Embroidered Action

Etti Abergel (Israel), Nelly Agassi (Israel), Erez Golan (Israel), Gal Weinstein (Israel), Masha Yosefpolski (Israel), Michal Na'aman (Israel), Ernesto Neto (Brazil), Ghada Amer (Egypt/USA), Alice Klingman (Israel), Chiharu Shiota (Japan)

The Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

June 2004 – October 2004

"Saying that aspects of what we consider to be radically postmodern have always existed within modernism is not to say that there is no such thing as postmodernism or that history itself has no meaning [...]. It is rather to recognize the complexity and density of history's 'taking place', always referring itself (performatively) to its previous incarnations [...] in order to proclaim itself as new, but, in so doing, emphasizing its dependence on the old."

-- Amelia Jones, 1988[1]

Embroidered Action is a thematic group exhibition that explores various works of art based on the use of "soft" materials (thread, wool, fabric), synthetic materials (lycra, latex) and other "alternative" materials (paper, masking tape, steel wool) vis-א-vis "rigid" artistic contexts derived from the rudiments of the modernist perception as defined and established since the mid-20th century. The exhibition features the works of ten prominent contemporary artists, local and international, created in diverse media, including sculpture, photography, video, sound, installation and performance. The majority of the works on display were created especially for the show.

1

One may generally mark the beginning of the use of soft and/or alternative materials in the context of the western art world during the second half of the 20th century, as part of a broad cultural atmosphere that led to a sequence of attempts to breech and expand the familiar boundaries of art by means of diverse conceptual and physical actions. Within this frame, various artists during the 1960s and 1970s, in different places in the world simultaneously, began rethinking the materials of art on the one hand, and the structural array of its known institutions on the other. Many artists turned to new and alternative channels, among them conceptual art, earth art, body art, video art, etc., often yielding the very existence of the artistic object or its preservation in favor of the presence of the body or the abstract idea. The deviation from the bounds of conventional practices such as drawing, painting and sculpture, the use of unusual materials and the introduction of the moment of action were, thus, an integral part of the occurrences of the period.

Concurrently the use of soft and/or alternative materials began to surface. It is, however, important to indicate, if only on the most basic level, a certain split with regard to the use of these materials, and mainly with regard to the web of contexts deriving from it.

On the one hand, one may note the use of materials such as wool, fabric, various types of rubber, etc., in the quintessential context of the modernist western art world. Standing out among the first artists to consciously employ alternative materials in their work is Eva Hesse, who as early as 1967 began using latex with the professed intention to expand and redefine the boundaries of her art and the concept of art in general. A major axis in Hesse's work process, as described by curator Elisabeth Sussman in the

catalogue of the artist's comprehensive exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002,[2] was the attempt to transcend the notion of the sculptural object into what she called "non-art." She sought to obtain this mainly through the choice of unconventional materials and the crucial combination of planning and chance, knowledge and a dimension of surprise and revelation.

Hesse began her artistic career with drawing and painting, after which she shifted to collage. Around 1965 she started creating reliefs, and about a year later began producing diverse objects, while moving on to work with materials such as papier-mאch' , rope, latex, and fiberglass. The objects she created during that period were not traditional sculptures; they were more like obscure, rounded amorphous forms from which various extensions erupted, extending into the space. The minimalist simplicity of these works was closely linked with American conceptual minimalism, but the distinctive personal touch discernible in them and the implied sexual dimension they emanated challenged the familiar minimalist neutrality, and led to the formulation of a new, alternative language.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned materials were used as part of corresponding work procedures (thread/sewing, wool/knitting, and so on), thus emphasizing a traditional female context, whether essential or cultural, or alternatively a tendency toward a dialogue with different cultures, historically ancient and geographically remote, in an attempt to undermine not only the basic definitions of western art, but also, mainly, the elitist, arrogant male tone that typified that practice and its discussion. Practice in this context ranged from essentialist-feminist female art based on the fundamental assumption regarding the existence of a separate, independent "female sensibility" (an assumption that surfaced during the 18th century, became established in

the Romantic and Victorian period, and remained unresolved in terms of the feminist discussion to this day) and cultural-feminist female art that led the struggle for the legitimization of traditional female crafts. Typical examples of such a frame of thought can be found in the work of Harmony Hammond, Miriam Shapiro, or Judy Chicago, for instance.

The Dinner Party, Chicago's pivotal work created between 1974 and 1979, first presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
in 1979, encapsulated all the above-mentioned elements. Its major part consisted of a large table shaped as an equilateral triangle, with thirty-nine unique place settings dedicated to thirty-nine significant women from various periods and cultures, from Antiquity to the time in which the work was created. The names of 999 additional significant women were inscribed on the raised surface on which the table rests, in addition to several background panels elaborating on the theme by providing general texts and detailed descriptions of many other women who contributed to shaping the face of society. Each of the unique place settings on the table consisted of a personal, embroidered napkin bearing the name of the chosen figure and a sculpted dining set akin to a metaphorical portrait. The imagery and the visual language distinguishing Chicago's work were based on diverse variations on round and feminine, organic and anatomical forms, while focusing on themes such as fertility and cyclicality, and on the use of a wide range of traditional craft techniques, such as needlework and weaving. Chicago's work mode blended high and low art, concept and decoration, and introduced a clear statement regarding women's exclusion and writing out throughout history and the legitimization of the diverse work techniques and visual codes on which their work relied.

In a conversation with the renowned art critic and scholar Lucy Lippard, Chicago describes her ambition to transform needlework – namely, embroidery – into high art,[3] an aspiration which was clearly realized and is manifested in many art works presented in recent decades. Yet, the context issue of all these works has remained unsolved.

This aspect of engagement with the material led, *inter alia*, to the evolution of artistic trends based on the choice of a specific material or given practice, such as fiber art or textile art. In these cases the material or operational dimension were not only a part of the process of creation, but also a central axis in structuring its meaning. This current habitually relied on the basic assumption that material as such possesses a given immanent meaning, and hence – that the very choice of a specific material, and certainly its use vis-א-vis an old tradition, embody a profound political and cultural meaning. Leading artists who operated along these lines are Magdalena Abakanowicz and Sheila Hicks, for example.

Sheila Hicks, an American artist born in 1934, considered one of the forerunners of fiber art which she still practices, distinctively employs soft materials such as wool, cotton and silk in her work. Upon graduating from Yale, she received a Fulbright Fellowship to Chile, where she first became acquainted with the traditional materials and work techniques of fiber art. Her early works were relatively small in scale and relied directly on traditional weaving procedures. At an early stage, however, she started combining traditional, Native American and other techniques with conceptual and formal elements derived from Western culture. Hicks's later work grew larger, and explored a variety of spatial concerns by breaking away from the normative thought patterns associated with her chosen materials and methods.

The artists participating in **Embroidered Action** are characterized by their conscious use of a wide scope of materials that does not settle into the structured array of existing contexts. Despite the distinctive use of soft and/or alternative materials, the exhibited works deviate from the relatively small-scale typical of traditional “female art” (the so-called lap work), and the stereotypical range of themes that has been tied to the use of materials such as thread, wool, fabric etc. over the years, a narrative thematic range of themes that generally touched upon “female,” domestic or cultural issues. Unraveling the categorical identification pertaining to the use of these materials and procedures of operation, such as embroidery, sewing, knitting, wrapping, tying or gluing, allows the participating artists not only to criticize, expand and develop the potential of meaning ostensibly embodied in them a-priori, as done by many feminist artists over the years, but also, mainly, to depart from it and formulate a new range of meanings that endeavors to bind different formal, material and conceptual values, while intersecting diverse, at times antithetical fields of discourse and activity. On the other hand, and despite the use of “soft” materials, the works in the show converse with the “rigid” principles of modernism, albeit in a manner that does not relate to them comfortably, simply, or directly.

Thus, for example, one may discern that the structure of the grid, in its diverse manifestations, recurs in many of the works in the show, albeit in a manner that thwarts a direct link to the principles of modernism and minimalism of the previous century. These principles deflected artistic practice toward the abstract and constituted a creation/display code that was based on the aspiration for objectivity, neutral anonymity, lack of narrative, and a continual rejection of expressive and decorative

elements. Many works from the minimalist period were based on quasi-pure geometric forms or fixed grid patterns, not only as structural bases, but as elements that articulated the very essence of the representational and utopian affinity between nature and culture most clearly and succinctly.

In the current show, on the other hand, the grid emerges in disrupted form, materially processed and conceptually channeled, serving as a vehicle in the formation of a specific essence or meaning, rather than as a utopian reflection of the ostensibly natural one.

In Gal Weinstein's work the grid emerges in the most explicit manner in the faux brick wall pattern; in Michal Na'aman's work the grid transpires in the crisscross pattern of masking tape strips that at once block and generate the painting/sculpture works; in Alice Klingman's work the grid emerges in various, varying modes through the red seam stitching the light-colored pieces of fabric together; whereas in Nelly Agassi's work it appears both naturally-implicitly in the texture of the knit from which her work is made, and intentionally-explicitly in the adjoining of the knitted fragments to form the structure of the work as a whole.

Another difference with regard to typical modernist works, which focused on the object itself and on its link with the world of ideas, is that all the works in the current show are based on the transition from the material, through the dimension of action, to the context of display. To wit, the participating artists focus on the dimension of action as one that binds the abstract concept, the creative act, and the exhibition space together, thus generating a situation where the physical dimension is present even when they are not personally present in the exhibition space.

In the second chapter of *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones defines the concept of the "performative subject" based on Jackson Pollock's case study as a

subject who not only “creates” his work of art, but also, mainly, “performs” it.[5] Within this frame she indicates an essential transformation in the self-perception and the attitude of that performative subject to himself, the work of art, and the audience viewing it; she discusses him as one who created the most significant shift from the fixed artistic object that possessed a built-in, given meaning toward the artistic object whose meaning is suspended, changing and determined, to a large extent, by the viewer and the context of display.

Based on this definition, one can doubtlessly refer to the artists participating in the current show as performative subjects, where the material representation attests to the existence of the physical, and the works function as a trace of an action that was performed. This aspect is introduced explicitly by Chiharu Shiota who “operated” her work during the opening night and “presented” herself and her body as an integral part of the work’s structure, but it is also manifested, in a less explicit yet equally acute manner, in the works of Ghada Amer and Etti Abergel. In this respect, the works in the current show are physical in terms of their process of formation and abstract in terms of the concepts they embody.

The artists participating in the show explore questions of space and context of display, matter and experience, while the perception of art as an extended act and not only as a delineated move of processing material or creating form, is an important element in the understanding of their work. In many instances, the choice of specific materials and work procedures, alongside the attempt to infuse them with stratified contexts, also leads to an attempt to generate voluminous structures through them, ostensibly antithetical to the basic qualities of the selected materials. Moreover, it is interesting to note that many of the works in the show are based on the use of white, red and black,

three colors with stratified coding, both (female) archetypal and (male) modernist, while playing with the gaps and contexts spawned by these different codes.

Thus, the works in the show maintain a fine, yet acute, tension between a quintessentially conceptual infrastructure and a refined expressive tone that is not pushed outside the frame of work. The severe control of the means of expression on the one hand, and the incorporation of time and movement on the other, generate a situation where the expressive penetrates the conceptual, the physical invades the abstract, and the personal is blended with the principal; a situation where different discursive fields and contexts blend, allowing for the emergence of an independent, local-specific, private, universal and timeless existence.

Notes

1. Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 62.

2. Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *Eva Hesse*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2002, pp. 17-39.

3. “Entering the Culture, Judy Chicago talking with Lucy Lippard,” in Elizabeth A. Sackler, ed., *Judy Chicago*, exh. cat., (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in Art, 2003), pp. 11-21

4. Amelia Jones, “The Pollockian Performative and the Revision of the Modernist Subject,” in Jones, see n. 1, pp. 53-62.