

Nelly Agassi

Palace of Tears

Ein Harod Museum of Art

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Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod. Friday morning, May 24, 2002. At the center of the exhibition space stands a young woman, wearing a simple skin-colored dress; hundreds of strips made of similar fabric are suspended from various points on the four walls surrounding her. Some trail on the floor, reaching her feet, others look as though they are already, somehow, connected to her dress. The young woman is absorbed in her work, as if she does not notice the scores of people encircling her, crowding at the entrance of the passage, albeit prevented from entering into the depth of the space. She bends, picks up a strip of fabric from the floor, sews it onto her dress, and so on and so forth. Strip after strip, hour in hour out, in a Sisyphean, cyclical, sequential act, until no more fabric strips remain on the floor, and she appears inseparably connected to the walls of the exhibition space.

Nelly Agassi's long, repetitive and meditative work process in *Wall Dress* concludes with her emergence from the dress/structure she has created, and her departure from the exhibition space, while the wall dress remains suspended in mid air as a remnant of the act performed and as a sculptural piece in and of itself.

Agassi's *oeuvre* is diverse, spanning drawing, embroidery, objects, video, and various bodily acts. One of the major characteristics of her work process is that all of her shows are set up as site-specific installations, often combining a performance that is held as a one-time event, and an installation that remains in the space for the entire duration of the show.

In recent years, Agassi has developed a series of dress works, each of them a project in its own right. One may say that the most conspicuous common element in all these dress works is the initial scale by which they are sewn, a scale that is always derived from Agassi's own measurements. Moreover, each of the dress works is typified by different extensions stretching out therefrom, deviating beyond any scale; extensions from the self outward, that split and deconstruct it while expanding the boundaries of its existence.

Thus, for example, the show *Embroidering Light* (Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002) featured a dress made of patches upon patches of fabric scraps in delicate skin color, hung on an iron hanger that was fixed to the wall. The body of the dress was small, almost miniature, while its fringe extended and spread well beyond it, across the bulk of the display floor, preventing free movement in the exhibition space.

In the exhibition *Unstitching the Light* (Heidelberger Kunstverein, 2000), on the other hand, as part of a performance she staged, Agassi wore a white dress made by delicate crochet stitching. Nine knitted threads were stretched from the breast area, connected at their ends to large and heavy stones. The nine stones were placed in front of Agassi on the table on which she stood, pulling her body forward, diverting it diagonally, preventing her from standing upright.

Extensions of another, different kind characterized the cotton-wool dress the artist wore as part of the performance *Platform to Where* (London Underground, 2002). These were sound extensions that were sent into the space from a tiny loudspeaker tucked amidst the layers of cotton wool that constituted the dress; extensions that echoed sentences such as: "where is nowhere," or "please take me with you," in the air, while Agassi's mouth remained sealed, and her gaze – obscure.

Understanding the changing scale of Agassi's works is crucial to the comprehension of her entire *oeuvre*. Her works are, for the most part, small-scaled or even miniature (such as the drawings or the objects exhibited in the show *No Stepping Outside the Lines and No Touching the Floor*, Borochoy Gallery, Tel Aviv, 1999), or alternatively – monumental and irregularly-sized (such

as the wall object featured as part of the triptych *Palace of Tears*, Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, 2002). Hence, one may say that the elements of emphasis, radicalization, and deviation are an integral part of the conceptual tactics underlying her work.

Agassi's works thus demand a unique, different attention, whether due to the intimate, excessive proximity required in order to read them, or due to the fact that they dominate different parts of the public sphere of the exhibition spaces, transforming them into quasi-private intermediate realms and undermining conditioned perceptions of the relations that may form between the various elements present in situ.

Concurrently, Agassi performs a witty move whereby she channels the delineating, governing power of the art institutions or exhibition spaces in which she operates, diverting them to fit her needs, and employing them as protective factors to support her work. This tactic, which recurs throughout her *oeuvre*, attests to the fact that she often explores the notion of boundary along with its manifold manifestations in her works, while employing the context in which they are displayed and interpreted in an educated, conscious way.

In this manner, for instance, as part of the work *Wall Dress*, Agassi transformed the exhibition space into an integral part of the garment enwrapping her. To wit: the structure of the museum in which the act took place – and thus the art world as a whole – was in fact rendered another skin, a protective covering, an extension of the fabric or insulation layers she wraps around herself.

In another instance, in a performance held inside the display window of the Borochoy Gallery, Tel Aviv (1999), Agassi sat on a chair situated in the center of the window wearing a long white dress, her legs joined together, and next to her – a pile of rolls of red wool from which she cut threads upon threads, and tied in loops around herself. Repeatedly cutting, repeatedly tying, to the point of total coverage, from toe all the way to just below the arms. When the act of wrapping was complete, she started unwrapping the loops one by one, and scattering the red threads around her. The ostensibly open, public window served Agassi as a closed lab; a lab which allowed simulated exposure, and at the same time

completely preserved the separation between herself and body on one hand, and the audience observing her, prevented from drawing nearer, perhaps touching her, on the other.

In her book *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones elaborates on the notion of the “rhetoric of the pose” through a polemic reading in artist Hanna Wilke’s work. She describes Wilke as an artist who “explores her body/self as always already not her own and enacts femininity as, by its very definition in patriarchy, inexorably performed...”¹ Subsequently, Jones bases her argument on an earlier essay by Craig Owens, who maintains that “to strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilized – that is, already a picture.... confronted with a pose, the gaze itself is immobilized, brought to a standstill.”²

Vis-à-vis the history of western art, and its norms of women’s objectification, it is interesting to apply such a reading to Agassi’s works. This kind of reading becomes particularly relevant when one relates to the highpoints or endpoints characterizing both her video pieces and various performances. In both the artist ultimately draws into a static state – possibly a pose, possibly a repose – a state in which she remains for a while, as if forcing the viewer to confront this part of her work as well, which is integral to the act itself. The conscious invocation of the gaze that occurs in Agassi’s work, as in the work of many other contemporary female artists, is, thus, a feminization of the rhetoric of the pose, and hence, a powerful convocation in its own right.

In the video piece *Peel-in* featured as part of the triptych *Palace of Tears* (Mishkan Le’Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, 2002), Agassi is seen covering her face with her hands, as if washing it with coarse grains of salt. Repeatedly salting, repeatedly exfoliating, until the surface of the skin is irritated/disinfected. In a second video piece installed opposite the first, Agassi is seen directing her gaze at the camera, forcing her facial muscles into a smile. Smiling and smiling, continuing to smile, until the facial muscles can no longer bear the painful

tension – for this simple act, like any other muscular act, becomes harder the longer it lasts.

These works represent two antithetical yet complementary positions that characterize Agassi's work as a whole. While the first work emphasizes the introspective element, the attempt to arrive at self-exposure and the engagement with one's ability to mediate the interior onto the exterior, the second work manifests the extrovert element while delving into questions of representation and visibility.

Another example illustrating the duality of these two elements, within a single work, is evident in the video piece *Sand It Better* (Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002), where Agassi is seen rubbing her chest with a piece of sandpaper she is holding in her hand, with measured, monotonous diagonal movements, until the epidermal surface of the skin is bruised, bleeding. When the act is concluded, she extends her hand, placing it over the bruised area, as if covering and calming, internalizing the essence of the act.

The attempt to peel off and tear the external layer of skin seems tantamount to an attempt to consciously relinquish a certain measure of protection in favor of permitting a gap, a possibility, an exposure; for some kind of potential which is concealed beneath the surface, pushed outside the realm of consciousness. In this manner, Agassi relates to those external layers of protection as layers that at once embed and stifle anxiety, passion, pain, yearning, or love.

It is interesting to note that although in the majority of her works Agassi appears in her face, body and person, her work doesn't readily fall under the category of body art. This is due, *inter alia*, to the fact that Agassi does not explicitly deal with issues of body and identity, gender or class. While she makes extensive use of her body in her work, she does so in a desire to communicate through the body, to mediate between the dimension of the act and the exhibition space, and to contract the distance separating between that which is defined as private, and is thus intimate, and that which is defined as public, and is, thus, principal. In other words, her work represents the transition from the preoccupation with the body

itself to a discussion through the body – a discussion that touches upon issues of context, representation and space, but without an exclusive withdrawal into the subject.

A similar approach may be discerned in Rebecca Horn's early works that centered on the relation between her body and the various spaces in which she operated. Between 1968-1974 Horn focused on the creation of spatial sculptural works, devised according to the dimensions of the person who performed them, usually herself. In that framework she created *Arm Extensions* (1968), *Lead Pencil Mask* (1972), *Glove Fingers* (1972), and *Mechanical Body Fan* (1972), among other works. These were performative body sculptures that became whole only when used in their intended function. All of them touched upon notions of vitality and absence, action and space, private sphere and public sphere. Horn's works, like Agassi's, isolate the figure performing them, generating tense physical and mental situations, while raising basic architectural and psychological questions.

The wall dress and wall object presented in Agassi's recent show, as well as earlier works (such as the red wool cascades featured in the exhibition *No Stepping Outside the Lines and No Touching the Floor*, Camera Obscura Gallery, Tel Aviv, 1999), are works that were created as soft sculpture – sculpture that employs unconventional materials, on the one hand, and a calculated yielding to the laws of gravity, on the other. These sculptural works echo the practices of female artists such as Eva Hesse or Marie-Ange Guilleminot, both in the use of alternative materials and in their undermining of latent systems of inner laws.

In this context one should note that while Agassi's works indeed echo traditional, domestic female crafts – handiwork, embroidery, sewing, knitting – her use of these tools is not conventional, certainly not functional, and it acquires a different resonance that stems from the disillusioned awareness of the moment of choice. Thus, Agassi does not practice embroidery, sewing or knitting as acts identified with femininity or with the scope of domestic activities as such. Her works are executed as part of modernist work procedures and in affinity with

the contemporary art world, while constantly problematizing the interrelations between her activity in space and the notion of the “white cube.” Thus, for instance, her work touches upon the strict minimalist rhetoric, as defined in the 1960s and 1970s, yet disturbs its order by introducing narrative, biographical or private elements, alongside the use of soft materials. In doing so, she deprives the minimalist sculptural act of the element of impersonal abstractness that is at its very core, while at the same time depriving the act of performance of the potential anti-matter aspect characterizing it. In this respect, Agassi’s works transgress the boundaries of normative, ostensibly proper order. They strive to break into the realm of consciousness, to expand the scope of action, to generate a new position of strength.

Notes

1. Amelia Jones, “The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the radical narcissism of feminist body art” in *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 151-155.
2. Craig Owens, “The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse” (1984), reprinted in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Eds. S. Bryson, B. Kruger, L. Tillman, & J. Weinstock (Los Angeles & Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 192-198.
3. Paul Schimmel (ed.), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* ex. cat. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp. 106-108.