

## From the Passion for the Real to Life Itself

Tami Katz-Freiman

In July 2008, the carcass of a strange, slippery creature with a sharp, beak-shaped mouth was washed ashore in the town of Montauk, New York. Was it a rare type of raccoon, the bloodied and disfigured body of a dog, or perhaps, according to some, a sea turtle that had lost its shell? Nicknamed the “Montauk Monster,” the unidentified animal joined a series of mysterious creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot – the source of numerous media reports and much scientific curiosity, as well as of conspiracy theories and countless interpretations.<sup>[1]</sup> The inability to affiliate this creature with a distinct category, its existence outside of a familiar zoological index, and its relation to other phenomena that have remained without scientific explanation, served as the flutter of the butterfly’s wings for Tomer Sapir, providing him with a core inspiration. As a student in the Bezalel Academy’s MFA program at the other end of the world, he subsequently embarked on the creation of a complex and wide-ranging body of works centered on the fusion of animal and mineral, organic and synthetic, real and imagined elements.

[1] According to one theory, the Montauk Monster was the hybrid product of an animal experiment conducted by a secret government facility on Plum Island, a small island known also as “Monster Island.” This facility, which once served as a military base, was handed over in the 1950s to the US Ministry of Agriculture, which used it to study animal diseases offshore. At the turn of the 21st century, it came to house a program for countering biological terrorism. The secrecy surrounding this facility enhanced the mystery surrounding the myth of the Montauk Monster.

Overtured Cryptid (2008) was the first work in a series of hybrids related to the Montauk Monster and to the kingdom of cryptozoology - the study of creatures that are not recognized by science - or, in other words, the study of monsters. This concave sculptural object resembled an overturned seashell or a prehistoric fossil, with a hairy human rectum gaping at its center. Composed of concrete, wax, latex, salt, and the silky white floss surrounding the seeds of the *Ceiba insignis* tree, the sculpture was installed at the center of the space like an inverted turtle shell. The adjacent puddle, which resembled a bodily excretion, lent the sculpture a seemingly real, organic appearance.

A year later, in 2009, as part of Sapir's MFA graduate project, the cryptid creature evolved into an installation titled The Visit (Hatachana, Tel Aviv, 2009, curator: Sarit Shapira). Here too, the sculptures were composed of concrete, plaster, wax, latex, salt, and silky white floss. The central sculpture was an organic mass, which appeared to have erupted into the space before being shattered into tiny fragments that were ejected from its body - invading the building, gathering in its corners, spreading like parasites over the walls, and erupting out of the fireplace like aliens arriving from the future. In a later version, The Visit No. 2 (Beit Ha'ir, Tel Aviv, 2012), Sapir focused on the silky tree fibers, winding them around the columns and staircase banister so that they came to resemble a series of mucous cocoons, without revealing the identity of the creatures growing on their interior.

The last version of The Visit was featured in 2014 in the exhibition “Dark Times” (Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University, curator: Avi Lubin). Here the exposed flesh of the “invasive creature” was placed upon three elevated, shiny mirrored surfaces, appearing as a dissected and headless monster, a mass of tremulous tissues.

The key work that situated Sapir’s sculptures in a museum context as a pseudo-scientific display was Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index (2008-2010). First shown at the Haifa Museum of Art (2010) in the exhibition “Shelf Life” (curators: Tami Katz-Freiman and Rotem Ruff), this work has since branched out in different directions. The exhibited structure resembled a chest of drawers combined with glass display cases, which contained a collection of imaginary taxidermy creatures. Their deceptive materiality lent them the appearance of organic or artificial remnants, archeological vestiges, or organic exhibits in various states of decay - fossils, silk cocoons, porcupine quills, stones, or the remains of rotten fruit. The glass cases called to mind the display conventions typical of natural history or archaeology museums. At the same time, they seemed to occupy a twilight zone between categories, since it was impossible to know whether the artifacts, which appeared like curiosities from a Renaissance cabinet of wonders, were bodily excretions or artificial imitations painstakingly handcrafted by the artist. At the bottom of the structure was an aquarium containing a greenish liquid, which was home to an amorphous, crystalline creature.

Suspended above it was a gilded birdcage, which contained a bloody slab of flesh. Sapir applied various sculptural manipulations to a range of materials including cement powders, salt crystals, fibers, seeds, and plastic beads; some of the artifacts resembled fossils or carbonized objects, others were wet, and yet others were crumbling or covered with webs resembling silk cocoons. In this work, the silky floss covering the seeds of the Ceiba tree, whose bio-mechanical trait is expansion, were made to resemble crisp miniature brains. The term “crypto-taxidermy,” which refers to the stuffing and mounting of animals which do not exist in reality, fixed this work in a liminal space between the natural and the artificial. Sapir exposed a new lexicon of constantly evolving hybrids, while undermining familiar systems of classification used to distinguish between nature and culture, art and science. The resulting sense of ambiguity questioned the very validity of dichotomous definitions.

The dialectic relations between nature and culture were discussed at length throughout the intellectual history of Western culture. In the current age, with countless manipulations and reconstitutions of an imagined nature constantly being recycled, it is no longer possible to distinguish between the real, the processed, and the virtual. As the digital revolution redefines the human condition and desire has come to be mediated by technology, these relations are constantly reexamined by contemporary artists, prominent among whom are Mark Dion, Matthew Barney, Roxy Paine, Camille Henrot, and Pierre Huyghe.

Sapir's oeuvre similarly blurs the line between "nature" and its countless representations (specimens collected by a scientist and animal, vegetal or mineral vestiges) and between what is clearly manmade (culture). This theme has come to constitute the central axis of his work, which he repeatedly circles around while refining the deceptive vacillation between reality and its representation, between natural materials that appear synthetic and artificial materials camouflaged as organic ones. Like an alchemist in his laboratory, he concocts materials, explores the points of intersection between the biological and the synthetic, and attempts to compose a precise formula for their fusion - to distill the actual substance of life, so that he may paradoxically use it to create a new artificial nature.

The hybrids first exposed in Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index as if they were in the process of incubation gave rise, two years later, to a body of hybrid works that seemed to have emerged out of the drawers and shelves, expanding and growing to their full size. In the exhibition "Terra Incognita" (Chelouche Gallery for Contemporary Art, 2012, curator: Avi Lubin), the sculptures appeared as mutations created in a laboratory, suspended between the categories of the biological and the artificial, the vegetal and the mineral, at once seductive and threatening: the bodily remains of a gigantic cryptid monster - a monstrous scrotum and a lion's tail oozing a black mucous liquid (Untitled, 2012) hung on the wall like a fossil; creatures resembling spiders with pointed tails (the monster's limbs) were installed around the space

like organic implants; a skeleton of a dinosaur (Untitled, 2012) lay on the floor, with cocoons embedded between its ribs like horrifying parasites. As an aficionado of horror and science-fiction movies, Sapir intended to evoke the experience of a recent catastrophe: the exhibits appeared as the repulsive remains of a plague or a natural disaster, masterfully cloned fossils of pre-historic creatures, the body parts of entities from a science-fiction movie, or life forms from another planet. “Terra incognita” (unknown land) is the Latin term once used by cartographers to describe areas that had yet to be mapped or documented. In this case, Sapir expanded the term from its territorial to its zoological aspects, while continuing the tradition of marking these unknown expanses with images of mysterious mythological creatures. The figure of the cryptid monster, whose identity, like that of all monsters, is fluid and without clear boundaries, appealed to him because it was constructed of and nourished by familiar materials, thus appearing at once attractive, threatening, and repulsive.

Representations of nature in Sapir’s works are thus almost always imbued by a morbid significance; they appear in apocalyptic-futuristic contexts and as part of the symbolism of life cycles and of vanitas, and recently also in familial, autobiographical contexts. It seems that the very attempt to distill the organic Real implies an obsession related to death and dissolution, which recurs throughout his works even when it is not explicitly expressed. In this context, it is interesting to follow the diverging lines stretching from The Montauk Monster

to Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index, and from there on in a range of morbid directions. For the project Mother of All Wheat, which was included in “Agro-Art: Contemporary Agriculture in Israeli Art” (Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2015, curator: Tali Tamir), Sapir created a sort of greenhouse designed for preserving grains of wild wheat in the event of an ecological catastrophe: As in Noah’s Ark, this apparatus concealed a genetic archive for “rebooting” if the existing reservoir was destroyed or damaged irreversibly.<sup>[2]</sup> In the ambitious project “Ministry of Information” (Beit Hankin Museum, 2016, curator: Neta Haber), which was created in an old natural history museum located in the agricultural settlement Kfar Yehoshua, in the Jezreel Valley, morbidity was coupled with a commemorative atmosphere reminiscent of a mausoleum.

“Ministry of Information” was one of the most intriguing projects to develop out of Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index, since it dealt with the strategy of collecting, which is related first and foremost to the fear of emptiness (horror vacui) or death. Freud, an ardent collector of antiquities (who was known to have some 3,000 items in his collection), related the thrust for collecting to the anal inclination for accumulation, as well as to actions pertaining to a repetition compulsion stemming from a thrust for self-preservation.<sup>[3]</sup> Sapir has often referred to himself as a collector: “I am a

[2] Tali Tamir, text on Mother of All Wheat, from “Agro-Art: Contemporary Agriculture in Israeli Art” (exh. cat., Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2014–2015), p.72.

[3] Freud’s enchantment with collecting was explored in the exhibition “The Festival of the Unconscious,” which presented a significant part of his collection at the Freud Museum in London in 2015.

collector of objects, mostly from nature. It is a family tradition . . . my mother was a collector, as was her mother before her. Nature is the prism through which I look at the world. As an artist, this is my way of telling a story.”<sup>[4]</sup> Indeed, processes of collecting, classifying, and categorizing, which had already been given expression in the first version of the “research,” were expanded in this project to an engagement with, and disruption of, an entire museum collection. Sapir took on an existing inventory of exhibits, a multidisciplinary display of natural and manmade objects, and manipulated it by disassembling and reassembling it. The skeletons, taxidermy animals, dried thistles, geological collection, antiquities, books, and guides were rearranged to include his own works: a pair of fetuses preserved in formaldehyde that he had found in the collection was presented both as an artifact and as two ghosts captured in an X-ray hologram; a sculpture of a dead dinosaur was placed in a display case; and a death mask of the artist himself was placed at the center of the space, echoing the death mask of the Zionist philanthropist Yehoshua Hankin featured in the museum’s memorial corner. In this manner, Sapir detached the objects from their museum definitions and disrupted the coherence we expect when entering a museum. He created an intentional deception while calling attention to the impossibility of classification, of producing clear-cut narratives, and

[4] From an interview with Tomer Sapir conducted by Angela Levine. See Angela Levine, “Unnatural Histories of the Natural: A Conversation with Tomer Sapir,” *Sculpture*, March 2016, p. 47.



of experiencing the comfort of some established order. Using pseudoscientific methods in a takeoff of sorts on cabinets of curiosity, which preceded the emergence of the modern museum, Sapir worked against the grain of scientific conventions and museum practices. Rather than supporting the core Zionist ideals of the museum where “Ministry of Information” was constructed, he engaged in the disruption of collective memory, while raising charged personal and political concerns.

The project at the Beit Hankin Museum was preceded by an exceptional work titled Bodies (2015) – a dance performance in collaboration with the choreographer Sharon Vazanna, which was also characterized by an apocalyptic and morbid quality. After years of being concerned with representations of the organic by means of objects (animal carcasses, stuffed animals, fur and skulls), in this work Sapir first took the obvious leap of working directly with living and breathing human bodies. The entire surface of the dancers’ bodies was coated in a mixture of pigments and various powders that thickened on their skin like dough or a disease, forming a rubbery and murky epidermis that dried, crumbled, and fell away as they moved. The choreography was imbued with the quality of a ritual dance involving a ceremonial process of wallowing and withdrawal; the sense that “you were made from dust, and to dust you will return,” was amplified when it seemed that the dancers were shedding the dust of their lives like an old skin, an excess charge of dirt. The symbolic meaning of this work was also related to the twilight zone

between life and death, as well as, of course, to Julia Kristeva's "abjection," which is based on a view of the body as a metaphor of interior and exterior, a symbolic system controlled by a regime of prohibitions.<sup>[5]</sup>

Sapir's exhibition "HANOTERET" [The Remainder] (Gabirol Gallery, 2017) was similarly accompanied by morbid ritual and ceremonial resonances, which were directly related to the offering of sacrifices. This site-specific sculptural installation centered on a mound of sand and pigment powder, which seemed to have fallen and been collected from the bodies of the dancers in the previous work. The mound was encircled by stones surrounding the white fur of a mammalian carcass - the remainder of a sacrifice or ritual. Other ceremonial objects, such as an animal skin suspended from the ceiling on a metal chain, as well as mammalian bones and skulls, were scattered in the space. According to the sacrificial rules outlined in the Torah, no part of a sacrificed animal should remain on the altar on the day of the ceremony, and any such remainders must be burnt. The preoccupation with the animal carcass, fur, and skin is also related to the concept of the abject. Here too, the treatment of what is filthy and contaminated, of the exposed organism and lacerated body, is symbolic. Abject materials related to repulsion and pollution also include rot, blood, and bodily excretions. These elements all represent a series of prohibitions and taboos related to disorder and to a fear of death. In this work, they are

[5] Julia Kristeva, [Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection](#), trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

crowded together on the remaining skin, on the margins of the living body's protective envelope. Sapir's concern with the animal skin, like his engagement with the excess skin on the dancers' bodies, carries the idea of the skin as a symptom of internal processes to its poetic and morbid extreme. He underscores the metaphorical power of the skin as a vulnerable, revealing, and protective part of the body, which defines its limits and underlies the dialectic between interior and exterior.

In recent years, Sapir's preoccupation with death has become more apparent and explicit. The catalyst for this change in his artistic strategy was, perhaps, the joint work created with Sharon Vazanna on the dancers' bodies, which provided an opportunity to engage with life itself; or perhaps it was the impact of the intimate familial experiences of raising children in the domestic sphere. In 2016, Sapir participated in the group exhibition "Between Synapses: Where Art and Brain Sciences Intersect," which was initiated by the Safra Center for Brain Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jerusalem Artists House, curator: Michal Mor). Within this framework, he presented Fetal Baby (2016) - a work born following his exposure to the term "philosophical zombie."<sup>[6]</sup> It consisted of a plastic skeleton of a fetus coated in a layer of white floss and latex, which was stretched like dry, shriveled skin with no flesh underneath it. A pair of artificial, harrowingly

[6] The term "philosophical zombie" emerged, according to Sapir, in a series of conversations with Prof. Leon Deuel of the Hebrew University. According to the definition of this term, the greater the difference between us and another person, the easier it is for us to divest him of his human qualities and to subject him to violence.

realistic eyes stared out of its skull. Placed in sterile isolation like a scientific artifact, locked in a glass case as if in a cage, the tiny creature simultaneously provoked compassion and horror. The combination of the dwarfed body and large, gaping eyes called to mind the lovable alien from Steven Spielberg's movie E.T. (1982) – an infant/monster that the viewer comes to befriend thanks to its human qualities. “I wanted this work to raise questions concerning the manner in which we perceive the ‘other.’ The image of the fetus at the heart of the work challenges the question of the beginning of life and consciousness. Since it represents such a liminal state, it undermines our relationship to it as a human being.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The sculpture Fetal Baby exerted a significant influence on another work, which was included in Sapir's most recent exhibition, “Something's Happened to Us, Father” (Chelouche Gallery for Contemporary Art, 2017, curator: Avi Lubin). This conclusive exhibition, which centered on Sapir's family and personal life, closed the circle that began with Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index, while perhaps indicating the emergence of a new direction. Yet in contrast to its previous appearance as a sterile exhibit locked within a display case, in this case the skeleton coated in a shriveled, mucous layer of floss was that of an adult, whose remainders were taken apart and reassembled as a mutation riddled with mistakes. The skull with its gaping eyes, which may have momentarily appeared to be smiling a grotesque smile, and the limbs severed from the

[7] Quoted from conversations with the artist conducted in the course of writing this essay.

spine, appeared as if they had been cast at the end of a struggle (or game) onto the floor of an improvised house, of the kind that children construct out of chairs and blankets in order to create a protected space. The disassembled skeleton was part of a two-story installation resembling a domestic territory, in which Sapir placed death masks of himself and his partner, who was also the exhibition curator, alongside memorial candles, photographs, and video works featuring their two children, Tamara and Nimrod. The human presence that was merely alluded to in Mother of All Wheat, and motifs from his family life that were only hinted at in “Ministry of Information,” now came center stage. The video work featuring the twins removing a death mask (of their artist father) from a plaster tray, which was first presented at the Beit Hankin Museum on a small television screen set upon a chest laden with objects, was featured here as well, yet this time as a large projection in a separate room.

In terms of the artistic vocabulary, it seems that the human skeleton, as well as Fetal Baby, were vestiges of real or imagined organic objects, a reincarnation of The Montauk Monster in a pre- or post-human figure. The sculptural representations of the Real came to be replaced by images of the artist’s family members, whose names and identities were exposed through photography and video. As mentioned, several copies of the death mask were integrated as a recurrent motif into the exhibition spaces, echoing the sloughed-off skin that appeared in previous works. This time, however, the familial context and the more direct and exposed artistic language gave rise to a new meaning:

Was the skeleton shattered because it was no longer needed?

The title of this exhibition was borrowed from that of a video work by the same name, in which the twins' faces are interchanged and one of them calls out "Something's happened to us, Father." The psychoanalytic filter through which Avi Lubin explained this sentence, and the work's overall strategy,<sup>[8]</sup> pointed to its clearly morbid charge, relating this cry to that of the dead son in the father's dream described by Freud in the seventh chapter of The Interpretation of Dreams. "Father don't you see I'm burning?" is the sentence that the father hears in his dream, as he lies asleep in a room adjacent to the one in which his son's body is surrounded by candles that seem to have caught fire. Freud argued that the dream could be interpreted as the fulfillment of the father's wish to bring his son back to life, yet believed that this interpretation was unsatisfactory, and that an attempt to interpret the dream using the tools previously presented in his book would lead to a dead end.<sup>[9]</sup> Jacques Lacan, who devoted two chapters to this dream in Seminar XI, argued that this call represents the trauma of the father who cannot save his son.<sup>[10]</sup> As Lubin writes, "Waking from the dream allowed the father to avoid the encounter with the real trauma. The dream does not function here as the

[8] Avi Lubin, curatorial text for the exhibition "Something's Happened to Us, Father," Chelouche Gallery for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, 2017.

[9] Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. and ed. James Strachey, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

[10] Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Seminar XI, trans. A. Sheridan, London: Hogarth Press, 1977, pp. 29-41, 53-64.

fulfillment of a wish, as implied in the earlier chapters in Freud's book. It makes the father face the Real, the trauma he cannot deal with outside the dream, the agony that cannot be expressed in words."<sup>[11]</sup>

One way or another, the Real is related here to trauma and death. I would now like to attend to this notion of the Real as a botanical, biological or organic element that recurs throughout Sapir's oeuvre, and which has served as a guiding principle in the course of this discussion. It seems that throughout the development of Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index, from Overtuned Cryptid to Fetal Baby, from the mucous scrotum to the slough crumbling off the dancers' bodies, Sapir sought to distill the same experience of a physical, fleshy existence, of a biological organism, the core of the Real, which in Lacan's terms expresses the fusion of life and death into a strange, amorphous, unidentified entity. This is the moment in which the body as a cultural form becomes flesh, an organic material, natural and degradable: "the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things . . . the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something that provokes anxiety."<sup>[12]</sup>

A similar concern with the Real arises repeatedly in the writings of Slavoj Žižek, who is known for his popular interpretation of Lacan's work. In his essay "Passions of

[11] Avi Lubin, curatorial text.

[12] The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: "The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis," Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 154-155.

the Real, Passions of Semblance,” he writes: “When we get too close to the desired object, erotic fascination turns into disgust at the Real of the bare flesh.”<sup>[13]</sup> Writing elsewhere about the film director David Lynch and his double treatment of the human body and flesh, of what happens under the skin, as well as about a range of science fiction and horror films, Žižek speaks of crude reality and its dissolution,<sup>[14]</sup> of “mucous stuff of the life-substance.”<sup>[15]</sup>

The unexpected malignant, wicked, and subversive element (Žižek’s “Real”) sheds light on the implicitly threatening dimension concealed beneath the seemingly normal semblance of reality. This attention to rot and dissolution underscores the tension between the mundane, bourgeois reality unfolding on the surface and the tremulous, infected “slab of life.” In this context, one can also recall the repulsive liquid creature in the film series Alien (1979), or the human fly in David Cronenberg’s film The Fly (1986), as well as, more recently, that headless “thing” in the television series Stranger Things. As technology continues to advance, the monster of the Real appears increasingly repulsive and threatening. This is the monster that Žižek calls “the absolute living creature, the pure essence of life.” It is the most palpable visual expression of a pure libido, a plastic form of skinned

[13] Slavoj Žižek, “Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance,” in Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates, London: Verso, 2002, p.6.

[14] Slavoj Žižek, “Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears,” October 58, Fall 1991, pp. 45–68. See also Slavoj Žižek, “David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression,” in The Metastases of Enjoyment, Six Essays on Women and Causality, London: Verso, 1994, pp. 113–137.

[15] See ibid., p. 150.



organicity - a glimmer of a bodiless life, a perfect corporeality. According to Žižek, this is precisely the source of the ambiguity underlying the postmodern image: the hyper-real strategy provokes a sense of disgust with the Real, while simultaneously serving as a barrier that enables the subject to keep his distance from the Real and to protect himself against its intrusion.<sup>[16]</sup>

This, perhaps, is the key for understanding Sapir's obsessive strategy - from his striving for a cryptid hybridity to his engagement with life and death, which is enfolded within life as a promise (or an appeal to the father). The very creation of an enigmatic, bodiless organic presence enabled him to keep a protective distance from it, yet he no longer seems to be in need of this protection. The infiltration of life itself, through the expansion of his artistic language to include photography and video, has led to a turning point at which Fetal Baby and related representations of the cryptid real have been disposed of as an unnecessary surplus, a now useless object. Only time will tell whether Sapir has reached a point of no return in the evolution of his oeuvre, or whether the concern with the organic Real will return to preoccupy him.

[16] Slavoj Žižek, "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears."

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