

DANIEL ROTHBART: INSIGHT/OVERSIGHT

Herzliya Artist's Residence Gallery
7 Yodffat Street, Herzliya, Israel

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The title of Daniel Rothbart's new exhibition provides a clue to the essence of his oeuvre – semiotics, the language of signs, which naturally includes the signs of language. A literal translation of it into Hebrew would miss the point.

The elements of identity and change, like pairs of concepts which are similar in form but different in meaning, quintessentially represent this system of philosophical thought. The Austrian-born philosopher and Cambridge professor Ludwig Wittgenstein undertook research on semiotics at the beginning of the 20th Century. He studied the structure of language and its communicative and organizational functions. The use of deconstructionism made by post modernist artists has its roots grounded in the theory of semiotics. This is reflected in their study and dissection of social stereotypes, myths and clichés dealing with power and gender, views which have been disseminated and strengthened by the system of signs used by the media. Semiotic analysis serves to reveal the variety of potential meanings arising from the differential gap between the manifest content of a “text” or work of art and its cultural or linguistic boundaries.

In the language of the Bible this linguistic phenomenon stands out (in Hebrew only) as a sign *par excellence* of overt and covert meanings which served as a theoretical basis for innumerable commentaries on the Bible by Jewish sages. The Hebrew equivalent of the term *insight* would be a *fine distinction* or a *penetrating vision*; and of the term *oversight*: *overseeing, supervision*. Naturally, the specific intonation of these juxtaposed words gets lost in the translation to the Hebrew (just as one cannot convey the *double entendres* of the Hebrew bible in a translation into another language). However, whereas the Hebrew term *hashgaha* (overseeing) stands for supervision, it is also used as a synonym for *hashgaha elyonah* (Supervision by the Almighty, i.e. Divine Providence).

Daniel Rothbart achieves the same effect with, for example, the title of a previous project – “Meditation/Mediation” – which he prepared for the Baruchello Foundation in Rome. Meditation versus the concept of mediation or conciliation – the meaning of the latter definition characterizes the former; meditation is effected by means of self-conciliation and mediation between body and soul.

The project which the artist describes as “Semiotic Street Situations” was initiated in 1993. Placing 12 symmetrical metal vessels in the shape of bowls in diverse locations and changing conditions throughout the world he allows a random flow of events to occur around, or with them. The photographic documentation of all that follows forms an integral part of the artistic work, thereby creating a significant interaction between the artist and society representing his external environment.

Ever since the late sixties and early seventies photography has become a uniformly integral part of the realm of art and theory; those were the years in which emphasis was given to the conceptual treatment of language, to the perception of art as an idea and to art as action.

Daniel Rothbart envisions and recreates an environment in which he takes part as an actor and also effects instant linkages and connections. In action art the relation between any two

microcosms to interact with one another. The point of departure is internal and consists of the choice or desire, which is given expression by placing the vessels in a certain place at a certain time. This denotes a kind of cosmogonic constellation that traces relative lines of existence, of motion or lack of motion, of emptiness and fullness.

Rabbi Nahman of Breslav says: “And be it known that contemplation makes a vessel – namely definition and time. For at first the object is undefined but when the object is seen, it becomes defined” (*Excerpts from the writings of Rabbi Nahman of Breslav, p.6*).^{*} The act of contemplation brings the object to life and enables it to exist; and the evidence in support of this is at one and the same time internal in its insight and external in its perception. Meditation in itself is nothing but that same process of emptying and filling, emptying of contents and connecting to the essential absolute by means of the self.

The bowls concurrently bring to mind a worldly existence through food contents and a spiritual one exemplified in the begging bowls used by monks to collect alms in order to suppress the ego and strengthen the “self.” The empty space reverberates in the empty vessel, just as “the one-handed clap” resounds in the Zen koan. The sudden enlightenment attained by intuitive illumination, commonly known as *satori*, represents the spiritual goal of life in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. It is the last and at the same time the first step, because gaining the stage of *satori* entails experiencing the state of innocence and of natural consciousness from which stem all the acts and in which awareness illuminated by the harmony of life is engendered. *Satori* is the “striker” of the gong whose sound shatters the silence of ignorance.

Daniel Rothbart’s art forges links to his fellow men. This is a clear indication of his main sphere of interest – the discovery of the self through others. Thus everything that comes to pass by chance can become part of the order of things. Insight unites with recognition – conceptual perception or oversight – and the two paths of contemplation create the whole, or the accepted peace. *The Book of the Zohar* refers to the “vessel of peace” in its comments on the verse “He maketh peace in His high places” (*Job, 25, 2*): “The Holy One blessed be He found no vessel containing a blessing other than peace; and peace is that which unites two opposites.”^{*} The sages give their homiletic interpretation to the above words: “He maketh peace in His high places between the Angel of Fire and the Angel of Water; the Holy One blessed be He maketh peace between them and joins them together.”^{*} Water and fire represent two opposites that coexist thanks to *force majeure*.

The symbolistic vision of the kabbalah, which inspires Daniel Rothbart’s own spiritualism, is not limited to the Bible alone; the entire world is infused with plentiful godliness, revealing the divine existence through the prism of symbolism. “Although in everyday life the *hidden light* is veiled behind a dense curtain, those who open their eyes wide can see through it and discern in everything and in every happening the divine brightness that appears to have disappeared from sight” (*The Book of the Zohar, p. 145*).^{*} Regarding this point Rabbi Nahman of Breslav states that there are 12 constellations of being during the 12 hours of the day and of the night – a different one for each hour. Daniel Rothbart’s choice of diverse combinations and of 12 bowls reflects a multi-linked relationship to biblical commentary, which is instanced in the number of months, of tribes, and of formulae of prayer, and most certainly contains a multitude of diverse cultural significances. The bowl comprises the volumetric form of the circle, and is symbolized by the circle which in its turn is the basic symbol of the sun and of the cosmos – an element of the eternal return which is part of nearly all the world’s cultures.

The circle became the symbol of pure gold for alchemists of the Middle Ages; a person standing within it was protected from devils and evil spirits. In the architecture of those days it represented wisdom. The viewer experiences the circle's line as an endless circular movement having no point of departure or arrival. According to Heraclitus, each point on the circle is both its starting and its end point. Its shape arouses a higher degree of sensation and emotion than any other geometric form, and all viewers will feel themselves to be either within or without the circle, according to their nature. The inward desire denotes a wish to reach the center, the point of infinity, the beginning. On the other hand, one feels an energy radiating outward from the unseen (or the seen) center to the surroundings.

According to Wittgenstein, the beginning is not "in certain words but in certain circumstances or activities. If you should come to a strange tribe whose language is totally unknown to you and wanted to know which words were compatible with 'good,' 'pleasant,' etc. what would you look for? You would look for agreeable smiles, gestures, and food" (*Ludwig Wittgenstein – Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hakibbutz Hameuhad, p.15).^{*} The act is the primal deed; coincidence as well as unpredictability and originality make all acts authentic; each gesture and motion recorded by the artist constitutes a statement at which point the work begins and after which the commentary may follow.

"Like myth itself, synchronicity bridges the gaps between the conscious and the unconscious, between the world of mind and the world of objective events. Not surprisingly, synchronicity is therefore ultimately best comprehended in the language of myth" (Combs, A. and Holland, M., *Synchronicity, Science, Myth and the Trickster*, Floris Books, p. 31).

Varda Genossar, Curator

^{*} The quotes are a free translation.

Translated by Amos Riesel