seems to me that it is possible to say so once it is acknowledged that I neither depicted nor painted, nor captured or documented anything.



Tel -Chai and an Ideal City 122 x 140 cm.
vinyl, blackboard color, chalk, photo

It is in the viewers' memory. You wrote the name ‘Tel-Chai’ under several of the paintings, and some of the drawings. In Israel one cannot relate to Tel-Chai, one cannot write the name Tel-Chai without recalling the awful slogan that was born there: “Good to die for our country”.

It is important for me that the entire cycle of paintings was generated from a page in a book, not the real place, not the building. It was a simple outline showing where Joseph Trumpeldor was shot dead, and it was even more schematically drawn than the shapes I

invented. Another source was a T.V. screen blurred black and white photo that I took and used for the kind of print that it was. In a sense I cannot say that I dealt with a famous ruin. You see?

Why do you resist the fact that the name Tel-Chai conveys a specific memory?

It does, and it is a crucial factor. Concerning the painting tactic in regard with such public images the main issue is that paintings are not mirrors. I dealt with the memory of a relatively simple symmetrical shape, and with various drawing operations about this memory. Somehow it is inherently different than – say - go paint the ruins of the coliseum. The shape that fascinated me was no symbolical trace of anything. It was neutral. At the time also the physical building itself interested no one. Whether Tel Chai of the public memory was at all associated with any object, it was the monument of the roaring lion, to which I paid no attention. The shapes I generated brought to my work other drawings of earlier times and places. That's how the Ideal City by Piero della Francesca's got into my work. The entire Tel-Chai cycle consists of the play with the symmetry of the first scheme. So it is true to say I did not *paint* Tel-Chai, but rather "*made*" one. The whole thing was to spread-out a fantasy about the no-icon that Tel-Chai is.

What intrigues about the no-icon?

The birth of a painting.

You mean the birth of a painting in Israel, a culture marginal with respect to the western painting tradition, the culture of no-icon by definition?

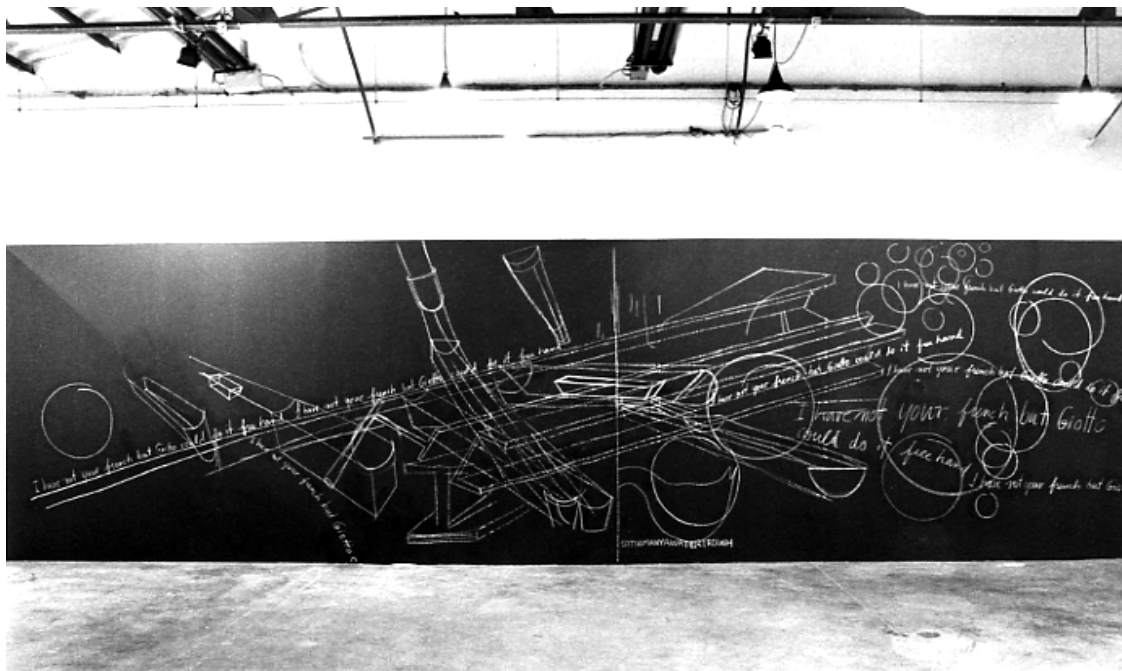
Partly that, but I think of something that confronts artists anywhere: I recall counselor Krespel by A.T.A Hoffman. He was a mad man, and he also was a natural architect. How did he know how to build? He used to shut his eyes and run straight into a wall. Where he bumped he'd cry break a door in here! And the masons breached a door. That's how he erected his house; he bumped-in and knew. In the collision of the accidental with memory/knowledge, something flashes. Yeah, I'm back on it; By Levin's universe there's no such a chance. The blind girl is falling and falling, and we laugh hysterically. By the Romantics – there is a chance, that is, for a one mad enough, or better - a genius. I do not regard myself a romantic, but I feel for the figure of the natural architect, the violent man who knows to build without a plan, who has no pre conceptions, and who builds by way of destruction. It's suicidal but vital. I come from 'The' place of the no-icon. It's a real situation, a lively one too. I have no icon. The only thing that there is, is that a painting comes into being.

It is in the name Tel = mound, ruin, Chai = alive. Strangely enough the same goes for the name 'Tel-Aviv' (aviv = spring). How it all comes, what invites the work, a thought , a place, a drawing, a text?

I don't know.

Is it an idea?

Ideas? No. How can I start by any idea? Please, do not be misled by this conversation. Working is different. I look. Well, I look, I fall in love with something, say a drawing, okay, well – whatever. Then I say let's go for it 12 times. Say this is one possibility.



1993 - LA LAITERIE Strasbourg, France. Nov. SUZANNA'S CITIES
4 walls installation (within the Israeli-Palestinian Show) The green wall, 1 of 4 walls

I would like to go on nagging you. I am afraid we shall not make it through in this interview, and you keep bringing noteworthy thoughts we can not really enter sufficiently. We are not going to discuss your use of blackboards and class chalks, which would have been the natural course from what you have just brought up. Nor shall we discuss the figures of emigrants, of the displaced, and the lot of wretched souls populating so many of your works. Nor shall we discuss the love letters. Let us try to stay with the axis we started with; utopia-symmetry-painting-present time-constraint. You've been dealing with perspective all your artistic life, I think in all your works there's no one correct perspective, it always shambles.

The future picture of utopias is finalized; hence the destruction of any future. Perec said that too. The use that utopists made of perspective, of its transparency indeed, exploits it as a means for a quantitative control of space. My paintings are cloudy in this respect. That's one sense of why they are fragmentary, unbound by any stable formal principle.

So they wish to open.

Yes, because there's no way to fill the missing space of the past, nor the absent space of the future. This too, I think, is Perec's, and I feel it strong. Painting, art in general, can open where utopia seals. It opens because it questions the present. This is its advantage: it both happens and is an occurrence. If one is attentive to these qualities one can deal with painting's inherent demise.

What you say clarifies the presence of the body in the paintings. I can think of a polarity established with regard to the human body in your work: The images of the body, and what you bodily do in the work are contradictory: images of the body appear isolated, segmented, severed; a torso, a hand, a head, float in the painting space. But the marks and traces that you bodily leave in the paintings regard always the complete image of high perfection, like the circle, the rosette, the chalice.

There's a tension I do not seek to resolve: "Let there be order" – this is the grand tribute, much as it is the madness and evil in all that is ideal in ideal plans; at the price of the idea the body is dismissed. To me it means freedom, truly - a genuine comfort, but no less - a real murder. Every singularity is disposed of, and that of the body – first. This is the first and last rule of racism, for instance. The physical occurrence, the 'I', and its historicity, that is its context, this must die. It means that the utopian fantasies I busy myself with, including that of Nordau – Garten Stadt by Alexander Baerwald, offer a place – a home, while downright negating any aspect of any home at all. I dismantle that non-place of Baerwald's plan.

The political analogy you seem to be hinting at is shocking. The title you have often been given, the *Nest Beschmutzer*, has it got to do with this?

Utopias are blinding seductive and dangerous, that all know, but paintings are not needed for such common place 'truth'.

What are they needed for?

For nothing, for their being, for their beauty. Painting may evoke feelings, thoughts.

I am trying to think what kind of a painter you are; your chalk drawings always look fabulous. They are a big painterly event, but like in the case of *Boulevard Central*, they are merely ‘errors’, or miscues as you suggested; the wrong spatial estimations caused by blindfold drawing. What do we admire then, ‘accidents’? Are they only miscues?

In many works you make a use of the chalk-line plumb. This tool is used by house painters or carpenters to draw straight lines. You use it straightforwardly for the same purpose, nothing added.

Well, there’s nothing to add. It’s a perfect tool.

Spirogyra is a small toy matched to a child hand. You have ordered one made to an adult body size, it’s a pillory of sorts, and you turned your entire body into a spirogyra machine. The device made so big foregrounds the *making of an error*, so to speak, it magnifies it along with the appearance of the perfect shape.

This buffoonery is one possible result of the decaying aura of the singular 'artistic' and 'personal' line. In a sense I do today what I did when I danced classical ballet: training, body control, memorizing, and show. But there’s a paradox to it: because we are not machines, each error provides another ‘picture’ of singularity. This is a very different gaze at singularity, other than devising the singularity of your special handwriting, or that of a style...

The word painter evokes so many notions your work opposes, even fights against, do you prefer to be called 'performer' rather than 'painter'?

No, why, what for? I like to think of myself as a marionette of painting. It is valuable, I feel, to acknowledge that you are driven rather than driving. For art making it is a crucial understanding. It’s a leading principle in martial arts too. The schemes I use drive me and *this* is laid bare for the viewer. What matters to me is that it is a passive production devoid of expressive intention. I take no interest in expressive art models (Expressionism). The action reveals the body, on that account it is literally polarized to utopian static totality, to its servitude to the ‘once and for all’.

Is the Tokyo project not some sort of a performance? Please tell more of it. You named it *Double Monster*. What was monstrous about it?

The name refers to the figure in the story that went with the drawings; the story of a double-head creature born after the atomic bomb. I painted 'him' by a squeegee between the two drawings of the chalice.

Is it a real story?

No, it is another invention. Doing the project was monstrous; it was like falling in a trap. Of the two chalices one is made by a simple class-chalk, no measure tools assisted. The exhibit is not so much Uccello's chalice, as it is the trace of an effort to work 'like a machine'; force the hand-made almost straight lines fall in place so that the 54 polygons composing that chalice are successfully joined. Of course it is an absurd 'production line', a 'no painting'. It is even less than to drop the colors into place in Warhol's screens.

And the second, the left chalice, how was it made?



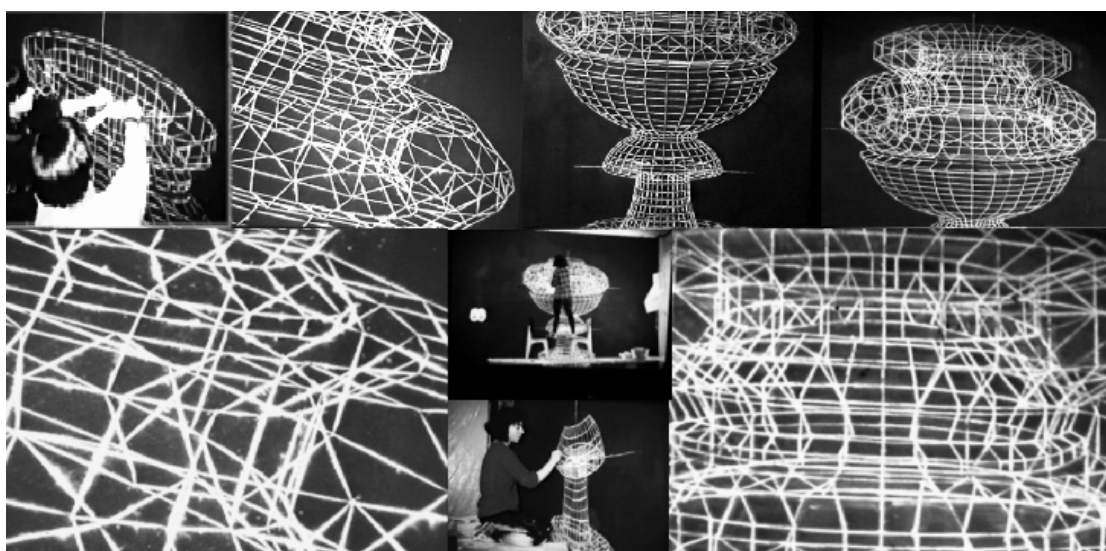
DOUBLE MONSTER

1996 - SAGACHO EXHIBIT SPACE Tokyo, Japan. April
Curator: Director Prof. Kazuko Koike.

4 assistants did it with a chalk-line plumb. My hand was not needed. I think Artists start being interesting when they understand themselves as performers. It's more complicated this way, the roominess of freedom is revealed. In reducing the painterly rhetoric to zero one receives a bonus. I am given things I have never dreamt of. In the past, art production was about this. We've lost it, and reinvented it in modernity. I think the constraint idea reflects that loss.



Double Monster, 1996 oil-tempera, chalk, pigments on canvas(on wall) 1,400 Styrofoam units (on floor) all: 4.91x7.92 cm. floor: 7.92x30.22m. below: work in preparation, Sagacho Exhibit Space, Tokyo



It is intriguing that you compare your procedures with those of classical ballet, and by the same breath with modernistic procedures, two opposites.

Why, yes, classical ballet, kabuki... yes. And Jeet-Kune-Do is the best to learn from.

I know that you admire Bruce Lee. In 1998 the French choreographer Bernardo Monte incorporated you, live drawing in his ballet Ma' Lov'. This was for once an actual performance. Is it not since then that I keep hearing you talking of Bruce Lee?

Lee is a hero of my childhood. But yes-yes, Bernardo calls his ballet theater of gestures. During those months of work we spoke often of Africa, Kazuo Uno, Lee, and Cassius Clay. I was training for my drawing performance and had plenty of time to think. I was watching one of the dancers, Marc Charles Veh of the Ivory Coast, how he was working on his movement. It was not learning exactly, it was something else, and it was inspiring. Things clarify at watching such a phenomenal movement, that's why Bruce Lee. He is a very great modern artist, and a rare theoretician of modernity.

Would you care to elaborate this point?

Well, Jeet-Kune-Do offers a great insight with respect to the meaning of tradition, what should be taken, what should be thrown away. Freedom breaks out through iron discipline. In sealing the experience of the loss of religion Modernism got highly reflective on this issue. It is no accident that artists like Pollock and John Cage were attracted to the East. The Israeli discourse about Modernism being bluntly against history and tradition is particularly foolish. However, often the tactics devised in Modernism are negative, or apologetic. The beauty of Lee's work is that it is devoid of any schism.

For me Lee was the fast nanchuka guy, but I may begin to see what you mean. Nevertheless Modernism is bound with utopian vision; it does celebrate the notion of the *blank page*. But I must ask it once again, how to understand the idea of working under constraint with respect to utopia?

'Constraint' is an Oulipo term. I should have said it earlier. I borrow it because I think it describes an aspect of my work. But that is all. The writers of the *Oulipo* developed by it far more complicated and demanding writing tools. I do not remember what the Minimalists term was, but the idea is pretty close. The perspective model presented by

Uccello's chalice can be read as an expression of the all-seeing-eye eternal pleasure. It is clear that Uccello invented the chalice on paper; it is a geometrical body, he was not looking at some glass. That's how I meet his drawing: an eternal dream of an intelligible, measurable, lucid, applicable and total order. I bow to it, and I corrupt it. The technical problems enfolding from the task *to make* a perfect geometrical body *by* the body is somewhat akin to those encountering a writer who submits himself to write a French novella without the letter 'E'. I compare the notion of trap, and self trapping involved in the action.

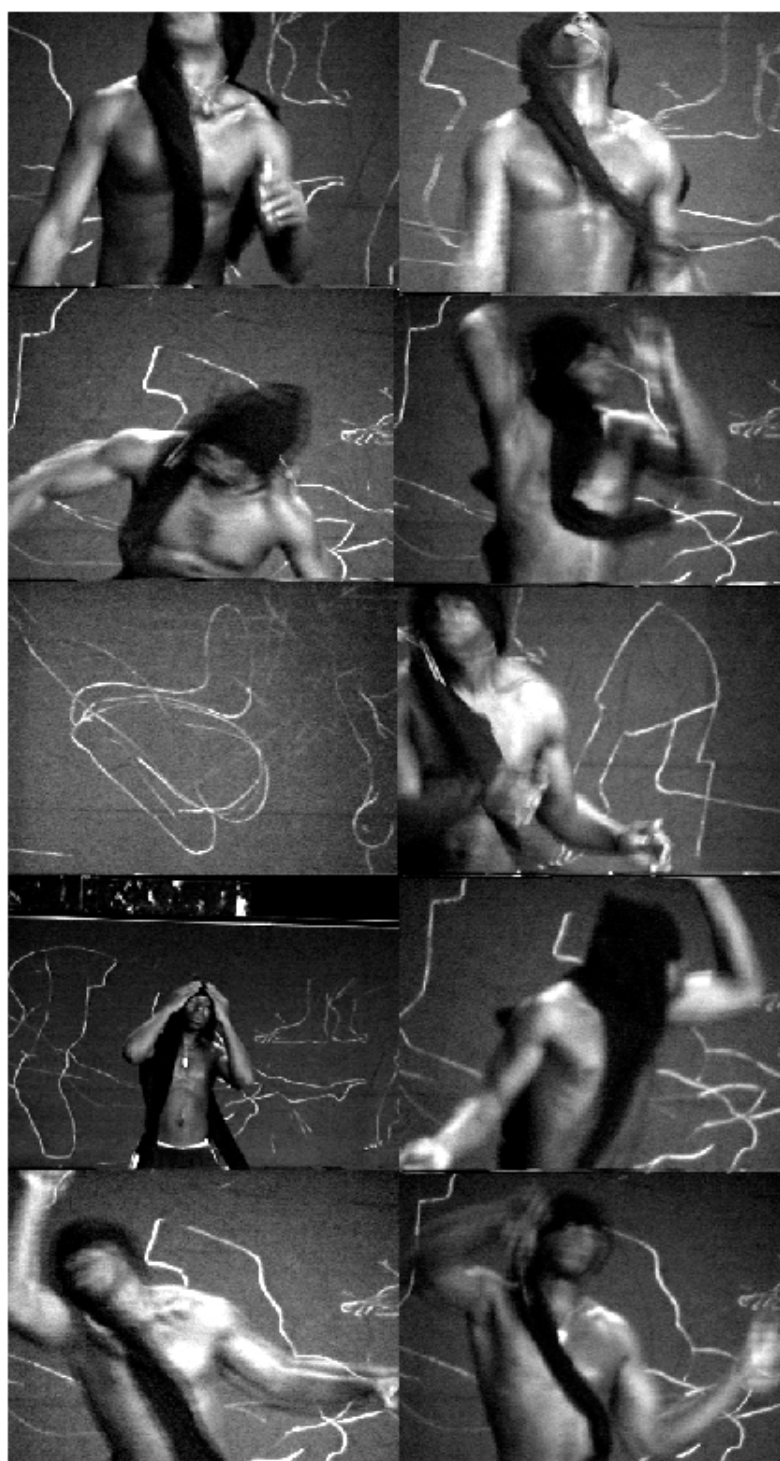
I see no particular *blank page* issue about such activities, to the contrary: they start by the premise of the made. And yet I call it a modern act.

Or rather a post-modern awareness par-excellence, some would say.

I do not know. I look for the means helping me pose a giant, a monumental stoppage: arrest the present time of drawing itself, show it, or 'this', but then: a chalk 'giant'? Puff ! It is something very small after all, tiny... Had Uccello no business with the immeasurable and that ever puzzling unpacked quality of life, I would not have gotten myself stuck with his vase. This is the main issue: painting is cursed because it does not share the might of the ephemeral, the mere flow of life. By its nature painting belongs with halting. My friend, Izak Livne says, that's why it is charged with death, why it is inherently connected with the experience of the sublime, and why it verges with utopia. Similarly Painting is always a planned close, be it a Pollock or a Poussin. The question how to open painting is always an acute one, how to plot and contrive against its unhappy nature; if painting is compelled to stillness, it must be able to create some sort of 'place'. At least it must sense a real opportunity for that which is alive.

Compelling painting to the ephemeral – is this upon what you ground the work of art, your work?

The immanent close of Painting *is* a trouble. Painting covets being, as once Christophe Hamman put it so well when we spoke of Gerhard Richter, that's why it exercises a permanent nostalgia for the present, the ephemeral. I think it answers why is Richter so in love with the visage of the terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, and what is so heart tearing for us about the wretched portrait of that murderess. Evidently we do not identify with terrorists or with terror activities, we identify rather with that which passes over language; the event, the urgency designated by the terror carrier, again, with a sense of *being* that has been so sharply provoked. The painter is jealous of the terrorist. I am strongly connected with this feeling. That also has been the place of *Giotto-Okamoto* in my work: It bluntly says be either 'like him', in Hebrew: o – k'moto, or be 'like his death', in Hebrew: O Kemoto.



'Ma' Lov' 1998 - Marc Charles Veh dancing himself in rehearsal at The Queens, Bronx

Marc Charles Veh and drawings by Getter, in rehearsal on 'Ma' Lov' 1998

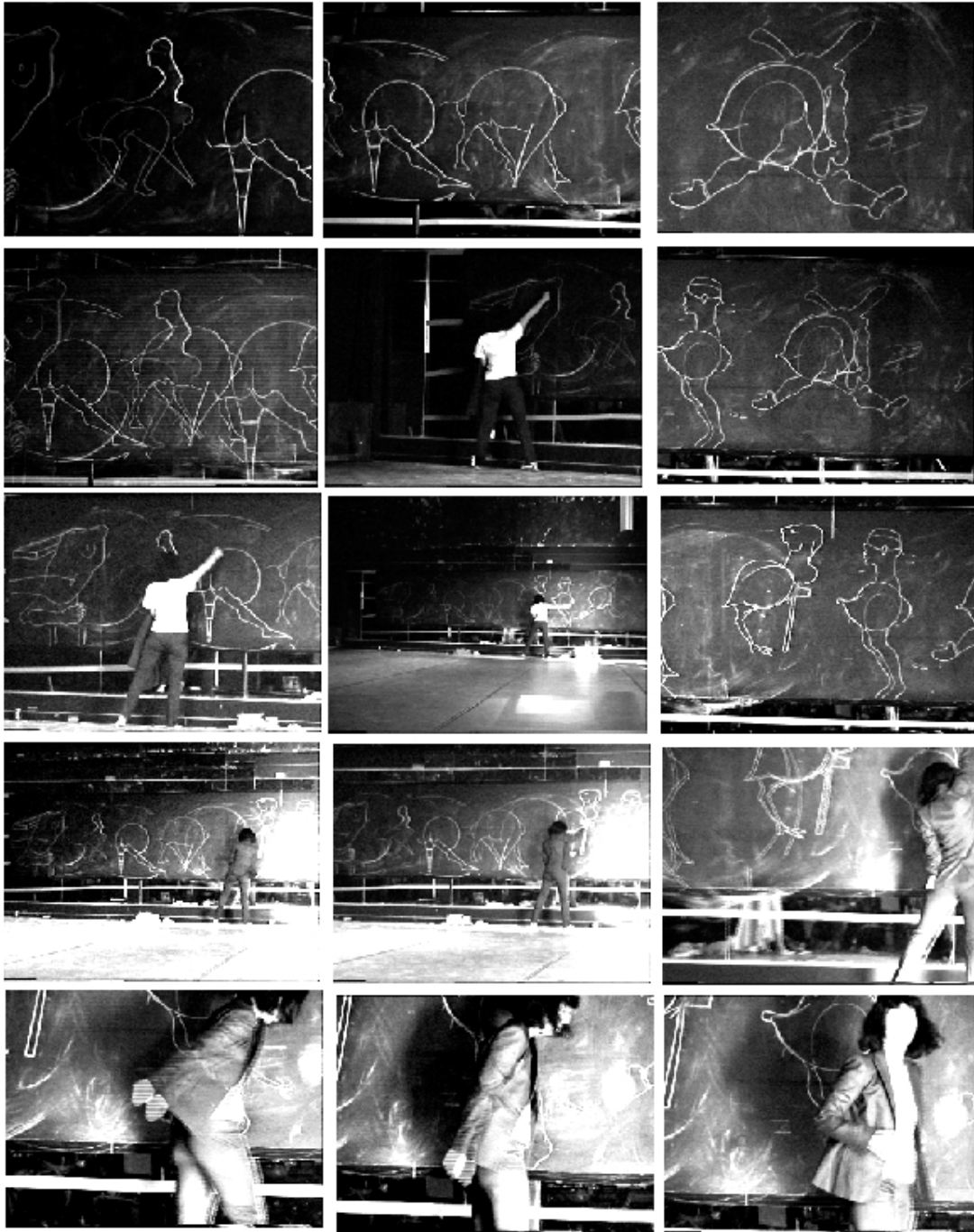
It's all linked now; Levin's blind girl, Hoffmann's Counselor Krespel, and Ulrike Meinhof. I notice that you insistently refer to painting tactics alone, to a notion of action basically.

Yes. The expressive weight of a Form is in the modality of the work. It is what art works can offer. An exposure of the modal logic of a work is an attempt to describe its particular expressive weight – its expressive value. It is quite different than discussing icons, symbols, 'content' or 'meaning'. People talk of an image as though it is a 'thing', as of something that was somewhere outside, and was brought inside the work of art; as if there is Tel-Chai in the world, and then it somehow creeps into the piece. It does not work that way.



Let us talk about art history and try to understand better the instant some call 'the interference', or 'disruption' In your article on Sweet Sweat by Roe Rosen and Justin Frank, you point to a certain tactical kinship between this book and *The Last Days* by Rymond Queneau. To your suggestion both books are invested in the collapse of historicity, as it becomes evident that chronology and causality make no real sense of the reality told in the stories. At the two ends of a century, you say, both writers experience the crash that has only deepened and darkened over the years, revealed in the Queneau text through subordination of lingual material to numerical systems, and in the Rosen-Frank text in the subordination of a Zionist émigré story to porno story rules.

So do you think it is the collapse of historicity, or what, historically, do you think has made the constraint necessary, and what does it enable today?



"Act 101" 1996 - Turner's father in rehearsal at Le Quartz, Brest

Interfered stories result: stories dictated by the machinery of a system, appearing in the reading process nevertheless 'normal', 'realistic'. The Oulipo writers made the big thing of it in the 60's, working to become 'writing machines' instead of 'authors'. Dada and Surrealistic awareness and techniques are, in a sense, behind all of these procedures. It is since then that we all understand that language rules and controls us.

Do you identify the collapse of historicity, (of the historic too) the cause for those “writing machines” and painting “factories”? Does it explain your work as well?

One possible cause. Clearly nobody knows why certain artistic preferences appear at a certain time. But one smells. I mean, when we seek explications that go beyond the

inside art story. That a sense of destination has been lost, and that we have no Ithaca to return to after the journey is done, to recall Di Piero remarks, is, I think, a shared, heavy, global modern experience, felt also in the visual arts. Everyone feels there's no passenger in Richter's' landscapes, for instance.

What's the legacy to be drawn from ready-made, and then, what weight, what implications are there in imported technologies, appropriated, transmuted, converted, recreated, assimilated... these, I think, are the complicated questions.

I'd like to get back once more to the question of the choice of tools: what necessitates a squeegee?

It sets to zero the surface I work on, with each dragging I must start allover again. It works like a de-fertilizer – vish' – gone painting, now go fetch the ghost... In a 'real' painting, say, in a Johns work, the layers 'remember', they accumulate, preserve and condense. It's always high, arch - cultural. My layering does not differ that much from my chalk work – it's about erasures, if that answers too your earlier question with respect to Hammershøi. My squeegee isn't about technology of painting, or a technique, it's some sort of a worthless 'memory' tool. This is the rhetorical act. It belongs with other tools and means constructing my rhetoric.

You mean your form is the set of gestures you create, their interrelationships being the rhetoric of your work rather than this or that application of materials on surfaces, or any specific drawing language, or convention that you put to use in your work?

Yes.

So you suggest that picking or preferring one Hammershøi of the series to others in terms of quality, saying painting number 3 is better than painting number 1, isn't coming closer to your idea?

Right.

Could someone else make them for you?

Yes. Valery Bolotin did one of the boulevards, for instance. He got involved with my process, studied with me the original Baerwald scheme. Here too there was a lot of interpretation work to be invested; one must decide what one sees.

Must be another painter, at least?

Not necessarily. Valery's doing mostly photography.

But an artist hand, anyway?

You've got to have a certain skill, and to understand the task.

I recall the fabulous film of Miriam Cabessa. She documented the manufacture of aluminum lampshades. The worker, a thick Tripolitaner ties himself by a large leather belt to an utterly archaic machine that arches the aluminum plates to his pelvis movement. It looks just what one thinks. When the knob is high enough, he chops its head to make the hole for the socket and continues with the next plate. This little funny film exemplifies brilliantly the questions about manufacturing we speak of.

Bruce Lee says that life has no frontier any more, they consist of permanent relation process. Doing is the issue, he says. Cabessa gazes at the machine-man as Hammershøi looks at the Asiatic Company building. I am attracted by their prosaic stand, the low pathos they keep; Hammershøi is factual and dry, and Cabessa laughs - of course, showing us a man who pulls lamps out of his - well - ass... But in both cases I am made aware of it that values do not float, also they are not carved in any meaningful ruins, but are a constant creation of the present. The laughing artist and the gloomy one, both are serious on that point. The poet Aron Shabtai often spoke of it; the Mythos is worth not as an image bank, but as a creation, a present occurrence.

Your fresh start of wall works begun in 1992, a short while after your acquaintance with the Oulipo writer Harry Mathews. Few years ago you translated for Studio Art Magazine his Singular Pleasures and in the article you added you drew attention to

some parallel procedural aspects in Wharhol's work and in Richter's. In the 70's you studied with Raffi Lavie who among other things was preoccupied with a close notion of manufacturing. Is it possible to say that the acquaintance with Mathews has sharpened or increased your awareness with those issues to have led you eventually to be doing those works that you erase after the show?

Yes. Harry Mathews is probably a writer and a person who marks a turning point in my life. Of course Raffi Lavie taught his particular lesson, but in the 70's my alertness with questions of the contextual, and the historic was far from Lavie. He was not preoccupied with manufacturing and production in any way that interested me. Lavie is the guy to pick one beautiful "Hammershøi", and ask who needs 12? Likely he could have suggested to get rid of the photos too! Of course he is the person who introduced me to Duchamp, but we part in our readings of Duchamp. To my understanding he did not father this path in the Israeli young art. I'd say rather that he postponed understanding of the issues. It happened through many channels, without him.

You keep opposing the structure of action, the form, and the action-image to 'content'. What's so wrong with thematic discussion?

How a work is produced – how it reflects its procedures is for me the essence. Subject matter is interesting as the work's creative device. This is opposite to the idea of the work as a container of meanings. What a decent art reading can show is the internal otherness of a work of art. A work does not represent in the sense that it does not substitute anything. We are encountered too often with readings that are obsessed by pulling of works the longest possible symbolical chains, thus thinking will their wealth or depth be seen. This is the praxis of substitution. Works of art are made silly by it, or altogether redundant. The ontological status of the work is something else. A work is not a collection of dead things that call for a revival through speech. I do not, I can not negate iconography, it goes without saying, surely one can discuss ideas, their history, but the complexity and the wealth of a work resides not in the manner by which it is assimilated and integrated in the history of ideas, but rather in how it manages to dissociate itself and gain its singularity.

Last for this interview: Near your Boulevard Central you attached a small news item. I wish to read it:

The surgeons were shocked: A Watch in the throat of the injured woman. Michal Jacobson (22) was heavily injured in the last bus blast in Jerusalem. During the 11 hours surgery procedure a strange round metal object was found in her throat. The mystery was unfolded later on when the doctors extracted two pointers and the watch mechanism that tore the blood vessels of the injured woman. It appears to

be the watch of one of the passengers. Yesterday
her condition was difficult but steady.

Yedyot Acharonot 24.11.2002

**I am thinking of that nude at the bottom of each boulevard, that enchanting
absurdity in linking between utopia and man – even a woman, even naked.**

The watch blew up in her larynx. “History is a flow that does not move”.

