

# Jewing Art

Joshua Neustein

Adi Foundation proposal: “What constitutes Jewish expression in art and/or design?”

The relationships among Jewish expression, Jewish art, and visual art generally that reflect Jewish experience; issues of national, religious, and historical identity; contrasts and similarities between forms of artistic expression in Israel and in the Diaspora.

Michael Wood wrote: “Fictions are everywhere although we often call them something else. There is an element of fiction in most uses of pronouns like ‘you,’ ‘we,’ ‘them,’ too many different persons are crowded into those common denominators.” To connect art to the Jewish problem, as invited by our hosts, is to engage in what I personally consider a fiction. This difficult subject leads into deep and murky waters... that are not deep enough. First, a multitude of definitions are in order, yet lacking. This is a particularist subject with scant serious scholarship but masses of polemics and barroom literature. Yet by no means does this suggest a hopeless endeavor: “Fictions are not lies,” Wood continues, “or not necessarily lies because they don’t usually try to deceive. They arrange events or feelings in the sense of a musical arrangement. They give experience an angle or a story.” It may be useful to consider how art, especially modernist cultural production, enveloped into the Jewish habitus.

“Jewish Art” is a populist phrase that has various definitions. It can refer to Judaica or second-rate art, or to illustrative platitudes uttered by polemicists and politicians. It can also refer to a consciousness comfortable with cultural theories such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, Modernism, and the swath of postmodernism. Anti-Semitic literature

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**Joshua Neustein** introduced Conceptual and Environmental Art to Israel in the 1960's. He was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship and the Sandberg Prize for Israeli Art. His art has been the subject of critical literature by leading critics such as Arthur Danto, Robert Pincus-Witten, and Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe. He represented Israel at the 1995 Venice Biennale on the theme of libraries. In the last ten years he has created five Ash Cities in five museums. His works are in many public collections including the Metropolitan Museum, MoMA, Guggenheim NY, and The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

correctly notes that Jews lean toward the breakup of a unified surface, the fracturing of the whole or holistic image. I don't endorse a notion of a *Jewish temperament*, however; the most one can say is that Jews have *an affection* for Modernism, not that they created it or were created by it. The Industrial Revolution and sprawling urban culture redefined travel, information, engineered the environment; they fractured families, coherent communities, and traditional institutions while displacing settled populations. And Modernism reflected these displaced conditions and values. The anti-Semites saw – again with some acumen – that Jews and Jewish artists among them, stood against the dominant classicism of administered culture. In this vein, Adorno posited the formulation for art that attributes its modernist drive to an anti-classical, anti-harmonic, anti-nature topos. Adorno maintained that a critical ideology must be that part that replaces *aura*. And that ideology must be presented and redeemed in the style that it promulgates.

Also in this vein – the dynamic of fracture, physical removal and replacement – is the practice of my own art. It is an ongoing fascination with the phenomenon – and meaning – of removal and replacement. Note well: a removal of an object will change its status from a tool to garbage, from decoration to junk. A porcelain figurine on a mantel is a treasured family heirloom but on the floor or in the garage it is garbage. How often have our mates and parents told us you are making a mess when you don't return an item to its designated place? Simply moving something from its place degrades its inherent character and value.

To differentiate art made by Jews of the Diaspora and art produced by Israelis, I'd like to turn to Arnold Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aaron*. Schoenberg, very embattled with his own Jewishness, addressed the tension between icons and iconoclasm that played out between these two biblical brothers. With his atonal or twelve tonal systems, Schoenberg, siding with Moses, sought to liberate the creative practice from iconic totality: "To compose against harmony is to step away from nature," In so doing, as Adorno commented, Schoenberg freed music from domestication. Schoenberg, who might be called the founder of Minimalist Music, was a major influence on Cage, Tudor, Phillip Glass, and Steve Reich.

I would like to conjecture that the bifurcated approaches to the sublime as enacted by the biblical brothers represent the difference between Jews and Israelis. Aaron is to Israelis as Moses is to Jews. The

dominant trope of Jewish Diaspora artists like Schoenberg, Barnett Newman, Rothko, Lawrence Weiner, Sol LeWitt, was severed from nature and inclined to the Conceptual or epistemic in a way that one can make a parallel between them and the first rabbi. Moses was the proponent of a disembodied God, of an elitist transcendental impulse. This deconstructed God in free form, utopian, un-described, without perspective can be extrapolated into an atonal music or construction without harmony. If we can draw a trajectory from those sibling differences and keep in mind that the two protagonists are brothers, then we may conclude that the disembodied urge is embedded in the pagan as a kind of dialectic.

Aaron could not let go of the animist (pagan, Christian) embodiment of the divine. He needed to clothe religion in ritual vestments, administered hierarchy, and an embodied God (the auratic calf). By bonding their identity to a particular place that gives meaning, the cultivation of special attachment to a regional vernacular, its light and climate, Israelis have reverted to the naturalistic figurative iconicity. Israeli art, especially its dominant artists and critics, practice a regional sensibility attached to the physical, visual, anecdotal idiom. That aesthetic attachment is a form of Aaronistic, pre-lapsarian iconography.

One could argue, that Jews and Modernism have perpetual self-examination and self-redefinition in common. The creative act in Modernism is particularly self-reflexive; process is often the subject, and examining material is the theme of its art. That self-reflexivity leads to a kind of “dying,” a closure of itself. Ergo we often hear the “death of art” slogans. I suggest that Jewish self-reflexivity also leads to a kind of “dying” although such dying may be a long process. But the discourse of closure leads to anxiety, trauma, and “end of Jewry” paradigms. Both Modernism and Jewry are engaged in creating new definitions, new forms, of re-inventing their bodies. In that reinvention Alain Badiou notes that a novelty provokes new antagonists (talking of the “creative process” not talking about Jews). The new postmodernists compete for novelty by maintaining that the previous novelty is still the harbinger of truth and authenticity. People that call themselves the New Jews, whether they are Israelis, Palestinians, or Fundamentalists do the same. Within the (exquisite)

body and outside it; they compete and claim to be the “other” voices that privilege them.

Consequently the “old” Jews are *attempted* to be rendered irrelevant, notice how their insistence/existence as remnant is characterized by Slavoj Zizek: “The Jewish God as emptied of Joissance and reduced to a self referential name... the Freudian name ‘trauma’ persists as the obscene/monstrous, ‘undead’ remainder, which keeps a discursive universe alive.”<sup>1</sup>

1 Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute*, (New York: Verso, 2001), pp. 98-99,109.