

Tal Matzliah, *A New Middle East*, 9.4.99 - 6.5.99  
Exhibition site: <http://www.hagar-gallery.com/talm00.html>

### **A New Middle East? Look Her in the Eye!**

Text by: Nir Nader

**"Art is separable neither from its modes of production nor from its means of distribution, from the points of view of both artist and critic. The artists must account for the work's context of creation and display, for their position within this context, and for the link between this position and the stand they have taken. If the artists themselves fail to account for these, then 'someone' else does it for them."**

Ariella Azoulay [From: exh. cat. *Curators in Israeli Art*, Sara Konforti Gallery, Jaffa, 1992]

Tal Matzliah exhibited her five solo exhibitions during 1992-1999. The path which began with "English Breakfast" at Mary Fauzi Gallery ended with "New Middle East" at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Gallery. In order to fathom the significance of the last show, one must trace Tal Matzliah's path from 1992 to 1999. This essay will briefly attempt to depict this course and touch upon some of the major landmarks along the way.

From the very outset of her artistic career Matzliah was dubbed an individualistic artist with a rich inner world. Some associated her with Aviva Uri and Mirit Cohen. This label stayed with her up until her last show and even thereafter.

The group exhibitions in which she participated revolved around painting, drawing and other serene and pacifying activities defined during those years as opposed to the political turmoil transpiring in the Israeli art world from the early to the mid 1990s, mainly at the Bograshov Gallery.

The hand holding a sharpened pencil, a felt-tipped pen, a ball-point pen, or a brush, would embark on a journey into the psyche's realms within the imagination of the "anonymous viewer" (critic? commentator? curator? gallery owner?). Thus, all these shadows of anonymous viewers joined a group of collectors in a feast whereby Tal Matzliah merged with the "figure of the artist" who puts his/her talent in the hands of the artworld's patrons of symbolic and economic capital.

Nevertheless, she used the stage of her last show at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Gallery to make an announcement about the expropriation of everything which comes under the title Tal Matzliah for public use. In other words, the artist ceases to play by the free market rules; rules by which Israeli art, which is still issued from bomb shelters, purports to operate.

The anonymous viewer has, in any event, become a known consumer, whose identity and name emerge when cross-referencing interactive information nets. Therefrom she sought her path elsewhere, in a place where the artist does not wallow in the waters of the internal and external swamp of the human body and soul vis-a-vis the stratified social tangle, but rather sets a goal for himself, to act toward reorienting and transforming society into a place where all can equally enjoy its capacities of production and dissemination.

**"Say there is a village, and the artist leaves the village, becomes successful and wealthy. You succeed, but where does that leave the village? So you have managed to get yourself out of there, but what's left behind? Everyone there has remained just as they were."**

Tal Matzliah

Tal Matzliah's first three shows form one group, exhibiting a similar mode of operation – Tal provides the paintings and drawings, the gallery hangs, the collectors buy, the critics write, the viewers interpret, and this whole "celebration" ends with her return to the production line, paving the way from her first exhibition to the second and the third. This was the case at Mary Fauzi Gallery, Noga Gallery ("Untitled", 1994), and Beit Ha'am Gallery ("Now Throw Me to the Dogs", 1996) – where the material differences are reflected in the amount of money divided between

the artist and the gallery owners, and in the cumulating values of the symbolic and economic capital of Tal Matzliah as an artistic product on the free market.

In these exhibitions, Matzliah's function within the system was highly passive; she gave her "account" within the works, thrusting curses at the viewer. Fried eggs with bacon are glued to the painting in "English Breakfast", swarming between stains on a child's body and vertigo-generating circular lines, about to cling to the eye of the viewer who is swept therein.

In "Now Throw Me to the Dogs" (Beit Ha'am Gallery, 1996) she exhibits pen drawings on yellow and white notebook pages. The papers are filled with dense erased texts. Like her male and female predecessors in the 1970s, with their frugal means, she conceals the private within a security pit. From this submarine she sends out a periscope-like snorkel to resuscitate vision with statements such as 'Die', 'SOBs', 'Injustice'. Like "Flowing with Milk" and "The Eyes of the Country", the text springs forth, sending a single eye to silently scream: I am the eye of the country, obliterated behind a black eye-patch.

Behind the erased texts in the erased drawings in the American gun pamphlet - behind all these painterly barriers, stand the anonymous viewer and the anonymous artist alongside the 'silence', 'silencing', 'obedience', 'repressed emotions'. All these are about to explode. Once again, thunderous applause and acquisition of all the goods.

**"The work of the intelligentsia itself is always mainly a decoration for the life of the bourgeoisie, comforting the wealthy in their petty lifestyle."**

Maksim Gorki

In 1998 Tal Matzliah parts with the gallery that has represented her since 1993.

In her exhibition "Decorations for" at Noga Gallery she chooses, for the first time, to be active toward her viewer, and start taking responsibility for the ideas she had previously concealed behind the erasures. In a letter to select viewers she says she can no longer paint, but feels it is important that her paintings come to light. She asks them to collaborate and draw within patterns she will prepare. In between the pencil lines they will fill in the blanks with color, her diligent workers. In return she offers every laborer who would paint for her a day of cleaning in their apartment, another skill Matzliah has acquired and from which she made a living throughout the years.

Collector Benno Kalev offers to clean her apartment and paint for her, but on the condition that he gets to keep the painting. The ratio between a worker's pay (120 NIS per cleaning day) and the work's price for collectors (13,000 NIS including expenses) is 6400% (!). This percentage indicates the surplus value between the worker's labor and the capitalist's (the artist and the gallery) profit. It is with this surplus value that the State of Israel has served society on a silver platter to the present capitalists, among them the buyers of Tal Matzliah's works.

**"I always wanted to leave the gallery. Things didn't make sense to me, but I couldn't call a spade a spade."**

Tal Matzliah

This was the end of Tal Matzliah's collaboration with the "free" market; henceforth she turned to the Heinrich Böll Foundation Gallery for summation and declaration of independence from the postmodern demand for individuality (absurdly enough, self-searching is still considered one's culmination of liberation, freedom, and self-expression).

'New Middle East' is a subsidiary of the 'New Universal Order', both established in the 1990s and directly linked to the fall of Communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and to the enforcement of American military-economic world hegemony.

Tal Matzliah's exhibition opens two weeks before the election campaign for the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). The agenda is Bibi or Barak, namely – continued political stagnation or a 'New Middle East'. The Israeli left wing, including the majority of the art world, want a 'New Middle East'.

At the beginning of the exhibition she announces that the sale of her works will take place on the closing day in the form of a raffle. "Everything for a \$1" – one dollar per work. Anyone attending the sale event is entitled to participate in the raffle. Of the distinguished list of her many collectors, all but one were absent.

The works themselves are small sculptures, flat and free, not fixed within the framework of solemn-canvas paintings, nor drawings attached to paper; these are mobiles of sorts, tangles of images which may well send the viewer rushing to a neurologist to find out why s/he is so disconcerted. These images, frameless yet dense, hanging side by side on a single wall in the gallery, are everything that was under the erasure erased by Matzliah in her previous exhibitions. These works are one step away from becoming tamed objects, which the viewer's educated gaze recognizes as framed drawings or paintings (in the previous exhibition at Beit Ha'am Gallery she wrote on the back of the works within the frames: "The frames ruined my works." Tal Matzliah ingratiates herself behind the drawings, while only the collector, in fact, is entitled to see this complaint after paying and taking the work directly off the wall. The 'anonymous viewer' will never know about it).

The small sculptures exhibited at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Gallery are everything that is on her mind. She thrusts all this mass in the viewer's eyes, which are dazzled by the density. The erasure served as a protection against image flooding, but the viewer wants to know everything, mainly what is for sale. Like Icarus, he is essentially dazzled.

From underneath the erasure surface suddenly emerges the wealth, the 'bright', 'Middle Eastern light'; the Israeli mishmash, the confusion between Arab Israeli and Arab Jew, the coexistence of matter and spirit, of eastern wind and western wind. All these conceptual pairs march hand in hand to the spaceship in which they arrived, taking off to the site; lad and lass, painting and drawing, saying thank you and goodbye. The artist who encountered herself every evening by the canvas turns to society requesting to be hired, to join its real battles which revolve around reality rather than a concept; to join the conclusion of a chapter whose concerns were total introspection, polite defense against the public, keeping one's knowledge to oneself and its disclosure in the form of a critical artistic language with its own economic boundaries and rules.

The artist says, it is recruitment time now; I have a role and society has needs which I must meet. She holds the raffle, announcing the 'Division Plan'. Now it is her own proposal for a new Middle East.

**"Why are people afraid of taking responsibility? Commitment to an ideology brings out the best in them."**

Tal Matzliah

Her five exhibitions may be divided in two ways: The first four – those traded in the free market - in one group, and the fifth – the one which broke the market – in another. Alternatively, the first three shows where she was passive may be grouped together vis-a-vis the last two, in which she activated the viewer within economic systems of production modes ("Decorations for") and distribution means ("New Middle East"). Through these two categorizations Tal Matzliah has come to the understanding, on her way to breaking free from the erasures, that at the end of the 1990s it is not enough to demand of art to take a stand, just as in the beginning of the 1990s the artificial division in the art world between works of art and political work did not suffice. The political stands taken by artists are but a 'fig leaf' following a heavy meal of the capitalists and capitalistic leaderships on their way to creating a 'new world order', and subsequently a new Middle East.

Tal Matzliah has shown how this works in the art world, when she posed herself once as a capitalist, and subsequently as someone introducing a new proposal, whereby she has joined the battle over the image of the Middle East. She leaves the place devoid of ideology, the place that has furnished her with a comfortable living space, turning to engage in the study of a language and a space left outside the division circle. She has turned to observe her own surroundings, crossing the boundary of the Hebrew language which separates, by means of small hyphen-fence, between "Tel Aviv" and "Jaffa"; the two cities linked to one another with a border guard handcuff. She has moved to operate in the Arab city whose residents have no city council, and as citizens of the country - they have no government. She has decided to join the battle of the Arab society against the Jewish capitalists and the Tel Aviv Municipality for their right for a living space

and an identity. In the battle for the Sawaf family, that has become the symbol of Jaffa, and in joining the political cultural center 'Elbakaa' ('Staying'), she supplements the demand of art to take a stand with the demand to dictate a political agenda and to act thereupon.

Tal Matzliah

Israeli artist/ Lives and works in Tel Aviv.

Studied at the Kalisher School of Art' Tel Aviv.

**1998 "A New Middle East", Heinrich Boll Foundation' Tel Aviv\***

1996 Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art' Tel Aviv\*

1996 Beit-Hawam' Tel Aviv\*

1994 Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art' Tel Aviv\*

1992 Mery Fauzi Gallery' Jaffa\*

From: Ben Zvi, Tal (ed.), 2000. *New Middle East: Eleven Exhibitions, 1998-1999, at Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tel Aviv*, Jaffa: Hagar Association, pp 104-102