

On the Noise in the Heart

A Chronicle of an Acquaintance with Hila Lulu Lin*

Tami Katz-Freiman

In one of her books of poetry, *Shririm* (2000), Hila Lulu Lin wrote the following:

"foreign foreignness foreignness / we thought that / was that / that's the code / for all this remoteness / the art / the noise in the heart." The words "foreign foreignness foreignness" alongside "this remoteness", "the art / the noise in the heart" – were introduced by the artist as a code, which I now wish to adopt in order to discuss her work. Thus, in a few words, I shall introduce her now: foreign foreignness foreignness – a rare breed, alien corn, an orphan in Israeli art.

I'm not from here / just a mere / guest

Back in 1992, when she first exhibited her sculptural objects at Bograshov Gallery, Tel Aviv, it was already clear that such art had never been seen here before. These were not sculptures in the conventional sense. They were objects, weird objects, unsettling crosses between organic and synthetic, concrete and fictional, mundane and esoteric, pleasing and agonizing. The enigmatic eroticism of these objects was morbid; they appeared as though they originated in a nightmare, luring and repelling at the same time. The Lulu Linian aesthetic, which later evolved in more physical directions, already materialized in these early objects, as alienated, sterile, bionic, and threatening. These enigmatic objects resonated not even the slightest echo of

the frugal art prevalent in Israeli art in previous decades. Devoid of all local influence, of political or ideological reality, they were simply there, shining in the aura of their non-belonging. Looking back at the history of Israeli art, no foremothers or forefathers from whom they ostensibly derived could be found. Even back then it already seemed as though Hila Lulu Lin, with her unique-sounding name, had landed here from another planet – an alien with rare qualities.

I met her in 1993, shortly before the exhibition "Antipathos" featured at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, which dealt with aspects of black humor, irony and cynicism in young Israeli art. Lin was presented there in a quintessential post-modern context that offered countless alternatives for authenticity; a discursive field which I had dubbed a "sterile bubble replete with defenses." David Lynch's films inspired the show ("a delirious mixture of cynicism, irony and camp, which penetrates the darkest corners of our soul."). With reference to Hila Lulu Lin's surprising objects (eye-bearing teaspoons, black crows standing on transparent bowls gathering atop synthetic fur) in the Lynchian context, I wrote: "The touch is neutralized completely, insofar as it has proved to be destructive, hurting and painful. The subject is reduced to a pure receptive gaze, an indifferent gaze that observes the world from without. The objects [...] seem to be aware of the fact that the painful dimension is inherent in the contact with reality, even on the most microscopic level. Thus, an alternative reality must be created, a new skin must be transplanted, with the knowledge that any transgression, any encroachment upon the inner world, cuts – so to speak – the living flesh, touches open nerve centers." At the time

it was convenient to read the escape from the horror into the trifle, as a generational syndrome, "a new kind of disillusionment... an intricate version of a defense mechanism, a means of denial or blunting the edge of the horrifying stimulations of reality, whereinto these artists were born."¹

A year later we had another interaction, in proximity with the exhibition "Meta-Sex 94: Identity, Body and Sexuality" which I co-curated with anthropologist, Dr. Tamar El-Or, at the Ein Harod Museum of Art. Lin presented *No More Tears*, an iconic video piece, later to become a Lulu Linian trademark. At the time I dubbed her aesthetic "vomit aesthetic," and called her act involving the egg-yolk "anorectic acrobatics." In the spirit of the entire exhibition, the work's interpretation was channeled in feminist directions: "The work documents the endless journey of a yolk, that crawls slowly along her arms, climbs to the shoulder, enters the mouth, emitted fully, reverts to rolling on the palm of her hand, and so on and so forth. An never-ending loop of reception and emission, between pleasure and strangulation, trickery that requires an exceptional control over the body, complete concentration (lest it burst in her mouth); not to swallow, nor to vomit. Lulu Lin ... attempts to unravel the familiar links between woman-food-body-flesh-matter, to take control anything that is likely to penetrate. [...] The body is perceived here as an infinite, fluid and evasive territory, that allows another body (the egg) to slide over its surface without actual penetration."²

In researching for the catalogue essay, the question of identity and self definition came up repeatedly in affinity with the themes addressed by the

exhibition (gender, body, sexuality). The more we tried to decode – and naturally categorize and label – the more we were pushed back. Lin refused to yield to either this or that interpretation, and was quoted in the catalogue thus: "All my life I move between different existential options [...] I don't belong to any group, nothing is self-evident. I insist on my right for self definition and mobility, even in a place where inborn, given identities are so strict and obvious to others. For me, nothing is obvious, I don't believe there can be such thing as collective liberty; the possibility to move, to sail in a spiritual, mental, sexual and physical space is individual..."³

More than twelve years have passed since that interview, and it seems as though the rebellious spirit, the insistence on the right of flexible definition, the freedom to sail and oscillate between countless existential options – all these have only become more consolidated, refined and developed, forming an intrinsic grammar that has accompanied Lin throughout her artistic career. From the minutest discrete object through the poems, drawings, photographs and video pieces, to the later, more intricate productions – the grand installations, such as *A Drop of Milk*, the multimedia performance held at the Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theater (2002), or *Mole* at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2005) – all her bodies of work convey a unique personal aesthetic, that has long left an imprint on Israeli art, and has already spawned a next generation. The Lulu Linian syntax is forever intricate and winding, and never obeys the familiar codes of language. The narratives marked in it always remain open, ambiguous, enigmatic, and shattered to countless sub-stories, deconstructed like the fonts she has invented, devoid of beginning,

middle and end. Even today, in retrospect, having closely followed her art for many years, it is hard to force interpretation on Lin's images. As in the shrouding of night-webs after a dream, with every attempt to penetrate and decipher them, something else becomes sealed and blocked.

In this essay I would like to tie the unique Lulu Linian language with three discursive fields as keys whereby I will set out to cross her work's barrier of refusal safely. Instead of proposing interpretation, I will thus offer contexts. The first key is the notion of metamorphosis (transformation from human to animal), the second is the cyborg model (the bionic person), and the third discursive field, which naturally derives from the former two, involves the creation of a new language from the surrealist syntax.

My eyes are snails so slender / diving in the chamber

Both the term "metamorphosis" and the cyborg model pertain to hybrids. The former refers to a transformation from man to animal, and the latter – to a cross between man and machine. In 1995, when I lived in Miami, Hila Lulu Lin brought me a book. It was the debut novel by French writer, Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, about a young woman working in a beauty parlor who, in a nightmarish process, gradually metamorphoses into a pig. The fictive story takes place close to the turn of the millennium, in a ruined, deserted, hunger-stricken Paris, dominated by a ridiculous police regime. Later it struck me that I was given this book as a type of code, a reference. Against the backdrop of a reality which appears more and more like a

nightmare, the writer described, in the first person, in uncanny detail blending pleasure and horror, the transformations undergone by her body and soul in the process of her metamorphosis into a sow. She probes her sensuality changing before her very eyes, her passion for new tastes and smells, and the new modes of contact she develops with humans and animals.

Pig Tales belongs to the genre of metamorphosis stories, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, or David Cronenberg's *The Fly*. At the core of these stories lies the anxiety of turning into something else, of becoming a foreign body within oneself, of losing human form, becoming a monster. Most conspicuous in the novel is the attempt to describe the bodily experience and female sexuality from within, as it were. At some point, once the girl's first strange symptoms start appearing (such as the uncontrollable passion to eat the flowers she is given by customers), as she becomes accustomed to the strange fattening and the new pace of her body, comes the metamorphic climax:

My eyes now seemed smaller to me in the mirror, closer together than before, and without powder my nose took on a slightly piggy look that was a total disaster. [...] The worst was the hair. It was growing on my legs, even on my back: long, thin hairs, tough and translucent. [...] [M]y nails had grown quite hard and more curved than before. My teeth were strong, too. [...] It was as though my vitals – guts, tripes, bowels – were turning inside out like a glove. [...] I was naked on the tile floor. [...] When I finally managed to move, it seemed to tear something in me, as though exerting my will required terrific effort from both my brain and my body. [...] I wound up on all fours. [...] I was so upset by all this that I had to look at myself in the mirror [...] I saw my poor

body, saw how damaged it was. [...] And there, in the mirror, was what I dreaded seeing [...] The teat over my right breast had turned into a real dug, and there were three other blotches on the front of my body: one above my left breast and two others, perfectly parallel, just below my real nipples. I counted and recounted, there was no mistake: that made six all right, including three fully formed breasts..."⁴

In Lin's work too, the body is formulated, as part of the discourse of sexuality and eroticism, through a rhetoric combining horror, distress, and repulsion. This is true of both her images and her texts, some of which are incorporated in the works, while others stand by themselves. Even in the later, more environmental works, such as *Mole*, which are initially read in an architectural context, the prime site remains the body, wherefrom the work's major existential arena is derived. The experience of the body is reported from within, as it were, as a painful, threatening experience of fragmented, non-organic, non-homogenous identity. In this spirit one may read many motifs recurring in the works in countless variations: the eye and the egg, alongside body parts and other orifices: the mouth, nostrils, ears, navel, lips, fingers, and belly. As the novel's heroine says, there is no surplus of inner harmony there. It is always a partial, fragmented, manipulated, scarred, pierced, duplicated, cloned, distorted body; an exposed sexuality of internal organs, an assembly of independent, evasive, fluid, predatory entities. And so are the actions: swallowing pearls, rolling an egg-yolk on her tongue, chewing wool, shaving off her eyebrows, bloodletting, or washing her hands in glue – these are always eccentric, radical actions that convey the horror of disruption, harsh feelings regarding a collapse of the protective barrier between exterior

and interior. In later works, such as *Help*, *Hevanti – I Understood*, or *Mole*, Lin enacted a bionic figure: in *Help* (Tel Aviv, 2002) her naked body is wrapped in vinyl straps, as she walks toward the high sea, determinedly, on her way to the horizon; in *Hevanti – I Understood* (Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek, 2002), she walks in the paths of the kibbutz, where she and her father were born, in the figure of "the monster from the kibbutz," with a layer of latex filled with stones covering her body like a second skin; in *Mole* she is curled up on a metal bed, packed inside a black lycra leotard with holes, exposing flesh which becomes a confessional surface.

The female figure emerging from the totality of her works is thus a dynamic, detached, bionic figure floating in a fluid, boundless mental and spiritual space. The sense conveyed by the body particles, its settings, its prostheses and the actions they perform, is one of discontent: discontent with the body, discontent with the state of being inside a body. This fluid state of collapse of interior and exterior may be associated with the Kristevan notion of "abjection" which in recent years has become a key concept in feminist theory. In its light one may also fathom the use of bodily fluids, such as milk and blood, alongside the recurring engagement with egg yolk and egg white, with skin-like latex sheets, and salivary effects of various lacquers.

Hairs grow backward in my throat

Various types of hybridizations and crosses populate Lulu Lin's work – ones she performs with her body before the camera, others which she processes through computer simulations, and yet others which she creates via words in

her verse. Virtually every one of her images and poetic lines spawns a different hybrid composition. Thus, for example, she writes: "ultra-thin skin grows inside the mouth," or "my eyes are snails so slender / diving in the chamber / their bodies halt crawling on a cold wall / dense flesh breathing lightly," or "look look how dirt cumulates in the scratches of the heart / near-invisible cracks herald a collapse," or "the body's walls all are cushioned with thick dark velvet / within the interior of the shell so very soft." All these x-ray sentences convey the horror of internal disruption, but also an inkling of enchantment which I would like to explore.

For this I will require the second key – the cyborg model – a sophisticated, more current and more fictive stage of metamorphosis – the mutant cross between human and machine. Originating in science fiction, this image has become naturalized in recent years in the body politic and feminist discourse, as a metaphor fusing a human body with mechanical organs, denoting absolute otherness. Donna Haraway, who formulated the Cyborg Manifesto, maintains that being the absolute other, implies multiplicity, boundlessness, creativity, and mainly – liberation from authenticity and naturalness, notions that have automatically been associated with femininity and have subordinated generations of women to their wombs. Hi-tech culture, virtual reality, and the cloning principle attracted the feminist discourse as they challenged the traditional duality and promised liberation from the reproductive act. The cyborg aesthetics specializes in spare parts, in particles, prostheses, substitutes, and aids. After the catastrophe, says Haraway, only the cyborgs will know how to put all the pieces back together.¹⁵

The cyborg context, with its prostheses and crosses, like the context of metamorphosis and shifting the functions of familiar objects, call for discussion of the surrealist object, by which Lin seems to have been greatly inspired. From among the avant-garde movements of the 20th century, it was Surrealism that turned to dark realms of black humor, irony and absurd. From the post-World War I darkness rose fantastical humor replete with paradoxes, intertwined with macabre cruelty. The Surrealist mindset was characterized by the blurring of identities, metamorphoses, and apocalyptic mutations. The postmodern era rediscovered Surrealism, and several key exhibitions were dedicated to it during the 1990s in Europe and the US. The relevance of Surrealism in 1990s art was manifested in the work of many male artists, including Mike Kelly and Matthew Barney, as well as female artists, such as Louis Bourgeois, Janine Antoni, Kiki Smith, Rebecca Horn, Jana Sterbak, Pipilotti Rist, Sylvie Fleury, and Ann Hamilton – artists with whom Lulu Lin has much in common.

The Personal is Political – and Vice Versa

In recent years, and more specifically toward her work *A Drop of Milk* (2002), the bubble of preoccupation with the intimate private body was breached, and materials from the public sphere started infiltrating Hila Lulu Lin's idiosyncratic imagery. "For the first time in my work," she stated "I strive to create a palpable tension between materials drawn from a physical, public, Israeli reality and intimate, personal, physical realms." In that assertion Lin embodied her act of line-crossing not only in substituting the visual language of plastic

art with a performative-theatrical language, but also in expanding her field of vision from the realm of the enigmatic, intimate, private physicality to the realms of the conflictual, biting reality of the Middle Eastern exterior.

But this was not the first time. It had already happened in 1996, when Lin crossed the line from the private to the public in a radical, acute manner in her triptych *Cold Blood: A Poem in Three Parts* (1996), created especially for the exhibition "Desert Cliché: Israel Now, Local Images" (Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, Florida, and other museums in the US, 1996-1998). The work was created a moment before the Rabin assassination, upon Benjamin Netanyahu's rise to power in 1996. The sky of the Middle East, over Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, like the artist's eyes, was exposed, bloody meat. In *A Drop of Milk* the elusive fabric of events concocted by Lin transmitted equally harsh apocalyptic sensations. It was a spectacular vision blending club music, acrobatics, erotic personal texts, Sisyphean choreography, Scout-camp aesthetics, fire inscription ceremonies, and Zionist patriotic songs filled with sacrifice and pathos.

Ever since, it seems that the feminist dictum, "The personal is political, and the political is personal," is highly congruent with the nature of her work: on the one hand, images whose affinity with the body is distinctive, such as the burning heart, the stretching skin, the whitening pupils, or the bleeding fingers; on the other, themes and images with high conductivity of a bleeding public sphere. Concurrent with *A Drop of Milk*, the exhibition "Crying in Eight Minutes" was also featured in 2002 at Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel

Aviv. The fence that divides the private from the public collapsed here altogether. A soundtrack of hackneyed Hebrew songs accompanied her works in that exhibition, infusing the gallery with Israeli politics surprisingly and movingly. Thus, in her video *Satiated Hebrew Blood*, Lin's eyes were seen whitening to the point of blindness, as the words of the refrain which echoed in the background acquired an uncanny meaning, which reinforced the stupidity inherent in the never-ending bloodshed. Thus, also in the video *My Beauty*, Yossi Banai's* sensual song by the same name played in the background, against the backdrop of the artist's bleeding fingers, as the words "We have known fire, we have known sorrow," acquired a heart-rending symbolical meaning. The self-licking of blood made the pain concrete, full, and devoid of cynicism. The feeling that there is no longer a division between the private body and the public sphere also underlay the video *I am the Man* in that same exhibition, where a stretched piece of body was featured, which seemed to have been smelted into an asphalt surface, with Yehoram Gaon's** famous song ("I see you, distant one / like a princess captive in a tower") playing in the background. One of the most powerful images in the exhibition was a fire inscription of a burning heart, which appeared in the video screening. The title of the work, *Call Me, You Bastard*, ridiculed the romantic pathos of the burning heart. Vis-à-vis all the other works, the burning heart acquired meanings that deviated from the romantic context. It was no longer clear whether it is burning from passion or consumed by despair. The discontent with the body, with the state of being embodied, fused with the discontent and despair with the situation, with existence in this part of the world.

Both "Crying in Eight Minutes" and *A Drop of Milk* served as foundations for the concept of the more disciplined, minimalist installation/performance – *Mole*, which Lin staged at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The accurate blend of sentiment and estrangement, the reflection of great vulnerability, of exposed nerves, of erupting emotional turmoil, and the horror of the outside penetrating in, to the point of total consumption – all these were fully refined in *Mole*, reaching ultimate exhaustion. The total spatial thinking blended with performative elements pertaining to disciplining and control of the visitors' movement in the space. The various function-holders: the "Wordkeeper," "Entrancekeeper," "The Woman with the Holes," "Holekeeper, Mother," and "Exitkeeper" – marked, guided, and outlined the visitors' active participation. A sequence of past tense, first person verbs: 'I Stole,' 'I Lied,' 'I Forgave,' 'I Loved,' 'I Understood,' 'I Ended,' 'I Fell,' 'I Fled' – functioned as a key for the entire work, guiding the viewer in its twists and turns. Here too, the settings were likewise hybrid: a bench whose back contains sunflower seed shells, walls made of bread crusts, an asphalt road in the darkness of night, egg shells floating in shallow water, expanses of internally-lit red feathers, woolen army blankets, a frozen heart of milk melting between the thighs, pillars of bones, bowls of salt, floor "slough" in the form of latex sheets suspended from the ceiling, steel lockers filled with salt, embedding sounds, and, of course, the various stops – all these, alongside other materials conveying feelings and volumes, came together to form a painful statement about coercion and the denial of freedom.

Broken words mumble words

"Sometimes I am a huntress," Lin once said, "capturing snakes, words, ready-mades, objects, accessories, situations, and conversations with people. I mix all these to construct a language which I use. Through that language I convey ideas and feelings." Indeed, Lin's language of fantastical compositions is created from poetical transformations, whereby the familiar becomes alien. Mundane objects are estranged, generating an atmosphere with radical conductivity of physical and bodily sensations – beauty, horror, and alarm. This is also true of her innovative use of language and the font based on the handwriting she invented "so as not to close any word, so that the words will be able to connect among themselves and create sequences amongst themselves, additional pockets of meaning" – all these enable her, she says, "to regard language from its backside as well, to perceive the characters and the texts as layers of consciousness and sub-consciousness."

Many feminist thinkers have discussed the female option of subversive and challenging use of a language to be spoken outside the phallus-centered male language, a language that will not reflect the woman in a silent mirror as an object for the male subject, but rather as a speaker speaking out of the female body. This is true of psychoanalyst and theorist, Luce Irigaray, in her essay *This Sex which is Not One* (1977), as well as of Julia Kristeva and other feminist scholars who introduced an alternative to the binary, linear logic inherent in the male language. In contrast to a language based on hierarchy and oppositions, they maintained that the female experience, as manifested in the female body, is one of closeness which includes the other without

appropriating him. They proposed a female discursive realm that will strip language of a single, cohesive meaning, and open up an opportunity for expression of the female experience.

Lin's images and texts indeed offer a different discursive realm – open, non-committed and transgressive. The female experience is conveyed in them as a pre-lingual, basic physical-bodily experience. The link between the images, materials, narrative fragments, and word fragments is based on doubling, hybridization, cloning, reverberation and repetition. It seems that through the combination of plastic art with poetic writing and her unique handwriting, Lin has succeeded in creating a sensuous, chaotic, fluid, boundless language which enables her to move between the intermediate states; between pleasure and pain, expressivity and kitsch, beauty and decoration, nature and culture, real and artificial, realistic and artistic. This language enables her to create a place all her own, and express her passion, her body, and her thought via a sequence of images in a seemingly constant flow in bi-directional routes from the conscious to the subconscious.

Notes

* This essay is based on conversations with the artist conducted over the years and on texts I wrote about her in the past in the context of solo and group exhibitions in which she participated in Israel and in the United States.

1. See Tami Katz Freiman, *Antipathos: Black Humor, Irony and Cynicism in Contemporary Israeli Art*, exh. cat., trans.: Aya Breuer (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1993), pp. 52, 48.

2. See. Tami Katz-Freiman, *Meta-Sex 94: Identity, Body and Sexuality*, exh. cat. (Ein Harod: Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, 1994), pp. 135-134.

3. Tamar El-Or, "From Universal and Binary to Local and Unified: The Feminist Thinking in Anthropology Pays Studio Visits," *ibid*, p. 93.
4. Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, trans.: Linda Coverdale (New York: The New Press, 1996), pp. 42-49.
5. Donna J. Haraway, "Cyborgs and Symbionts, Living Together in the New World Order," *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. xi-xx.