

Foreword

Tami Katz-Freiman

The car began to cough and choke, it bounced and stopped. We came out, four women - three of the artists participating in the exhibition and myself, the curator. We were on our way back from the Ein Harod Museum of Art, midway, just past Wadi Ara. Darkness was growing. We lifted the engine cover and once more were compelled to admit that the "constructivist relief" uncovered in front of our eyes is like a riddle told. Were it not for the men, who stopped their car and within seconds located the source of the problem, we could not have gone on. We could not ignore the grotesque coincidence that put the feminist theory and all those academic texts we read to the test of reality. We thought of history, that kept us away from the car engine, of the progress we made towards it despite all, and of the long way still ahead of us. Can this story serve to uphold an anti-feminist argument? Is this an essential scene or is it merely a coincidental episode? Without taking an evaluative stand concerning these questions, I use this trivial anecdote to shift our point of view to the wide scope of concerns dealt with by feminist discourse, to its relevance and intricate vitality.

The feminist discourse offers reflection from the point of view of those occupying the margins (the "other"); it attempts to divert the dominant stream to new directions. In this sense, it is no more than an additional analytic tool for looking at the world. Feminist reading has integrated successfully in the general discourse of post-modernism, offering a larger frame of reference. The rational-hierarchic thinking, which characterized the modern era, collapsed along with the absolute utopian and ideological belief systems. The feminine voice offered the sobering world a different rationale, containing a variety of multi-faceted, experiential alternatives, distinct from the male hegemonic rationale. It is hard to ignore the contribution of the feminist discourse to a discussion of contemporary culture. I refer mainly to complex attitudes concerning sexuality, stemming from a renewed feminist study of psychoanalytical and linguistic theories, a process which took place during the

last decade. As mentioned above, this discourse produced an abundance of artistic products focusing on identity, body and sexuality (1), which provide the motive for the current exhibition.

Such introduction might create the wrong impression, as though a radical, world reforming manifesto underlies the exhibition. This is the place to make it clear this is not the case. It is not the militant feminism of the seventies, nor the standard of revolt; and there is no-one left who wishes to hoist the flag of revolution. The words I wrote in the catalogue for *Antipathos* (July 1993) are still valid: "It is not a revolt, because there is no reality worthy of revolting against, and no real alternative worthy of constituting [...] it seems to me that the dissolution of dichotomies and the endless transformations of point into counter-point are unique to our *fin-de-siecle*, implied by the state of things and not conceived, at least not in real time, as a revolt or an ideology." (2) And yet, the current exhibition incorporates a great deal of defiance, implicit as well as explicit, and a considerable measure of provocation, too. I see it as a point of departure for raising questions that undermine the existing order, as a proposal for new points of view - multi-focal, flexible and mobile - corresponding to those prevailing in the field of cultural theory and criticism for some years now.

Meta-Sex is not concerned with a historical review, nor with a systematic spreading of the feminist work in the field of plastic art in Israel. Its aim is to set as convenient a grouping as possible of female and male artists who participate in the current scene and to spread the plethora of divergent possibilities composing the frame, a seam-line that makes it possible to point out one of the trends that sprang up in the last few years in Israeli art, as elsewhere: an occupation with questions of sexuality and identity, while challenging the dogmatic-didactic definitions. It is not, therefore, an exhibition which exposes one stylistic common denominator or another. The connection is a thematic one, that grew out of the engagement with those questions and out of the intensities stemming from those works. I refer to that personal, stimulating and vivid, ironic and provoking, painful, shocking, funny and crazy,

lively and wild something - that is not meant to moralize, nor pretends to offer a ideological revolution.

The exhibition deals with subjects that relate, both directly and indirectly, to sexual identity (female and male):challenging the borders of gender, examining the connection between body and sexuality, questions concerning the representation of qualities associated with femininity (seduction, beauty, decoration, sexuality, nourishing, organicity, naturalness, fragility), appropriation of pornographic discourses, investigation of the accepted relations between woman-mother, woman-nature, woman-home, woman-dirt, woman-man and defiance of stereotypes concerning women's work with material (transparency, tenderness, delicacy etc.). These are questions which engage the artists taking part in the exhibition and to a great extent, correspond to central issues in the contemporary feminist discourse within the field of cultural criticism.

An examination of the world of young artists reveals a generation which internalized the consequences of the battle of the sexes that took place in the sixties and seventies. Questions then occupying the center of the social arena are now considered self-evident and there is an intuitive recognition that gender is indeed relevant to the work of art. The sexual identity, the sexual roles, the personal, social or moral-conceptual expectations, all become a matter of negotiation. Nothing is obvious or clear; it is as though the cards are reshuffled and with them open up new opportunities, no longer based on a dichotomic classification according to gender. There is no attempt to propose solutions, there is a harsh, impudent, cynical, spiritual and painful occupation with the diversity of opportunities. The erasure of the dualist distinction between male and female raises options of trans-sexuality, androgyny and a variety of intermediate states, thus undermining other accepted dualistic divisions - such as body-spirit, private-public, nature-culture. This situation, characterized by lack of boundaries, is no longer perceived as threatening; for most artists this is the starting point.

Naturally, dealing with matters of identity establishes the body as a central object, both as a biological organism disintegrating into parts, a demanding, physical matter, that can be experimented on and metamorphosed, and as a spiritual home. The body is considered the last front of ideological battles, involving its use and representation, and not much is left of it now that the battle is over. It is hard to detect here a whole body, standing homogeneous in space. The body seems to be opened up, divided into numerous elusive and fluid entities, no longer responsive to any confining or dividing pattern. Such representation of the body challenges centuries of women's representation by men, as objects on display, whose anatomical details were blotted, and at times completely erased. Boundaries once clear-cut – insideout side, body-soul, sexuality-spirituality - have collapsed into the twilight zone of intermediate states, into the very heart of the kingdom of cross breeding, into the restricted regions of perversion and taboo. Sexuality bursts forth from there, as though a disembodied, independent entity; "sexuality of internal organs, exposed in a world wanting contrast between internal and external. Sexuality without eroticism, sexuality that does not take part in the signifying games, that has lost touch with a self bearing identity and unity".⁽³⁾ Most women artists in this exhibition make use of the body and its devices as a kind of internal reflection, at times ironic, at times painfully sarcastic, thereby re-examining modes of representing femininity. The irony is created at the very instant they adopt the mastering-male view and shatter it to pieces.

A review of the inventory of images found in the exhibition yields a great treasure: body parts, sexual implements, personal articles, domestic objects, items connected with hygiene, purification, eating and secretion, kitchenware, mothers, women-soldiers, brides, feeding instruments, biological mutations. Often the images are accompanied by ambiguous word-play, texts, instructions for use. At first glance, these images reveal an explicit connection to gender. Some of the women-artists even use ironically, through manipulation of representation, what has been often defined as "female practices" - the various handicrafts: embroidery, weaving, needle work. Moreover, the occupation with sexuality as connected directly to femininity may in and of itself raise the question: Are these not the familiar

representational systems, is this not a fixed match? The answer presents itself through the strategies taken in the works: a manipulative usage, cynicism and irony. In other words, in order to reject the beaten binary division of gender, there is no other choice but to use it. In order to say something about the exploitation of women in pornography, one has to appropriate the language of porn.

The adoption of the "powerful" masculine stand and the "weak" feminine one is intended to expose the ideological problematics concealed in the disintegration of binary models for representation, classification and manipulation: feminine-masculine, I-Other, object-subject, high-low, private-public, physical-mental, material-spiritual. The use of stereotypes is designed only to demolish them, to destroy patterns that reproduce the existing order. Like other critical discourses, this discourse attempts to uncover mystifications, whether stemming from the discourse of mastery (the masculine ordering) or from the feminist discourse, that likewise lapsed into creating new mystifications (woman-mother-fulfillment-wholeness). In this sense, it can be said that the current exhibition "attacks" both targets: On the one hand, it undermines expressions of male mastery, yet at the same time, it rejects the ostracizing and offending orthodox feminism; that which perpetuates normative thinking modes (woman-victim). For that reason, I do not see *Meta-Sex* as "women's exhibition" in the militant sense, despite the fact that it is clearly dominated by women.

Four years ago, in the summer of 1990, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art held the exhibition *Feminine Presence* (curator: Ellen Ginton). The four years that passed conceal a deep generation gap, which marks a real change with regard to sexuality and gender within the artistic context. The exhibition *Feminine Presence* undertook to locate the beginning of the "feminist era" in Israeli art. In retrospect, it seems that a paradoxical move took place here, one which demonstrated the problematics of the feminine speech within the local artistic context. What the curator exhibited is in fact a chronicle of a denial foretold, often accompanied by an apologetic tone, both on part of the women-artists and on her part. She analyzed well the history of the denial-

discourse and showed how it corresponds to the early stage of Feminism - the phase of mimicking man and talking in his terms (Simone De Beauvoir).

Dganit Berest, for example, wrote in the exhibition catalogue: "First, I knew that feminine identity or sexual identity had not occupied me at all in my works[...] an interpretation which would try to distill a common component, a "feminine" one, from the works of the various artists represented in this exhibition would seem to me forced, even offensive." (4). Tamar Getter was quoted in the same context as having said the determined sentence: "Just as there is no male and female mathematics, so there is no masculine and feminine art." (5). It seems to me that both would have agreed with Virginia Woolf, who wrote in 1929: "It is fatal for a woman to lay [in her work] the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in anyway to speak consciously as a woman." (6). The bottom line uttered by the curator was that there is no point in looking for formal, behavioral or mental common denominator, since "these artists have nothing in common, apart from the fact that they are women, and Israeli women artists." (7). These words imply that art is a universal-autonomous field, operating beyond sexuality and has nothing to do with gender. And yet, despite all, *Feminine Presence* marks a beginning. It was an important exhibition, if only for exposing the meaningful power held by women in Israeli art since the seventies to these days. It can be claimed that *Feminine Presence* made *Meta-Sex* possible, by opening a legitimate channel of discussion, putting the matter on the agenda and stimulating discussion.

And yet, unlike *Feminine Presence*, the current exhibition does attempt to point out a common-denominator, perhaps not formal, but certainly behavioral-mental, which reflects the changes that occurred in the last years in feminist thought. A certain normality can be detected, a maturation. Israeli art, that refrained from showing its sexual colour, is beginning to discard itself of the embarrassment. The art of the seventies (in Israel and elsewhere) was characterized by repression and denial of sexuality (being conceptual, intellectual art). The eighties stressed sexuality. This is one of the reasons that the gap between the participants in *Meta-Sex* and the women-artists of *Feminine Presence* is much greater than the four years separating them,

since it conceals at least twenty years. Most of the women artists that exhibited in 1990 (with the exception of the younger ones) were a product of the seventies, years in which they grew and matured as artists. In their art, and moreover, in their statements as expressed in the catalogue, they internalized the denial of the significance of gender to the work of art. The young artists of *Meta-Sex*, on the other hand, internalized the flourishing of sexuality characterizing the late eighties - for them, feminism ceased to be an object for battle; and in the entanglement of direction seeking and identity formation and crystallization, there may be taking place an emancipation from an existential state of mind within "arrested consciousness". As far as these artists are concerned, it is possible to talk about art in feminine or masculine terms, as it is possible to deal openly with the sexual aspects present in the work.

Beyond the generation gap and the differences in attitude, I wish to stress also a principal difference in the artistic language. Of the seventeen women-artists that participated in the exhibition *Feminine Presence* - only three exhibited sculpture, and painting was clearly the dominant medium. In the current exhibition, most artists make use of technologies related to mass media - photography, video, installation and object. Only few exhibit paintings, and even then, they evade the traditional definition, being a part of an installation (Anat Betzer-Shapira), or being disguised as photography (Nir Hod, Merilue Levin). This tendency can be explained in terms of fashion or in what is called *zeitgeist*. It may also be argued for the fatigue of the painting act as a leading discipline. But, one can offer another explanation, that takes into account the exclusion of women from the privileged sphere of painting. For the craft of picture making - an act that is in fact a translation of the world into its material being - was all through art history the heritage of men; these pictures functioned as "porthole to the safe", where "the visually desired" was deposited. Among the various treasures lying in this safe were representations of women (8). Facing this problematic, women-artist focused, since the beginning of the seventies (in Europe and the U.S.), on alternative expression modes to replace painting - photography, installation, earth works and performances. Most women artists creating today have no desire to continue in the tradition of picture making. On the contrary - through

strategies aimed to destroy the representational systems, they attempt to reduce as much as possible the translation gap and bring forward "the thing itself".

To sum up, a word on the limitations of interpretation. Almost in every reading there is a communication failure: a commentary text, by its essence, attempts to extricate meanings, yet at the same time, threatens to delimit the works, to enclose them with a field of meanings and close them off to other readings. In an exhibition that deals with melting borders, which offers the option of mobility and fluidity - it seems to me all the more dangerous. I have no doubt that levels of meaning may be drawn from the works of the artists exhibited in the current exhibition, that go beyond or deviate from the reading offered here. In order to avoid constituting an ordering, a sequential and authoritative meaning, I chose to write on each of the artists separately, without setting up an ideological unity or some sort of pattern. In order to expand the point of view beyond the prevailing interpretation of art discourse and to avoid falling into the trap of perceiving the works as an autonomous, contextless product, I turned to the anthropologist Tamar El-Or, to supply the social context and anchor the works and attitudes of the artists in the feminist discourse of the social sciences. Coming from another discipline, and thus enjoying the obvious advantages inherent in the stand of a "layman", El-Or joined the curatorial adventure and extracted her "story" from the meetings with the artists in the studio. Her text offers a different reading, complementary and cross-referenced with the interpretative text suggested by myself. The decision to tie the exhibition to the feminist discourse of the social sciences, in a way that expands the discussion to sociological-cultural contexts, seems to me vital, especially when facing the appropriation of the terminology of the psychoanalytic discourse and its prevalence in the reading of contemporary art.

- 1 In this context, one should mention two exhibitions held in the Whitney Museum of American Art: *Dirt & Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine*, Summer 1992; *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, Summer 1993. During the last year only, a variety of exhibitions concerned with body and sexuality were held throughout the world. I will mention only the three versions of the exhibition *Bad Girls* held in London (ICA), New York (The New Museum of Contemporary Art) and Los Angeles (University Art Gallery, California). As for Israel, the exhibition *The Full Part of the Sign* was held in Borochov Studio's Gallery (November 1993, curator: Ilana Tenenbaum), offering a critical opinion regarding the modes of production and representation of the female self. Lately, it was joined by the issue "Female Time" of the historical quarterly *Zmanim*, winter 1993 and "The Dirty Issue" of the art magazine *Studio*, no. 51, March 1994.
- 2 See my essay in the catalogue *Antipathos: Black Humor, Irony and Cynicism in Contemporary Israeli Art*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, July 1993, p. 50 (translated by Aya Breuer).
- 3 Ariella Azoulay, taken from her lecture in the conference *Women in Israeli Society* ("Between a Penguin and a Nun", November 29th, 1993).
- 4 Dganit Berest, *Feminine Presence: Israeli Women Artists in the Seventies and Eighties*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Summer 1990, pp. 167-168 (translated by Richard Flantz).
- 5 Tamar Getter, quoted in the catalogue *Feminine Presence* (p. 184) from an article by Sara Breitberg-Semel "Women Art in Israel", published in *Ariel* in 1979.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), London 1945, pp. 102-103.
- 7 Ellen Ginton, *Feminine Presence: Israeli Women Artists in the Seventies and Eighties*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Summer 1990, p. 179 (translated by Richard Flantz).
- 8 Lea Dovev, "The Eye and the Body: Malaise in the Feminist Aesthetics", *Zmanim* No. 46-47, Winter 1993, p. 93. Dovev refers to the fifth chapter in John Berger's book, dealing with the oil painting medium. John Berger (with others) *Ways of Seeing*, London 1974, pp. 83-112.

"In itself changed by sexual liberation, the body has been reduced to a division of surfaces, a proliferation of multiple objects wherein its finitude, its desirable representation, its seduction is lost. It is a metastatic body, a fractal body which can no longer hope for resurrection."

Jean Baudrillard, "Rituals of Transparency", 1987.

Meta-Sex 94: Identity, Body and Sexuality

Tami Katz-Freiman

Woman's inability to escape her body is dictated by her sexuality, derived from her existence as "matter". For centuries, men were assigned the Apollonian qualities - activity, intellect and spirituality - while women were considered Dionysian - tied to the corporeal existence, imprisoned in the flesh of their bodies, "prisoners of the womb" (1). Alongside this distinction settled other dichotomic distinctions, no less overused: nature-culture, soul-body, material-spirit. Simone de Beauvoir, who represents one of the early phases of the feminist discourse, adopted the dichotomic point of departure and argued that in order to obtain liberty and equality women must first liberate themselves of bodily processes, especially those connected with childbirth, which she perceived as the root of their subjection to biology: "Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a stock-pile of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children proud of their young, straight bodies and makes young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument" (2). De Beauvoir's criticism on motherhood aroused a strong opposition. To contemporary eyes, it is impossible not to see it as "based on her strict distinction between nature and culture, and, concomitantly, between body and mind. For her, nature is something to be transcended by culture. It is the realm where human beings cannot be free subjects. Mind and culture are male [...], [while] passivity and flesh are female..." (3). The identification of nature (and woman) as a threatening element, to be combatted with the aid of spiritual-logical tools, so as to establish in it order, to control and overcome it,

became one of the focal points of the contemporary feminist discourse, that attempts to deny its power.

Miriam Cabessa chose to situate in the display space allotted to her in Ein Harod one of the moving attractions of "Beit Sturman", the neighboring museum - a showcase displaying shuddering errors of nature: two-headed calf, a lamb with sixlegs, an egg within an egg, chicks with three and four legs and a diversity of other mutations - creations of nature's cruelest imagination. Some of the exhibits are conserved in formalin, others have been stuffed by a taxidermist. The accompanying inscriptions convey the clinical information in cold scientific language: "Displayed in this cabinet are anomalous animals, that underwent change and metamorphosis during the embryonic development." The jewel in the crown is the two-headed calf: "A Siamese twin calf, born in Kfar Yehezkel, who was delivered by Caesarean section and suffocated during the operation". The practice of dislocation - transferring an item from one display location (a museum of nature) to another (a museum of art) - renders a cynical, amusing and cruel shift, that undermines the validity of taxonomical categories in general. The representation of nature's failure in its documentary-scientific sense is given an expanded meaning within the new feminist context. The failure is taken to the twilight zone of the various intermediate states, a meaning that can be read both as an offer of protection and as reaction to the marking of the woman as "other" - inferior, lustful and unequivocally non spiritual. (4)

The miserable creatures behind the Sturman museum glass cabinet resemble that "collection of sticky materials"; they, too, render laughter and confusion being anomalous, miscarriages of nature, biological mutations. Displaying them in a cultural context (foreign to them) exposes a wide field of meanings, that can be read as undermining of the social order of things, that classifies, divides, defines and institutionalizes the various androgynous possibilities. The error of nature seems to stain the texture of the social order. Anything orderless, deviating from the norm, distorted, anomalous, or infected by a shade of irrationality is considered threatening to the ordered way of life, and

is banished to the dark kingdom of hybrids, perpetuated through a mechanism of differentiation and division, and at best, even announced as a curiosity.

One of the basic assumptions posed by the feminist discourse in the field of contemporary culture is that woman's social presence differs from that of man's, at least with regard to representation. Lea Dovev, who recently reviewed the contributions and weaknesses of this suspicious discourse, pointed out that the traditional research of art history is paved with texts, that "confiscated the body of its sexuality and removed the social and psychological rhetorics, attached to it as a differentiated object. It became a detail within representation systems", (5) and in this process, the nakedness of the body, the erotic charge carried in its nudity, its sexual identity and its modes of presentation within a context of social discourse, were submerged and erased. (6) The features common to most pictures depicting naked women were formulated by Dovev more or less in the following manner: The morphology of the body had been disconnected from its anatomy and fixed in formulas: anatomical details were blurred, displaced and erased (the body weight, bones, sinews and muscles, nipples, and pubic hair). "The posture is often quite impossible, or extremely awkward; yet, it looks not only convincing, but also effortless. [...] Representations where the naked woman directs her gaze to the spectator are rare, a fact that nearly suffices to define them as a separate group, constantly read as a realization of an expressly rebellious and/or sexual representational politics." (7)

Within this context, it may be that the harshest and most subversive representation of the female body, at least in the current exhibition, occurs in the video work of **Anat Zahor** (*Urination*). In a display space set apart, inside an intimate, dark and purified niche resembling a bare ascetic cell, a place of seclusion, a monitor displays a video film that documents a woman urinating. The woman, shown in the natural and comfortable position of kneeling in nature, is photographed from behind, while the point of view is focused on or restricted to the lower part of her body only, namely her rough buttocks, her parted legs and the shower of urine excreted from her body, penetrating the earth and being absorbed in it. The screening of the film in a loop engenders

a sense of endless urination - giving, absorbing and harmonious merger with nature - an act of emptying, embedding within it a total liberation or release; or as the artist calls it, "a virginal urination". In exposing the intimate act, in peeping into the most discrete, taboo parts of the female representation, Zahor is undermining centuries of canonical female representation that invites ownership. The meditative atmosphere, reinforced by the sound track, which combines the sound of gushing water with the singing of nuns, aims to make the act of urination a sacred one, thereby turning the insignificant into worthy, and elevating that which was repressed and banished from the boundaries of representation for so many years.

The outlines of the female body were shallowed here into a microscopic close-up of bodily flesh, with all its openings and pores. This theme relates to a central term in the feminist theory – *Abjection* - which was coined by the theoretician and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (8) and refers to the rejected, the despised. Underlying this term is the body as a symbolic system of outside and inside, ruled by a set of prohibitions, constituting the symbolic order: What is clean and what is dirty, what is orderly and what is despised, what is approved and what is rejected, what remains within the system and what is secreted and banished from it. In this context, dirt is perceived as an interruption within the symbolic order, as a violation of the bodily integrity, threatening to melt the relaxing partition between the inside of the body (the hypodermic occurrence, the quivering tissues of the flesh) and its external casing (the skin, covering the flesh as a thin and fragile coating). This process of "abjection" - rejection, estrangement, disposal or removal of waste - takes place primarily on the basic level of bodily tissues: blood, excretions and secretions, pus, urine, saliva, feces, vomit, breast milk, and all other liquids, permeating the body, whose fluidity threatens to blur the borders defining the subject. However, from the basic level of bodily tissues, Kristeva expands the principle of abjection to different levels of the social order. Dirt has always represented the marginal, that which exists in the margins of the dominant culture, and in any case belongs to the domestic sphere of the woman (the house work, the impurity of sex, the sensuality of darkness, hygiene, excretions and menstruation). From here we can broaden the scope to show

how dirt was expelled from the aesthetics too (the ashtrays in still lifes have been empty), how the artistic labor were itself perceived as a form of cleaning, ordering. The term *Object Art* derives from this context; it refers to art which deals with a body that ceased to be an object of passion and became *object* - a despised object, that is exposed in its most base, contemptible aspects. The introduction of body excretions as a legitimate concern in art, as well as the focus on the act of urinating (a stereotype of an exclusive male experience), undermine the partition, which regulates and supervises the functioning of the body; yet, at the same time, it ironically mocks the idea of the "liberated woman".

A different kind of intimate act is performed by **Hila Lulu Lin** in a video work placed in a yellow-walled room. 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. A 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 shifts the dialogue from eye to body, attempts to unravel the familiar links between woman-foodbody-flesh-matter, to take control over anything that is likely to penetrate. She lays out in front of us an almost microscopic documentation of a sisyphian, auto-erotic act, without relief. An act which is performed for its own sake, in between a game and a ritual - anorectic acrobatics. The body is perceived here as infinite, fluid and evasive territory, that allows another body (the egg) to slide over its surface without actual penetration. The choice of a yolk- a feminine-organic element, living and quivering, that crawls on the skin - brings to mind erotic cinematic scenes, exhibiting a similar use of organic materials (honey, chocolate); yet, there someone is always quick to lick them up. Here, dark sensuality stands in its own right, playing its private game before the camera. The occupation with the body in contexts of food also corresponds with the chocolate and soap castings of Janine Antoni (*Lick and Lather*, 1993), as well as sharing a common denominator with the flesh works of the artist Jana Sterbak.

The video work stands in the middle of a room installation titled "No More Tears". Walls coloured in yolk-yellow stab the eye, a tired fan hangs from the ceiling, a big stone, wrapped round and coated with yellowish lacquer, hangs on a hook, threatening to fall down on the head of the spectator in the most irritating point in the room. Details of a black body are photographed in Polaroid, placed in square tin boxes- bare black flesh, wrapped in white cotton wool. Long hairs cast in polyester swim in a lump of yellowish mucosa, completing the enigmatic game of paradoxes. "Vomit aesthetic" at its best: a presentation of ethnographical remnants of almost fictional culture - surrealist objects, quasi organic, quasi synthetic, that have seen better days - that passion seems to have frozen in them, the vibration of life sterilized, and now they convey restlessness, repulsion, seduction and suppression.

The perception of the body as battlefield to be fought, the negotiation over its borders in light of the distinction between "impure" and "pure", the explicit occupation with unprocessed raw material, that has been removed from the field of representation as dirty leftovers - all these find expression in the wide range of possibilities found also in the works of **Ariane Littman-Cohen**, **Anat Betzer-Shapira**, **Ganit Mayslits-Kassif** and **Meira Shemesh**. Each in her own way attempts to undermine the social prohibitions by adopting the object of abjection - dirt itself, the evidence material that served to define femininity - and turning it into the "subject" of the work. **Ariane Littman-Cohen** exhibits here a sterilizer - a closed space, whose inner walls are covered with mirrors - an implement designed to purge and sterilize, to neutralize the virus threatening to contaminate the body. The domestic look of the sterilization instrument (used mainly in hairdressing salons) alludes to seemingly innocent territory (kitchen), and this is the first impression evoked by the personal articles inserted in it: a photograph depicting a baby (the artist) curled in her mother's arms, cosmetic products for preventing premature wrinkles, a reproduction of Manet's *The Fifer* (1866), a photograph of a street in Prague, sweets, condoms and dried flowers. And yet, as soon as the original function of the instrument is identified, the contexts become binding: the articles are read as laboratory-samples of outer space, exposed to ultraviolet lighting, to a sterilizing and purifying mechanism, that neutralizes them of the "real", of

childhood memories and remnants of life stuck to them. From here, the path is paved for reading the entire work as metaphor of survival, demanding partition between inside and outside - life in a bubble as allegory.

The French theoretician Jean Baudrillard developed the bubble metaphor in his essay "Rituals of Transparency" (9). He compared our lives to the life of the sick boy in the United States, who lived for years in a sterile, medical surroundings, that protected his fragile body by technology of artificial immunization; a kind of vacuum, totally preventing the penetration of germs. His mother caressed him through a sterile sleeve, built into a glass tent, her hands wrapped in rubber gloves; he grew-up in an ex-territorial atmosphere, under the constant observation of science, threatened by his mother's kiss. According to Baudrillard, we are all bubble children, we are all afraid of touch, our brains and bodies have already become this sanitized sphere, a transparent envelope in which we seek refuge in vain. The collapse of the personal immune system derives, according to him, from the irreversible tendency called "progress" (artificial intelligence, synthesizing of life, virtual sex, etc.), that pushes the body and spirit into relinquishing the natural defenses and replacing them with technical, artifacts. According to Baudrillard, "the extermination of mankind begins with the extermination of germs". For, "man, with his humors, his passions, his laugh, his genitalia and his secretions, is nothing more than a filthy little germ disturbing the universe of transparency". (10)

Such sterile and sophisticated world triggers art that seeks to redefine traditional terms concerning body, sexuality and personal identity. The occupation with body and identity, as manifested in the exhibition, is part of a greater tendency characterizing a large part of the contemporary artistic practice throughout the world. In this context, it is enough to mention Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Charles Ray, Jana Sterbak, Rosmarie Trockel, Cindy Sherman, Rebecca Horn, Annette Messager and Sophie Calle. The occupation with the female body is only a part of a general discourse, striving to fracture accepted body-definitions, muddle ordered categories, destroy ideological norms and stereotypes, decompose the subject and break through

its boundaries, as set by society. Many of these norms are reproduced and fabricated over and over again in the world of advertising and media. The second work by Ariane Littman-Cohen deals with representations of such "modeling of femininity" (11); sexist representations making use of the female body as object for sales promotion. She exhibits a pair of parted legs belonging to a display window manikin, and between them a window inviting a peep (an allusion to Duchamp). Posing the body in such a manner (by a woman-artist) invites an invading look, externalizes the possessiveness of the look and thus decreases its power. The appropriation of the language of porn to the world of advertising undergoes a shift, that decomposes it and exposes the powerfulness and tyranny of the male gaze.

Anat Betzer-Shapira adopts the stereotypical image of feminine functions and mocks it from within, subverts it from below, through the language of painting itself, like a double agent. In the series of paintings, *Sisters* (1992-1993) exhibited here separately, she uses stereotypes of children paintings, drawn from psychology books, pictures depicting the family institution, motherly and fatherly functions from a child's point of view. She processed these childish representational stereotypes of "mummy in the kitchen", enlarging them into "bad" and "dirty" child-like-paintings and added identifying inscriptions in careless handwriting: SISTER WASHING DISHES/ SISTER DIGGING IN THE DIRT/ SISTER COOKING, etc. The irony results from the juxtaposition of pictorial language, corresponding with the lyrical tradition of male-"standard"-Israeli-painting and a bothersome subject, that has never been treated before in Israeli painting. The defiance of the cultural refinement of the act of painting, that for years has been constructed of "sensitive" brush strokes, may be read here as subversive appropriation of the male language. For, one of the prevalent questions in the feminist discourse is, whether the visual language that aspires to describe "female" experience should be new and distinguished from the language encoded in order to represent "male" experience, and how should this unique feminine discourse, this *distinguished* feminine paradigm endeavoring to undermine the basic principles of male order, striving to confront the phallic language saturating western culture, look like.

In the catalogue for the exhibition *Feminine Presence: Israeli Women Artists in the Seventies and Eighties*, Nurit David attempted to demonstrate how the male modernist position set a picture which is a "woman": "Standing flat in the presence of the painter, created from the movements of his phallic brush, contained in a frame, autonomous, non verbal, physical, sensual, intuitive, passive, seductive in its very presence, intended for the eye to gaze on." (12) By the same token, it may be argued that Betzer-Shapira's paintings indeed perform a subversive appropriation of the male language, but negate it from within, through the image and the text. These function here through identification and solidarity, as though wishing to sanctify the despised works of all the anonymous "sisters" sharing the same fate, wherever they be. These paintings may recall to mind the drawings of the American artist Sue Williams - spontaneous and quick drawings, combined with bold texts, confronting harsh subjects such as sexual abuse, rape and child abuse. It is not the fervor of early feminism, but a personal challenge, aimed at destroying from within dichotomic categories of "forbidden" and "allowed", even in the feminist discourse itself.

The room installation situated by Betzer-Shapira further complicates the intricate texture of mutual relations between the act of painting and the female stereotype: door mats cover the floor of the display area and the walls are covered with tapestries, created in a process of mechanic weaving according to original paintings of fresh pure brides; tapestries which utterly disrupt the machoistic relations between the brush stroke and the canvas. The juxtaposition of brides' tapestries (meticulously reconstructing the lyrical nature of the original paintings) and the dirt and mud usually permeating the door mats render a double meaning: on the one hand, this move can be read as the ultimate sacrifice of painting on the altar of life - no more "autonomous" painting, "contained in a frame" and "intended for the looking eye", but a reconstructed, mechanic painting, woven at a carpet factory. On the other hand, the flattening dimension also works in the opposite direction: the bulky and rugged door mats, belonging naturally at the threshold, outside the domestic territory, enter the display area with all due respect, become pictorial

and acquire a metaphoric meaning. The standard inscriptions impressed in them (Come in, Hello, Welcome) promise happiness, inviting you in, into the warmth of home, tempting you softly and intimately to nestle against a muddy mat.

Once the functioning of the objects is shifted, the romantic narrative shatters to pieces: the object of universal yearning - the wedding night ideal - becomes a farce. Everything blends. Likewise, the entire work can be interpreted as a metaphor to the critical question concerning the marking of territories, as challenge to the traditional ideology of "home". What remains outside and what enters? What is clean and what is dirty? Are brides really as pure and fresh as they are represented to be? And, in general, what meaning is assigned to dirt in constituting the relations of the symbolic order? An exhibition held recently (Summer 1992) in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (*Dirt & Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine*) presented an attempt to investigate processes of social construction and the constitution of the definition of femininity in terms of modes for treating dirt. The basic assumption underlying such attempt is that dirt is a by product of an act of ordering, that involves a rejection of inappropriate elements. That is to say, where there is dirt there is method and order. In other words, dirt is defined as matter out of place. Therefore, the different modes in which women negotiated with dirt may account for hierarchic distinctions within the definition of femininity (dirt as a status symbol) and point to symbolic connections between dirt and body. Hence, by the type of contact established with dirt, whether physical or mediated by "cleaning agents", one can learn a great deal about different models of femininity. In short, when all meals are cooked, all plates and cups rinsed, the washing folded and the tiles washed, we are left with the history of femininity in the form of a huge catalogue of cleaning agents. (13)

An occupation with gender while negotiating with the sexual identity and its link to working processes occurs also in the works of **Ganit Mayslits-Kassif**, an Israeli architect who lived and worked in London for the past six years. In her work she endeavors to express her "feminine voice" through the

architectural project. She perceives her architectural and academic work as laboratory, where the categorical seams between architecture and body, order and randomness, cleanness and dirt, become unraveled. The body is studied in relation to the architectural envelope and the process of building is perceived as an act of enveloping the body. Architecture is the object of her study, a politically, critically and conceptually intricate discipline, whose borders she seeks to re-examine. Counter to established working methods customary in architecture offices, she offers an open research, granting legitimacy to any medium. The encounter between gender and architecture enables her to apply critical thinking, similar to that prevailing for some years now with regard to plastic art.

Architecture is considered a discipline with clear masculine tradition. Therefore, it is only natural that the feminist criticism, which aims to subvert the tyranny of big ideas and myths, pretending to "universality" and manifesting an exclusively male world view, attacked the hegemony of modernist architecture as if it were great treasure. Values considered patriarchal - rationality, order, efficiency, linearity, functionality, clarity and mechanization - as well as the fact that modernist architecture drew on the hegemony of the straight line and the right angle, and believed in the purification and removal of any ornament and decoration ("an impressive, true mastery game" (14)), set it as convenient target for the arrows of feminist criticism. Ganit Mayslits Kassif strives to apply these critical theories in the architectural practice, thus violate the tranquility of the ordered, clean architectural space. She seeks to rethink the materiality of our everyday, constructed environment through sensual motivation, that enjoys that which is considered "forbidden" and "dirty". She does so by inserting that which is perceived as "feminine", that which has constantly been excluded from the traditional architectural discourse, directly into her architectural palette. She achieves this by combining "edible" elements, doubtful whether organic or synthetic (milk, rice, sweets), or sensual (feathers, latex, nipples, rubber), with standard building components (wall, door, handle, window, column).

In Ein Harod, Mayslits-Kassif chose to carry on with the series *Building Components* and treat the unique display space of the museum (well-known for its architecture from the forties) in a manner that subverts the unique architectural hygiene. The walls of the room were manipulated with "staining" techniques, with inferior materials that originate from the sanitary sphere - milky latex bubbles, quivering upon touch, seem to bruise the whiteness of the walls and elasticize the rough lines of the "white cube". The window onlooking the valley was "blocked" - stuffed with feathers - an act which is considered nearly criminal in modernist terms.

The act of intervention in the details of the architectural envelope was extended to the "interior" of the architectural territory in the joint work of **Galit Eilat and Max Friedmann**. They deviated from the confines of the museum and situated their work in a wooden storage shack located in the deeps of the adjacent wood - the little house from the fairy-tales, possibly hunters cottage, possibly refuge of delights in nature (*Lady Chatterley*) - becomes here a bedroom, the fortress of romance, the symbol of intimacy: two adjoined single beds, a table, shelves, a chair, an open device for hanging cloths, an armchair, reproductions on the walls and a window overlooking the landscape - functional items, expected to be found in a habitable room. The walls of the shack - mahagoni or cherry-like wooden beams - decorated by a repeated pattern, wallpaper-like. The floor is covered with a wall-to-wall synthetic tiger-like fur carpet. A path of road signs links the shack to the museum. The shack as a surprise, a bonus to those who took the trouble to come to Ein Harod, a promise for happiness.

A closer look will reveal focal points of subversion and malaise: a reproduction of a medieval painting depicting tortured women, bedclothes (pillows and sheets) decorated with a printed pattern comprised of images of body in motion, a kind of endless contact band, disintegrating the classical representation of the body (decorative nude). Seemingly marginal details, exposing mechanisms of restraint and denial of sexuality, both in high and in low culture. Situating the bedroom - an explicitly domestic territory - within a natural wood (a domesticated remnant of the fairytales woods), outside the

museum, in the periphery of the Beit She'an Valley, invokes reflections concerning the collapse of the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, about the conscious gap opened here between the display space and the house. The fictional isolation site is opened to the public, that can roam and learn about its fictional lodgers, similar to the rooms in history museums, that preserve the picture of the collective past through the daily life of the individual (the king's bedroom, the servants room).

The question of class intensifies the more we go into details: one of the protruding components in the room is the open cloth hanging device, a wardrobe without a wardrobe. Different articles of clothing, some for man and some for woman (part of them taken from the kibbutz cloths-store) are hanged on a hanger, telling the story of their owner. The garment - the basic element of fashion, one of the clear status-symbols - is raised here to the level of art-object. The garment is also the attribute by which we are supposed to identify the difference between the sexes. A close look reveals photographic prints - bodily impressions on clothing items, that undermine the possibility to extricate the identifying code: underwear with an upper body image, full slip with an image of masculine body and a diversity of inversions and identity shifts, that subvert the norms confirming the stability of the social order. The "unisex" regime acquires here an ironic expression: androgynous garments that destroy the texture of dual-relations between masculine and feminine and fully erase the distinction between them. The transvestite as an allegory, as a social idea concerning the merger of the sexes and perhaps even as subversive attribute to a reconciliation between the different parts of the spirit.

Virginia Woolf talked about "the great mind model", the androgynous spirit which makes art interesting ("that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided." (15)) Susan Sontag defined the basic attraction to the androgynous by saying that the most attractive thing in a manly man is something feminine, just as the most attractive thing in a feminine woman is something masculine (16) . In connection with his discussion of love, Jacques Lacan mentioned Plato's *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes relates the myth of androgynous,

recounting the yearning for a double of the other sex, of the cravings for the love of a creature that will resemble us in all aspects. (Lacan, by the way, also used the metaphor of the rustic shack in the mountains to depict a man and a woman isolated in nature). According to Plato, "in the first place there were three sexes, not, as with us, two, male and female; the third partook of the nature of both others and has vanished, though its name survives. The hermaphrodite was a distinct sex in form as well as in name, with the characteristics of both male and female, but now the name alone remains [...] 'Man's original body having been thus cut in two, each half yearned for the half from which it had been severed. When they met they threw arms around one another and embraced, in their longing to grow together again.'" (17) Max Friedmann and Galit Eilat attempt to formulate through the image of the transvestite the ideal which disrupts language and permits a way out of the tangled labyrinth of male and female. The rhetorics of bisexuality allows them a reversal of masculine and feminine. That which was hidden underneath the skirt - is printed here on the front. Underwear becomes "overwear" and vice versa. Male and female take one dynamic form. The duality is set here as an independent value, challenging cultural conventions that distinguish between male and female, between spirit and matter, between delighting and tormenting.

The transvestite motif is present in the bedroom even in less obvious ways: in the reversal of materials (the synthetic, domesticated fur of the wild tiger), in the imitation and in the simulation (the mahagoni-like wooden beams, the wallpaper-like decoration), in the mobility between ends, in the rococo atmosphere alluded to. The stylized velvet armchair, the decorative model on the naked wooden beams, the decorations, the colorfulness and the texture that invites touch - all these are qualities of "wealth", reminding the splendour of the rococo era - abounding magnificence, grace, jolly decadent and capricious magic. The historian Arnold Hauser characterizes the rococo style as a highly professional decorative art, piquant, delicate and lively, that replaced the massive baroque with its realistic pompousness. (18)

The allusion to an explicitly social art, responding to the tastes of the middle class, is not accidental. The appropriation of the characteristics of the rococo style and their privileging over any other specific kind of ideological-active-militant art corresponds to the kind of questions the current exhibition seeks to evoke, questions that seem to have been planted here in the inner most chambers, in the intimate place where the mental and physical dialogue (or conflict) between the sexes is manifested. "The epicureanism of the rococo stands, with its sensualism and aestheticism, between the ceremonial style of the baroque and the emotionalism of the pre-romantic movement", claims Hauser. In order to describe the lives conducted by the people of those classes, Hauser uses the term "sweetness of life" and states: "The 'sweetness of life' is, of course, taken as meaning the sweetness of women; they are, as in every epicurean culture, the most popular pastime. Love has lost both its 'healthy impulsiveness and its dramatic passionateness; it has become sophisticated, amusing, docile, a habit where it used to be a passion. There is a universal and constant desire to see pictures of the nude; it now becomes the favorite subject of the plastic arts. Wherever one looks, whether at the frescoes in state apartments, the gobelins of *salons*, the paintings in boudoirs, the engravings in books, the porcelain groups and bronze figures on mantelpieces, everywhere one sees naked women, swelling thighs and hips, uncovered breasts, arms and legs folded in embraces, women with men and women with women, in countless variations and endless repetitions. [...] The rococo is, in fact, an erotic art intended for rich and blase epicureans – a means of intensifying the capacity for enjoyment, where nature has set limits to it. [...] It is] the natural attitude of a frivolous, tired and passive society, which turns to art for pleasure and rest. The rococo actually represents the final phase in a culture of taste, in which the principle of beauty still holds unrestricted sway, the last style in which 'beautiful' and 'artistic' are synonymous." (19) Hauser created here a natural connection between erotic-art for the bored and a trivialization ad absurdum of a delighting art, exhausted and passive.

Meira Shemesh too makes her way from the trivial and operates in a concept of a "room". Her fictional room includes three wall-works: the dress, the

sideboard and the chandelier. A domestic environment disintegrating to its components, a puzzle that throws the spectator to private realms of reminiscence, woven together into a local collective state of being. Hanging on one of the walls is a silvery evening dress, its splendour dimmed with the years (*My Mother's Dress*), an empty dress on a hanger, concealing the memory of the body once occupying it, with its smell, its touch and the secret passions experienced. The empty garment always represents the body that has been plucked from it, like absent-present, and in this context it is impossible not to recall the dress collection (*The History of Dresses*, 1990-1991) of Annette Messenger, one of the most interesting feminist artists working today in Europe, who exhibited long rows of showcases, containing different models of dresses made of silk, cotton, gauze and muslin, remnants of a lost female culture, like an inventory of the dresses of all times, a timeworn storehouse of fashion. Meira Shemesh is content with one model only, an elegant dress from the fifties, her mother's dress, but unlike Messenger who functions as archivist, Shemesh destroys her ready-made and manipulates it: she increases the deep décolleté, adds a necklace, stuffs the breasts with balls, thus violating the archaeological (authentic) dimension that clung to the dress as a nostalgic remnant and making it grotesque.

She performs a similar manipulation on the chandelier (*The Hanger*), a light disruption which interferes with the original functioning: shifting the norm concerning the placement of the object (situating it on the wall instead of hanging it from the ceiling) and replacing the light bulbs (the source of light) with colorful stuffed balloons. Such shifts also characterize the series *Thingies*, crowding the two wooden shelves set on the third wall. The remains of the formica sideboard belonging to her parents' living-room - the most representative location in the house, the realm of kitsch - populate a rare collection of utterly useless objects: souvenirs, cheap ornaments, parts of toys; all retreated and re-processed, through an obsessive handicraft of occupational therapy, a careful and pedantic work, as though attempting to preserve the nostalgic qualities, to heal and stitch together the memory fragments. Yet at the same time, they attempt to undermine accepted ordering and categorization principles, to shake from within the conception according

to which home is the ideal design for the construction of a good woman, and at the same occasion, also seek to undermine definitions of good taste. Placed together on one shelf are a saving box shaped as helmet, an old alarm clock, a plastic cup decorated with flower-shaped beads, an Eiffel Tower made of beads, doll's hairs placed in a flowerpot, hairpins in a jar, a decorative heart, a napkin holder with an old photograph fixed in it, lipstick shaped-like swan, spices in bottles, salt cellar, healing stones, a small cat-food plate, cheap metal bracelets re-shaped as a snake - a diversity of consumable items, lacking splendor, placed on faded lace-work-like serviettes, made of hardened transparent plastic glue. On a second shelf, barbie-doll shoes dipped in plastic glue are lined up alongside castings of glue mache and spices, made of medicine tablets.

These unimportant objects, that radiate a cheap and scorned beauty, the shifts that stress their wretchedness, the fact that they are brought as they are, without the slightest desire to represent something bigger, bring to mind the *still life* genre, considered in art history a "small" and inferior theme in comparison to historical, religious or mythological paintings. Unlike the "grand" subject, that is placed in the public sphere of history - the sphere of existence, where subjects constitute themselves by action - the "small" theme is pushed to the margins, to the domestic sphere of home, that which is placed on the table, and in any event belongs to a female world. Norman Bryson, who studied the genre of *still life* (20) argued that it is the silent, hidden side, the voiceless side of material life. He claims that precisely because it is a "small" subject-matter it is subversive, since it questions the place of the subject in the world, challenges the pretension of man to be present in the world. According to him, domestic artifacts convey a sense of familiarity, as they situate the spectator in a close and identified space; therefore, in their presentation lies a dimension of comfort. Bryson also pointed out that *still life* paintings correspond to the sensations of the hand and not of the eye. In this context, it may be claimed that the manipulated mundane artifacts of Meira Shemesh deny the dominating power of the (masculine) gaze, and are far more receptive to touch than to look; they convey a sense of physical closeness, as though touched already by countless hands.

Therefore, the three components of the work are interpreted as references to explicit domestic locations, attributed to what is defined as female territory, at least according to the common binary symmetry, that constructs the place of the woman in the limited and restricted homely space. If we insist on looking for a *feminine essentialism*, it is spread in front of us. Nearly all the issues of the contemporary feminist discourse are placed here on the walls: mothers, role division, representation of the female body, the sensuality of material, organicity, womanly crafts (use of spices, sequins, nail polish, sewing, embroidery and gluing, etc.). Yet, the childhood memories and the personal experience are not directed here into a feminist-militant channel. This is a quiet subversion, seemingly bursting forth from a position of weakness, from backstage, gnawing at the texture of the right order and constituting some kind of elliptic chain of "otherness", with all its shades and virtues. This syntax of "otherness" invites a discussion of *female essentialism*, of the representation of an experience and not a narrative, of reassuming the lost mystery, of a look attentive to the surface, a gaze that does not seek to penetrate, to possess, to get to the essence, of a different voice, coming from the repressed and claiming ownership on that which preceded the social construction of the woman.

A different kind of quiet subversion can be found in the works of **Michal Shamir**, who chose to exhibit here a series of "sign-posts" – text-works prepared especially for the display space of the art museum in Ein Harod and assimilated in its architectural components: tin sign-posts were attached to the central pillars of the building and to the entrance walls, an additional inscription was concealed in the washroom and other sign-posts were planted in hidden niches within the display area. All sign-posts bear inscriptions – physical instructions for use (OPEN YOUR MOUTH/ CLOSE YOUR EYES/ LEAN FORWARD) or intimate-erotic commands (LICK YOUR KNEES/ TOUCH YOURSELF). Most of the texts are written in English, which unlike Hebrew, allows refraining from sexual identification, both of the speaking voice (the manipulator) and of the spectator (the manipulated). All signs are

embedded "naturally" in the architectural components and mimic familiar visual conventions employed in the media.

Simultaneous to the scattering of sign-posts in the specific display area in Ein Harod, some weeks before the opening of the exhibition similar signs were scattered in key-points of the Israeli art world (a burned inscription on the door in the entrance to Bograshov Gallery, a small sign-post in the elevator of the O.R.S. office building, run by the art collector Doron Sabag, in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem). These sign-posts act as secret agents planted in the power-centers of the art world, as though trying to expose hidden control mechanisms. The camouflaging strategy (assimilating the "other" sign-post among "regular" sign-posts, similar in appearance, without exposing its creator) operates here in contradiction to the functional essence of sign-posts – inherently demanding a maximum level of visibility. This strategy also undermines the position of the artwork as exchangeable object, a commodity. The effectiveness of such work is achieved only by an accumulative process of visibility (of each sign-post separately and of the whole lot together), assuming that there exists indeed such routine rambling route within the Israeli art world. The appropriation of the display area to a public domain with anonymous patronage reminds the subversive activity of the "Guerrilla Girls" in New York in the second half of the eighties, a group that operated as the militant feminist conscience of the art world and warned against sexism and discrimination on sexual grounds.

The choice of language as medium, the direct use of words and sentences and the clinging to the formal norm of the signpost, remind the lingual manipulations employed by American women-artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, who sought, each in her own way, to evoke in the spectator awareness to the common language codes and the clichés we all use in everyday speech without considering the traps and manipulations that preserve suppressive discursive-regimes. However, unlike the fighting atmosphere which characterized the activities of the "Guerrilla Girls", and unlike the didactic nature that marked the clichés and epigrams of Kruger and Holzer, Michal Shamir's texts stand out in their personal-intimate nature,

based on addressing the spectator. The anonymous sentences, the seemingly-technical instructions, tell us what to do: PRESS YOUR THIGHS/ INHALE/ EXHALE/ TOUCH YOUR EYES/ LICK YOUR KNEES/ SUCK YOUR TOES/SMELL YOUR SWEAT, and at times even pose a question: WILL YOU LOOK AT ME NOW?. The innocent appearance of the signs, their anonymity and the common typographical design of the text (capital letters in relief or engraving) – stand in complete contrast to the ironic meaning conveyed by the imperative sentences they contain. Under the auspices of the intimate tone, these sentences constitute a discourse which talks about different modes of body maintenance: instructions for body shaping and care (exercise), recipes for happiness (yoga, meditation, masturbation), manufacturer instructions concerning personal hygiene, the operation of instruments or of public toilets – sentences conveying authority and power, coercion and discipline – a list of defined tasks, based on external intervention within your body. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault described discipline as central technology in the regime of knowledge that constitutes subjects. "These are the actions performed by the individual himself and by others on his body, his soul, his thoughts, his behavior and his modes of existence; actions which enable him to induce in himself change in order to achieve happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or eternity." (21)

This idea, connecting bodily discipline with recipes for freedom or happiness, also exists, though in a reversed form, in the two works by **Merilou Levin** displayed here. The first – a realist painting depicting pedantically a bra hook on a board used for slicing vegetables (a sequel to the series *Oil on Chopping Board*, displayed in the exhibition *The Full Part of the Sign*, November, 1993, Borochov Studio's Gallery, curator: Ilana Tenenbaum), and the second – a surface of dark slate (blackboard), used as background for a text which reproduces in docile handwriting the defiant inscription: "I Will Not Fake Orgasms". The act of reproduction and the obsessive repetition of the same sentence strive to restore a childhood-memory of an "educational" punishment, that involved self-taming, obedience, submission and repetition. Yet, this obedience (good handwriting) stands here in complete contrast to the spirit of rebellion conveyed by the assertion embedding the refusal to

cooperate in the false game of sexual functioning. The refusal to fake orgasms no doubt undermines the familiar model of the woman as purvey or of sexual services, the woman that is forced to satisfy by pretending to be satisfied herself, and is willing to pay for her desire to satisfy man with denial of her authentic self. However, the fact that this denial is presented here as assignment, as punishment, as an act which originates from a place of inferiority (victim), produces an additional meaning, that challenges the radical model of orthodox feminism too – feminism which dictated and fixed different kind of expectations. This ambiguity can also be found in the painting of the bra hook on chopping board, a painting which can be read as metaphor for what is left of the struggle for women liberation. Foucault talked about good handwriting as one of the common technologies within the mechanism of subject production; "a specific practice and training, that focus on the hand in order to teach it to produce punctual movements, thus discipline the entire body to create a new, better and more docile self." (22) Likewise, it can be claimed that, through good handwriting or the pedantic, delighting realist painting, she (the artist? the woman?) seems to train herself to "submit" to her liberated self, declaring its explicit unwillingness to fake orgasms.

Discipline and falseness are manifest also in the series *Woman-Soldiers* exhibited here by **Nir Hod**: three photographs printed on canvas and painted with oil-colors, each showing a portrait of a woman-soldier in a representative pose. The first – wearing glasses and an army-beret, the second – wearing glasses, her hair let loose and the third (in the middle) black haired with pony-tail and a cellular phone. Each directs her eye to eternity in a heroic pose radiating pride, glamour and patriotism, a common convention in photographs of male and female soldiers until recently. The central figure is interpreted easily as a fictional self portrait, recognized from the exhibition *Antipathos* (Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1993) as wax sculpture of an a-sexual beautiful narcissist (*My Eyes Are Not The First To Cry*) and as the fictional lover of Madonna. The assimilation of the presence of the artist (the woman-soldier Nir), this time between two other women-soldiers, seemingly "authentic", produces here the symbolic power of the work and plants it within a field of meanings whose core is self-representation, blurring and alteration of

identities. The chameleon obsession, the search for surface alternatives (identification accessories, representative uniform, makeup), constituting a privileged self identity re-invented each and every time, replaces here the "authentic" search for the real, unique, absolute "self". The world becomes a mirror to a diversity of fabricated and split identities, to countless stereotypical images, which serve as conductors for some evasive "self", examined over and over again in different variations. In this sense, the woman-soldier is simply another image in a sea of stereotypical images, an empty costume decorating an old postcard from Independence Day, an image on a T-shirt: a glamorous remnant of the dauntless woman. There is no concern with the army, nor the military experience. The immediate political aspect is completely negligible, at best it is possible to say that these woman soldiers represent some local version of the TV series "Charlie's Angels", and that their symbolic battle will never deviate from the fantastic borders of a fictional script on the TV screen.

On the internal-artistic level, the series *Women- Soldiers* maintains a dialogue with a long line of art works, concerned with self-portrayal and blurring of sexual identity. The most early and familiar among them is *Rose Selavy* (1920-1921) by Marcel Duchamp. Man Ray photographed Duchamp in a fashionable black hat, fur coat and made-up face, and Duchamp used this photograph of the elegant, fictional female figure to advertise perfume. Urs Luthi, a Swiss artist active in the seventies, also photographed sensitive self-portraits, that documented processes of turning from man to woman and vice versa. At the same time, in New York, operated the video and performance artist Vito Acconci, who exposed in a series of works the process of his disguising as androgynous and society's reaction. The Israeli parallels were Yocheved Weinfeld, who in the seventies exhibited a series of photographic images, based on stereotypical representations (the officer and the prostitute); Jacob Mishori, who in the eighties painted a series of "feminine" self-portraits; Motti Mizrachi, who dressed up as a woman and was photographed by Gadi Dagon in 1988; these were recently joined by Reuven Cohen, whose paintings are inspired by the *Drag* culture. In all those cases, the new sexual definitions make it possible to subvert social norms and to expose a different

psychological and sensory world, beyond the fixation of sexual identity. Yet, it seems that the case of Nir Hod invites a reference to a more flexible model, that allows complete melting and mobility between identities not necessarily corresponding to the binary classification. Cindy Sherman, for example, an artist for whom the motif of changeable identity is central, does not attribute much importance to the context of sex changes, but more to the social context of flexible shifts from one identity to another. The same principle is true for the works of Nir Hod, the choice of the woman-soldier image as stereotype precedes in importance the choice of a woman's image, not because he is not engaged with sexual identity, but because the female identity is present anyway, as a flexible option within the fluid definition of his sexual identity.

In this game of identity changes a central role is played by the medium of photography, that inherently conceals the tension between fabrication, fiction and documentation. As with Duchamp and Sherman, photography is intended to perpetuate the disguising act. Without it, there is no evidence to its existence. The traditional portrait photograph was perceived as the core of the human character, as a medium that is supposed to best convey the "inner truth" of the individual. This norm had already been shattered and replaced by the recognition that photography can crush reality (Roland Barthes), just as it can constitute and confirm identity, whether "real" or "fictional". The staged posture, the accessories, the facial expression, the gaze – all these are explicit techniques for constituting identity – aids in the manipulation. This point is reinforced here by the massive pictorial "manipulation", as though the possibilities concealed in the photograph are not enough. The trick is, hence, double: the act of painting on the photograph blurs the "truth" of the photograph, nearly erasing the fact of its existence, yet at the same time, it exposes the manipulation the photograph is itself so contaminated with. Hod joins here a long tradition of self representation, while making a cynical use of a common representational rhetorics: half-profile posture, a slight turning of the head upwards, tonal shifts in the background and gilded frame. However, the feminine (subversive?) image of Hod holding a cellular phone, his gaze veiled and his shirt partly unbuttoned, was planted into this rhetorics. The pornographic suggestion destroys the representative Israeli heroic image of

the woman-soldier, an image obscure to a stranger, and operates similarly to the way Madonna's Israeli double (in his work *Golden Moments*) was interpreted as metaphor for a suburban-Israeli-local culture.

Photography as an explicit technology for constituting and disintegrating identity manifests itself in the works of **Tiranit Barzilay** too. She exhibits three giant-photographs depicting people in action. Women and men doing something, occupied with some kind of an action, usually mundane, common, sisyphian, dull: moving watermelons from one pile to another, like the cleaning of leaves from the wood (Pina Bausch), a task that can never be accomplished. Scenes from life. Figures of women in a circle, a man combs a woman's hair, three women whisper aside. A group of people on their way somewhere, their gaze focused on one point in space where nothing happens. A desperate attempt to preserve the banal. Circles. Circles. Circles. The figures are unidentified, their appearance vague, anonymous. The location is unknown, the place is nowhere, not quite nature and not quite urban. The time is not known, as if stopped. Every detail in the photograph seems as though withdrawing into the private image of itself, not wanting to represent anything, sinking into the neutrality of a faceless "she". The figures seem to have been selected at random, erased faces, wanting uniqueness, somehow relating to a species of a suburban-Israeli-local culture. Heroes without identity, existing solely for their own sake, in a reality that is between the fictional and the authentic, not recognizing the identity or existence of the other. A kind of anthropological dance-theater of different characters. The photograph emerges here as flexible and convenient no-man's land, allowing maximum setting, directing and control within a given, structured space.

The most evident element in the new series of photographs is the circular structure. Women standing in a circle wearing white. No eye-contact between them. Nor do they hold hands. "Boy takes girl, girl takes boy". "Blind man's buff". "Hora" * [Translator's note: These are titles of typical Israeli adolescence play-songs and Israeli folk dances associated with Zionism, pioneering and youth groups]. Apparently, what can be more Israeli than that? A metaphor of a joyful collective, a symbol of the Israeli "togetherness". And yet, the details

expose the deceit. The Israeli "togetherness" collapses here with the big narrative of Zionism, disintegrates into an empty form of a staged ritual. Sara Breitberg-Semel talked in this context about the "ventriloquist strategy", implying a treatment of the issues on the agenda of the west, while turning them into local concerns. "Only an Israeli can hear another voice in her work, the sound of her gut, and give it a place within the work [...] In the works of Tiranit Barzilay, the official western voice talks about the disintegration of meaning, while the gut voice talks about post-zionism." (23) The fact that the circle includes women only is not accidental, just as it is not accidental that certain actions in her photographs are performed by women while others are performed by men. "Every time there is a figure attempting to maintain balance, sanity – like the young woman attempting to walk on the fence [in the previous photograph] – it is always a figure of a woman" (24), says Tiranit Barzilay. The sexuality conveyed by the figures is restrained, sterilized, the look is detached from the body, there is no real contact. Everybody is engaged in some kind of repetitive sisyphian action, as in an Egyptian relief.

The circle – a form ordered around a center – has great, magnetizing, energy charging power. According to Jung, this is the archetypal form of simplicity, unity and wholeness. In Alchemy, this is the sign of "one and all" – a line containing its beginning and end – and in Sanskrit, this is the symbolism of the mandala, representing the ultimate *Is*, a merger of opposites. In art history, the choreography of three women in a circle bears a long history, from the motif of *The Three Graces* up to Matisse's *The Dance* (1910). Whether the contexts were mythological or secular, this motif always joined an iconography associated with an harmonious rhythm of cosmic circularity, with the Bacchanalia and pastoralia of the joy of life. The dance is conceived as a primary emotional outburst of joy, rendered by an identifying with nature, an expression of passion, motion, continuity, flow and deep rootedness. In the photographs of Tiranit Barzilay the symbolic fabric of the dance is unraveled. The metaphor has collapsed. The intensity of energy and impulse were reduced into immobility, alienation, isolation, and monotony. The active, internal spin became a trapping fixation. It looks as though the women froze within the circle. They are present in the ritual, but refuse to take part in the

dance of ideology. They are fixed to the spot, each in her own private space, planted in their forced state, sterilizing the joy of life. Each for herself.

Ayelet Hashahar Cohen also presents staged photographs, yet in her work there is no one scene, no single theatrical happening in a common location. Each of the characters seems withdrawn into its private space (usually a room or a place identified as home), where it stands on its own, striving to represent something else. Twenty-two photographs manipulated in mixed media, combining printing on a transparency, gilded "backgrounds" and colorful confetti. Each photograph usually exhibits one figure – a man or a woman – and underneath appears a defining and identity-constituting inscription. Twenty-two roles for twenty-two identities, a private riddle, a crypto-puzzle containing the code for identifying, sorting and classifying the various social roles. Dull, tamed, domestic figures, standing in a representative-ritualistic position: a man standing in a bathtub ("The Hesitant"), a naked woman flexing a muscle in the basin ("The Conquerer"), an Arab worker in a slaughter house ("The Valet"). The photograph does not convey absolute situations, it obeys the definition and at the same time refutes it. Any attempt to locate the classifying key comes up against a new wall of stereotypes, like a manipulation performed on hierarchical identification mechanisms that perpetuate the female inferiority and male mastery positions.

Nevertheless, a close look reveals the key. There is a rationale, or at least a source of inspiration, underlying this practice of order. The secret is found in the cards, in the twilight-zone of mysticism, in the margins of culture, where all is open, borderless. The Tarot cards – ordinarily used to decipher states of consciousness, stages of spiritual-mental development, according to female and male energies – become here a kind of symbol-key, visual-secular dictionary, aiding to undermine (or reinforce) the existing order. The twenty-two photographs correspond to the twenty two cards, but the functions have altered and the inscriptions updated. For example, the androgynous "Justice" card of the Tarot became here "The Historian" (a feminineman), "The Emperor" became simply a "director", "Temperance" is from now on "The Storekeeper" (a masculine woman), "TheCosmopolitan" replaces "The Fool",

"The Witness" replaces "Death", "The Searcher" replaces "The Hermit", "The Inventor" replaces "Judgement", "The Dancer" replaces "The Wheel of Fortune" and "The Photographer" (self-portrait) replaces the harmonious card of "The World". The symbolic painting, which included a figure, a landscape and some identifying characteristics, became a local, staged scene; the wide cosmic point-of-view was shallowed into an Israeli snapshot, the clan's role-dictionary.

By assigning a name to the photographed figure, Ayelet Hashahar Cohen as though attempts to apply the logic behind the Tarot cards on life here-and-now, to derive from the esoteric knowledge a new filter for observing her close environment. As in the Tarot, here too one can read two interpretations in every photograph: the good side and the bad side. "The Juggler", for example – the hairy man with the big belly, standing in the grass holding a dustbin, corresponds to "The Magician" card in the Tarot. His good side refers to male energies – practicality, leadership, execution ability, and self confidence – while his bad side indicates charlatantry, pretence and deceit. In the same manner, the man in the bath ("The Hesitant"), who replaces "The Hanged Man", is interpreted in his good side as someone taking consciously a weak stand – elimination of ego, sacrifice of "self", relinquishment and non-violence, while in his bad side, he is read as someone immersed in self pity, as a victim. Drawing on the Tarot cards allows her to invent new identification-tags and replace the classic western dichotomy with the principle of mobility and flow: all roles are androgynous, each of them combines both elements, the difference is in quantity.

The identity of the women appearing in the photographs moves on the range between lover and conquerer, between a madonna and a tempting prostitute, between a woman in the kitchen and a motorcyclist in leather clothes. The prostitute, the conquerer, the dancer and the artist offer temptation as privileged female strategy, allowing a condition of being an object out of choice. The temptation element is intensified here by the visual language itself, by the use of gold. The protagonists of the new social dictionary seem to bath in gold, their prosaic wretchedness is decorated by the glamour of the

most expensive of all, the ultimate fetish – a perfect object of desire. The surplus, the excess, the shallowness, as well as the principle of accumulation and repetition, reduce the new role division into its grotesque level, covering all with sweetness, deceit and sentimentality. A choice of such strategy might be interpreted in the current context also as subversion of male-modernist principles, such as economy, cleanness and concision, and be read as inferiority which is turned into power.

Against the excess and the multiplicity, the temptation and the playfulness, the photographs of **Tamara Masel** offer the option of silence, the dialectics of avoidance. Anonymous portraits, photographed from behind on a background of a gray wall – surrendering at most a middle parting of the hair, one tight braid, tied back, or two braids fastened with elastic band, firmly compressed, docile. The upper body is packed in white, masculine vest. Doubtful whether a woman or a girl – turning her back, avoiding exposure, refusing to return gaze. Any attempt to define and constitute identity comes up against the wall of resistance. The private space is protected, there is no story and no place for dialogue. Sexuality is restrained, embarrassing, not transmitting in the familiar channels. Not transmitting at all. The braiding (like the vest) implies something innocent, returns one to adolescence; yet, it is, in fact, another kind of bodily-regime, a routine act performed by mothers on their daughters in order to render a clean, disciplined appearance. In this series, Tamara Masel continues to deal with the body, as part of the engagement with femininity. In her previous works, it was the soup bowl with the dumplings, juxtaposed to a lower body packed in underpants and an enlarged piece of skin – disintegrated body parts, pointing to a hidden self identity, that chose silence – contexts of food, dirt and excretions – territories assigned to women.

The choice of anonymity, of turning the gaze to the wall, may be read here as provocation – a subversion of the conventional genre of female representation, just as it can be seen as metaphor of the anonymous state forced on women throughout history, as claimed by Virginia Woolf: "For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force." (25) The turned back

conceals a long line of avoidances: not to be connected with anything associated as "feminine", not to convey materiality, beauty, or any othersign of temptation. To focus on the surface, not let the spectator penetrate into the picture and decipher the sexual secret. The limitation, the cleanness, the cut and the precision, paradoxically remind both the direct photographs of the German photographer Thomas Ruff - giant portraits conveying frontally all details of the individual as differentiated person - and the police snapshots of wanted criminals, designed solely to expose identities. Here, however, there is an additional third point of view - an angle that reveals neck and hides face, protects it from the voyeuristic game of the spectator, letting it be, leaving it "full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked." (26)

Notes

- 1 For further reading, see the essay by Jose Bruner, "The Mother's Voice, or: Dialectics of Feminist Self Consciousness", *Zmanim* No. 46-47 ("Female Time"), Winter 1993, pp. 4-17.
- 2 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949) New York, 1974, p. 553.
- 3 Jose Bruner, "The Mother's Voice", *Ibid*, p. 7.
- 4 A similar meaning can be extricated from the photograph of Michal Na'aman portrait, taken by Dganit Berest in 1978, during Na'aman's stay in New York. The photograph depicts the artist, sitting next to a stuffed animal - a two-headed calf. The photograph was later chosen to serve as the inner cover (representative) photograph of the catalogue for her oneperson exhibition held in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1983 (curator: Sara Breitberg-Semel). The choice of the photograph connects to the sympathy for "monsters" and hybrids notably present in her works.
- 5 Lea Dovev, "The Eye and the Body: Malaise in the Feminist Aesthetics", *Zmanim*, p. 94. In this context, Dovev drew on the third chapter in John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972, pp. 45-64.
- 6 Lea Dovev, *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 91-92.
- 8 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1982, p. 3 (trans. Leon S. Roudiez).
- 9 Jean Baudrillard, "Rituals of Transparency" (1987) in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, New York 1988, pp. 29-44.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 11 Sasha Weitman, "On Flirting", *Studio*, September 1992, pp. 24-25.
- 12 Nurit David, "While Beuys was Pregnant", *Feminine Presence*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1990, p. 174 (trans. By Richard Flantz).
- 13 Frazer Ward, "Foreign and Familiar Bodies" in *Dirt & Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine*, Whitney Museum of American Art (June 12 - August 14, 1992).
- 14 Quote taken from a text by Le Corbusier. See Margalit Shinar, "Residence of the Masters: Feminist Criticism on the Urban Utopias of Le Corbusier", *Studio*, April 1992, p. 52.

- 15 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), London 1945, p. 97.
- 16 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, New York 1961, p.279.
- 17 Plato, *The Symposium*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1951, pp.59-61.
- 18 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 2, London 1951, p. 528.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531.
- 20 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Cambridge MA 1990.
- 21 A paraphrase on Foucault's words, as brought by Ariella Azoulay in her lecture in the conference Women in Israeli Society ("Between a Penguin and a Nun", November 29th, 1993). See also the relevant chapter in his book:
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Middlesex 1979, pp.135-169 (trans. Alan Sheridan).
- 22 Ariella Azoulay, *Ibid.*
- 23 Sara Breitberg-Semel in Conversation with Tiranit Barzilay, *Studio* No. 44, June 1993, p. 14.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 25 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 98.