

# After the Fact

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Gideon Gechtman will not die again. Now, five years after the death of this artist whose frequent future-tense utterances always-already alluded to his impending death, we can only look back to the body of work he conceived and produced over four decades. “There are two people, Gideon Gechtman who is a private person, a father of children, the husband of Bat-Sheva, who lives a very ordinary life [...], just an average citizen. [...] The other Gideon Gechtman is an artist [...], who observes the world and makes his art [...], and Gideon Gechtman can observe Gideon Gechtman walking at his son’s funeral and weeping.”<sup>1</sup>

One Gechtman passed us in the street and waved hello like an acquaintance. Perplexed, we turned to the other Gechtman, then to the first again, and then back to ourselves. This familiar experience of the perplexed addressee – this moving of the head and the body this way and that without knowing to whom the wave was directed – reveals several essential aspects of Gechtman’s oeuvre: the critical gaze of someone who has scrutinized himself, reality and life from without and within at one and the same time, someone who is both the

observer and the observed, the subject and the object, who has worked and acted with and from inside his body and also upon its surfaces; the complex conception of time that grasps both life and death simultaneously – a conception in which the earlier and the later, the “before”, the “now”, and the “after,” co-exist in a constellation that rejects the view of life as a linear succession that ends in death; and, perhaps the most important of all: the fact that whenever Gechtman perplexed us, confounded us, or scandalized us by inverting the natural order of things in an exhibition,<sup>2</sup> he was speaking not only about himself, but about us as well.

## Mausoleum

In 1971, when he was 29, Gechtman conceived the idea of creating a “mausoleum for ten anonymous people”, to house personal belongings of ten unknown persons, as if they were well-known heroes.<sup>3</sup> The tension between the anonymity of these protagonists and the motivation to erect a memorial to them – actually a cenotaph containing objects they ostensibly used while they were alive –

<sup>1</sup> Gechtman in an interview with Moshe Hausman, 5 July 1998 (in Hebrew; unpublished), Gechtman family archives, Rishon LeZion.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the exhibition “Yotam”; see *Yotam* (in Hebrew), exh. cat., Moshe Ninio, curator (Herzliya Museum of Art, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Christian Boltanski’s work *Untitled* in his “Inventories” exhibition that opened two years later (in 1973) at The Israel Museum (curator: Yona Fischer) aimed “to attest to a person’s existence by means of his personal effects” (from the catalogue [in Hebrew]).

lies at the core of Gechtman's work. Although it was never executed, the traces of this early idea can be seen in his continued engagement with his disease and his expected death, and in its reformulation in his idea of a personal mausoleum – a memorial to himself (“an anonymous person” whom Gechtman knew better than any other anonymous person) – as a conceptual framework for his work.<sup>5</sup>

After the birth of his son Yotam (1971), Gechtman's thoughts about the heart condition he had suffered from since childhood made him feel a strong need – so he recounted – to leave something behind him, as a memento from a father to his son. Gechtman's mausoleum is, in effect, an external framework that unifies his entire oeuvre into a single work, a cenotaph in which all the items are interconnected, “just as a pyramid contains all of a Pharaoh's belongings, except that there the works are not on view”.<sup>5</sup> Gechtman viewed his works as artificial products endowed with a greater durability than life, substitutes (in most cases reproducible) that in suitable conditions – which he aimed for and attempted to organize

in every possible way – could function in a systemic manner. This composite, which would remain after him as a complete whole, would keep him present in the world and preserve his memory as a mausoleum does, in this word's denotation as a commemorative edifice or space. “I know that if I were to die tomorrow, I will have left nothing behind me. All I want is to sit down with my son Noam and go over everything that I have here, so that he can take care of my artistic survival in the historical consciousness.”<sup>6</sup>

Gechtman's mausoleum combines organizing forms of collective memorial sites and houses of religious worship (e.g., synagogues and churches) with precedents from the history of art. Stylistically, his works over the years refer to a number of existing paradigms (mostly from the 20th century) that he felt a connection with and drew upon<sup>7</sup> – especially minimalist sculpture and Pop art, both of which reflect the clean, cold, and impersonal production of the industrial world rather than the touch of the artist's hand. His collaborations with tradesmen (several of them from the “commemoration

industry”) who produced works for him ensured that replication of his works could continue even after his death. It may be argued that the “commemoration-industry” materials (such as marble) he chose to work with evoke the permanence of eternity, while the impersonal replication processes and substitutes he employed, in the spirit of Warhol's “Factory”, represent infinity in its inherent potential for endless (re)production.

In this conceptual framework that engages with the posthumous fate of the artwork, mention should be made of Gechtman's work *Launching Apparatus* (2006-08), which was accompanied by a pamphlet containing detailed instructions for the future do-it-yourself production, packaging and mounting of the work.<sup>8</sup> *Launching Apparatus* referred both to the political circumstances of the time when it was made – the regular launching of improvised Palestinian rockets from Gaza into Israel – and to the launching of art into an unforeseeable future. It represents a conceptual distillation and a starting point for a more comprehensive project that Gechtman planned to realize before he died: the creation of a detailed set of instructions for the production, assembly and mounting of almost all of his works, to be widely distributed so as to create conditions for the works to continue existing after his death, even in cases where the original works did not survive.<sup>9</sup>

“Retrospective” is the term generally used to describe an exhibition that sums up a phase or the entirety of an artist's lifework and evaluates a present state of his works by examining how they unfolded in the past; in medical contexts its equivalent is the case history, or “*anamnesis*”, from the Greek word for “remembering”. The goal of this turning to the past is to attempt to analyze its data and to arrive at a synthesis that will yield better and more comprehensive insights into the total oeuvre that has accumulated over the course of time. But a reexamination of Gechtman's total oeuvre in a retrospective exhibition that might yield superior insights than previous exhibitions of his work have done, is not an option within the terms laid down by Gechtman, who saw his oeuvre as a system in which all its elements can constantly be recombined in a different order, each time creating different relations with their neighboring elements. Thus, for example, an element that once appeared in isolation might be integrated on a different occasion into a more extensive ensemble and, conversely, a constituent element of an ensemble might be isolated and be presented as an individual piece. Likewise, the character of the organizing forms in Gechtman's installations kept changing all the time. Some of the arrangements were austere, ceremonial, symmetrical, with an emphasized central axis that echoed structures of churches and synagogues, as in *Exposure* (Yodfat

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<sup>4</sup> On his studies under Streichman and Stematsky and his turn to a conceptual approach, Gechtman recounted: “I realized I could never become more than a good Stematsky, or an excellent Streichman. I was looking for a statement of my own. I was 19, I hadn't been recruited into the army because of health problems. [...] I went to England where, in the '70s, Conceptual art – art that emphasizes the idea – was flourishing. I absorbed its values and have been creating Conceptual art ever since.” Gechtman in an interview with Anat Meidan (in Hebrew), *Yedioth Ahronoth: 7 Days*, 22 September 2000. At the conclusion of his studies in England, Gechtman wrote his final thesis on the work of the Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth.

<sup>5</sup> Gechtman, interview with Moshe Hausman (see n. 1 above).

<sup>6</sup> Gechtman, interview with Anat Meidan (see n. 4 above).

<sup>7</sup> Prominent in Gechtman's library are several books that served him as reference sources: Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: a Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1969); Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of this Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1969); Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1969); Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972); Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of instruction manuals in modern and contemporary art, see Aya Miron, *Life: a User's Manual*, exh. cat. (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> On art as a project motivated by the self-preservation drive, and on the tension between the original and the reproduced works to be made by following the technical specifications, see Moshe Ninio's remarks in the preface to “Specification 1”, *Gideon Gechtman: Launching Apparatus* (in Hebrew), exh. booklet (Tel Aviv: Chelouche Gallery, 2008).

p. 48 Gallery, Tel Aviv, 1975) and *Preparation for a Mausoleum 1* (Artists’ Studios, Jerusalem, 1988), while others were freer, more organic or cluttered. Speaking about the Noemi Givon Gallery of Contemporary Art, where p. 11 he exhibited *Mausoleum, Intermediate Stage* in 1984, Gechtman remarked: “This gallery has the structure of an Egyptian tomb, and that’s ideal for my work.”<sup>10</sup>

While motivated by the utopian aspiration to construct “The Gechtman Mausoleum”, a final and ideal installation of his entire personal oeuvre, Gechtman’s method of working continuously undermined this goal by the constant changes in his installation procedures. “The mausoleum’s boundaries are burst anew time and again as long as Gechtman lives; the mausoleum as a complete whole is either an unattainable ideal or an unverifiable conjecture.”<sup>11</sup> It would be impossible to arrange an installation of Gechtman’s entire oeuvre that encompasses all the various forms his works had been presented in over the years. A backward gaze at all of Gechtman’s forms of presentation leads to a clear conclusion: the retrospective arrangement of his works in the current exhibition cannot fully realize the idea of the mausoleum. Gechtman’s mausoleum is incomplete in its very essence, because its constituent parts – the actors in Gechtman’s theater – keep changing their roles and positions from one show to the next. It is therefore important to note that the choices and selections made in the present exhibition, the most comprehensive Gechtman exhibition to date, are inevitably

enmeshed in this challenging, inherent tension between the effort to make the mausoleum a reality and the awareness that always – as in any edifice designed to preserve memory – certain things will be missing, and that selections (and omissions) must be made from among a diverse range of different possibilities.

Third Person Singular

In the 1960s Gechtman spent nine years in London, and while there, he completed a course of studies at the Hammersmith College of Art. The minimalist sculptures he created during this period became for him a foundational approach to form that would be echoed in his works throughout the years. The values he assimilated during his studies in London – austere simplicity of form, repetition, the use of industrial materials, uncompromising workmanship – would later be applied to materials of body and life. After his return to Israel (1971), Gechtman created three-dimensional works that demonstrated transformations of materials, such as *Tins in the Process of Rusting* and *Lead: Stages of Melting* (1972-1973). These concrete works marked the beginning of his engagement with processes of change and, in particular, decay, which shortly afterwards he would formulate in body works with a more overt biographical dimension. In his first solo exhibition (at Gallery M, Jerusalem, 1972), Gechtman presented his performance/installation *Heads: rows*

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upon rows of plaster casts of his own head, distorted in various ways, arranged within a three-dimensional steel grid. Gechtman had shaved his head for the casting process, and the casts looked like distorted white death-masks, and even more like masks of illness that were defined by their relation to the steel grid, a rigid minimalist object. At fixed times and for fixed durations Gechtman, his head shaved and painted, would sit facing the grid, as though contemplating his death-masks in their gradual variations.

After his earlier formalistic investigations of sculptural materials in different states and in processes of decay, Gechtman moved on to an engagement with illness and death in the most trenchant, direct and extreme way ever seen in Israeli art, in works that employed powerful biographical raw materials, corporeal as well as emotional. The installation *Exposure*, which was shown as an exhibition at the Yodfat Gallery in 1975, was a bold artistic representation of the medical procedures Gechtman had undergone two years earlier, at the age of 31, culminating in open-heart surgery to implant an artificial valve in his heart.<sup>12</sup> Some critics related the presence of a sick and injured body in the show to the general sense of pervasive crisis

within Israeli society following the Yom Kippur War – a profound fracture that also found expression in new and subversive (in most cases conceptual) artistic modalities that foregrounded the artist’s body, pain, fragility and mortality.<sup>13</sup> The sexual liberation that began seeping into Israeli society during the 1960s also brought more freedom of expression with regard to the deteriorating and dying body. “Exposure”, its raw material being a private, personal, bodily event, was thus a seminal exhibition. Indeed, the key to understanding Gechtman’s entire artistic enterprise from here on is his *formulation* of this event – formulation as a procedure that at its base touches an original, actual event, but above all is concerned with syntactical decisions of arranging, organizing, sorting, cleaning, polishing, discarding words and things and introducing substitutes.

In the exhibition-cum-artwork *Exposure*, Gechtman included the following items: his medical record; three pages from a “patient chart” prepared especially for the exhibition by a medical intern;<sup>14</sup> a color photograph of his surgical scar; an x-ray of his chest; the artificial heart-valve; black-and-white photographs of his hospital bed and of the Hadassah Ein-Karem hospital building;

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<sup>12</sup> In 1998 Gechtman presented an expanded version of *Exposure* in the “Expanded Exposure” exhibition at Tel Aviv University’s Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery. In addition to the original components of the 1975 work, this show also included a large-scale sculpture and a photograph of the artificial heart valve, as well as the works *Brushes*, *Yotam* and *Beds*. The urine for this exhibition was freshly collected in 1998.

<sup>13</sup> When the initial “Exposure” exhibition opened, Gideon Ofrat wrote an article, “The Art of Death” (in Hebrew) (*Davar: Massa*, February 1975), which begins with a short survey of international art that engages with pain and death, and goes on to examine this nexus in Israeli art, focusing on Gechtman’s work and also referring to other artists (Moti Mizrahi, David Ginton, Yocheved Weinfeld and Jack Jano, among others). On the same topic, Yigal Zalmona wrote “If Zionism deliberately reinvigorated the male physique, in the period following the Yom Kippur War the flawed body was reinstated as a prominent example of a new artistic sensibility”; Yigal Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, and Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2013), pp. 302-303.

<sup>10</sup> Gechtman, interviewed by Tamar Gelbetz (in Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 19 November 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Art Practice: A Critique of Museum Economy* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1998), p. 258.

portrait photographs of the people who handled his body during surgery: the hospital barber, the nurse, the intern and the surgeon; four pill-jars, appropriately labeled; seven huge test-tubes filled with urine collected over seven days together with detailed lists of the exact amounts of food he consumed and the quantities of urine collected each day; a color photograph of the test-tubes of urine; a TV monitor showing a full-length video re-enactment of the full-body shave he had undergone in preparation for the operation; photographs of his entire naked body, his head and his pubic area before and after the shaving; four Plexiglass cubes of different sizes each containing hair from a different part of his body: his head, his pubic area, his armpits and his eyebrows (the size of each cube matching the volume of hair from each body area). In the background, an amplifier played the recorded sound of the artificial heart valve opening and closing.

Gechtman's exhibition was not an act of personal exposure of the kind where an

artist bares his pain and emotions in front of the viewers.<sup>15</sup> Nor did it engage with the question of life after death, or associate disease and suffering with any kind of spiritual sublimity or transcendence,<sup>16</sup> although some critics did interpret it in terms of ritual, or as an expression of spiritual 'repair' or self-cleansing.<sup>17</sup> I would argue, rather, that Gechtman's unflinching observation of the complex experience of disease and its attendant personal processes subsumes a much broader cultural perspective that encompasses contemporary relations between the individual and his caregivers, between "raw" life and art, and between the actual physical body and its representations and redefinitions within given social frameworks. Gechtman's cold, distanced and restrained rendering of bodily processes in *Exposure* echoes fundamental disparities and questions that underlie any presentation of an artwork disconnected from its life in the studio. Moreover, in *Exposure*, Gechtman adopted the clinical

language of a scientist who observes the body from the outside, who can isolate a part of the entire body, examine its attributes, sample the body, sort its components by physical indexes (volume of hair) and in relation to processes over time (micturition), and can then collate his findings and report on them. The medical context only heightened the inherent tension between the treatment and care given and the patient's submission to painful and invasive procedures entailing humiliation and alienation; but Gechtman's personal confession in *Exposure* was not articulated in the first person, but with the dispassionateness of a third-person report. The work's powerful impact derived from the internal disjuncture and tension entailed in presenting the artist's body as disconnected from the artist's "self", in casting the artist in the role of someone who, as it were, observes his own body laid out before him. It is this fundamental disjuncture that enables the viewer to be simultaneously with both the patient and the caregiver, with both the sufferer and the doctor, with both the weak person and the strong person, with both Gechtmans.

The full-body portrait photographs of Gechtman invited the viewer to a frontal encounter with him. His stance – stable and symmetrical, with raised arms bent upwards at the elbows at a 90-degree angle – is hardly a "natural" posture, certainly not for

someone with a gravely ill body. Significantly, Gechtman chose to present himself in the same stance both before and after his body was shaved, and this has given rise to a broad range of interpretations, for this posture seems to beg associations with salvation or with surrender (hands up) before death.<sup>18</sup> If we look at it from a clinical perspective, however, we see that this artificial stance enabled Gechtman to display a maximum surface area of his bare body, including both armpits (generally a hidden zone), and to make maximum use of the photograph's surface area to display his body's surface. The same posture frequently appears in anatomical illustrations in medical books, p. 15 especially in drawings of general anatomical systems, such as the muscular or circulatory systems. The posture's artificiality, and its apparent incongruity with illness (an exhausted person lying in a bed), reinforces the feeling of clinical detachment that characterizes the entire exhibition. A person viewing this exposure, with all the intimacy entailed in penetrating into the most private places of another person's body and soul, is left somewhat perplexed confronting the difficulty of identifying emotionally with that person.

In the video loop that ran continuously in *Exposure*, Gechtman shared his pre-operation experiences with the viewer, by means of an expanded re-enactment (performed in 1974)

<sup>14</sup> From the "patient chart" (in Hebrew): "Admitted this time at his own request for purposes of his work as an artist. [...] As a child he did not receive appropriate care or supervision, [...] and his parents, although they knew of his heart-murmur, did not see fit to report it to a doctor, because they feared he would not be accepted into the kibbutz and would become a problem"; see pp. 45-47 in this catalogue.

<sup>15</sup> Mordechai Omer distinguished between Israeli body-artists, whose activities took place primarily in private circumstances and mainly facing a camera, and international body artists, who worked mostly in public performance events; see *Tikkun: Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies* exh. cat. (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University, 1998), p. 465.

<sup>16</sup> According to Joseph Beuys, who more than any other 20th-century artist associated suffering with the romantic conception of art, "someone who suffers definitively also creates in the most definitive manner. [...] Through suffering something spiritual and sublime is created. [...] suffering itself leads to change"; Joseph Beuys, "Seven Actions and One Environment" (in Hebrew), *Kav* 8 (Tel Aviv, 1988) p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Mordechai Omer wrote about Gechtman in terms of repair (*Tikkun*), understood as an "acceptance of the verdict", "a rite of passage", "the body's 'repair' and restoration"; of the artist's "purging himself of such destructive feelings as anger and blame: toward his negligent parents, and towards society", *Tikkun* (see n. 15 above), p. 314.

<sup>18</sup> Kobi Ben-Meir, in the chapter "Gideon Gechtman: Death and Commemoration in Life" in his MA thesis *To the Ends of Sorrow: Images of Pain, Sickness and Death in Israeli Art in the 1970s* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, Department of Art History, 2008), related this posture to the orant posture of figures that appear in early Christian catacomb paintings, to statues of the deceased in ancient Egyptian tombs (intended to anchor the deceased's soul – his *Ka* – in the tomb), and to a famous photograph of a child raising his hands in the Warsaw ghetto. For further Christian contexts see the essay by Amitai Mendelsohn in this catalogue.



of the preparations for surgery, including footage of him undressing and being shaved by the hospital barber. In this film we see a man shaving the hair from Gechtman's head, armpits, pubic area and eyebrows, which is then displayed in the four Plexiglass cubes. Gechtman on several occasions described the feeling of de-humanization that arose in him while being shaved by the hospital barber, and even referred to the surface of his body as a field of vulnerability more palpable than the surgical scar itself.<sup>19</sup> The shaving of the hair (understood as the body's natural protective covering) and the displaying of the stills of the naked body before and after the shaving, in a way that positioned this act of shaving at the center of the medical procedures formulated in the exhibition, inevitably evoked memories of the Holocaust. The undressing and the shaving of the hair, which are linked in the collective memory to acts of mass humiliation and effacement of individual identity, were presented here as a reconstruction of a very private and personal event, mediated through a representation of medical procedures. The only color photograph of Gechtman's body in the exhibition focuses on the post-operative scar. Color, in this case, is used mainly as a clinical "index", a means of monitoring the state of the skin.

Other exhibits in the show referred to the interior of Gechtman's body. They included a chest x-ray; an artificial heart valve (a substitute for a substitute) identical to the one implanted in his heart (both made their way from the hospital to the gallery);

the recorded ticking of the metallic valve reverberating throughout the gallery space; and, perhaps most significantly, the urine collected by the artist over seven days. The experience of the individual patient and of the people closest to him, who are constantly reminded of the time measured out by the ticking of the artificial valve as it makes audible the body's exertions and its responses at moments of fear or excitement, became an experience shared by all the visitors to the exhibition. The valve's amplified metallic ticking that now overrode the natural pulse-beat sounded like the tolling of church-bells that can be heard far beyond the church's precincts, measuring out everyone's time.

The shaving and its products designated an exposure of the exterior of Gechtman's body, while the urine collected in the huge test-tubes designated an evacuation of its interior. The urine was the product of materials that his body had absorbed and excreted during a week; hence this presentation of the flow of fluids and other materials through his body created a three-dimensional graph that plotted time against quantity and constitution (the latter reflected in the color of the urine, which changed from day to day), while the natural passage of time was made perceptible in an ordered, abstract form in space. Gechtman's choice of hair and urine, from among all of the body's materials, is also significant. These are materials that are regularly shed or excreted by the body. When we look at urine we have expelled or at hair we have shed, our sense of self

gets split between our interior and exterior, between our sense of being alive and a sense of looking at our body as an object, of looking at our death. Duchamp's *Urinal* designated a cessation of the flow of life's fluids and an absolute desiccation that paved the way to a new era of art; Gechtman's urine, in contrast, may be seen as a symptomatic return of what was repressed and banished by Duchamp's work.

After the closing of the "Exposure" exhibition, Gechtman – then 33 – had obituary notices printed (ostensibly by his family) announcing his "untimely" death. This was a kind of dress rehearsal for his expected demise, perhaps a case of "acting out" as a way of managing anxiety. The obituary notices were posted on bulletin-boards around where he lived [as is the custom in Israel (Tr.)], in his "habitat" in downtown Rishon LeZion. It could be said that they marked out his territory, giving that common survival strategy a macabre twist. To publicize his fictitious death in broader circles, "artistic circles" among them, Gechtman had the obituary notice published in Hebrew and English in the daily newspapers *Haaretz*<sup>20</sup> and *The Jerusalem Post* – albeit for one day only, yet their distribution was much broader than that of the bulletin-board notices, which usually remain visible for only a few days before they are covered by notices of more recent deaths.

The neighborhood bulletin board is where one gets updates about local events and where, in passing, one encounters the names of recently deceased residents of the habitat. Such encounters generally hold the reader's attention for a very brief time-span, the interval between a "before" and an "after": for most readers the dead person had not died until they read this notice, and for them that moment is the moment of the named person's death. Likewise, a casual leafing through the daily newspaper (full of reports and stories about death and about life) may halt when we reach the obituary pages (death as news). The moment our body halts opposite the obituary page, or the notices on the bulletin board, our eyes commence their agitated scanning motion, looking for (while hoping not to find) a familiar name. This agitated gaze is familiar to us from times when we leaf through an album looking for a photo of someone in particular – a photograph that could serve as evidence or confirmation of their presence in a particular time and place, a ghostly photographic presence that somehow encapsulates death (Roland Barthes: "when I discover myself in the product of this operation [photography], what I see is that I have become Total Image, which is to say, Death in person.")<sup>21</sup> The moment our eyes' motion halts – when we see a familiar name on an obituary notice or a photograph we were looking for – fragmentary memories

<sup>19</sup> Gechtman, quoted in Y. Michael Barilan, "Medicine Through the Artist's Eyes: Before, During and After the Holocaust", *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 47:1 (Winter 2004), 129.

<sup>20</sup> *Haaretz* is the "natural habitat" of the artistic circles in Israel, and is therefore a potential site for creation and presentation; see also Ruti Direktor, "Gideon Gechtman: The Newspaper as Exhibition Space" (in Hebrew), *Contemporary Art I'm Talking: The First 100 Years*, (Jerusalem, 2005) pp. 126-129.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 14-15. It is noteworthy that Barthes opens his reflections on the nature of photography with a few personal remarks.

congregate and coalesce into a name, an image, a figure.

It is always a surprise to learn that someone you know has died, regardless of the circumstances of their death. Gechtman merely intensified the surprise when he announced his own fictitious death, while also subverting the accepted ways death is dealt with in Israeli society.<sup>22</sup> By publicizing his own death while still alive, Gechtman multiplied exponentially the temporal tension already present whenever one reads an obituary notice. This artistic action, whose addressees stumbled upon it by chance, not in any organized framework of the art world but in the world of everyday life, was an act of mischief that conjured an encounter with death as a random presence that insinuates itself nonchalantly<sup>23</sup> into the fabric of everyday life. Gechtman’s action may be seen as a realization of a universal fantasy, “to be present at one’s own funeral”: to experience (to live) the days after one’s own death, to witness others’ responses to it, to stretch the boundaries of one’s consciousness and that of those around one: “The obituary notices are an attempt to live for a few days after my death. [...] First, I

looked at my own obituary notice, which is quite a jolting experience, and then I saw it hung.”<sup>24</sup> “The relationship to my own dying does not have the meaning of knowledge or experience”, observed Levinas, and then quoted Epicurus: “If you are there, then death is not there; if it is there, you are not there”.<sup>25</sup> In the very same vein, Duchamp composed his own epitaph: “*D’ailleurs, c’est toujours les autres qui meurent*” (“Besides, it’s always the others who die”).<sup>26</sup>

On the face of it, Gechtman’s act of publicizing his death – as a conceptual action that does not entail erecting a memorial or creating a physical object that leaves a reminder of him in the world – does not seem to cohere with his mausoleum idea; nonetheless, as a simple yet grave and extreme action that had a powerful impact on the Israeli art public, it has functioned effectively in preserving his memory. For everyone who saw the obituary notice on the day it was published (or later on, in one of the many photos that documented it), or even heard about it (what started out as a rumor of the artist’s death, a few days later became a disproven rumor), Gideon Gechtman and his action would become deeply etched into

<sup>22</sup> Azoulay, *Art Practice* (in Hebrew) (see n. 10 above), p. 258: “He wished to realize the right of the individual to die, to decide on his own death, to declare it and to dispose of it for himself.”  
<sup>23</sup> From the old French verb “*nonchaloir*,” literally “to not get hot,” denoting cool indifference, equivalent to “cool” in modern slang usage.  
<sup>24</sup> Gechtman, interview with Moshe Hausman (see n. 1 above).  
<sup>25</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 19.  
<sup>26</sup> One may of course recall many artists whose works touched upon the fantasy of their own death, such as Ingmar Bergman in his film *Wild Strawberries* (1957), whose protagonist (a 78-year-old widowed doctor) reviews his life while on his way to receive an honorary degree and, in the opening scene, sees his own corpse laid out in a coffin; or Bialik, who in his poem “After My Death” creates an analogy between his own death and the loss of his poetry; and of course Hanoch Levin, in all of his works and particularly in his long poem “The Lives of the Dead,” published (in a book with the same title) during the year of his death (1999).

their memories. Another powerful effect of this action was to make viewers realize that they too could see their own name on such a notice – a realization (with its attendant emotional reaction) that raised the viewer’s repressed consciousness of death up from its hiding place to an unmediated confrontation with the first-person, through (and despite) its third-person articulation.

In the same year, Gechtman had a selection of obituary notices printed in color (in the same dimensions as the ones he had posted in Rishon LeZion), using bright, generic hues that were available at the printers’. These notices immediately added another layer of irony, as if their intention was to go on mocking death. About a decade later, in 1984, Gechtman painted several even more colorful obituary notices on wooden panels which echoed Jasper Johns’ *Flag* (1954-55) in their absolute correspondence between the edges of the notice as image and the edges of the painting, as well as two gigantic black-and-white notices, each 310 cm. wide, which he exhibited as objects, one standing on the floor and one leaning against the wall. This enlarging of the notice to such immense dimensions represented a further stretching of the boundaries of the work, of the notice, and of the addressees’ minds. Gechtman also had a number of obituary notices made in colored neon lighting that turned on and off in a rhythm like that of

heartbeats, thus linking the rhythm and the ebbing of life with this announcement of a death.

Third Person Plural

Shortly after orchestrating the reenactment of his preoperative shaving for *Exposure*, Gechtman began creating a hair-raising series of works, *Brushes*, their bristles made out of hair from his head and the heads of his family that had been collected on various occasions from many haircuts at different stages of their lives. Thus, for example, the first brush – made from his wife Bat-Sheva’s hair – contained locks of hair she had kept from haircuts she had had at the ages of 11, 17 and 30. These human-hair brushes were potent memorial objects: not merely *memento mori* or macabre relics,<sup>27</sup> but also a reiteration of the Nazi practices of manufacturing goods from materials taken from their victims’ bodies.<sup>28</sup> In this action of transforming a body part into an artifact that was also an exhibit, Gechtman also alluded to the way personal effects are displayed in commemorative institutions as means of conveying the memory of a historical trauma. Like the publication of the obituary notices, Gechtman’s *Brushes*, made from his and his family’s hair while they were still alive,<sup>29</sup> confront us with the possibility of our own

<sup>27</sup> Speaking about the tradesman who made the brushes, Gechtman said: “I don’t think he realized at first that it was human hair. Later, I called him up and asked: ‘Tell me, what about the blonde boy’s hair, have you finished his brush?’ I heard a choked cry, and the next time I came there he looked at me with revulsion, as though I were some psychopathic child-murderer.” Gechtman, in an interview with Tsachi Raphael (in Hebrew), *Bamakom*, 31 December 1993.  
<sup>28</sup> See also Sarit Shapira, “The Myth of Deterritorialization”, *Makom: Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Israel*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1993), p. 85.

death by showing us how we could become objects while still alive. In contrast with most of Gechtman’s other works, which are (intentionally) replicable after his death, *Brushes* and *Urine* are the only ones that cannot be recreated after the death/s of their “donor/s” (indeed, after his son Yotam died Gechtman made no more brushes from his hair). “In principle, my work does not require the hand’s touch – all the pieces can be replicated. They need not be identical. The *Brushes* – there’s a problem with them; they’re an exception and intentionally so; there’s a point there that emphasizes the rule: they’re not replicable.”<sup>30</sup>

Gechtman’s *Brushes* are not replicable because they attach the physical actuality of life to death.<sup>31</sup> Made from the same material they are generally meant to brush or remove, they nevertheless refuse to sweep death under the carpet. The most chilling thing about them is the fact that they are made from “living” human material, which, once it has become detached from the body, assumes an “alien” and revolting character, and must swiftly be removed. Confronted with Gechtman’s *Brushes*, a shudder runs through our bodies and our hair stands on end, betraying the involuntary drama unfolding on our body’s surface, revealing our transformation from a subject into an object, a bristling brush.

Second Person

*Exposure* (1975) was an extroverted yet restrained expression of Gechtman’s extraordinary ability to level a direct and trenchant gaze at his own ailing body and at all the implications of being “cared-for”, whether as a child by his parents, or as an adult by doctors and hospitals. The obituary notice, published when the exhibition ended, was like a period at the end of a sentence. The illness of his son Yotam, diagnosed when he was three and a half years old (in 1975), was the main reason for Gechtman’s not holding any solo exhibitions shows or producing many new works between 1975 and 1984. It is likely that Gechtman withdrew from art during those years to enable him to live in the shadow of Yotam’s disease. Nonetheless, during one of Yotam’s first hospitalizations a work was born: a heart-rending photograph of the small child in a hospital bed several sizes too large for him. The photograph’s frame was made like a part of the white hospital bed-frame, with legs resting on the floor and its top leaning against the wall, as if simultaneously present in two worlds, the physical world of life and the regions of death and memory – on the floor of the hospital or the gallery as a physical object in this world, and on the wall as a picture, an image of something that has passed from

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<sup>29</sup> The *Brushes* were divided among 3 glazed wooden display cabinets: the first contained (as described in the label) a pair of brushes (Bat-Sheva and Gideon Gechtman); the second, three brushes (Bat-Sheva, Gideon and Yotam Gechtman); the third, four brushes (Bat-Sheva, Gideon, Yotam and Noam Gechtman).  
<sup>30</sup> Gechtman, interview with Moshe Hausman (see n. 1 above).  
<sup>31</sup> Gechtman’s *Brushes* is the only art-work chosen unanimously by a panel of ten Israeli curators who were asked to select the five most important works of Israeli art; see Eli Armon-Azulay, “The National Curator” (in Hebrew), *Haaretz: Galleria*, 29 July 2009.

the real world into another world. “I call the picture of Yotam in the bed ‘The *Akedah*’.”<sup>32</sup> It was important to me to bind together our medical histories, the curse that rests upon us both, the feeling of our family sacrifice.”<sup>33</sup> It would seem that Gechtman’s identification with Yotam’s illness opened up an outlet for emotions that had not found expression in *Exposure*, which had been penetrating yet devoid of sentimentality.

In *Exposure* Gechtman displayed a photograph of his hospital-bed. He later reduced the photo’s size, duplicated the reduction, and placed the framed duplicates in a display case.<sup>34</sup> Shortly after heart surgery saved Yotam’s life at age 11, the hospital bed returned to the three-dimensional arena in *Beds* – a pair of beds made to Gechtman’s specifications, each of them half the length and half the width of the original bed. These shrunken beds,<sup>35</sup> mostly shown as a pair, were born of the same photograph that was shown in *Exposure*, and they retain

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the photographic medium’s attributes of reduction and replication. They inhabit an intermediate state between a unique object and a reproduced image; they are “things which have one foot in the ‘world’ and one foot outside it, but in a different way than the readymade”, as Gechtman put it.<sup>36</sup> The beds appear to be pre-fabricated industrial products, but they are not readymades because they were hand-made uniquely for a one-off order from the artist.<sup>37</sup> Their children’s-bed size and their adults’-bed appearance makes them beds for one child and for one particular other person particular, and for them alone – representing the shared fate of father and son and the father’s wish to lie beside his son, to be with him, and embodying a bonding of the emotional/empathetic with the bodily/biological/genetic.<sup>38</sup>

Twenty-five years after *Exposure*, Gechtman exhibited the installation *Yotam*, which he created during Yotam’s final

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<sup>32</sup> The Hebrew term for what in English is generally called “the binding” or “the sacrifice” of Isaac (Genesis 22) (Tr.).  
<sup>33</sup> Gechtman, in an interview in *Haaretz*, “Gideon Gechtman: Beds” (in Hebrew), 1 November 1985.  
<sup>34</sup> “A bed sees us born, and sees us die. It is the ever changing scene upon which the human race plays by turns interesting dramas, laughable farces, and fearful tragedies. It is a cradle decked with flowers. A throne of love. A sepulcher.” Xavier de Maistre, *A Journey round My Room* (1794), trans. Henry Attwell (1871), <http://archive.org/details/ajourneyroundmy01attwgoog>, p. 16.  
<sup>35</sup> The reduction in scale in *Beds* can be likened to the shrinking of the body in fear. See Yaniv-Yehuda Eiger, “Gechtman gives Death Hell” (in Hebrew), *Maariv*, 12 January 2009.  
<sup>36</sup> Gechtman, in a conversation with Uri Hess and Moshe Ninio, *Kav* 9 (second series, January 1989), reprinted in this catalogue; English translation: pp. 212-203.  
<sup>37</sup> In the years 1964-65, Marcel Duchamp, in collaboration with Arturo Schwarz, created replicas of 14 of his original ready-mades. The industrially produced objects, which had become art works, were replicated; see Adina Kamien-Kazhdan, “Duchamp, Man Ray and Replication”, in *The Small Utopia Ars Multiplicata*, exh. cat., ed. Germano Celant (Venice: Fondazione Prada, 2012), pp. 97-113.  
<sup>38</sup> *Beds* (1984) was exhibited as an independent work in Gechtman’s exhibition at the Kibbutz Gallery (1985), and was subsequently integrated into an extensive installation in Gechtman’s exhibition “Expanded Exposure” (1998), at the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery (Tel Aviv University). In 2000 it became part of the installation *Yotam* (Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art).

hospitalization and until his death. “Yotam was suffering, his body was breaking down, and I stood there with a camera”,<sup>39</sup> Gechtman recounted, and this description reflects his agonized awareness of the conflict between his desire to document Yotam’s ordeal as a photographer or disinterested observer and his emotional involvement as a father. If *Exposure* was like a single fluent and calculated sentence enunciated in a language that deliberately distanced itself from the lyricism of the “I”, then *Yotam*, as a story of two, was composed of dense and complex present-tense sentences articulated in the second person.

To use the extended metaphor of the hospital, one could say that *Exposure* was like a hospital laboratory that receives “specimens” taken from the patient’s body, while *Yotam* portrayed the vista of the hospital wards, in which the patient himself is immured during his encounters with life and death. In *Exposure* every item was framed or enclosed in containers and display cases, distanced from the body, while in *Yotam* many objects were openly exposed – white hospital cabinets,<sup>40</sup> towels, white light fixtures, infusion stands, an “Emergency Exit” sign, an aquarium with a “still life,” a bowl of plastic fruits, test-tubes, a doctor’s white smock, a stuffed peacock, a trolley, a picture of Yotam. Glazed drawers, partially open, protruded from the cabinets, functioning as an archive that as-it-were swallows and emits images

from carefully sorted earlier art works. In *Exposure* the living body was reduced to two states of matter – solid and liquid: hair and urine, but in *Yotam* all of the four elements appeared, contained in the many images as intersections of movement and inertia: water in an aquarium with no living thing in it; fire, represented by a fire-extinguisher and a sign warning against fires; earth, in the form of crushed marble enclosed in test-tubes; and, of course, air – air bubbles in the aquarium and in the blood oxygen saturation sensor clipped onto Yotam’s finger, and of course the air in the space surrounding the exhibits. The installation’s arrangement created a bubble of space that absorbed an entire world into itself – an isolation bubble, cut off from life yet full of life, obeying the hospital regime yet contravening it, seducing but at the same time aloof, cold and alienated in the whiteness of its exhibits but also bleeding (*Cart*).

The name *Yotam* echoes the outrageous inversion of the natural order of things, the experience of a father “orphaned” of his son.<sup>41</sup> Yotam, who grew up in an environment suffused with his father’s illness, became, through his own disease, a recapitulation and a genealogical continuation of his sick father’s fate. “Yotam suffered a history very similar to mine, so I feel we share a common fate. He brought back to me some very difficult experiences I had gone through. In many respects I see in Yotam

<sup>39</sup> Gechtman, interviewed by Anat Meidan (see n. 4 above).

<sup>40</sup> The cabinets in the installation were in fact purchased from suppliers of equipment for cosmeticians, who provide pseudo-medical treatment that focuses on the body’s surface and on the artificial enhancement of its aesthetic qualities.

<sup>41</sup> “Yotam” (יֹתָם) looks and sounds very similar to *yatom* (יתום), the Hebrew word for “orphan” (Tr.).

a reflection of myself during the course of my illness,” Gechtman wrote.<sup>42</sup> He saw *Yotam* as a process piece – an installation expressing an intimate closeness and a prolonged and agonizing leave-taking. In contrast to *Exposure*, in which he presented his own illness through the eyes of a dispassionate, external observer, *Yotam* was an installation of tenderness, helplessness and lassitude, guilt and the grief of parting – yet what it projected was not an ending, not movement halting completely in the past, but the movement of those living in the present who were accompanying the dying person. Death, here, did not appear as a general or universal idea, nor was it distanced to the third person or to the past and future tenses; it was experienced as the prolonged dying of someone closely accompanied and cared for throughout the process of his decline.

p. 71 In a video screened on a monitor standing on one of the white cabinets, Gechtman is seen weighing each of the letters in the name “Yotam Gechtman” (the letters were taken from his headstone, which was made of green marble, a material familiar from Gechtman’s earlier works). He writes down the weight of each stone letter in a table that is also displayed in the installation, smashes the letter with a hammer like a chemist pulverizing medicines with pestle and mortar, then weighs the pulverized stone again and writes down its weight. The disparity between the weights of the whole letters and of the pulverized stone is embodied in dust – the dust that is both created and lost in the act of crushing

the stone, its existence expressed only by its vanishing, after the event.

In this video work, which documents the smashing and erasure of the identity embodied in a name, Gechtman recapitulates procedures he had developed in *Exposure* and in other earlier works: the graphic presentation of the name “Yotam Gechtman” (*Obituary Notice*); the disintegration of the “eternal” marble (a central material in Gechtman’s oeuvre, which he had already presented in various imitation and hybridized forms), similarly to the way other materials were disintegrated in his works *Sawdust* p. 88 and *Unraveled Rope*; the quasi-scientific p. 89 measurement and notation of a material (as in *Urine*); the repetitive sounds of the hammering (echoing the “ticking” of *Valve*).

Metabolism

Gechtman’s work is deeply rooted in the constantly proliferating art discourse that since early in the 20th century has been darting about uneasily through the tangles of relations between presence and its signifiers, substitutes, images, traces, representations, presentations and appearances; or, in brief: between a substitute or an imitation or a surrogate and the unattainable original. Gechtman’s surname, which is present in many of his works, is itself the result of a series of substitutions: “In Russia, only sons [with no male siblings] were not conscripted into the army. So, every time a son was born to a Jewish family, the family changed

<sup>42</sup> Gideon Gechtman’s notes, unpublished and kept in the Gechtman family archives, Rishon LeZion.



its surname. Hence one family might have seven surnames – for example: Gechtman, Rechtman, Lechtman – all sorts of variations on the same name. My father’s original surname was Parokhodnik, which means ‘steamboat.’”<sup>43</sup> Substitutes were also found for Gechtman’s parents (whose physical and emotional absence had a profound impact on the sick boy’s early childhood) in his adoptive parents at Kibbutz Alonim, where he was sent at the age of eight and a half to live as an “outside child”.<sup>44</sup> There was a large library in his adoptive parents’ home, and through it, like many Israeli artists of his generation, he experienced his first encounters with art – encounters mediated by reproductions, not by direct contact with originals. The artificial valve implanted in his heart in 1973 was a substitute too – a cold, alien, ticking industrial artifact that was embedded into his anatomy, that prolonged his life and would most probably survive much longer than his decaying corpse.<sup>45</sup>

In the early ’70s Gechtman created a series of works named *The Imitation and the Substitute* – two-dimensional works, most of them abstract, which were primarily juxtapositions of materials and their substitutes, one above the other: imitation-wood Formica over wood veneer, green imitation-marble Formica over green marble, and so on. The vertical positioning

emphasized the horizontal line, at eye-level, between the members of each pair, highlighting the relation (and the disparity) between the imitation and the natural original. As Gechtman put it: “I definitely see the relation between Formica and marble as being like the relation between landscape painting and the landscape itself.”<sup>46</sup> During the same period, Gechtman produced a series of fiberglass casts that looked exactly like white canvases stretched on frames, as though in readiness to be painted on. These were hung on the wall like paintings, and titled *Canvas*. Presenting a perfect *trompe-l’oeil* of the two-dimensional painting support, these pieces too straddled the line between a painting and an object – between their actual material and the material they were imitating, between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, between the beginning (actually the moment before it) and the end of the creative process.

We can find a more extensive example of material and functional substitutions in Gechtman’s *Carts*, which traversed an entire gamut of his alternate materials, each *Cart* being based on a hybrid combination of a different set of real objects (for example, a chair with a billy-cart of the kind children build). At the start of its journey, when the cart was made of a few boards and four wheels, it was a plaything for the Gechtman

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children, Yotam and Noam. In its later transmutations, it was driven along the paths of life and art, parked in one or another of Gechtman’s installations, or placed on its own in a group exhibition, all the while undergoing changes in its materials, its structure and especially its surface, which more than any other element clearly marked it as a substitute, a replacement. Every few years, *Cart* changed its texture, its color or its material, as though testing the viewers’ alertness to the changes it had undergone (in certain versions, it was proportioned like a funeral gurney). A variety of tradesmen produced different parts of the *Carts*, and with the passage of time it was built to be less and less durable. Headstone-marble-patterned Formica, or green imitation marble, indicated the macabre layers of meaning that adhered to it. The *Cart* grew more ornate and beautiful, even as it became more fragile and less usable, and it even blended, like a chameleon, with the bases it was placed on. Nevertheless, it could always be returned to the world without immediately disclosing itself as an art object. Its final stopping place was the installation *Yotam*, where it bled in red-and-white imitation marble.

“Untimely”

Gechtman’s constant subversion of his own imagined notion of the time after his death is analogous to his to-and-fro movement between real time and imagined times, and to the distortions of temporal order in his artistic formulations. This is, in effect, a movement that resists the “natural” perception of time as a linear progression ending in death, and is analogous to subjective time.

In his consistent engagement with memory as a concept based on a reversal of times, on bringing the past into the present, Gechtman did not neglect childhood memories that centered on children’s playthings. As was his wont, he “elevated” local playthings, and subjected them to “a process of incremental distancing from ‘life’”.<sup>47</sup> Among these playthings were a slingshot, a gun, and of course a cart – “adults” things that children (like artists) copy and imbue with the spirit of play – and marbles, those magical glass spheres that children (like curators and archivists) sort, protect, define and rate by giving them distinguishing names (“alley”, “swirly”, “butterfly”, “commie”, etc.). This of course brings to mind the connection between play and art as worlds that combine an infinite seriousness with a total lack of practical purpose.<sup>48</sup> Children’s games of days gone by served to evoke Gechtman’s Israeli childhood, “in the sense that only childhood is ‘life.’”<sup>49</sup> His decision to remake them in

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<sup>43</sup> Gechtman, quoted by Dana Gillerman, “Not from the Horse’s Mouth” (in Hebrew), *Haaretz*: Galleria, 12 April 2007.

<sup>44</sup> This term refers to children not born to kibbutz members who, for a variety of ideological, economic or social reasons, were sent to live on a kibbutz without their parents (Tr.).

<sup>45</sup> About the role of substitutes as markers of the absence of Gechtman himself, see Michal Ben-Naftali, “The Death of the Author: Footnotes to Gideon Gechtman” (in Hebrew), *Hamidrasha: Parshanut* 12 (Fall 2009), 163-170.

<sup>46</sup> Gechtman, in a conversation with Uri Hess and Moshe Ninio (see n. 36 above).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Marcel Duchamp, as a “chess artist,” blurred the boundaries between these two worlds and related to both with the profoundest seriousness. For a more extensive discussion of the relationship between play and art see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

<sup>49</sup> Gechtman, in a conversation with Uri Hess and Moshe Ninio (see n. 36 above).

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materials of limited durability, his placing of them (occasionally) in display cases with identifying labels, and certainly his printing of their names in the format of obituary notices, or his carving these names in marble that is used for headstones, all highlighted and made clear that they belonged to the past and, in a certain sense, returned them to the world of the dead – the place and the time where playthings exist until children breathe life into them.

Memory situates time at a given physical site (space) in the present (memorial sites, museums, libraries, archives). It can be argued that Gechtman twice situated momentous events from his recent past in the present: first in *Exposure*, the installation that performed an *anamnesis* of his own illness, and again in the installation *Yotam*, where he used “life materials” to reprise the final hospitalization and the death of his son Yotam. When, at the age of 33, Gechtman published the obituary notices that announced his own “untimely” death, he situated the future (his death) in the present of the action and in the imagined past of his impending death. Twenty-four years later, with his real illness and fictional death already etched in the public mind, Gechtman produced an installation that recaptured and represented the real dying of his son, a perplexing reversal of the natural order of things – the son’s death preceding the father’s. The temporal inversions formulated in these two highly significant works, one creating a fictional event in imagined time and the other responding to a decisive event in real lived time, fit nicely into the conceptual framework of the mausoleum that had begun to crystallize as early as 1971 – a framework that on principle refuses to contain solely the

past and the present, for it is oriented to the future (be it near or distant) that will come after the artist’s death. Gechtman usurps the roles of those who will remain after him, announces his own death, and plans the memorial site that is to be displayed after this event.

Temporal inversions of this sort are more easily conveyed by the narrative arts, such as literature, theater and film. The plastic arts, and sculpture most of all, are arts of space and of the present, of stationary objects in the world, whose physical presence outweighs any other times they may represent. Sculpture is not inherently suited to represent the duration and the movement of time by means of the duration of its reception (in contrast to reading, for example). Gechtman’s direct engagement with his own death in response to events in his own life (and not to death as a general idea), demanded a conceptual framework capable of containing such complexity, and he therefore turned to mediums such as performance, video and photography, and even planned interactive actions in extra-artistic spheres.

His unrealized project *Forest* (1970) – p. 90  
a plan to plant a forest of a thousand trees in the Arava desert – echoes Zionist commemorative practices while adopting the conceptual art trend of extending artistic activity beyond the studio and gallery to sites in natural surroundings – in this case, arid desert where the harsh conditions challenged the collective motivation to commemorate the dead by means of living, growing trees. By way of contrast, one can mention Josef Beuys’ realized plan (1982) for the reforestation of the city of Kassel (according to Beuys’

doctrine, trees contribute to the salvation of humanity, and must therefore be nurtured).

Another “outdoor” work by Gechtman, which in a certain sense carries associations of the Holocaust, was performed on several occasions at which the artist handed out meals to the audience.<sup>50</sup> The experience of standing in line for *Pad Thai* or minestrone in a soup-kitchen atmosphere demanded patience, and evoked thoughts about real hunger in an extreme and uncontrollable time in the past.<sup>51</sup>

### The Art of Dying

pp. 150-151 One of Gechtman’s last works, *Archive* (2003), is a reconstruction of an original setting – the cemetery (built in tiers of burial niches) in the Spanish town of Portbou, where Walter Benjamin was buried.<sup>52</sup> “Benjamin suffered from heart trouble,” Gechtman wrote. “The original cemetery, the mausoleum, has a spectacular flat façade. The visible surface area of each tomb is reduced to a small niche. [...] My reconstruction exaggerates the characteristics of the original. The façade – there is nothing behind it. [...] All the images are produced by technical means of reproduction. [...] This is a place Benjamin would have wanted to be buried outside of, I suppose.”<sup>53</sup>

The lucid syntax of *Exposure* and the complex narratives-of-objects that composed *Yotam* were combined in *Archive* to create a catalogue of objects arranged in niches – artificial flowers, burial-urns made of various materials, cubes of artificial marble, marble candlesticks – at once a reconstruction of objects from the Portbou cemetery and a catalogue of Gechtman’s characteristic objects and materials, items that might just as easily be found in a cemetery, at a memorial site, in one Gechtman’s exhibitions or in his studio. *Archive* is therefore a periodic table of Gechtmanian elements, or an index to his entire oeuvre. These organizing forms have by necessity submitted to the vicissitudes of his “life-materials”; hence parts of *Archive* are empty, mysterious, designating a state of pre-occupancy, or perhaps a lost datum or a repressed memory whose details are missing. *Archive* is an incomplete summation that remains aware of what has been lost along the way. Its cubical niches combine the regimented language of the grid with the chilling silence of a cemetery, and echo all of Gechtman’s display cases that had become inseparable from their contents – a combination of abstract geometric forms with a functioning space/repository that contains, displays, frames and protects the objects in it.

Gechtman: “This work is a continuation

<sup>50</sup> *Hebrew Work No. 2: Pad-Thai/We’re Only Here for the Money*, 1997 (with his son Yotam Gechtman, who enjoyed cooking; the food-preparation brought father and son closer together); *Untitled: Soup Distribution*, 2004 (with Noam Gechtman); in this action a sign proclaimed: “Portions will be served free of charge, the public is to stand in line, in something of a soup-kitchen atmosphere.”

<sup>51</sup> Gechtman’s works *Bread* (1970) and *Queue* (1988) should also be mentioned in this context.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin is presumed to have committed suicide after being apprehended by the Spanish at a border-crossing between France and Spain while fleeing from the Nazis.

<sup>53</sup> Gechtman’s notes (see n. 42 above).

of my Mausoleum project. It's a kind of mausoleum within a mausoleum. The contents of the niches stem from various elements that have appeared in my works, remnants and fragments of works that have accumulated over the years. [...] Some of the elements create a disparity between the original and its reconstruction. This work [*Archive*] functions as a kind of index of my earlier works and puts some of them in a more accurate context."<sup>54</sup>

In a niche in the bottom row of *Archive*, behind a glass door, there is a tiny golden cart that recalls a multitude of things: the miniaturized objects hidden deep inside monumental pyramids, Gechtman's childhood playthings, the funeral gurney, the miniature creations of artists like Rodin and Duchamp, photographs that reduce the sizes of their subjects, the beauty of surfaces, the paths of art and life, Yotam.

"Since death is such an important event, it is incumbent upon us to study the 'art of dying', *i.e.*, to prepare for death in an appropriate manner so that when the time comes we may depart in a respectable manner."<sup>55</sup> In the life and the art of Gechtman, a firm atheist who abhorred mysticism, there was no room for theological considerations of life after death. Gechtman was an artist of lucid thought and operated within a conceptual framework. His material formulations and his actions received their meaning from this framework, which enabled them to simultaneously contain past, present

and future times as well as reflections on the body and life, on sickness and death. Death is certain and final, "a departure without return",<sup>56</sup> hence one can say nothing about it. It is possible (and needful) to speak about our attitudes towards death, about the fear of death, about preparation for death, about mourning, about our attitudes towards our own dying and other people's dying. That is Gideon Gechtman's project.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Zeev Levy, *Thoughts About Death in Jewish Philosophy and Thought* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), p. 126.

<sup>56</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time* (see n. 25 above), pp. 9, 37.