Sigal Primor | 56 Levanda

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A segment from a massive gray structure lies in the gallery space. It looks like it was just dropped there – though it also resembles an organic parasite that sucks up the gallery space and expands within it. The gray slice, coarse and unpleasant, is entirely covered with steel wool. At one of its ends extends another part of a typical "Bauhaus" balcony, so identified with certain areas of Tel Aviv. The balcony is suspended, partly floating in the space, like a ship's deck that juts out of the water when the hull breaks in a storm. The fragment is strewn with various objects – a metal bed, chairs, a stool, bottles, flip flops, mirrors, high-heel shoes, a bucket; they have all undergone a deformation, been partly covered with felt, and seem planted in the gray surface, sprouting out from among the various mounds it has grown. At the end of the diagonal-angular surface extends the unstable-looking balcony. In this part of the gallery, a slit runs through the balcony's body, dividing it in two.

The balcony that seems to have landed in the gallery space is in fact an exact copy of part of a floor in the Ship House on 56 Levanda street, Tel Aviv, built in 1934-1935 and overlooking the triangle of Levanda, Hamasger and Harakevet streets at the north-east corner of the Neve Sha'anan neighborhood. This striking building, designed by the architect Shimon Levy, is one of the 4,000 International Style houses documented in Tel Aviv.

The contradiction inherent in the Tel Aviv International Style can be read as a point of departure for the exhibition. This style's provincial incarnation in these parts – as it is examined, for example, in Sharon Rotbard's book *White City, Black City* – combined utopian European avant-garde with Levantine orientalism, affluent bourgeoisie with socialism, and a promise of innovation and progress with ancient historicity. The gray and faded Tel Aviv embraced the white appeal and boasted an appearance of universal modernity. In this way, Rotbard claims, the Jews sought to "whitewash" themselves with the colors of the cosmopolitan ethos.[1] In this familiar spatial story, many voices were silenced: Jaffa and the neighborhoods of the "black city" seemed to evaporate, and with them the diverse cultures of the city's south, with all their associated economic, employment and legal problems.

Today, the "black city" is in effect the most colorful and cosmopolitan environment in Israel and is home to people of all types, ethnicities and colors; and yet, this vibrant living space remains outside Tel Aviv's "official" narrative and far from the trails of its visiting tourists. While the utopian aspiration of the International Style has been realized, in an alternative fashion, in the city's south – it came side by side with an absolute collapse of the values of tolerance and openness fundamental to it. It is precisely the Neve Sha'anan neighborhood, whose planning is rooted in universal principles of brotherhood, that is today dominated by xenophobia, racism and exclusion of the other. But just as Africa forms the

[1] Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City* (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005), p. 88 (in Hebrew).

backstage and the economic hinterland of the Western economy – so does the “black city” constitute a supporting layer behind the blinding screen of the white city, as a vital energy supplier whose presence is invisible.

Sigal Primor presents a piece of broken architecture, a gray slice of life, emptied of the variegated and sophisticated promise it carried. The unequivocal gray dominating it is the least absolute color. It is hard to imagine it in its pure form: it is the in-between color, the pathway connecting the absoluteness of the black and the white; it is more complex than any other color and is seldom simple. While mentally gray evokes absence – a lack of color, interest, passion, warmth, life – in reality gray is always presence. The Collins dictionary lists 48 synonyms of “gray”, ranging from lightless, depressing and gloomy to faceless and anonymous, from old and primeval to indecisive, from vagueness to instability. The broken chunk lying before us thus presents gray in its full complexity and presence, basking in dense anonymity.[2]

The opaque and faceless fragment that Primor presents consists of two inseparable grids set one on top of the other, one inside the other. The first is the grid of distorted objects: they are partly covered with felt, growing quasi-organically from the lumpy surface and parading the distortions inflicted on them. The objects include a pair of broken mirrors; the skeleton of a globe, with all the areas of water and oceans cut out, leaving behind a gray, scorched and extremely dry “earth”, and scrunched drink bottles; a stool with a severed seat, one of its legs shortened and the other curling up like a taut spring; a dissected metal bed; three chairs dismantled and reassembled to create an unusable structure; a gutted table; an overextended desk lamp; a chair with its leg bandaged like a wounded returnee from the battlefield; high-heel shoes, seemingly burned, echoing their previous existence; and additional objects that seem to have once been flip flops, plates, or a bucket that seems to have itself become liquid.

These distorted objects are pinned to the gray surface just as the piece of structure squats in the gallery. The extending organic appeal flaunts the dysfunctionality of its various parts, which merely evoke their previous existence as useful objects. The gray surface does not signal organicity in the conventional sense: its aridity is closer to that of laboratory compounds than of organisms in nature. The term “organic material” also serves to designate artificial organicity (for example carbon compounds), and the gray segment seems to exist somewhere in between. The injured objects sprouting from the gray surface are like refugees that are simultaneously rooted in the space and incongruous to it, damaged survivors. Primor strips them of their original value and endows them with a new presence and visibility; their attachment to the work surface seems to embrace their current condition and enable them to exist in an in-between state, neither here nor there.

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[2] See David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), p. 64

The random dispersal of the objects across the surface, along with the internal fracture running through the Bauhaus balcony, brings to mind photographs documenting the famous *Merzbau* – the house (Bau) of commodities or commerce (Kommerz) that Kurt Schwitters installed over many years in his home in Hanover, until it was destroyed in 1943 during a Second World War bombardment. Schwitters followed it with a second and a third *Merzbau*, none of which was completed. Each of these houses of objects (in Germany, Norway and England) was filled with meanings around refugeehood, migration and displacement. Schwitters liked the idea that waste and junk that seemed worthless to others were granted in his hands an alternative reality, like words and syllables emptied of their original sense to become lines and forms, elements or morphemes in a visual language. One of the new meanings with which Schwitters charged the term Merz was rejection and refusal.

Merzbau, one of the most important artworks of the 20th century, was like an organism in constant development, serving as a habitat for the storage and display of many objects that were taken out of their context or cut off from their usage. It represented a continuous pursuit of a four-dimensional matrix that would constitute an integrative-mystical basis for Being and make use of the rhythms and appearances of nature to offer an organic alternative to the existing urbanism.[3] Through it Schwitters sought to liberate himself from the absolute quantitative values of space and time in favor of an animate dynamic entity that fed on the force of life.[4]

The deformed objects that grow in the gallery space emit a continuous beat, which constitutes the second grid organizing the exhibition – the tonal grid, which is woven into the retinal one. A quick listen reveals that what we are hearing is atonal music that lacks any clear melody and is not pleasing to the ear. Atonality is built on instability, and it sits well with the complexity of the gray. Primor's broken objects play their objectness as Karlheinz Stockhausen did in "Mikrophonie 1" (1964) – a piece in which the microphone functions as an independent musical instrument that identifies, focuses and amplifies the voices of the other "playing" instruments, including a gong, filters and controllers, that scrape and rub against each other as they reveal their invisible objectness, which is hidden in ordinary use.[5] To demonstrate the variety of sounds emerging from the various implements, Stockhausen's instructions to his players included words such as groaning, trumpeting, whirring, hooting, roaring, wailing, grating, chattering, sawing, ringing, cawing, clacking, choking, grunting, chirping, whistling, crunching, clinking, scraping and so on.[6] The verbalization of the sounds, or the voices, points to the vitality he wished to evoke in his listeners by revealing the participating implements' different dimensions of existence. Expropriated from their original

[3] See Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), pp. 115-116
[4] Ibid, p. 120. 127
[5] See Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music: Lectures and Interviews*, compiled by Robin Maconie (London: Marion Boyars, 2000), p. 78
[6] See www.sonoloco.com/rev/stockhausen/09.html

use, the objects were given a voice, a presence and a life by virtue of the distortions and deformations that Stockhausen imposed on them.

Primor scatters the sounds of Stockhausen's piece over matter and space. Merging the two grids (the retinal one and the atonal one) in the wedge of structure laid across the gallery space creates an organic entity which, though faceless, possesses multiple voices. Through the disrupted functionality and the various defects that Primor inflicts on the objects she creates a sense of estrangement, instilling the objects with a different presence and thus enabling the relation of refugeehood to emerge from the gray surface. The various voices in which the space "speaks" and through which the objects are heard generate from them and for them a voice and a presence, an anonymous multicoloredness that, constantly heard, illustrates the extreme difference embodied in the opaque fragment.

Like Stockhausen, who generated a living presence from his different implements, and Schwitters, who sought to construct a dynamic and evolving place for the objects he included in *Merzbau*, Primor endows her various distorted objects with a voice and an alternative existence. Wallowing in the shattered universalist aspiration of the International Style, and steeped in their own faceless generality, her dysfunctional objects propose a radical, concrete and demanding pluralism, which emerges out of the opacity. The silencing of the black city is amplified into a multiplicity of human and non-human, open and diverse voices. It is precisely through the material vacuum, through the estrangement and the expropriation of usefulness and through the distortion and the betrayal of their identifying characteristics, that the exhibition's components take on a complexity and a multifaceted colorfulness. Primor unfurls an alternative topography, a movable geography that enables us to extract a plurality of perspectives from the residues of an organic and technological singularity. The gray surface, despite the profound rupture that runs through it, acquires a face and a subjectivity.

1 Sharon Rotbard, **White City, Black City**
(Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005), p. 88 (in Heb.).

2 See David Batchelor, **The Luminous and the Grey**
(London: Reaktion Books, 2014), p. 64

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