

## Neo-post-(trans)-minimalism and the Grandmother's Chest

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The subway travelers' thumb-twiddling – as they sit in line, earphones inserted and iPods gripped – has the automatism and repetitiveness of a mechanical ballet: in the twenty-first century, though, movements are reduced to a minimum and the machine wears a friendly face. Their digital gestures are delicate, intuitive, and efficient, easily controlling those tiny colorful objects with rounded corners and super-smooth surfaces. Children of a similar popularization of the minimalist aesthetic, Reuven Israel's sculptures act on the same satisfying circuit, sight-touch-action, while at the same time raising doubts about it, opening it up to multiple options.

The first moment of unease takes place when the observer realizes that the material the sculpture is made of does not correspond to what it ostentatiously seems: I am referring to those shiny, colored sculptures that look like plastic, metal or porcelain, but also to those less numerous and alarming ones that imitate corrugated asbestos<sup>1</sup>. This revelation derives from the hypodermic quality of these objects – the eye intuitively realizes that the real material is not the one it looks like – or from the deliberate presence of parts or details where the MDF utilized is shown without enamel-like coating<sup>2</sup>. MDF is an industrial product that resembles wood and which Israel considers a non-material on account of its hybrid, non-noble character. The impulse to touch it is therefore stimulated by this ambiguity, but also by the seductive quality of the sculptures Israel obtains by smoothing the MDF down minutely and then painting it with the colors of industrial ice-cream<sup>3</sup>. In this way the cultural category of the “statue” and the social rite of the museum or gallery visit are brought into question: “Can I touch it? Should I touch it?”, visitors

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<sup>1</sup> See three works of 2005: *Asbestos*, *F.As. (Floating Asbestos)*, and *F.As.2 (Floating Asbestos)*. Unlike most of his other sculptures, the raw material used for this series of works is cardboard.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the “testicular” protrusion of *T.I. (Treasure Island)*, 2007, or the interior of *G.M.C. (Gordon Matta Clark)*, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For an insightful parallel with the aesthetics and anthropology of food, see Ruti Direktor, *Raw and Cooked – Tasting Offer*, in *Raw and Cooked*, exhibition catalog edited by Ruti Direktor, The Art Gallery, University of Haifa, 2007. The exhibition displayed works by Orna Bromberg, Reuven Israel, Sima Meir, Barak Ravitz and Tal Shochat.

often wonder as they approach uncertainly. Significantly, Israel's recent works<sup>4</sup> can even be "activated": if you push them they revolve. The immediate satisfaction of those who have understood how a new device *works*, the self-fulfillment of those who feel they have made the right move in the esoteric and inscrutable context of a contemporary art exhibition, and the excitement of those who have violated the sacred aura by touching (and profaning) the sculpture, are followed by the quizzical mockery of that pointlessly revolving thing.

If in this way Israel's sculptures lead experience back to the physical nature of the object and the touch, breaking with the anesthetic and addiction effect of the virtual action, his drawings correspond, at the projectual level, to an equally urgent need for concreteness. Midway between architectural projection drawings and medieval bestiary, these large folios on a black background visualize and catalog objects that have only a potential existence. They are visionary or science-fiction apparitions defined cautiously by their various options of form and position.

Speaking of his work, Israel uses, alone, the prefix *Neo*: "Every style defined as neo...leads to a distortion of what you wanted to revive. You try to imitate or reassert something which ends up being completely different, because the essence and the original contexts are missing"<sup>5</sup>. As Gilad Melzer has recently suggested, the methods of Reuven Israel and other young Israeli artists (Shirly Bahar, Ron Kuner, Maya Attoun, and Hadas Hassid) may be traced back to the historical precedent of the Post-minimalism that flourished in Israel in the 1970s<sup>6</sup>. This appropriated and further developed the research begun by the first American minimalism<sup>7</sup> about the redefinition of the object and its essence (*objecthood*) in relation to painting and sculpture. However, what characterizes the artistic quest of Israel's generation is an openly heretical tendency compared with the

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<sup>4</sup> His first mobile work was *Lazy Susie* of 2007, followed by *Roger Roger*, executed in New York during his Harlem Studio Fellowship (January-April 2008), and subsequently by *Jolly Roger* of summer 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Matteo Galbiati (interview conducted by), *Reuven Israel*, in *EspoArte*, Anno IX n° 55, Ottobre/Novembre 2008, pp. 46-49; republished in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> The artists of reference, as identified by Robert Pincus-Witten in 1977, are Micha Ulmann, Beni Efrat, Michael Gitlin, Nahum Tevet, Micha Laury, Joshua Neustein, Zvi Goldstein and Buki Schwartz.

<sup>7</sup> See Gilad Melzer, *The Face of Things*, in *[Flat] Israeli Post + Neo Minimalism in Two Dimension*, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, 2007.

modernist orthodoxy of the Northern European and American tradition, to which Post-minimalism had remained substantially faithful. Melzer therefore defines them by speaking of Neo-minimalism or even – not without irony – of Neo-post-minimalism. While understandably freeing himself from such univocal interpretations, Israel nonetheless recognizes the pertinence of the prefix “neo”, not so much in the sense of a parody or post-modern appropriation of the historical precedents, as of a capacity and necessity, always, to constitute novel circumstances and spark off new meanings. The industrial appearance of Israel’s sculptures, perceived historically as a made-in-USA aesthetic<sup>8</sup> (minimalist but also pop), let its opposite leak out: a patient manual dimension, the aftertaste of traditional handicraft<sup>9</sup>. By deserting the lingua franca of the installation, Israel courageously gives central place to the sculpture as an object: he looks at Nahum Tevet but also at the i-pod, at Richard Artschwager but also at the good old woodwork of the grandmother’s chest. Our attention thereby moves from the narcissism of the appropriative practice to the exhibitionism of an ambiguous object, which becomes a catalytic crux of experience.

(Raffaele Bedarida, New York, December 2008)

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<sup>8</sup> See Ruti Direktor, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> The present exhibition in Milan constitutes in itself a new and interesting context, since it takes place amid a tradition of Italian design which is itself characterized by its merging of industrial aesthetics with an artisan-like attention to detail and care over materials.