

Dreaming is also Work

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When I received Nelly Agassi's materials prior to writing this essay, they came packed in two different boxes. One was whitish, relatively small, decorated with a pink satin ribbon attached to it with a gold label bearing the words "for you"; the other was slightly bigger, brown and somewhat archival in nature. The contents of these boxes were variegated, including paper, embroidery and textile works, drawings, bracelets, small objects, sketchbooks, notebooks of sorts, miniature origami pieces, etc. A representative selection of Agassi's work materials, highly faithful to the spirit of her work, albeit certainly not encompassing its full scope. Naturally, other materials from her *oeuvre*, such as photographs, videos, the soft sculpture installations, or her various performances, could not have been included in these boxes.

I linger on the boxes not because they are significant in and of themselves, but rather due to the fundamental issue of presentation addressed by Agassi's works, which is embodied in the boxes and quintessentially articulated by them; an issue that involves the works' display and presentation on the one hand, and a proposal, an invitation, a type of request embodied in their very essence, on the other.

Typified by a conceptual tone, Agassi's works assume an emotional form, and mediate themselves to the viewer in a manner at once acute, demanding and refined. One of the basic features of her various works is that they address the viewer directly, offering themselves in such an intimate, personal and enchanting form that it is nearly impossible to negate their offer. Thus, even though the words on the golden sticker were not addressed specifically to me, but were simply there, on the box, before it ever became familiar with its new content, nonetheless they exemplify Agassi's magnificent ability to convert and activate objects, spaces and situations, thereby rendering them unique to her.

This process of transformation occurs in various forms, such as when addressing the viewer directly by voicing the sentence “can you take me with you,” or when exposing an inkling of her inner world by writing the sentence “washing myself with my dreams,” and even when she converts public spaces or unconventional parts of familiar exhibition spaces, making them personal, dedicated to her activity alone, and one-off in terms of their experiential dimension.

In her installation and performance works Agassi habitually creates a soft sculptural setting that reinforces and expands her presence in space, thus problematizing her relationship with the public sphere in which she operates and exhibits. In these works, as in her paper, embroidery and textile works, she breaks down the veins of her consciousness and soul into lines, threads and piercing references, in a manner which is neither narrative nor entirely abstract.

On the strategy that accompanies the tension between the relatively small-scaled paper, embroidery and textile works and the larger and more complex installations in space, I have already elaborated in my essay in the catalogue of Agassi’s exhibition *Palace of Tears*, 2002.* In reference to her works on paper, it is interesting to note that although the contents emerging from them are not always simple, their drawn line is not conflicted, unstable or interrupted as typical of quick spontaneous drawings, nor does it resemble the drawn line usually identified with an emotional storm or a free stream of consciousness. Rather, it is a direct, confident, decisive line that leads itself on, from a situation of awareness and determination, rather than from an intermediate state of searching or wandering; a line that attests to a clear, lucid, cold consciousness, one that indeed touches upon the chasms of oblivion, upon fears, passions or horror, yet does so out of vigilance and attentiveness, sobriety and reconciliation.

Two key elements recurring in Agassi’s divergent *oeuvre* throughout the years are the image of the dress with its diverse manifestations and the repeated treatment of the breast area. Agassi’s dress image is a private image akin to a

self-portrait, but it is undoubtedly also a symbolic, alocal and atemporal image; a general image of womanhood, that may attest to inclusiveness. The dress image or motif has been tackled in the past by numerous women artists in various contexts. Suffice it to mention the work of artists such as Rebecca Horn, Kiki Smith, Beverly Semmes, Jana Sterbak, Qin Yufen, and Chiharu Shiota, to indicate the scope of the preoccupation with this image, which crosses cultures, periods and artistic trends.

In Agassi's work, the dress's attributes are encoded and systematic, and are identified by tiny body measurements and a long, wide or spreading fringe. At times, feet or arms appear, at times motion is outlined, but the pivotal axis is usually the garment itself. This relationship between the slim, pressed, stifled upper part, and an expanded lower part that is attached to the ground, the structure or the setting, attests to a functional type of cover that links the body or the body's potential within it to the context of the action constituting it.

Agassi's dress is an extension of the body, an empowerment of the entity contained within. It is like a second skin, a shell, a sheltering, protective essence, albeit one that is expendable and reaches a moment when its shedding and replacement are required. Indeed, Agassi's sculptural installations usually begin with a performance situation; a situation where the body fills the volume of the dress and operates through it, but at the end of the process, casts off its skin, breaks free of the dress, leaving it devoid of content, voided, exposed; an empty shell. An early reference to the stratified nature of the dresses/skins may be discerned, for example, in the work on paper *Dress upon Dress*, 1999, where the body remained naked under the excess of layers.

Concurrently and over the years, Agassi's works have repeatedly touched upon the breast area in various manners, as if burrowing, refusing to let go. One of the earliest instances of this preoccupation was in *Untitled*, 1999, where she sewed hundreds of hair threads to the breast of a delicate blouse, or a little later, in her video pieces *Burnt*, 2000 and *Sand it Better*, 2002, as well as in scores

of works on paper from 1998-2004, where the breast area was treated via pricking, subtracting, sewing, embroidery, etc.

Agassi's persistent tackling of the breast area is intriguing, since it is intrusive, aggressive, and obsessive on the one hand, therapeutic and cleansing on the other. One may say that the breast area in Agassi's works has become familiar, ostensibly domestic territory over the years; a territory within which the artist wishes to operate and delve deeper, as if it were a private archaeological site identified and marked a-priori, yet one that may be under search, excavation and work for a long period of time.

According to the perception prevalent in the West, the breast is the area of emotion, where feelings of happiness and sadness, worry, relief and pain are cumulated. In this context one may regard Agassi's work as one that attempts to discharge emotional baggage, as if it were a sensitive explosive; to throw up, release and embody it via implied representative metaphors or actual repetitive rituals. According to Hindu philosophy, on the other hand, the breast is the seat of the higher consciousness, a place that enables development and activation of the so-called emotional logic, which differs diametrically from western reasoned logic. This perception is linked to the consciousness underlying Agassi's practice rather interestingly, for over the years her works have demanded and generated a place where the conventional categorical division between logical thought processes and emotional mindsets, between intention and contingency, between art and life, between *work* in the sense of a process of creation and *work* in the sense of the work of art itself, dissolves. Agassi's works produce a distinctive locus where intelligence is blended with emotion, practice with thought, sleep with creation; a place where dreaming is also work.

* The exhibition *Palace of Tears* was presented at Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod in 2002. The catalogue referred to Agassi's body of work from 1998 to 2002.