

A Snowball from the Beit She'an Valley

Aya Miron

“My earliest memory: snow in Kfar Ruppin, I’m a quarter to three years old. A nice kibbutz member makes a snowball and throws it to me”.¹



Kibbutz Kfar Ruppin in the snow, 1950; courtesy of Hagar Natan

The whiteness of the rare snowfall in the winter of 1950 in Kfar Ruppin – the kibbutz Efrat Natan grew up in, in one of the warmest regions in this country, the Beit She’an Valley – infused it with something of the European landscape from which her parents had come, and probably cast a strangeness on the familiar

¹ All quotations of Efrat Natan’s words cited from here on without footnote references are from conversations I had with her during the last decade and particularly in the years 2014–2015 while preparing for the exhibition.

local landscape. Within the quasi-photographic freezing of the motions of life and work in the kibbutz, a “nice kibbutz member” created a simple and spherical white form in his hands, and with a single movement sent it in the direction of little Efrat Natan’s body. Contained in this vivid and primal memory are some of the essences that are fundamental to many of her works: simple and instantaneous creation from materials available in the immediate vicinity; a conspicuous presence of the color white, mostly in relations with a dark background; an engagement with the surrounding physical space within which the movement of bodies in defined directions is marked; discernible relations between large and small; and, perhaps the most fundamental and important of them all – a unique blending of minimalism, which aims for reduction of color and form, with body art, whose theatrical dimensions require a human presence and a duration in a defined time. Natan’s body actions make do with little, with a primary nucleus of an experience – but, like a snowball that accumulates volume as it rolls, they are a kind of once-in-a-lifetime event that keeps on thickening for a long time after it happened; and – like the snow that melts – is the end of something has a form that is worth contemplating.

Efrat Natan, the youngest child of pioneers who came from Germany, was born in 1947 in Kibbutz Kfar Ruppin, which was founded in 1938 as a “tower and stockade” settlement. The kibbutz is located on the eastern border of the Beit She’an Valley: its fields and fishponds extend to the Jordan River, in a landscape bounded by the Gilead and Gilboa ranges. When she was 21 she began

taking painting classes at the Avni Institute in Tel Aviv (with Yehezkel Streichman, Avshalom Okashi, Mina Zisselman and David Kaftori as her teachers). About two years later she met Raffi Lavie, and moved on to study with him as her private teacher in Ramat Gan. There, like other students of Lavie, among them Yair Garbuz, Nahum Tevet, Tamar Getter and Ehud Pecker, Natan absorbed – besides knowledge of art history – some of the new messages of the art of the '60s and '70s, and with them a new way of thinking that changed the traditional conceptions of visual art. Prominent among the leading currents in those years were Minimalism and Conceptual Art, the buds of which had already appeared in the work of Marcel Duchamp in the early years of the 20th century. This is the framework she works in to this day, though influences from various periods and cultures in art history have been drawn into it. She has drawn inspiration from Egyptian and African artifacts,² and blended them with Western-Christian iconography and influences from modernist movements such as German Expressionism, Surrealism, and Futurism. Just as, before falling asleep in the kibbutz children's house, she heard a diversity of stories told by different parents all at the same time, Natan, in the conceptual

frameworks she employs, ties together a polyphonic arrangement of diverse images and practices from art history.

Until the early '70s Natan lived in the kibbutz, and her artistic activities there were not seen as deviant; on the contrary: her artistic abilities served the kibbutz, which for its part enabled her to express herself by artistic means: "I was a useful artist for the kibbutz. I prepared posters and stage sets for the festivals. The festival pageants at the kibbutz were a kind of Happenings", she recounts. Influences of her childhood and of life in the kibbutz in the '50s mixed well with the art world she encountered in the '70s. At that time various aspects of kibbutz customs seemed to her quite similar to the actions and to the means of performative expression of Conceptual Art. The Happenings and the "radical" Performances of the art of the '60s and '70s reminded her of ceremonies and festival pageants in the kibbutz, and of the fire inscriptions and the oath ceremonies in the youth movement. Making do with little, an ideological imperative in the austerity period of the '50s in Israel, returned like an echo from movements such as the Italian Arte Povera (perhaps a precedent to what in the '80s was described as the Israeli "Want of Matter").³ The improvisation practiced in the kibbutz, to manage with "what there is" in the immediate vicinity, morphed into ready-made works and the use of found objects. The photographs that recounted the history and the mythology of the kibbutz influenced Natan's language of

³ See Sarah Breitberg-Semmel, *The Want of Matter: A Quality in Israeli Art*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1986),

² Natan: "I had a 'Germanic' love for ancient Egypt, with its mythology and cosmology. The similarity between the Nile River and the Jordan River, an aunt who served in Egypt during the Second World War, who had a book called *The Glory of Egypt* with beautiful pictures in black-and-white, Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* which I read in the early '70s, a trip with my father to Egypt in 1983 – all these infected me with an Egyptomania. My final school project in Year 11 dealt with the relation of Africa's leaders to tribal culture".

black-and-white and joined with the black-and-white photographs of body actions that were a common mode of representation in Conceptual Art – and the modest modernist architecture of the kibbutz also connected somehow with Minimalist sculpture.

"Minimalism was already established and articulated, and we sought to do something new with it. *Head Sculpture*, for example [^{#6–10}], was a fusion of Minimalist sculpture with Body Art. The Minimalism went well with my shyness: it was a kind of mask. The space, which sits strongly in my body, led me to Body Art", Natan says. Body Art sets up the artist's body as a central object to be viewed, and puts the tension between the body as subject and as object in the center of the action. Many artists – for example Hermann Nitsch or Chris Burden, and also the Israelis Motti Mizrahi, Yocheved Weinfeld and Gideon Gechtman – have focused on the wounded, deviant, or bleeding artist's body. With Natan, however, the point of departure was the space that surrounds her body – a space which includes and contains, from the outside in, and one within the other, the earth and the sky, the four wind directions, the specific landscape, the architectural environs of the kibbutz, and the bed inside them. Each one of these elements has been powerfully interiorized into her body consciousness and through it has received its artistic expression. Minimalism has been a channel that enabled her to evade expressive exposure of the body, and to a large extent has tightened and empowered the images she has created.

"My relatively few works have been spread over large intervals of time. This may be the reason why they've absorbed many



Ceremonial doll depicting a masquerader wearing a Wanyugo firespitter Janus mask. Senufo people, Ivory Coast, early 20th century, pigment on wood and burlap, 40x12; collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift of Eva and Semi Sznajderman, Jerusalem, in honor of Clara Sznajderman, Caracas, Venezuela (B06.0303a-b)

influences and sources of inspiration, and perhaps the paucity of works opens up spaces through which it's easier to see a multiplicity of influences. I think of my art works as mushrooms that spring up from inside a large and tangled network of hyphae". Natan's silences – the long periods during which she did not create any new works (principally the long interval between 1979 and 1992) – remind her of the rhythms of the ceremonial appearances of African ritual objects: "In my first art book, *Africa: The Art of the Negro Peoples*, I read about one of the masks that it appears once every 25 years in a performance honoring the spirits of the dead, and remains hidden most of the time. In my art there are relics of magical thought and shamanic practices; at any rate, for me this was a model to relate to". The materials and the objects used by shamans are charged with magical energies that operate by means of the body – and Natan too has succeeded in creating tight and powerful

images that bring to mind the presence of religious artifacts, like icons in churches or other ceremonial objects that are charged with magical powers and exert an influence on congregations of believers.

In all of Natan's works one can see articulations of Body Art. In the chronological survey that follows I will refer to her various works, from the early '70s to the present, while examining the memories that have become engraved in her body. The oeuvre of Efrat Natan – as an artist born on a kibbutz who is identified with the Conceptual Art of the '70s in Israel – has been examined until now from two main points of view: in the socio-historical contexts of the pioneering ethos that she imbibed in the kibbutz,⁴ and in the framework of the radical phase of Conceptual Art in this country.⁵ In this essay I will look at personal aspects that are not set exclusively in socio-historical or inclusive art-historical frameworks. Biographical events and places, family experiences and memories, will serve as keys for understanding the private mythology that Natan has created in her work.



Plate 31 in Elsy Leuzinger's book *Afrika: Die Kunst der Negervölker* [Africa: The Art of the Negro Peoples], from "Kunst der Welt" ["The Art of the World"] series; Hebrew translation by Ada Zemach (Dvir Publishers, 1964): "Otobo" mask (half man, half hippopotamus) of the Kalabari-Ijo people

CRADLED IN THE BIG WAGON⁶

"Going to sleep every night is a parting from the activities of the day and from life to the sleep of night – the little death. In kibbutzim where there was communal sleeping, the task of putting the children to bed – an operation whose aim was to make many children fall asleep together – created the 'putting to bed' ceremony, a procedure that was clear and regular". This structured ceremony –

⁶ Hebrew follows the German tradition in referring to the constellations *Ursa Major* and *Ursa Minor* as the Big and Little "Wagon," respectively.

which was discussed extensively in kibbutz society and has been examined by more than a few researchers and authors⁷ – was often accompanied by a variety of private ceremonies – for example, the one shared by Efrat and her father, who would walk together to the children's house to read a story before sleep. Beneath the dome of the evening sky her father would explain the constellations of stars and point out the Little Wagon and the Big Wagon, and Cassiopeia which shows the direction of the north. "Dad was responsible for the map of the sky, in the spirit of the all-embracing German romanticism". The big sky and the gleaming stars became part of the intimacy of the ceremony of going to sleep, and although the way there was shrouded in dark night, it at the same time conveyed confidence. The star-studded sky became a mental blanket, which preceded the covering with an actual blanket in bed. In this meaningful ceremony, the infinite external space included coordinates of orientation that gave one a hold on things. In this way the order of space was internalized in the body consciousness – and the sense of the presence of the "four winds of the sky" was etched into Natan's body, much more deeply than the sense of right and left, which position the body only in relation to itself.

Like the four winds of the sky, one can say that Efrat Natan is "divided into four" between two arms and two legs that stretch her body to four balanced directions. The division into four already emerged at the outset of her path, in the *Wind Rose*^[#2] action that she organized in an open field as part of

⁷ See in *Togetherness*, n. 4 above.

the "Metzer-Messer Project" (1972).⁸ In this action she connected three artist friends to her body;⁹ they stood together, back to back, each facing and pointing to one of the four cardinal directions. In this way Natan as it were became a four-headed body capable of looking in all four directions at one and the same time. In another action in the same year, *The Artist and Five Bricks*^[#1], she held a white brick in each of her hands with her arms stretched to the sides, stood with her legs apart on two other bricks, and placed another brick on her head, thus completing the boundaries of the balanced body with a sacred halo in the spirit of Conceptual Art. Like a joke about Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, Natan stretched out in all directions and attempted to hold the entire world with her body.

The work *Blanket and Boy (Desert)* (1974)^[#15], which in the art-historical memory was associated with Joseph Beuys' felt blanket, had appeared in Natan's sketchbook earlier, even before the Yom Kippur War, and in fact related to the fallen in the War of Attrition.¹⁰ In this action – which was recorded in a series of contact prints – Natan divided the supine body/corpse of the boy into four, using four parts of a gray woolen army blanket in accumulating steps, in each of which an additional quarter of the body was covered

⁸ The project was initiated by Avital Geva, who brought together artists in the area between Kibbutz Metzer and the Arab village Messer to perform art actions. One of the better known of them was the political action of Micha Ullman, who dug two pits – one in Messer and one in Metzer – and moved the soil from one settlement to the other.

⁹ Tamar Getter, Nahum Tevet, and Micha Ullman.

¹⁰ In the preliminary drawings for the work Natan herself appears in the role of the boy.



Joseph Beuys, *Halved Felt Cross with Dust Image "Magda"*, 1960–65, dust, nails, wire, metal, and paper on felt, 108×68; collection of the Ludwig Museum, Cologne
Photo © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne / Joseph Beuys © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn (2016)

WALKING

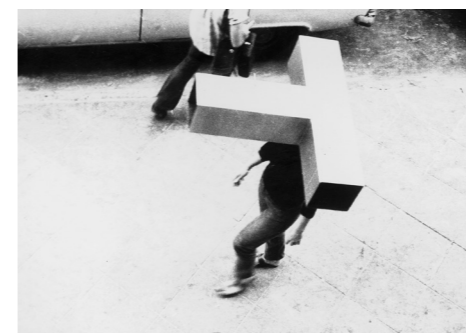
Natan's first performance in the presence of an audience (in this case, people who happened to be in the street) was *Head Sculpture* (May 1973) – a most distinctive combination of Minimalist sculpture with Body Art. Body Art first made its appearance in Israel in the early '70s, and stimulated contemporary local articulations of traditional iconographic engagements with the figure of Jesus.¹² Natan executed the performance – in which she walked through Tel Aviv streets with her head stuck inside a hollow T-shaped plywood sculpture – on the morning after the Independence Day military parade in Jerusalem, five months before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. The sculpture – whose form can be read as a cross, as an airplane, and even as an angel with outspread wings – conjoined numerous sources of inspiration: Minimalist sculpture like the works created by Robert Morris and Tony Smith in the '60s that were based on geometrical forms at right angles to one another; African helmet-masks that cover the entire head horizontally, a photograph of which Natan had seen in a book; and perhaps the most distinctive source, which Natan realized only some forty years later – the structure of the children's house in the kibbutz, where she had lived from her second year of elementary school until the end of her 11th-grade year in high school. The T-shaped structure of the children's house, the most familiar architectural structure of her life

¹² On the figure of Jesus in Natan's work, see Amitai Mendelsohn's essay in this catalogue; on *Head Sculpture* and its relation to the medium of photography, see Noam Gal's essay in this catalogue.

(first a quarter, then a half, then three-quarters, and so on). The boy's body, as it were, epitomized the opening lines of Haim Gouri's iconic elegy "Here Our Bodies Lie"¹¹, while the scene itself echoed the *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* by the Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna, as well as a line from Hanoch Levin's play *Queen of the Bathtub*: "All the uncles have one leg but the kingdom is whole". This was a body of someone whose conventionally presumed heroism had begun to crack, a body now covered with the serial mathematical pattern of Conceptual Art.

¹¹ This elegy was written for the convoy of 35 Haganah soldiers who were all killed in January 1948 during the War of Liberation.

in the kibbutz, contained bedrooms, a dining room, the showers, and a classroom. The long side of the children's house, with the dining room in the center and the bedrooms on both its sides, faced west. The ends of each arm of the children's house T were closed off with a wall, but in *Head Sculpture* they were open, allowing her to listen to voices and sounds (from the outside inwards) and to look straight



Head Sculpture, May 1973 (the morning after the military parade in Jerusalem), performance, as photographed at the corner of Frishman & Dizengoff streets, Tel Aviv



Robert Morris, *Untitled (Three L Beams)*, 1965 (refabricated: 1970), originally plywood; later versions: fiberglass and stainless steel, 243.8×243.8×60.9; collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of Jean and Howard Lipman
Photo: Sheldon C. Collins / Robert Morris © Artists Rights Society, New York (2016)

ahead (outwards) in the direction she was walking.

LYING DOWN

Efrat Natan created the photographed action *Flag* (1974)^[#11] several months after the Yom Kippur War, as a response to that war. In this work, the image of people walking erect with raised flags, so familiar from state ceremonies, parades and processions ("On May Day", Natan recounts, "the youth of the kibbutz would travel to Haifa to march in a procession of waving red flags") became a vision of lassitude, sleep, or death, and the spirited, active, red color of the flag was replaced by a defeated and passive white. Basically, the work entailed seemingly simple actions of lying down: the artist lying on the floor with a rod and a sheet of cloth beside her, most of her body on the floor, one leg over the rod and one hand under it, one end of the sheet laid under the rod and its other end covering her face. Just as the erect marching body now lay outstretched on the ground, the flag waved in the air had become a white sheet laid out breadthwise, and here also covering the head, bringing to mind the surrealist paintings of René Magritte.¹³ "There were works of mine that responded to the political situation but not as a manifesto; they were always closely connected to a private body memory, an earlier one, which already drew upon body images from the world of art".

¹³ For an extensive discussion of *Flag*, see Noam Gal's essay.

POURING MILK

In the performance *Milk* (1974) ^[#22], which Natan presented at the Midrasha Art Teachers' Training College, she gently poured milk down a staircase, and it flowed down slowly in a way reminiscent of the meanderings of the Jordan River, to gather in a puddle at the spectators' feet.¹⁴ On April 11, 1974, Natan's birthday and a short while before the performance, a terrorist attack in Qiryat Shmona took the lives of 18 people, among them eight children. This was the first terrorist incident in Israel in which terrorists broke into a building in an urban settlement, and Natan learned about it in a television report, through the eyes of a camera that ascended the stairs in the building and entered apartments in which citizens had been murdered. "I kept thinking at that time about helplessness, like that of new-born babies,



Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, ca. 1657–58, oil on canvas, 45.5×41; collection of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, purchase (1908) with aid from the Rembrandt Society
Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

¹⁴ For an extensive discussion of *Milk*, see *ibid.*, esp. notes 14 and 15.



Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, 1912, oil on canvas, 147×89.2; the Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art
© Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris (2016)

which somehow connected then with my birthday which fell on that day, and to the fact that Qiryat Shmona was close to the sources of the Jordan". The Jordan is an important vector in Natan's perception of space: it descends from north to south, from topographic heights to the lowest place in the world, the Dead Sea, and on its way it passes close to Kfar Ruppin. On this background, the performance *Milk* on a staircase became impressed in her mind and in the minds of its spectators as an arena in which blood was converted into milk.

The milk that spilled down the stairs was also a kind of visual realization of the sayings "Don't cry over spilled milk" and "Land of milk and honey"¹⁵. In that same year Michal Na'aman created *A Kid in Its Mother's Milk*, and

¹⁵ This expression appears numerous times in the Bible. It first appears in *Exodus* 3.8, as praise of the "Land of Israel" in comparison to Egypt.

David Ginton initiated photographed actions that created ironic visualizations to sayings such as "hiding your head in the sand" or "jumping into troubled waters".

As musical background to her performance, Natan played a record of the vocal work *Stimmung* ("Atmosphere") by the modern-classical German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, which in this context could be interpreted as a lamentation. The use of a material such as milk, the food of the beginning of life, was linked to the sweeping influence of Joseph Beuys and the healing use that he made of charged materials such as honey and animal fat. In the topical context of the incident at Qiryat Shmona, it may be said that Natan converted blood into milk to perform a ceremonial action of healing or *tikkun* ("repair").

We can also connect earlier artistic sources with this performance, and see it as a conjoining of Jan Vermeer's depiction of a maid serenely pouring milk into a bowl in *The Milkmaid* (1658–60) and Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912). Both paintings depict the actions of one person: in the former the static body and the slow and graceful movement are made perceptible by the materiality of the milk being poured, while the latter depicts a modern rhythm whose main focus is the relations between the movement of the body and the stairs. Natan's simple action of pouring the milk thus drew in numerous levels of meaning, and she did this in the presence of the "Midrasha tribe", who brought to it their awareness of the event in Qiryat Shmona and their prior acquaintance with art history and with the materials used by Joseph Beuys.

HOLDING BACK

In the imagination of a girl in the 1950s, who knew the map of the country well, the map's "landscape" was perceived as a body with human qualities. The small Hula lake looked like a fetus, Lake Kinneret ("The Sea of Galilee") like a sweet child, and the Dead Sea like the silhouette of an old man close to his death – and all these were joined by the Jordan, a wet channel of life that looked like an umbilical cord. This "landscape", which was strongly engraved in her memory, became the central image in *Bridges of the Jordan* (1975) ^[#23–32] – Efrat Natan's last performance, which was also the bravest and most self-exposing of all her performances in the presence of an audience.

This was a surrealistic nocturnal performance awash with liquids. The actions in it included Natan washing her hands in a basin



Bridges of the Jordan, 1975, performance (happening) at Artists' House, Tel Aviv

and dragging a mattress which she laid as a bridge between the banks over “the Jordan”, an image of which was placed on the central axis of the performance. Among other things, she repeated the action of standing with her legs crossed like a girl holding back “not to do peepee”. In this posture Natan pointed at her body and indicated the course of the Jordan from her mouth downwards, as if creating a correspondence between her body and the map of the country. This action of private holding back, associated with bed-wetting, was echoed by a sign on an oilcloth dripping with paint on which was written the words “פלשתין שלי שלך” (“Palestine mine yours”).¹⁶ The dripping paint was a visual means that brought out the word “שתיון” (“piss”). The holding back was associated with the following memory: “I’m not sure if it actually happened, but this is how I remember it. One day the Jordan held back for a few hours when a sand hill fell into it and blocked the flow”.

In the outer ring of the performance, a figure of a plowman or watchman walked around slowly, in a circular route that defined the bounds of the nocturnal happening. In contrast to her previous performances, which were characterized by a single, conspicuous and distinctive image, in this performance use was made of a variety of objects, texts and actions, and one could describe it as a

three-dimensional collage of the stream of consciousness.¹⁷

WORKING ON THE ROOF

The title of the installation *Roof Work* (1979) [#33–45] hints at its functioning in the range between a body-action and an art work that is an object. Presented on the roof of the apartment building at 91 Shlomo HaMelech Street in Tel Aviv where Efrat Natan lived at the time, it was a kind of theater of ready-made items in which the principal actors were undershirts and vinyl records, which here appeared in her oeuvre for the first time. In contrast to performances such as *Head Sculpture*, in which an object was attached to a body, in *Roof Work* the artist’s body was replaced by undershirts of children and adults. Natan herself hid in her apartment, from where she activated a gramophone and played a record (33½ rpm). Each of the undershirts presented a variation on various chapters in the circle of life: a halved barrel was covered with two halves of undershirts, which were given volume and a bent spine and laid beside one another like a couple, two that are one [#40]; a chair was dressed in the undershirt of a pregnant woman from whose belly a record emerged [#42]; six little undershirts were tied as six babies or bunnies lying side-by-side inside a frame [#37]; children’s undershirts hung crucified in a row on upright floor-squeegees,

¹⁷ This was also the only performance that Natan executed in a space designed for the display of art: the Artists’ House in Tel Aviv. For details of the actions, materials and objects comprising the performance, see in this catalogue, #23.

¹⁶ [Translator’s note]: During the British Mandate period, the country’s official name in Hebrew was (א”י) פלשתינה, pronounced Palestina (*Eretz Yisrael* [the Land of Israel]). Another Hebrew spelling is פלסטין, *Falastin*, the country’s name in Arabic. In this work the estrangement perhaps emphasizes the Hebrew word פלשת (which means “I invaded”), and it certainly creates an ambiguity about how the name is to be pronounced or understood.



From *Roof Work*, 1979, installation on the roof of a Tel Aviv condominium

facing west towards Tel Aviv’s sea-shore like a choir of angels [#38]; a man’s undershirt was hung on an omega hook and slid down on a zip-line cable stretched down from a TV antenna [#39]; a three-paned window was laid on the floor, like three pools, together with a stretched undershirt and two records, one on top of the glass pane to the east and the other under the milky glass pane to the west [#44]; beside all these – a couple, birth, a baby, children, an adult man, and again a couple lying on the ground – stood a column of hundreds of black records laid on top of one another, a dense, blocked mass that looked as if it had risen and accumulated out of the thick nocturnal sea of the tar on the roof [#43]. The thin coat of dry whitewash, which had struggled in the summer to cover the tar that had been spread in the winter, served as a surface for the white and black objects that represented an entire pattern of human life.

From the record that she played in her apartment, sounds of Bach’s *Cantata No. 140* rose to the roof: soloists and a choir singing an allegory calling on the Daughters of Zion to wake and prepare themselves to greet Jesus the bridegroom who was arriving in Jerusalem. In addition to the Christian character of the images, which was emphasized by the

ecclesiastical music, the installation alluded to Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* (1915–23), in the affinity created between the records (round objects activated by means of mechanical equipment) and the round forms of the “bachelors’ machines”, and between the undershirts (as metonymies of bodies) and the form of “the bachelors” themselves. The installation closed at midnight, with the rising of the full moon of the eve of Passover (which is also the evening of the Last Supper, at the end of which Jesus was delivered into the hands of the Romans) which that year also fell on the eve of Natan’s birthday and the beginning of her 33rd year (Jesus’s age when he was crucified). The installation, as was noted in the invitation, was open to the public during fixed hours in daytime and nighttime, in light and in darkness.¹⁸ During the decade after *Roof Work* Natan did not exhibit any new works, and returned to creating and exhibiting only in the early ’90s.

In the exhibition at The Israel Museum, Natan presents a reconstruction of *Roof Work*, which is something like a new production of a play at a different time and in a different place. While preparing the reconstruction she looked for objects to replace the original ones, which had not been preserved. This is a work that in its original form too had been time- and site-specific. The reconstruction at The Israel Museum is therefore nourished by the tension stemming from the gap of 37 years that have passed since the original presentation, and from the structural differences between a specific place set in the midst of life and the

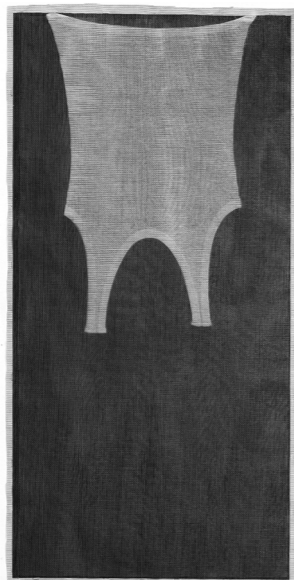
¹⁸ For additional commentaries, see Amitai Mendelsohn’s and Tali Tamir’s essays in this catalogue.

museum. One essential principle has been meticulously preserved in the reconstructed presentation at the museum: all of the objects have been positioned in the original orientation to the cardinal points, exactly as they were positioned on the roof at the time.

STRETCHING

“In the ’70s I used my body, myself, to make art. Towards the end of the decade I took myself out of the works, and then the undershirts came in. In the ’90s I added window netting to my store of materials, and stretched the undershirts behind it on a black background. The works became flat and looked almost like prints or photographs depicting an undershirt in a window”. The undershirts, which had first appeared in the *Roof Work* installation (1979) as actors on a stage, were preserved in memory thanks to photographs, and later returned to be used in two-dimensional works, while still preserving the theatrical element of the original.

In the ’90s Natan flattened the undershirts and stretched them behind window netting, on black velvet in white oblong frames that resembled the windows in the kibbutz. The first and perhaps the most iconic of these was *An Undershirt in the Window in Memory of My Father* (1995)^[#72], which was created about a year and a half after her father’s death and is connected with the memories of the girl arriving at her parents’ room and looking into the window from the bright outdoors of Kfar Ruppin, in an attempt to distinguish a human presence inside. This is an image of a body imprisoned simultaneously in



An Undershirt in the Window in Memory of Myself, 1995, net and undershirt on black velvet wallpaper mounted on plywood, 106x59

the grid of modernist painting and in the netting of the window. Behind the grid the undershirt shows its whiteness, and the figure that wore it is swallowed up in the dimness.¹⁹ This work, in memory of her father, hangs in Natan’s home beside a painting by Raffi Lavie, her teacher and father in the family of art.

The contrast between the white undershirt and the dark background brings to mind woodcuts, in which the surface of the carved block leaves a distinct and sharply-outlined black impression on the white paper; Natan was particularly acquainted with woodcuts in the German Expressionist tradition.²⁰ Another German tradition of black-

¹⁹ On the connection between the modernist grid and the image of the window in art, see Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids”, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 8–22

²⁰ As in the woodcuts that Efrat Natan saw at the home of her “artist uncle” Fritz (Shmuel Regev).

and-white found expression in the cut-out silhouettes that Natan’s mother used to make. Also relevant is Natan’s mother’s confession that “the art teacher at the gymnasium told her that she was good at black-and-white and bad at color”. Natan still has at home a papercut that her mother made in an art class at high school in Germany, which depicts a humoristic scene in which a man is chasing a woman-demon who has a tail, holding a pair of scissors in his hand. The principal artist’s tool of the mother who made papercuts had become an image that is both violent and humoristic.

Immediately after *An Undershirt in the Window in Memory of My Father* Natan created *An Undershirt in the Window in Memory of Myself* (1995),²¹ in which she used a child’s undershirt and laid it upside-down, so that her father’s figure seems to be present in the negative background. One can identify the father, who



Lotte-Rivka Rosenberg (the artist’s mother), *The Tailor and the Demoness*, 1929–30, papercut, 17.5x14; courtesy of the Natan family

²¹ Many of the works she made during the ’90s were tributes to her friends, some of which were also given (actually or symbolically) to the closest of them, for example *To Michal* (Michal Na’aman), *A Sunflower for Tamar* (Tamar Rappaport), etc.

taught Efrat Natan about the sky and directed her gaze to it, stretching his muscular arms as if about to fling his little daughter up to do a somersault in the air and then to catch her again. This is a clear example of a single tight and simple form that enfolds and combines a multiplicity of meanings. The black and the white, the large and the small, the upside-down and the “right side up”, the daughter hovering above and the father planted on the ground – all these complement one another behind the netting and inside the window, an architectural frame that also encloses the grid of modernist painting. In this minimalistic expression of two flat forms, Natan has managed to make most sharply perceptible an intimate physical moment between father and daughter.

“I like the form of the undershirt. It has concave arcs, strongly outlined, that are familiar to us from the early days of the state (fishermen’s nets, camel caravans, tents in the transit camps, shepherds’ dances, biblical figures); it’s also very picturesque and convincing, both as an abstract form and in its bodily suggestiveness”. Her turn to the body and to actions of the body in space was influenced in part by her engagement in sport, which was of course encouraged in the kibbutz society that she grew up in. Natan was a national girls’ champion in the high jump, and after this played basketball – a game in which an object is passed from one body to another.²² At the age of 14, while training for the high jump, the young sportswoman was injured.

²² Among the exhibitions she later curated in the Youth Wing of The Israel Museum was the exhibition “Sport” (2004).



Efrat Natan doing a scissors jump, 1960

Following a diagnosis that she had ruptured a disc, the upper part of her body was wrapped in a plaster cast after being stretched in traction. For many weeks she wandered around the kibbutz in this plaster undershirt. The plaster cast, generally perceived as a sign of bodily bravery, marked a direct continuation of stretching the boundaries of the body forward and upward. The stretched body appears in Natan's undershirt works from the '90s on, and in them she stretches the undershirt "as much as possible".

TEARING

"Around the end of the millennium I started fraying and perforating the undershirts, and then made them more and more torn. The undershirt enables me to touch both the young body and the one that's starting to get old". Natan "processes" (works on) the undershirts in her "abattoir", the name she recently gave to her work room, where she nails and stretches undershirts in order to rub them fine and to make holes in them. The negative forms produced in this process charge the undershirts

with more and more meanings. The undershirts in fact display a life cycle: at the start they are whole, and gradually they get worn down and unravel. "When the undershirt has holes in it, I can think about actual calcium loss and memory loss in myself, definitely not only as a metaphor for the crumbling of the kibbutz society, the state, and society in general; or as both, especially about the fact that things crumble as time passes".

The first torn undershirts were frayed mainly in their lower part, and when they were displayed in a horizontal layout they became waving flags frayed by the wind. The positioning of the *Swing of the Scythe Sculpture* (2002) [#60] – constructed of the 12 scythes of "Father Time" – beside these flags,²³ hinted at the role of time in all disintegration. Only when a flag is raised in the air, at the height of its symbolic appearance (as, for example, in *Liberty Leading the People* by the French neo-Classical painter Eugène Delacroix), is it subjected to the fraying force of the wind and dust. The physical fraying of the flag may be read as a visual translation of the fraying of symbols, in the sense that they become clichés and their status changes. These undershirt flags look like paper that has been rolled under a printing press after the color has run out, leaving only parts of the image on it.

GOING TO SLEEP

In the current exhibition Natan employs the T-shape as an architectural structure. The

²³ At Natan's solo exhibition "Winds", The Kibbutz Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002; curator: Tali Tamir.

T-shape houses three works at its three ends, and in each of these works there is an image of a bed [#90]. Next to the T of her children's house there stood an identically structured building where Efrat Natan's mother worked as a carer of other kibbutz children. The T-shape therefore also embodies "the mother" as a space that contained many children. The bed in each one of these works stands in darkness, covered with a white canopy, like the ones that were used in the kibbutz for protection against mosquitoes. As the most distinctive of containers of the body, the four-legged oblong single bed is also a minimalistic image of the human body with its four limbs.²⁴

Screened at the end of the T that faces the blazing south is the video work *Phoenix* (2007) [#58],²⁵ in which the bed and the canopy go up in flames time after time: "One night the woman on watch got us out when the bed of one of the toddlers went up in flames; the woman's burned face kept reminding me of the event for many years after it happened, and I keep imagining it over and over again". At the opposite end is the installation *Nocturno* (2005) [#56],²⁶ – a small bed that is swallowed up in a dark, wet space, while the door and

²⁴ Minimalist-Conceptualist formulations of beds in the Israeli art of the '70s are also known to us from Nahum Tevet's *Beds* (1974), or from David Ginton's bed-body action *Pain (Bed)* (1974).

²⁵ *Phoenix* was first shown at the "Summer in Winter" exhibition. Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2007.

²⁶ *Nocturno* was first shown at the "Togetherness" exhibition, The Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2005; curator: Tali Tamir (catalogue). For further details, see Tamar Berger, "Three Beds: On Efrat Natan's Installation *Nocturno*", *In the Interval Between World and Toy: On the Model in Israeli Culture* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), pp. 133–144 (in Hebrew).



From the video screening in *The Twelfth Window*, 2002

the two windows in front of it create an abstract image of a body. "This is the Minister of the Night, who looks in from the outside and with his arms spreads the blanket of the night." And at the eastern end of the T, on the canopy in the center of *The Twelfth Window* (2002) [#55],²⁷ a film is screened, in which we see a man carrying an upside-down bed on his head. He walks from east to west up a hill, ascending time after time like the sun rising over the horizon. The holes in the base of the bed, through which light penetrates, look like stars in the sky – while the man, like Atlas, carries the dome of the sky in the form of the simple bed which is commensurate to the size of his body.

This image has its sources in ancient Egyptian art, which Natan particularly loves for the unique way in which it integrates mythology and cosmology. She was enchanted by "the headrest of Tutankhamun, which is supported by the god Shu's arms raised up into the air that separates the earth from the sky.

²⁷ *The Twelfth Window* was first shown at the "Winds" exhibition, The Kibbutz Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002; curator: Tali Tamir.

The headrest bears the head of the sleeping pharaoh, between two lions that symbolize the eastern horizon and the western horizon. Then there is the figure of a maid who carries a square wicker basket on her head. Or a figure in *The Book of the Dead* or the *Papyrus of Ani*, Nun, who embodies the primal waters and raises aloft the sun god Ra's boat at the moment of the Creation". The man in the video raises his arms at a ninety degree angle, like someone who has internalized the geometry of the bed and of Minimalist sculpture and also the mathematics of the Egyptian body.



Ivory headrest from the tomb of Tutankhamun, Egypt, 18th Dynasty; collection of the Egyptian National Museum, Cairo
Photo © Egyptian National Museum, Cairo / Bridgeman Images

The East and the West, the sunrise and the sunset, the Creation and death in the cosmological mythology of ancient Egypt – in this work too all these impressive sources connect to the autobiography: "In 1952, when I was five, my parents moved from their 'room' to the 'Seniors' Quarter', and simple items of furniture were moved and carried in the air". The move was documented in a tiny photograph in which her father is seen lifting a table with its legs pointing up to the sky. In



The Natan family moving from their "room" to the "Seniors' Housing", Kibbutz Kfar Ruppin, 1952; courtesy of the Natan family

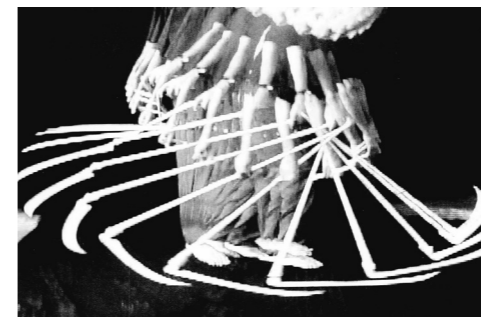
the foreground of the photograph the camera caught the upper part of a barrel. A half of this barrel would appear 27 years later in *Roof Work*, on the roof of the building in Tel Aviv where Natan was living at the time.

REAPING

Natan's point of departure as a body artist is well discernible in the work the *Swing of the Scythe Sculpture* (2002) [#60], an arrangement of 12 scythes in a circle which depicts the stages of swinging a scythe in a field. As in the pioneering photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey, who studied movement with rapid snapshots that created a sequence of frozen moments, and like the Futurist paintings that imaged the movement of motorized vehicles, this sculpture, too, creates a rhythm of circular motion, while the empty center of the circle of scythes is the place of the reaper. During

Natan's childhood, in an environment of relatively mechanized agriculture, reaping with a scythe was a ceremony, principally at the Omer reaping festivities, where the men reaped the wheat and girls in bell skirts gathered the wheat into sheaves. The sculpture fuses the movements of the scythe with the dancing movements of the girls making the sheaves.

In posters and photographs from the early days of the state and from chronicles of Jewish settlement in this country, the scythe appears as a distinctive insignia of the pioneering society – but it must be remembered that it is also the symbol of the Angel of Death or "The Grim Reaper" who steps out in the Dance of Death. Natan's circle of scythes is therefore also a macabre *hora* dance, an emblem of utopian unity whose violent connotations seem to contradict its declared essence.



Computer simulation for *Swing of the Scythe Sculpture*, 2002; videography: Orly Azran; simulation: Moshe Zilbernel

SEEING IN THE STARS

In the advanced states of Natan's body-and-undershirt genealogy, the outlines of the undershirts were unraveled as well. They burst open and dispersed in all directions, and thus grew and began taking over a larger area of the surface. *The Large Undershirt* [#64] from 2006 is already a disintegration of a supernova or a cosmic explosion, which leaves its traces in a system of celestial bodies.²⁸

Conspicuous with its bright radiance, standing out from a black wall, is a single, heavy star in the form of *Tent* (2011) [#88] with its 12 sides, as in the division of time on a clock and as in *Swing of the Scythe Sculpture*.²⁹ The tent has moved its place from the ground to the wall, which simulates the nocturnal sky and aspires to continue moving in space. As though in a dialogue with Kasimir Malevich's black circle, it perplexes the gaze between black and white and keeps shifting from a flat and perfect form – perhaps the most utopian among the forms of modernist painting – to a concrete three-dimensional body. The tent is the residential space of the pioneers that is documented in many historical photographs, whether as a solitary structure, or in flocks as in the tents of the "Labor Regiments", or in

²⁸ *The Large Undershirt* was first shown in Natan's solo exhibition "Undershirts in the Window", Gallery of Kibbutz Be'eri, 2006; curator: Ziva Yellin.

²⁹ *Tent* was first shown in the "Wall Work" series at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2911; curator: Amitai Mendelsohn. An earlier *Tent* work (2001) was composed of a small tent in a black wall niche, and inside it were two figures asleep in their beds. Two mirrors placed opposite one another on either side of it turned the small and intimate tent into a row of reflected tents extending to infinity.

ordered rows in the army or the transit camps.

Also on show in the current exhibition is *The Big Window* (2015) ^[#63], a new work comprising 24 units that combine on the wall into an image of a huge window: not a one-pane or a three-pane window built to the scale of a single body in a private room; this window, with its dimensions and divisions recalls windows in public buildings or convention centers. Hence it is clear that this time the focus is no longer the condition of the individual body, but the disintegration of the society. In this *Large Window*, the undershirts completely lose the form of the body: they are torn, crushed and crumbled, absorbed into the depths of the black background like dust, clouds of feathers or celestial bodies. The tears sometimes look like hovering entities, imaginary creatures, demons and bats – the kind that only looking at clouds and at stars can evoke in our imaginations. They are present and at the same time swallowed up in the depths of the exhibition's western wall, at its distant horizon.