

Tali Tamir

The Reversed Parade

2.

A land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof.

Its well-wishers consume its well-wishers.

Change all of the above to the future.

— Dan Pagis, from **Exercises in Applied Hebrew**¹

What do you perceive as normal?

Normal is living in a more mature society. A society that has better distinctions, more clearly defined lines between the private and the public. A society where the army barracks are in their place, rather than dominating everyday life. A society whose capacity to identify with the pain of others enables it to better relate to its own pain, rather than continually repressing it.

— Shuka Glotman²

A. The Tenants

Shuka Glotman's installation **Here Live Happily Mr. Poetic and Mr. Pathetic** was devised in rewind: it reconstructs a typical 1960s Israeli living space. Born in 1953, five years younger than the State, Glotman grew up along with it. During the 1960s he turns into a teen, whereas the State already approaches its twentieth year. In terms of self-image, there is no finer time than this for the State, whose ultimate archetypes are a young boy and girl,

and Youth—its real time. The 1960s furnish a perfect parallel between the historical phase and the idyllic one: this is exactly how it would have liked to remain forever. This is her life, this is her time: **Noa at 17**^{*}. While still in the prime of youth, she celebrates her great victory—the Six-Day War. Like any adolescent girl, she is dazzled and dizzy, losing herself entirely, totally succumbing to the intoxication of power and might. Virility being her internal code, she never questions the unwavering, power-minded male rituals.

Glotman chose that very moment—the moment of overwhelming victory, right after the Six-Day War, the culmination of the Israeli dream (“the phase in which the disease took root,” says Glotman)—reintroducing it into the field of visibility and consciousness. Glotman reenacts the great victory parade of Israel's 20th Independence Day in 1968: a parade which departed from Shoafat and ended at the gates of Bethlehem—a cross section of the expanded united city. A monumental, ambitious parade which adopted the Fascist disposition of a power-oriented, victorious army. On the television screen in the reconstructed living room, facing the sofa and armchairs, vis-à-vis the domesticity and familial intimacy, Glotman has the historic parade retrace its steps: the tanks go in reverse, the soldiers march backwards. The act of tampering with the movement orientation is the only detail deviating from the exhibition's realistic pretense: a minor change, which takes a few seconds to grasp. Glotman wishes to create a cognitive dissonance, projecting on the spirit of the entire installation. The parade ends with colorful fireworks in the skies of Jerusalem; the decision to live with the euphoria has already been made.

Glotman is haunted by Israeli reality. His biography attests that he had attempted to escape it several times: he lived in London for a long period of time, and for quite a while in a secluded, nature-oriented community in the Galilee, faraway from the local turmoil. However, all his attempts to take photographs of open green landscapes, far removed from human socio-political occurrences, were doomed to failure. Glotman's anxious alertness repeatedly leads him to any place where there is a developing climate of human

and cultural friction. He continually moves along winding routes linking Mt. Meron with Elkosh, Nazareth and Metullah with Dir-el-Kassi and the Arab Usha; Be'er Sheva, Ramla and the Muslim cemetery in Lod are familiar sites, alongside Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Modi'in, and Jerusalem.

Glotman does not perceive Israeliness in terms of a sociological research or an anthropological arrayment of a culture to be studied closely, but rather as a frantic entanglement of phenomena, occurrences, objects, and fragments of information, somewhere entrapped therewithin is his own life: his parents' home, Tel Aviv of the 1950s and 1960s, his military service, the wars in which he fought, his sleepless nights, his sanity. Glotman's private obsession to collect, record and register every possible detail, without regard for any aesthetic or contextual hierarchy—an obsession which has long transcended the boundaries of his original medium, photography, onto every other possible piece of data—corresponds to an ongoing psychoanalytical process seeking to trace every detail, as marginal as it may be in the patient's life, in the hope of pinpointing the traumatic moment and from there build himself anew. Glotman is not a photographer who documents the city outskirts or the margins of society. He positions himself at the margins of the photograph: he uses a miniature camera, neither looking into the viewfinder, nor focusing, nor selecting the frame—"blind photography." He merges the photographic with everything that is non-photographic. He is not "The man behind the camera," he is there, within, in the midst of the hustle and bustle, and only later does he retreat into his studio at Mitzpe Abirim, where he processes, deconstructs and reconstructs the myriad of his collected images.

Glotman belongs to a generation that was not blessed with the ability to remain indifferent towards the public sphere. Like many others who grew up during those years, he is bound by the same oppressive need to repeatedly contain the public sphere, unable to resist it. His compulsion to continually mirror, both for himself and for his viewers, the

local cultural environment as he has experienced it was generated by an urge diametrically opposed to the universalistic drive that inspired Israeli artists during the 1940s and 1950s, as well as to the international, career-oriented drive motivating young artists in the 1990s. Glotman and members of his generation, such as David Reeb and Arnon Ben-David, who as teenagers witnessed and participated in the euphoria of the great victory of '67, and as soldiers in the '73 Yom Kippur War had undergone the shock of disillusionment, experienced in their bodies and souls the shift from belief to doubt, from identification to growing alienation. Thus, the private-public sphere delineated by Glotman at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is not merely a reconstruction of a period—it is a metaphorical construction of a mental-psychic map, at once disconcerting and amusing, collapsing under the burden of the engulfing chaos. Glotman's personal statement relates how hard it is for him to live with this burden.

"There is no despair in art," wrote Israel Ring in the young Israel of the early 1950s. "Art embedding despair cannot be dubbed art,"³ he said, calling to order a Zionist-utopic culture that cannot afford introducing symbols of despair, endeavoring to repress any pain and loss. In its desire to cast a gigantic screen of optimism over an intricate, scarred reality, Zionist-Israeli culture has obstructed any possibility of expressing private distress and any channel of criticism from within. The demand for optimism complemented the idyllic landscape profile—sun, sea, and waves of grain—a landscape without poverty, without discrimination, without ruins of deserted villages. These were exalted by the sabra's eternal youth, like the jewel in the crown. How does one age in the land of the rising sun? How does one express despair within its bounds?

The school system sought to foster a bright world of blue and white, where there is a clear distinction between good and evil, low and high, right and wrong. The upbringing in the Glotman family home, in the spirit of the meticulous German school, tended to restrain emotion and encourage self-control, thus developing self-discipline which internalized

rather than externalized the pain. As a grown man, who ostensibly succeeded in coping with the range of conflictual, unsettling experiences introduced by the local, both military and civil, reality, Glotman finds himself exhausted and dispirited in view of a reality which cannot be disciplined, which carries an emotional burden begging for expression. Like a biological cell, reality splits, producing countless mutations. It is refracted, divided, born anew at each and every moment. It is chaotic, cacophonous, blending the street with the home, the home with the street. It seeks to be rational, yet fails to remain lucid and clear. Glotman realizes he does not possess the differentiating power, and reality, in turn, lacks the capacity to become lucid. It is like a "supermarket" of images: an accumulation of details and impressions which cannot be digested completely, but only in a fragmentary, personal and associative manner. The tenants—Mr. Poetic and Mr. Pathetic (and perhaps they are two who are in fact one?)—dwell in this unruly space between the repressed and the expressed, in the tension between the poetry of the personal and the pathos of the public.

B. The Apartment

1. *Every apartment consists of a variable, but finite, number of rooms.*
2. *Each room has a particular function.*⁴

This is how Georges Perec opens his discussion of the space called "apartment" in his book **Species of Spaces and Other Pieces**. "A sitting-room," Perec elucidates, "is a room in which there are armchairs and a couch."⁵ According to the imaginary timetable sketching the various functions of the rooms by the hours of the day, the sitting-room comes into operation in the evening. Then, at 20:30, "The father and the mother go into the sitting-room, they watch television or else they listen to the radio, or else they play cards, or else the father reads the newspaper while the mother does some sewing, in short they while away the time."⁶ In Glotman's living room the TV is on, the radio is on the shelf.

What is the exact time? Is it the 9 o'clock evening news on Channel 1, or is it a live broadcast of the noontime Independence Day parade, at the height of the celebrations?

The living space of Mr. Poetic and Mr. Pathetic consists of four metaphorical living areas: living room, porch, bomb shelter, and entresol, while the space in-between symbolizes the street and the public exterior. As in the intricate iconographical structure of a cathedral, there is a correspondence between the content and meaning of the image on one hand, and its architectonic location on the other: the Saints are located on the central apse, and the sinners on the gargoyles. Similarly, Glotman has positioned his inventory of images in accordance with their functions in the living space: the repressed and perplexing is pushed to the bomb shelter-basement; the adorned, iconic and collective faces the porch facade; and the dream scraps have dissolved into the empty entresol. The interspaces are packed with exterior images, whereas the bourgeois living room is devoid of any photographic image, furnished only with "real" objects reflecting the spirit of the period. From the outside it reveals its metaphorical existence as a setting construction made of coulisses, baring the electric wires, leaving peepholes at the four corners of the room, which connect it to the world outside. On the inside, it is frozen, like a memorial room for a well-known personality: roped off to prevent audience entry, it preserves a biographical memory of a clean, spotless room, divest of any sign of life, yielding to the maternal regime of tidiness and order. Its content is a mixture of iconic objects bearing familial, public and national meaning: indeed, there is a sofa, armchairs and a bookcase. Arranged on the shelves are the **Encyclopaedia Hebraica**, the writings of S. Y. Agnon and Joseph Hayyim Brenner, and the victory album of the Six-Day War. On the floor—an artillery shell with a cotton branch placed inside. Laid on the living room table, decorated with family pictures, are blue Hebron glassware, a copper bowl bearing the portrait of Moshe Dayan, an Arab jar with a thistle. A striped carpet from the Old City of Jerusalem is spread on the floor, and a painting of Safed landscapes adorns the wall. Placed on top of the record player is a photograph of Glotman's father in his youth, wearing a

starched-collar shirt, reminiscent of a uniform. In the background the sound of fighter planes is heard from time to time, and a rhythmical-optimistic song accompanying the backward marching parade. The private, biographical living room (oppressive in its silent sterility) merges with the post-1967 social-Israeli portrait, extending the aesthetics so as to contain the “new authenticity” of the symbols of occupation and militarism: the naturalized artillery shell, the General’s portrait, and Hebron glassware. Reflected opposite the living room door, as if it were the horizon of another world, is the Museum’s display space of the Old Masters—an aesthetic rejected from the local canon, left behind once the boundaries of Israeli modernism had been demarcated.

The bomb shelter’s level of realism is rendered less accurately than that of the reconstructed living room, and is more symbolic-perceptive: it is located at the same level as the living room, yet its interior is dark, narrow and elongated; on the longitudinal wall, a little below eye level, there is a peephole onto the space. The shelter contains repressed testimonies of the Palestinian presence latently woven into Israeliness; signs of militarism, intercultural stereotypes and paradoxes: images of vestiges of Arab villages, objects found among the village ruins, *keffiyehs*, images of fighters, weapons, a map of Israel in Arabic, a map of the Arab villages prior to the 1948 war, photographs of the village *Mukhtar* (leader) found in the ruins, a scorched Arab newspaper printed in the Occupied Territories with a photograph of Ariele Deri kissing the hand of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. A stereotype of an Arab riding a camel, a pioneer riding a horse, a shepherd wearing a *keffiyeh*—an Arab or a Jew? Glotman manipulated the photographic images, gaping “eyes” in them, spraying them white, shooting them against the backdrop of a fig leaf, constructing a collage therefrom, crossing them with data from another culture, another language: Chinese, Yiddish, Arabic.

Raised by a flight of stairs, thus allowing a heightened perspective of the entire space, the entresol is empty of images, offering a clean and isolated space for observation and

contemplation. As opposed to Glotman’s shelter, whose walls are not immune to the conflictual reality, and rather than protecting from danger, it is densely crowded and disconcerting, the entresol is stripped of a functional status, serving as a true refuge. It is only there that an intimate, confessional space is created, one which can lend an ear to the private voice. The act of emptying the entresol is a rebellious one, subverting the concrete realism of the installation as a whole. Free of *Horror vacui*, the entresol space creates a “pocket” of exposed consciousness, or to quote Perec, “a useless room”: “a functionless space.” Perec challenges the definitions of his living spaces: “It wouldn’t be a junkroom, it wouldn’t be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space.... How does one think of nothing? How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something, an activity, a function, a destiny, a gaze, a need, a lack, a surplus...?”⁷ The porch facing the exterior, toward the Museum’s new sculpture garden, manifests the “excess of contents” in the local culture: decorated with festive flags, it externalizes a smiling and optimistic, obedient and familiar portrait.

The apartment image, utterly simple and basic, as it were—“...it is...like that, and not otherwise, that architects and town planners see us as living or want us to live”⁸—serves Glotman as an open image originating in a biographical memory of his parents’ home, continuing in the universal existence of Everyman. The link between the mundane, simple, and low on one hand, and the conceptual, political, and principled on the other, charges Glotman’s installation with complexity, exposing how pathetic is his private attempt at maintaining the life of a creative artist under the Israeli circumstances, “which radicalize to the point of paradox the artist’s role.” The very engagement with social critique in the existing socio-political situation, Glotman maintains, assists in its fixation: “The artist in his activity, be it the most subversive, is bound to be a collaborator and serve as a cover-up,” he can never change a single thing in the problematic reality. Thus, in fact, he reinforces the existing order by assisting his social environment create a seemingly

normal appearance within whose framework there is room both for artistic activity and for conceptual criticism and opposition. In other words: since he cannot essentially alter reality, the artist serves as an "ordered, regulated drainage and clearing house of aggression."⁹

The transformation of the artist, against his will, into a collaborative, normalizing factor in post-modern society has pushed Glotman's artistic practice into a more total direction, transcending the boundaries of style and genre to the point of eliminating the stylistic component and fusing the components of life and art. The point where "everything" may be incorporated in the artistic assemblage assumes the responsibility of renouncing the photographer's aura, as well as the aura of the traditional ready-made. Glotman has introduced a banal dimension into the choice of the photographic frame, likening it to the status of a note written by an anonymous writer. Thus he transforms himself into a "photographer unknown," so to speak, who blurs the boundaries of his artistic "self." By the same token, the road was clear for a total relinquishment of photographic technology in favor of an intense preoccupation with language, as part of a whole range of local phenomena. "Leave school, only by order of the military governor can you go back to school!" a phrase in applied Hebrew, translated into spoken Arabic, taken from the "Occupation phrase book" for soldiers serving in the Occupied Territories. In 1994, in an installation done in collaboration with the Arab poet Nida'a Khouri at the Givat Haviva Jewish-Arab Center for Peace, Glotman reworked a series of pages from the "Occupation phrase book," performing aesthetic-ornamental manipulations upon them, such as gaping almond-shaped "eyes," painting and perforation. The routine of occupation and oppression—interrogating prisoners and detainees, threatening school children, curbing demonstrations, etc.—was "camouflaged," as it were, by a series of actions indifferent to the content of the written words. In the Winter of 1999, on the gallery walls of Ami Steinitz Contemporary Art, Glotman inscribed clusters of corresponding phrases, mapping out the various nuances underlying the language of the occupation, exposing its political

pragmatism: "The good fence / The strong hand / The ticking bomb / The revolving door." A linguistic inventory of "applied Hebrew" differentiating between "the one with blood on his hands" and "the one without blood on his hands."

C. Borders

A cross between the private discourse and the political discourse occurs unexpectedly in the work **Borderline**, 1997 [cat. 20], containing photographs of Israel's northern border and a transcribed conversation between Glotman and a palm reader analyzing his psychological personality. In **Borderline** Glotman delves into the threatened, anxious "self," exploring the limits of his own resistance against the mental difficulties inherent in Israeli reality. He lets his viewer/reader in on a discussion concerning the nature of his parents ("Who's intolerant?... Who's skeptical?... Who's stubborn?... Who's friendlier?"), unfolding an analysis of the emotional relations in the family ("Mother, yes, friendly, but not a deep relationship, she is also not very open, she's reserved, father is too") and the degree of emotional, intimate expression ("...there was no discussion, they didn't go inside to see what was happening to you, maybe something was hard for you..."), continuing in the same sequence to border sights, the barbed-wire fence, a bullet-riddled "Stop!" sign. The work **Borderline** is located on one of the shelter's external walls, rather than in the family living room, conveying some of the perplexity and introversion of the Israeli family, the lack of intimacy, and the difficulty in expressing emotions and distress on a genuine scale of intensity. It alludes to borderline zones of flight from a reality which pierces the individual within it, cross-firing him with frenzied events, conflicts and data. "The great yearning for normalcy," anxious for the boundaries of intimacy in Israeli society, endeavors to legitimize it in both the public sphere and in the familial living room. "If political photography implies personal photography," wrote the late Meir Agassi on Glotman's exhibition "The Bright Side of Life" (1992), "if it alludes to the manner in which the collective experience or consciousness provokes the self-defending,

troubled private consciousness, invading the closed porch of privacy, on one level of violence or another, intervening, haunting it like a nightmarish mechanism, repeated excessively to the point of indifference, then Glotman's photography is perhaps one of the most profound and cumulative political statements in contemporary Israeli photography."¹⁰

Notes

* The title of a celebrated Israeli film (written and directed by Yitzhak Zepel Yeshurun), tracing the process of a young girl's maturing in early 1950s Israel, set against the background of the ideological debate over the future of kibbutz socialism.

¹ Dan Pagis, **Double Exposure**, Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1982, p. 9 (Hebrew).

² The quotes of Shuka Glotman are all taken from conversations between the author and the artist held prior to the exhibition.

³ Israel Ring, "There Is No Despair in Art," **Orlogin**, 9 (1953). Ed. Avraham Shlonsky (Hebrew).

⁴ Georges Perec, **Species of Spaces and Other Pieces**, ed. and trans.: John Sturrock, Penguin, 1997, p. 28.

⁵ Perec 1997, p. 27.

⁶ Perec 1997, p. 30.

⁷ Perec 1997, p. 33.

⁸ Perec 1997, p. 31.

⁹ Text written by Shuka Glotman, "Jester, Spy and Artist," *Mitzpe Abirim*, May 8, 1998. Published in **Studio Art Magazine**, 100 (January-February 1999), pp. 36–37 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ Meir Agassi, "Shuka Glotman: The Bright Side of Life," text for an exhibition at Camera Obscura Art Gallery, April–May 1992 (Hebrew). Curator: Michal Heiman.