Paternal Milk On Polar Interactions in Hadas Ophrat's Works Tali Tamir

> "My alter ego believed in the imagination, in creation – in the discovery of new metaphors; I myself believed in those that correspond to close and widely acknowledged likenesses, those our imagination has already accepted: old age and death, dreams and life, the flow of time and water."
>
> - Jorge Luis Borges, "The Other"[1]

"My body requires urgent duplication," typed poet David Avidan during one of "Eight Authentic Conversations with a Computer,"[2] where he conducted a revealing heart-to-heart talk with a screen and a keyboard. "Why do you say that your body requires urgent duplication?" the software rephrased Avidan's yearning in an interrogative sentence form, "I want to be here, there and elsewhere, at the same time, and this is impossible with only a single body,"[3] the avant-garde poet admitted his weakness. "'To duplicate yourself' – what does it mean?" the computer insisted. "To become a multiplicity, both corporeal and incorporeal," its human interlocutor replied.[4] Unlike Avidan's futuristic megalomania, Jorge Luis Borges offers an everyday reality where the duplicated "self" is embodied by the surrealist presence of two different people who are, in fact, one. In his story "The Other," the elderly writer sitting on a park bench, meets a man who turns out to be his younger self: "The person one meets is always oneself," the elder tries to reassure the panic-stricken man who is himself, in light of the strange encounter,

"That is what's happening to us now, except that we are two. Wouldn't you like to know something about my past, which is now the future that awaits you?"[5]

The task is to generate two that are one, whether by duplication of the body or multiplication of consciousness, as Borges maintains in the afterword to the collection of stories including "The Other": "My duty was to ensure that the interlocutors were different enough from each other to be two, yet similar enough to each other to be one."[6]

The issue of opening up the psyche to the emergence of different identities, without challenging one's mental health, by heaping additional layers of imagination, time and sexuality, has extensively preoccupied Hadas Ophrat in the various media in which he has worked – writing, puppetry, performance, installation, video, and sound works. His intricate oeuvre is characterized by attempts to bring contradictory states together, to fuse identities and situations, and enable one entity to be reflected in the other. The dynamic of opposites inspiring Ophrat's work as an innate condition, recalls the classical figure of the theatrical fool, whose role, as masterfully defined by Arieh Sachs, was to introduce a foreign, individual element into conformist society, "to run wild (at designated times) in the spirit of parody, humor and folly, to rebel against social as well as natural and cosmic orders."[7] In the friction between art and life, as manifested in Ophrat's work, however, the parodic dimension is dimmed, and the

emphatic sentiment is shaped. As a former practitioner of experimental theater and a performance artist at present, Ophrat indeed adopts the role of the "outsider" who sheds light on the repressed subconscious and undermines the orders of life,[8] but emotionally he is strongly motivated by his own mental intensity and is connected to biographical elements. In this double move, while his "alter ego" – to use Borges's words – switches medium for medium, one identity for another, as an anarchistic act of mischief, he himself preserves a subterranean current that remains faithful to the basic existential questions: life in its flow toward death, and the relations of the one – the self – with his own past, with the world, and with others.

I. The Old Fetus

The last of "the nine commandments guiding my life" itemized in text no. 85 in Hadas Ophrat's 2004 book *Ever Never* reads: "To divide my life into two concurrent axes of action: from birth to death… The first axis is nourished by the womb, by the primal raw material of which a man is cast and which he processes throughout his life. The second axis is severance from the umbilical cord, detaching oneself from the source of nourishment, accepting death, and the mental and emotional preparation for that time. To exhaust both axes as a single dynamic."[9] Two years later, in 2006, Ophrat returned to the double frequency splitting from the womb's nourishment and the subsequent detachment from it,

and created – this time in a plastic language – a suggestive, intrinsic image of a double-identity entity: fetal-uterine on the one hand, yet infused with the consciousness of death and old age. As a performer morally committed to physical and mental presence in real time, Ophrat cast himself into the theatrical situation, assumed the "fetus's suit" and shot the real action on video in the space where the work is now presented. From this specific mid-life moment he intertwines past and future and propels them in a single dynamic while eliminating the linear point of view that perceives a man's life as rungs in a ladder flowing from one to another. In the psychological "field" outlined by Ophrat, the "old fetus" now transpires at the heart of a garden which forms for him a tolerant, containing sphere that can readily accept the miracle of the enfolded time embodied in it.

Like a middle "third eye," the round pool is gaped open in the garden's heart. While the garden looks outward, the middle eye looks inward, imploding into chasms. Ophrat's garden is the epitome of order and organization. He recognizes the importance of external pattern and follows its outline. He knows the secret of lucid paths and the exact meeting points of the sides of the squares constructing it. The garden is typified by aridity – it is neither verdant nor flowered, and is devoid of both thickets and hidden corners. Instead, the gray color of the trees and vases encounters the skin-like floor color. A stylized pattern of myrtle (Heb. Hadas) branches with their small leaves emerge intermittently, extending on the

ground, merging with the surface to which it clings, as if it were "inscribed in the flesh." Bearing in mind the artist's first name, Hadas, suggests a possible link between the garden's myrtle-decorated floor and a symbolical representation of his body, despite the ostensible dissociation between the anatomy and the metaphor.[10]

A constant murmur is heard in the garden's space. It moves between the planters, slowly marking the link between its wanderings in the space and the movement of the "old fetus" in the umbilical pool. The sound turns out to be a latent blood circulation flowing in the "fetus's" body, while beating in the garden's veins.

"The old fetus," a delusion that appears and dissolves, resembles a figure wrapped in a raw-embryonic shell, indrawn. Armless, it tries in vain to rise to its feet; lacking an arm outstretched towards it, it falls on its back, helpless. With feet up in the air, the red letters inscribed on the soles become visible: HO, the Latin initials of the artist's name – Hadas Ophrat. The face and neck extend beyond the fetal "cocoon," generating a sharp transition between the fuzzy-cutaneous texture of the shell and the stained skin devoid of make-up, which exposes the wrinkles of age and time. The bald skull links the figure of the mature man and the fetus-cocoon imprisoning it therein.

"[I]n spite of his tremendous efforts, [he] couldn't get up, HYPERLINK "%20http://www.geocities.com/cyber_explorer99/garciamarquezoldman.html" ~~impeded by his enormous wings~~," Gabriel García Márquez wrote about another old-child, an angel who landed in the yard of the poor Pelayo and Elisenda in a sequestered fishing village in the story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings."[11] As the creator of puppet theater for adults, Hadas, in collaboration with his wife Amalia, created the play "Icarus"[12] which brings together two flight-legends: Márquez's aforementioned story and the Greek myth of Icarus. The play's plot emphasizes the tension between the yearning for the lofty and spiritual, and the corporeal limitations. "Man is created from two dichotomous elements – in the image of God and from dust," the program read. "He oscillates between heaven and earth, infused with a sense of the miraculous versus the mundane and insipid. He tries to substitute a piece of earth for a piece of the heavens, but the force of gravity is stronger than he is, he wobbles, once vanquished, once victor." Ophrat shaped a third figure in the plot – an infant – "the offspring of Mother Earth. The old man needs the baby, from which to suckle its vitality and with the help of which to rehabilitate his damaged wings. The baby needs the old man to teach him something that the man of the earth has already forgotten."

Can one draw affinities between the "old fetus" appearing in *Renaissance* and the theatrical encounter in Ophrat's early work between baby and old man? After

twenty years the poles meet again, this time not as two disparate figures in a play, but as a circular-Ouroboros* figure which allows the one to be reflected in the other, and be fused in it inseparably. Thus the chronological order of things has lost its value, and the experience of desistence already echoes at the moment of nascence.

"But," as asserted by Emmanuel Levinas: "it is the embodied subject who, in collecting being, will raise the curtain,"[13] the very body which Didier Anzieu has described as "a vital dimension of human reality and as a pre-sexual and irreducible general datum, the anaclitic grounding for all the psychical functions."[14] In *Renaissance* there is a strong physical presence further reinforced by its solitude in the empty space. Its surface is expanded, enhancing the over-exposure of the skin. The naked body of the "old fetus" conveys the impression that the pale, fuzzy skin is too thin to curb feelings or dull pain. At times it appears "more naked than the naked of skin," exposing its sensitivity which is "uncovered, open like a city declared open to the approaching enemy, sensibility beneath all will, all act, all declaration, all taking stands – is vulnerability itself."[15]

The scorched vulnerability and the lack of contact, alongside the mantric attempt to stand up, project onto the cutaneous surface of the "old fetus" what Anzieu has dubbed, in an acute insight regarding the affinities between biology and

psychology, "Skin Ego": a primary sense of existence totally dependent on external touch: "a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development…, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body."[16]

Beyond its being a surface and a stabilizing protective boundary against penetration by the outside, the skin, according to Anzieu, forms, prior to all other means at man's disposal, "a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations."[17] "From before birth," Anzieu maintains, "cutaneous sensations introduce the young of the human species into a world of great richness and complexity, a world as yet diffuse, but which awakens the perception-consciousness system, forms the basis for a general and episodical sense of existence and opens up the possibility of an originary psychical space."[18]

From an ethic of experimental theater, fostered by revealing psychical states, Ophrat introduces an image of groping withdrawal to an "originary psychical space" into the stylized plastic language, a primary hunger for what D. W. Winnicott has designated with the unforgettable term "holding" – a calming, stabilizing embrace or containment, a sense of confident touch resulting from the infant's physical nestling against his mother's body. A physical separation between the mother and her baby, or, to use Bion's words – the "letting go of this

clinging grip" elicits a "nameless dread" in the infant's psyche and might signify "the catastrophe haunting the nascent psyche of the human baby."[19] While Winnicott and Bion believed that the contact with the mother's body is a primary condition for the infant's psychical development, Anzieu located that contact on the very epidermis which absorbs the stimuli of speaking "through the body,"[20] which thus becomes a "mirror of the soul": fissures of the skin metaphorize cracks in the psyche, and therefore "the extant of the damage to the skin is proportionate to the depth of psychical harm done."[21]

Ophrat's pre-verbal "fetal allegory" insists on a charged, disconcerting presence that cumulated the vitality of an inner fantasy, one which oscillates between the exposed, cutaneous focal point and the raw, self-enclosed image. Psychoanalyst A. H. Modell used the explicit image of a "cocoon," reminiscent of the cocoon-like shell of the "old fetus," to characterize "…'variations of a womb phantasy – a state where one is cut off from interaction from the environment, where one is not "really in the world",' where there is 'an illusion of self-sufficiency and yet a total dependence upon the care-taking functions of the maternal environment'."[22] Unlike the pathological perception of the regressive ego, however, which attempts to deny birth and revert to being contained by the mother, while internally dissociating itself from the external world, Harry Guntrip offers a very different interpretation: discussing the fantasy of a return to the maternal womb, he maintains that it is a passion so powerful that "that it becomes the dominant

motivational thrust within the personality. All other motivations, all relations with external and internal objects, become defensive bastions against this regressive pull." As an adherent of the regressive pull toward flight, Guntrip explained that it always entails a longing for renewal, "the regressed ego seeks to return to the prenatal security of the womb, to await a rebirth into a more hospitable human environment."[23]

The option of "re-birth" also lurks beyond Ophrat's work. Having collapsed the "defensive bastions" or, more precisely, shifted them to the peripheral realm of the "garden," to what may be termed the "superego," he has plunged into the regressive fantasy, while remaining attentive to the Ouroboros principle characterizing his thought: the threshold rolls not into the abyss beyond it, but onto a new essence born from within in. The passion for dissociation, like the passion for impregnation, originates in a time gradually evolving toward rebirth.

The Ouroboros essence occurs in *Renaissance* in another dimension as well: not only in the polar encounter between the fetus and the old man, but also in the metamorphosis between the hapless figure that cannot stand up, and its bursting, overflowing content. The embryonic, sack-like envelope contains a considerable amount of seed that spills from its orifices, and is scattered around it. The "old fetus," wallowing helplessly on the ground, turns out to be a type of "Shiva-Linga"[24] as well – the potent Indian god that links phallic masculinity

(linga) with the appearance of an old beggar, generously spreading his sperm. The abundance of seed is perceived as masculine, but the anatomy is revealed to be feminine as the seeds ooze from a slit gaped open in-between the legs of the "old fetus"… Instead of penetrating the female vagina, the seeds are emitted from it, indicating a double inversion between penetration and being penetrated, between charging from without and containing from within. From the point of view of the male body, Ophrat offers a radical shift of the imagination, not as a yearning for sexual transformation, but, according to Lewis Aron, as an extension of the symbolization capacity and an enrichment of psychic life.[25] a challenge striving to deconstruct the binary male-female, masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual oppositions, and ultimately – the traditional perception of cohesive identity, on the one hand, and a multiplicity of identities and transformation ability, on the other. The change of perspective, Aron suggests, introduces a broader option for shaking traditional perceptions and distinctions, and for "deconstructing dichotomies."

The "pool" is not dichotomous in itself, but only in relation to the garden surrounding it. Within it, the round frame overflows with seeds; the artist's hands "bathe" in them, passing them between his fingers, immersing in them, performing rituals of touch and bathing. The "re-birth" option is implied not only by the propagative charge that pours out and fills the "pool"; it also emerges from a sequence of touch-images that respond to the scorching of the empty space

and the entity of absence in the fetus's image. The link between the two entities – between the seed-charged fetus and the protective space around it – occurs through the murmur rising from the pots, buzzing the hum of passion to whoever is attentive.

II. Paternal Milk: Notes on Previous Works

The whey that poured over Ophrat's body during the 24 hours in which he walked along the patrol-road encircling Kibbutz Nachshon (*Milky Way*, 2001), dripped from the sacks-udders he wore on his shoulders, which dropped to his belly and thighs, symbolizing the artwork's capacity to skirt familiar definitions and generate – if only metaphorically and momentarily – abounding, generous "masculine milk," "paternal milk." The metaphor created by Ophrat at the video biennial "Blurrr" in Kibbutz Nachshon refers not only to the reversal of sexual identities, but also indicates, through the association between male and female anatomy, a major theme occupying him, pertaining to the very essence of his being an artist: a cyclical, closed production process of one man, like an autarchic, self-nourishing and self-sufficient monad reflecting the creator in the producer. At the same time, however, the artist wanders in the world, projecting on his surrounding: as a nomad he arrives at a place of residence, offering himself to be milked (exploited?), allowing the audience around to fondle his "udders" and grab a fresh lump of newly-curdled cheese… Surrendering his body to the total

importunity of nourishment and the open possibility of burrowing has exposed the female physical psychology clear and open on the male-artist's body. "Art," thus, is perceived as female, if one construes the term "female" as a productive, nourishing, procreating, life-giving body…

In text no. 57 (in *Ever Never,* 2004) Ophrat created an ultimate image of role-reversal: "You can close your eyes and imagine a midwife placing you on his body, the father's body. The placenta is still moist, the fluid is viscid. Only milk is missing on the dry-cracked lips." A baby is born to a procreating father, and the odor of the placenta tickles the nostrils… Ostensibly, the "begetting male" is a quintessential expression of the omnipotent fantasy of "being all " – both the inseminating, propagating male and the inseminated, bearing female, but Ophrat always exposes the slip stitch linking the identities, enabling them to live side by side and one within the other, without creating overcrowding or mutual threat. The pathos that could have cumulated due to the double loading of one identity on another dissolves before it ever cumulates by virtue of the irony, humor and generosity: "paternal milk" is not an industrial accomplishment, but a development of the sensorial ability; it is not over-charging, but rather – heightened containment.

The insight regarding the meaning of the identity reversal and identity diffusion also informs Ophrat's engagement with the reflection of the father figure in the

son's identity. Vis-à-vis Rembrandt's painting, *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1668-69) featured at the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, where he went to adopt his son, Ophrat is aware of the fact that the eruption of his late fatherhood marks his return to the son, more than the son's return to him: "Somehow the initiation is mine and not my son's… in a paraphrase of Rembrandt's painting, it is I who is kneeling, burying my face in my son's lap."[26] Exploration of the fatherly function and the consciousness of the paternal authority is blended with Ophrat's appeal to his own biographical father: "My father Haim, whose spirit is wherever it may be...," he wrote on the day of his son's adoption, "today I am becoming you; I connect to the natural heritage you have bequeathed me as a father…"[27]

Ophrat wore one of his father's suits for three nights as he performed *Insomnia* (2003). Wearing his father's suit, he lay on a bed, at the entrance to the exhibition space of "Omanut Haaretz" at the Reading Power Station Compound, Tel Aviv, took sleeping pills and fell into a deep sleep. The son's recorded voice emanated from the father's suit, discussing identity switches and role reversal. When he surrendered his body to the gaze and touch of the exhibition visitors, only his bare feet, marked with the initials of his name, remained as an undermining sign attesting to his original identity. In the performance *Unraveling** staged in 2006, Ophrat performed a reversed act: likewise dressed in a white shirt and dark suit, with a checkered tie, he marked a circle around himself. Sitting in its center he

unraveled the entire suit – stitch by stitch – from the pockets to the lining. At the end of the unstitching process, which took over an hour and a half, shreds of the unstitched suit and white shirt remained scattered on the floor, and the artist himself, released from his suit, left the area of the demarcated circle. An ostensibly prolonged and tiring, slow and nondramatic act, yet one charged with compact meaning of deconstruction and shedding of authority and identity, conventions and definitions; a ritual of transition from "being" to "annulment," from existent-dressed-identified to nude and devoid of identity. What at the beginning of the performance sounded like a statement referring to the garment about to be unstitched – "this is my suit" – turns out at the end of the process to indicate change and transformation: "this is my substitute," my conversion.

The mother appears in Ophrat's works in contexts of bodily distress. In the performance *Mother Tongue* (Berlin 2001), Ophrat hung upside-down for thirty minutes, his head downward and his feet tied up, while suckling milk from an IV tube. A tape attached to his navel played the recorded voice of his mother, singing lullabies (in Yiddish) to him. Unconsciously, Ophrat separated the maternal voice striving to put him to sleep (*Mother Tongue*) from the paternal sleep (*Insomnia*). At the same time, distinct dissonance was created between the lullaby sung by the mother and the pain involved in the prolonged hanging. By the same token, the milk tube – a bodiless sterile apparatus – indicated the fetal unconscious which later erupted in the figure of the "old fetus."

III. Sisters

In the video installation *Sisters* included in the current exhibition, Ophrat surrenders his hands to the care of a manicurist sitting opposite him, on the other end of a stainless steel work table. In the dialogue they conduct, over the filing and cutting tools, the theme of nursing the sick comes up: "Have you ever considered yourself in a nursing position?" Ophrat asks the woman who treats his hands, wearing a white smock. "Yes, I did once," the manicurist replies, continuing her work: pasting artificial nails on Ophrat's fingernails, cutting and polishing them. The ritual of female beautification appears discordant on the hairy male hands seen in the photographic frame. What is puzzling, however, is the conversants' disregard of what is drawn on the pasted nails: miniature portraits of ten women who played (or still play) a significant part in the artist's private biography – friends, lovers, partners to creative chapters in his life – all maintain a quiet, undeclared presence, against the backdrop of the nail treatment act. The conversation centers on other issues: "Who (did you nurse)?" The artist continues to investigate his manicurist – "Sick people? Old people? Terminal patients?"

"I have two female sentries that safeguard my defense disposition," Ophrat wrote,[28] and the ten women revealed on his filed nails, ready to be extracted like a knuckle duster, indeed appear to guard the threshold, securing his defense

disposition. They are not identified by name, only by their affiliation to the "sisterhood": they are rendered metaphorical "sisters" not only by the fact that they are variously connected to the chronicles of one man, but also by being, by virtue of this connection, what Ophrat himself dubs "a biological sister, a friend, a nurse, and a nun – all but a woman."[29] As such, they take their place at the tips of his fingers, which are also the extremities of his body, interfering with his sensory ability, continuing to grow after his death… For the cut nails – bodily leftovers cast on the table, like hair after a haircut, allude to the relationship between the living body and its extremities and residues. The nail-women grow from the tips of Ophrat's body not as a mystical aura, but as a connected-detached organ, at once organic and anorganic.

In this relationship between the singular man and the order of "sisters" Eros is sublimatedly encoded into a domesticated sexual symbol: the orchid. The voices of the artist and the manicurist emanate from the insides of two crimson-hearted white orchids, cast in porcelain and placed on low stools on either side of the table. In Western culture, the orchids uttering the interlocutors' voices, signify male passion and are associated with symbolism of fertilization and sexuality. The ancient Greek already ascribed them with erotic associations due to their sensual, exotic structure as well as due to their round tubers which were identified with male testicles (The word orchid derives from the Greek word *orkhis*, testicle). In light of this specific symbol of male sexuality, female sexuality

in the installation *Sisters* remains silent, devoid of a symbolical representation, a situation congruent with the nature of the female image emerging from it: a yearning for a caring figure, rather than lusted physicality.

"Be mother and sister to me," Bialik wrote. "Be your lap a nest for my desolate prayers"… Not as romantic as Bialik, Ophrat explores male psychology over the manicurist's table, alongside the "order of women" he has placed on his fingernails, as he transforms himself into an ally and a partner, rather than the dominant, aggressive "abbot": "I was a regional doctor," he writes in text no. 4,[30] introducing yet another character in the range of figures he assumes in his book *Ever Never*. Together with his life partner who became a nurse working by his side, he went to Upper Volta: "We did everything there," he recounts, "even surgical procedures under the light of kerosene lamps, with scalpels dipped in boiling water. It was a blood relation and a conspiracy of silence that cast mutual commitment and trust."

As in *Renaissance*, so in *Sisters*, the external space represents a domesticated aesthetic world associated with rituals of beauty and order, leading its life parallel to the threshold and edge situations gaped and interwoven in it. Another meeting point between the two works pertains to the provocations regarding the question of sexual identity: what in *Sisters* seems to be a female practice adopted by the dandy who manicures his nails – an activity that verges on the transgender

sphere, yet is not such – has become in *Renaissance* a male-female anatomy in the figure of the "old fetus" spewing seeds from a hole between its legs. In both installations Ophrat interweaves into his work female practices as an integral part of his male identity, letting the shadows of death and weakness hover between strict patterns of order, hygiene, and organization.

IV. Spice Tower

Rising 3.7 meters, black and entirely burnt, the *Spice Tower* stands between *Renaissance* and *Sisters*, decorated with a pattern of interlaced myrtle leaves – possibly a sculpture standing on a classical pedestal; possibly an identified object – an enlarged version of a spice box originally made of silver, approximately 30 cm in height. As a conceptual object it continues Ophrat's engagement with architectural-Jewish motifs (for the spice tower is also originally based on the architectural model of a tower). In 1994 in the first exhibition in which he featured sculptural objects without performance,[29] Ophrat constructed a sculptural structure based on the architectural model of the sermon platform in the Abuhav Synagogue in Safed. Ophrat's engagement with Judaica, however, does not relate to theological aspects, but rather to physical and social aspects of the religious ritual: the platform as a place of dialogue and communication, a vantage point on a community, as opposed to the spice tower – an intimate object domestically used in the *Havdalah* ceremony, whose sweet-smelling herbs and spices (among them myrtle) are supposed to arouse the senses and illuminate

the soul at the end of Sabbath. The arousal experience offered by the spice tower, with the cyclical aspect inherent in its function as an object symbolizing the end's meeting point with a new beginning, links to the option of re-birth and renaissance embedded in the show as a whole, as one chapter in an entire metamorphosis.

The spice tower is based on an anthropomorphic principle: head (virtually touching the ceiling), shoulders and torso, belly and legs, although the deliberate reference to the "self" and its shell is more accentuated in the recurring motif of the myrtle leaves forming its walls. It is the same symbolical-cutaneous motif also recurring on the Renaissance garden floor in the installation *Renaissance*, only here Ophrat has scorched the structure with a flame-thrower, until it has turned entirely black, on the verge of being brittle, and ash began cumulating on the carved leaves, shaking them to breaking point. A tension is created between the arousing, opening aspect of the spice tower and its scorched, burnt materiality.

Processes of burning and scorching have preoccupied Ophrat from the very outset of his career as a plastic artist, when he exhibited the series "Trans Positions" at Many H. Gallery, Tel Aviv (1997) – floor works combining parquet-like boards that have been burnt. Already in that early phase Ophrat spoke in a dual frequency, when he formulated his words along a bi-directional conceptual axis: "The mixed media," he wrote in the exhibition catalogue, "as seen in the

burnt surfaces, allows for simultaneous processes of development and disintegration."[32] Already back then Ophrat strove to touch upon the threshold point between a flicker of life and desistence, between existent and nonexistent, when he imprinted phosphorous ultramarine stains in the scorched surfaces that altered the conceptual axis. "To be fired with enthusiasm means to flash and light up like embers," "Enthusiasm means catching fire," wrote Claudia Hirtl,[33] in a spirit of sprouting inner vision that sparks a spontaneous combustion. Her words link Ophrat's act of scorching and Yves Klein's transcendental "Fire Paintings."

Ophrat's work technique principally resembles Klein's: instead of a brush the artist uses a gas-operated flame thrower, and instead of dipping his brush in paint he builds up the fire and directs it at the canvas or the object before him. Klein began his "Fire Paintings" facing a blank surface, and his actions left "fiery traces" on the white canvases. Ophrat, on the other hand, burns and scorches objects of his own making, bringing them to an ashen phase on the verge of disintegration, from which they either die out or are re-ignited with a puff of air. While Klein's "Fire Paintings" are warm and "burning" with the symbolism of sexuality and passion, and a blend of Eros and faith, Ophrat's scorched objects swallow passion, concealing its memory. Like Klein, Ophrat construes the artistic act as an experiment containing a performative dimension that requires alert energy and a high level of tension. Klein endeavored to touch the fire and experience that which is beyond the material and the visible reality. He perceived

the flames as a springboard toward the void. Ophrat does not refer to the fire metaphor in mystical terms, but rather regards it as a process of destruction, disintegration and erosion, to which he applies forces of restraint and control. In the performance *Tom (End/Innocence)* (2003) he "reconstructed" the burning of a bonfire, from end to beginning: surgically, with surgical pincers, the artist patiently treated a pile of glowing embers and crumbling cinders, rekindling them with a new metaphorical flame. The reconstruction of the bonfire from its extinguished condition to an image of living combustion – a move which Ophrat ascribed with the cultural meanings of reinstating a lost innocence in the local-Israeli context – provides an additional layer to the paradigm of energy reincarnation, also manifested in the figure of the "old fetus": the movement to the threshold of death, and on – back to birth, and so on and so forth, assuming that the future is buried and reflected in the past.

The extinguished, self-enclosed option emerges in Ophrat's work in the status of a cocoon encasing a new fetus. According to Levinas, desire is "to burn with another fire than need, which saturation extinguishes, to think beyond what one thinks."[34] Hence, the tower watching over the exhibition space, looking into the distance, is a tower of conquered anticipation, of radiant thought, that preserves ashes and embers for a moment of great arousal.

V. Seed Beard

Projected on a tilted 3 x 4 m. screen, the video *Seed Beard* is the "erogenous zone" in Ophrat's exhibition: colorful, warm, pertaining to touch and feel, addressing stimulation – touching the skin. The photographic frame is filled with thistles – white hairy parachutes hovering in the air, carrying a tiny black seed. These seeds flutter on Ophrat's exposed body and face, landing on his skin, blending with his chest and abdominal hair, filling his nostrils, eyes, ears, calling to mind poet Amir Gilboa's verses "When I return to my thistles / and grab a handful / and bring them to my lips / and awaken my eyelids / to the newborn moment –"[35]

Without sound, in total silence, in a hover that makes the body lose its weight and stability in the space, the camera approaches the body, demarcating a photographic frame where only the surface of the skin and the tickle of the seeds are present. The stimuli and feelings permeate the "Skin Ego," emptying it of all other contents save touch. The body is present as a type of landscape, as a mountainous, grassy ground surface, with a blessed moment of insemination hovering above. Breathing determines the movement pace, exhalation moves the seeds. The zooming-in camera exposes a diligent, stained skin that is no longer young, a body covered with graying hair, whose whiteness blends with that of the seeds. The "seed beard" – embryonic and graying at the same time – is congruent with the ambivalence underlying the consciousness of old age that responds to touch and gratification. Fleetingly, the fluttering touch cumulates to

form over-stimulation, to the point of strangulation and itch. The eyes begin to blink rapidly, the nostrils are irritated to the point of sneezing, and the body seems to take in organic substances, like a corpse after death.

Seed Beard is an encounter of a mature body with seeds in a flirtatious, quiet and light interaction, possibly an interplay, possibly a grand act of masturbation or self-insemination. At the same time, it once again recalls the autarchic monad motif – a closed bubble of self-sufficiency, one that inseminates itself with its own seeds, not requiring external stimulus.

VI. Empathy

The title of the fifth installation in Ophrat's exhibition, *Empathy*, attests to a different fundamental structure assuming presence of others beyond the self. The term "empathy" assumes that the subject is confronted by the "other" which he cannot exclude from his field of vision, an other for whom empathy develops.

In this installation Ophrat demarcated a rectangular space simulating a squash court: a parquet surface with a tall, clean, straight white wall at its end. All along the wall, in its middle, a line has been marked, reddening from within, covered with a bandage strip. From the reddening groove the banging sounds of the volleys thrust against the wall are shot into the space, bouncing against the viewer's body, standing opposite. Ophrat recorded the banging sounds with

Pressure Zone microphones adapted to receiving sound frequencies that are absorbed in surfaces, and the sound is emitted from six loudspeakers embedded in the wall.

The rectangular squash court marks a hermetic-male sphere underlain by values of power, momentum, and competitiveness. Only the trajectories of physical energy leave traces in this space: two men competing with one another to a decisive point within a closed space, while "no one's watching, no one cares, not their friends, their wives, their children," as noted by London-based writer Ian McEwan describing the pure struggle between the two protagonists of his novel, *Saturday*[36] – neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, and his friend and partner, anaesthetist Jay Strauss. McEwan's two protagonists compete before the squash wall from "the irreducible urge to win, as biological as thirst"… "They play that wall in hard straight drives, dancing in and out of each other's path, then they're chasing shots all over the court, with the advantage passing between them"... For a split second the protagonist hears real sounds of war: "Perowne feels the echoing rifle-shot crack of the ball as an oppression...," but he soon returns to the intimate-physical dimension: "Every error he makes is so profoundly, so irritatingly typical of himself, instantly familiar, like a signature, like a tissue scar or some deformation in a private place."[37] McEwan propels the banging sounds of the strokes from a wild-primordial place through the oppressive memory of a soldier to a narcissistic anxiety; thus, through the literary description, opening up

the symbolic sphere of the closed room where the two men prance like a pair of horned Billy-goats onto psychological realms.

Ophrat has given up the co-player, and created an ellipse with two focal points – he himself and the white wall – that maintain mirroring relations as they confront one another. Such a situation generates an ethical metaphor of perfect reciprocity: anything thrown into the air is immediately returned as an incontestable, non-negatable, non-regrettable necessity. The only option is to assume responsibility. When he infused the wall with the capacity to testify about the absorption power, Ophrat replaced it with a "remembering body." The body-wall whose scar is bandaged functions as a sounding board that cumulated echoes of violence and a spasm of pain. It preserves the rhythmic code of intense physical action just as a Jackson Pollock painting preserves the dynamic choreography of the painterly act within it.

Within the empty space characterizing *Empathy*, the measured sound represents the mutual tension and the unimpugnable relationship between the "one" and the "other" facing him. It is a responsibility of the type which Emmanuel Levinas has described as a traumatic impression: Others who "near or distant, impute to it (the Ego) a responsibility, unimpugnable as a traumatism, a responsibility for which it made no decision but cannot escape."[38] Like the squash ball that maintains a bidirectional, lucid relationship with its sender, forever bouncing back

at him with tremendous velocity, without being able to ignore his existence, so the Other, according to Levinas, haunts the self, forcing itself on it, as if it were a haunting obsession. As opposed to the I-Other relationship in Martin Buber's doctrine, which is created in the encounter between two, Levinas describes responsibility as a trauma of the individual, imprinted in his soul before he confronts others. "The movement of the encounter [with others] is not added to the immobile face," he wrote in his typically poetic way. "It is in this face itself."[39]

Ophrat formed a pair-bond based on trust in and responsibility for the other, in a series of works he created in conjunction with artist Guy Briller. During one of these joint actions he covered his eyes and let his partner and ex-student lead him all the way from Jerusalem to the city of Barcelona, in Spain, including border crossings, flights, and foreign, unfamiliar surroundings. Like the state of sleep to which he condemned himself in *Insomnia*, the blindness situation he chose outlines a fascinating dialectic: the distress and limitation spawn a state of trust in others. The images of great closure – sleep, blindness, a cocoon-like shell – also give rise to great dependence and inability to deny the "other." For, at the same time, the other across is also the "interlocutor: the one to whom expression expresses, for whom celebration celebrates."[40]

A similar tension is interwoven in Kafka's story "A Hunger Artist" which Ophrat adapted into an adult puppet play and directed in the early 1980s.[41] The

"Hunger Artist" – a radical metaphor for the artist's existence in the world – spent most of his life in a cage (cocoon). He dedicated his time to one thing only, to which he directed most of his thoughts and attention: improving his art; perfecting his fast to an immaculate level. For this goal he gave up anything that turned out to be superfluous and unnecessary, primarily any contact with other human beings. He would sometimes give "a courteous nod, answering questions with a constrained smile, or perhaps stretching an arm through the bars so that one might feel how thin it was, and then again withdrawing deep into himself, paying no attention to anyone or anything…"[42] At the end of the forty-day fast, the artist emerged from his cage, his entire being manifesting desperate dependence: "The artist now submitted completely; … and the whole weight of his body, a featherweight after all, relapsed onto one of the ladies…"[43] Kafka describes a sharp transition from virtuoso self-control of an ascetic, rigorous "super-ego" that refuses any temptation, to great passivity accompanied by emotional detachment and radical helplessness. At this point the exhausted "artist" required (female) therapeutic support to nurse him in his weakness.

The relationship with the other and the artist's dual existence acquire a pivotal meaning in Kafka's work, as the story of the "Hunger Artist" ends with his near-negligible death and a total forgetting of his art. Without others, the art work has dissolved and lost its value. Not only has the significance of the great, miraculous fast been emptied, but the "self" too has turned out to be "empty," for the self-

absorption of the arch-monk has not imprinted his surroundings with any meaningful traces.

"Is the Desire for Others appetite or generosity?"[44] Levinas asks in this context, as an inverted mirror image for the total lack of appetite of the Kafkaesque protagonist. Is the other situated outside the "self," beyond his field of vision, and the individual must conquer him for himself, or is he present in front of him, sprouting from within, without there being a possibility of missing him – an extension of the "self," in effect?

In Hadas Ophrat's work these options are present simultaneously, generating one another. Between the "traumatic" responsibility for others and the womb-like cocoon fantasy – two threshold situations oscillating and transmuting between "personalized" and "depersonalized," flight and presence, attachment and detachment – Ophrat's work creates the metaphorical sphere that it wishes to imagine. Against the backdrop of a lucid, architectural visual language with a spatial mass and straight, clear-cut, essentially "male" circumferential lines, the multi-dimensionality of the "self" is intertwined as a branching creeper, becoming an emblem of inner freedom which involves a great deal of generosity and containment – for external others, for the internal "other," for the changing time, and for the "self" that seeks additional realms for itself.

Notes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 410.

2. David Avidan, *My Electronic Psychiatrist: Eight Authentic Conversations with a Computer* (Tel Aviv: Levin-Epstein Modan, 1974; rep. Tel Aviv: Babel, 2001) [Hebrew].

3. Ibid., p. 39.

4. Ibid., p. 55.

5. Borges 1998 (n. 1), p. 408.

6. Ibid., p. 479.

7. Arieh Sachs, *Decline of the Fool* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: The Hebrew University and Poalim Press, 1978), p. 10 [Hebrew].

8. A series of actions performed by Ophrat in conjunction with artist Guy Briller between 1998 and 2000 included, *inter alia*, a group of upside down suspensions – an anarchical-existential act defying world order, offering "refreshment" and estrangement of the gaze by means of an "inverted world." Ophrat's actions are congruent with the figure of the modern fool, as described by Sachs: "The modern fool is not enlightened; in his acts of folly he no longer provides an opportunity for 'clean' laughter of a traditional society capable of identifying with its values; he emerges as a 'dark' fool who manifests the very signs of alienation and detachment dominating puritan-industrial society… The modern artist himself

often functions as a fool in contemporary society. He not only fabricates conventional fool characters for play and entertainment, but the *very artistic practice* [emphasis in the original], art itself, in its innovativeness, often transforms into a conscious, deliberate act of folly, and by the same token, the artist's life, the social role which he intends for himself, often calls to mind the traditional theatrical fool." (Ibid., p. 10). With the one reservation that Sachs's words were written in reference to classical modernism, out of lesser awareness to the ambivalence underlying the artist's figure in the post-modern era, his words can facilitate understanding of the tactic guiding Ophrat's moves in the fields of performance and the visual discourse.

9. In preparation for the exhibition "Ever Never" at the Israeli Center for Digital Art, Holon (2003-2004, curator: Ori Drumer), Ophrat wrote 120 texts, a type of artistic autobiography blending fact and fiction. The multiple voices and multiple versions, conveyed in the exhibition via 120 loudspeakers attached to the walls, were published in the book *Ever Never* (Tel Aviv: Gvanim, 2004; ed. Lea Shishko). The essay contains several quotations from different texts in that book.

10. In his book *Ever Never* Ophrat mentions the myrtle shrubs twice. In both instances he attributes them to himself and to his body. In text no. 57 he writes: "The shadow of a Eucalyptus is still present on the hot ground. It is hard to believe that this giant tree is a shrub, a distant relative of mine, of the Myrtaceae family." Text no. 7 tells about a mountainside he wanted to purchase in order to cultivate the dry myrtle shrubs which the Galilean Arabs used to grow there.

Ophrat recounts how he watered the myrtle shrubs, cultivated them and ultimately even distilled essential oil from them, which he then absorbed into his body.

11. HYPERLINK "%20http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-marquez.html" ~~Gabriel García Márquez~~, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" from "The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother," in *Collected Stories*, trans: Gregory Rabassa and J.S. Bernstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), p. 217.

12. The play *Icarus* was first produced as part of the Box Theater in 1983 and ran on stage through 1989.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (1972), trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 15.

14. Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego* (1985), trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), p. 21.

15. Levinas 2003 (n. 13), p. 63.

16. Anzieu 1989 (n. 14), p. 40.

17. Ibid., ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 12.

19. The quotes from Winnicott and Bion in this context were also extracted from Anzieu's book, ibid., pp. 23, 30.

20. "The Eskimo baby is carried naked against the middle of the mother's back, its stomach drawing in warmth from her body. The baby is enveloped in her fur

coat and held by a scarf knotted around both their bodies. Mother and child speak to each other through the body." Ibid., p. 18.

21. Ibid., p. 34.

22. Philippe Ployé, *The Prenatal Theme in Psychotherapy* (London: Karnac, 2006), p. 24.

23. Jay R. Greenberg & Stephan A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 215, 211.

24. An entire chapter in Amram Peter's *Indian Mythology* (Tel Aviv: Mapa, 2001 [Hebrew]) is dedicated to the multifaceted figure of the Indian god Shiva. In one of the variations on his figure "all the women loved him with a tremendous passion and forthwith became pregnant and gave him 48,000 babies without labor pains. It all happened swiftly – the passion, copulation and birth." (p. 31) The linga (penis) is one of his many manifestations. "Shiva is a god of oppositions. He is a moralistic yogi ascetic who suppresses his desires and arrests his semen, but he is also a lecher and fornicator. […] He is a husband and father, but also a nomadic beggar… (p. 18) [Hebrew].

25. "This paper develops the idea that we need both a notion of gender identity and a notion of gender multiplicity; more broadly, we need an emphasis on people both as unified, stable, cohesive subjects and as multiple, fragmented, and different from moment to moment. In line with the postmodern emphasis on deconstructing dichotomies, the paper emphasizes the deconstruction, or rather the psychoanalysis, of such polarized concepts as male-female, masculine-

feminine, heterosexual-homosexual, father-mother, genital-pregenital, oedipal-preoedipal, identity-multiplicity, paranoid-schizoid … and even patient-analyst." (p. 195) Lewis Aron, "The International Primal Scene," in: *Psychoanal. Dial*. 1995, 5: 195-237.

26. Ophrat 2004 (n. 9), text no. 55.

27. Ibid., text no. 50.

28. Ibid., text no. 85.

29. Ibid., text no. 52.

30. Ibid., text no. 4.

31. "BIMA, The Waste Land," The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University, 1994. Curator: Prof. Mordechai Omer.

32. *Trans Positions*, exh. cat., trans.: Tal Haran (Tel Aviv: Many H. Gallery, March 1997), unpaginated.

33. Ibid., trans. Maria-Regina Kecht.

34. Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Studies in Continental Thought) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 55.

35. Amir Gilboa, "*Bein Kotzai*" ('Between My Thistles'), in *Poems from Here and There* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1979), p. 19 [Hebrew].

36. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), p. 115.

37. Ibid., pp. 115, 111, 103, 108.

38. Levinas 2003 (n. 13), p. 51.

39. Ibid., p. 44.

40. Ibid., p. 30.

41. The play *A Hunger Artist* was staged at the Box Theater as part of the first Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theater, 1980.

42. Franz Kafka, "A Hunger Artist," in *The Metamorphosis, The Penal Colony, and Other Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Classics, 1988), p. 244.

43. Ibid., p. 248.

44. Levinas 2003 (n. 13), p. 30.