

## ***You are under arrest for crossing an imaginary line on a giant rock flying through space.*<sup>1</sup>**

Regarding *Center of Gravity*, Lihi Turjeman's solo exhibition

In 1943, Hannah Arendt wrote the essay 'We Refugees'.<sup>2</sup> In 1944 Giorgio Agamben reacted to this essay, while quoting this fragment by Arendt:

"For him history is no longer a closed book, and politics ceases to be the privilege of the Gentiles. He knows that the banishment of the Jewish people in Europe was followed immediately by that of the majority of the European peoples. Refugees expelled from one country to the next represent the avant-garde of their people."<sup>3</sup>

Agamben wrote:

"It is worth reflecting on the sense of this analysis, which today, precisely fifty years later, has not lost any of its currency. Not only does the problem arise with the same urgency, both in Europe and elsewhere, but also, in the context of the inexorable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional legal-political categories, the refugee is perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day. At least until the process of the dissolution of the nation-state and its sovereignty has come to an end, the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come.

(...)

...(N)ation-states must find the courage to call into question the very principle of the inscription of nativity and the trinity of state/nation/territory which is based on it. It is sufficient here to suggest one possible direction. As is well known, one of the options considered for the problem of Jerusalem is that it become the capital, contemporaneously and without territorial divisions, of two different states. The paradoxical condition of reciprocal extraterritoriality (or, better, aterritoriality) that this would imply could be generalized as a model of new international relations. Instead of two national states separated by uncertain and threatening boundaries, one could imagine two political communities dwelling in the same region and in exodus one into the other, divided from each other by a series of reciprocal extraterritorialities, in which the guiding concept would no longer be the *ius* of the citizen, but rather the *refugium*<sup>4</sup> of the individual."<sup>5</sup>

In summer 2015 Lihi Turjeman was involved in an encounter of a 'refugge-ist' nature, which started in Paris and was forced to end due to bureaucratic passports issues. As the menacing termination date was approaching – while the couple was slowly acknowledging the fact that each will eventually return to his homeland, a country to which he is forever tied in tight strains of civil laws, and that the other could never

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<sup>1</sup> From an image by Waking Time, published on Bidoun Magazine's Instagram account, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt (1943), *We refugees*, *Menorah Journal* no. 1, New York City, NY: Menorah Association, [http://www-eland.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah\\_arendt\\_we\\_refugees.pdf](http://www-eland.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah_arendt_we_refugees.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *We Refugees*, translated by Michael Rocke, [http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary\\_zabel/Courses/Phil%20108-08/We%20Refugees%20-%20Giorgio%20Agamben%20-%201994.htm](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20108-08/We%20Refugees%20-%20Giorgio%20Agamben%20-%201994.htm)

<sup>4</sup> *ius* – the law; *refugium* – shelter.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *We Refugees*

visit – the two decided to board the train to Bordeaux. On their journey, they ponder the Palestine Railways, established in Mandatory Palestine days. This railway, which today seems like an utopian dream that will never be materialised,<sup>6</sup> travelled between Bagdad, Aleppo and Homs, Beirut and Sidon, Haifa and Benjamina, Jaffa and Lydda, Jerusalem and Gaza, Khan Yunis and El Arish, The Suez Canal, Alexandria and Cairo.

This railway was first brought to a halt when members of HaPalmach and Halechi (these are usually defined as paramilitary organizations which operated in Mandatory Palestine, however according to any universal category they will be defined as “terrorists”) exploded the local railway’s section. It then came to a complete stop with the explosion of the railway bridge over Rosh Ha’Nikra after the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948.

A nostalgic, absurd yearning (which will be revealed as alleged in the context of the show) was accompanying the couple on their way to Bordeaux – still, one must remember, we live in ISIS time. They finally arrived to the beach in Bordeaux, where they spent their last few hours together. However, the absurdity was slowly wearing off while they were sitting, the two Levant-born, on the artificial beach, covered by beads of fake sand grains, mimicking the divine authenticity of the Mediterranean beaches. These beaches are divided into mother lands and territories; this sea is surrounded by armies, bodies, memories and conflicts.

While in France, the artist took a small steel plaque, oxidized it and engraved on it the word ‘PASSPORT’, in the font identified with borders control authorities.<sup>7</sup> Her wish – to turn the passport into still metal, to produce it as an irrelevant archeological remnant, is far from fulfillment, but the absurdity which stands in the heart of this object is the starting point for the show ‘Center of Gravity’.

What are borders, if not imaginary lines fueled by man-made meanings, power relations and racial and national separations, controlled by violent means?

### **On the nature of Criticism**

Several sites echo in the gallery space: The Dome of the Rock, a seascape or the center of a big blue, a desert landscape, Rosh Ha’Nikra grottoes, Mount Nebo and one concealed swing.

The two last works are indexical – Mount Nebo is not present in the image, but only in the abstract plaque of this datum point in Jordan, where, according to the Bible, Moses first saw the Promised Land but was not allowed to enter it. The work *Welcome Back Traitor*<sup>8</sup> indicates the absence (and thus also the presence) of this land – which include Nabulus, Ramallah, Jericho, Hebron and the Dead Sea – as a place of continuity.

“In every hope, the sadness of Nebo”, wrote The Poetess Rachel.<sup>9</sup> Moshes’ punishment was to view his desired land, deprived of any ability to step foot in it. The

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike the negative local associations that international railways bring about, through a challenging retrospective gaze one may see the Palestine Railways as offering a trans-local hope, in the very fact that the train did exist. Its future thinking may seem stale, but back in history it already manifested.

<sup>7</sup> Lihi Turjeman, *Passport*, Engraving on metal plaque, 30X24 cm, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Lihi Turjeman, *Welcome Back Traitor*, ink and stone on canvas, 100x108x103 cm

<sup>9</sup> The Poetess Rachel, *From Afar*, 1935

Poetess Rachel described it as “There – no one comes”. This is a kind of sadness, steaming from envisioning a future clean of details, borders, blood shading, fences and walls; a sadness for an unfulfilled desired.

In retrospect, according to Rosalind Krauss in her essay ‘Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America’, even the most indexical art statement – the work *The large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* by Marcel Duchamp (1915-1923) – is wallowing in the sadness of Nebo, in a sorrow for an unrealized passion.<sup>10</sup>

The second indexical work in the show, *Apex*,<sup>11</sup> depicts a swing – an object whose essence is in its center of gravity. This center, which also appears in the show’s title, is another axiom that is thread throughout the show.

The two indexical works are a continuation of Turjeman’s work at Brenner 17A, a deserted building where the artist lived during a few years, while working in-between its peeling walls. In this home, she created many painterly gestures that touch upon the space’s character. In an almost forensic work, the artist mimicked, created, and weaved echoes and traces of the real space upon a substantial body of works on canvas. The work remained as a ghost of the primary space, which was almost translated onto the canvas in a foreign language. In this sense, Turjeman’s painterly gestures are similar in nature to that of Man Ray’s towards *The large Glass*, called *Elevaged e Poussiere (Dust Breeding)* (1920). This work indicated the time lapse through the dust accumulated on the work during its year of creation.<sup>12</sup> Through the removal of parts and remnants off the walls and their translocation onto the canvas, Turjeman signals the duration of time, its leftovers and injustices, written on the walls of a local and arbitrary space. Thus, her work corresponds to other indexical works which were included in the constitutive show ‘Rooms’, mounted in MoMA PS1, New York in June 1976. As Krauss demonstrates in her essay, action painting’s methodologies were based on the index term. However, she clarifies, one may not attribute action painting with the same kind of presence which exist through the index, because painting is perceived as the physical trace of the artist’s action.

Other works in the show may be classified as action painting, but in a critical, perhaps feminist manner, as I would now explain. One may think that Turjeman chooses to display sites as surrounded by mythical air. Seascape, the Dome of the rock and Rosh HaNikra Grottoes are presented in the show as mythical sites – sites whose mythization qualifies the materialistic, regulatory, controlling mechanisms that are activated as if for them. Each one of these sites is characterized in her works through the superimposition of motifs from two different aesthetics procedures. The first manifests in an aesthetization of geometric forms, in scientific and architecture models and in mathematic proportions, and acts through minimalist practices which wishes to annihilate the canvas’s character and to transform the image to the zero level of painting. Such practice will enforce visual methodologies, scientific serialization and distinguished grids onto the painting’s canvas.

Turjeman always starts from the systematic element. First and foremost, she establishes order in the canvas, while dividing it into a geometrical grid of measured and equal units, which forms the basis for any future image. This grid is present in the final image and is never completely erased, while echoing the systematic

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<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America*, *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 68-81

<sup>11</sup> Lihi Turjeman, *Apex*, graphite, charcoal and iron oxide on canvas, 295x235 cm, 2016

<sup>12</sup> Krauss, *Notes on the Index*

element inherent to her work. Respectively, also the first layers of color are characterized by distinguished, clear and opaque colorfulness, as are the canvases' hard edges. In this sense, her work draws from the minimalist tradition: in the first stage the painting is manifested as a divided symmetric unit, whose measured forms expand the pictorial image,<sup>13</sup> and then these units are painted with two to three shades made of pigments, water, glues and gesso (often this limited palette will control the painting through its completion). In this sense, Turjeman's practice answers the criteria articulated as a phase of the geometric painting under the influence of abstract expressionism.<sup>14</sup>

But the final image always incorporates more than just this systematic layout. As part of the second practice mentioned above, the artist appropriates practices taken from action painting. Prior to the affixing of any image onto the canvas, she processes and harden it to make present its original creases, texture, thickness, fibers' direction and traces of time, thus exposing its organic nature. All of these motives become an integral part of the final outcome. Unlike geometric painting and abstract expressionism, which ignore the organic nature of the fabric, Turjeman adopts its original character and presents it as an inseparable part of the final image.

The work *Blue Marble*<sup>15</sup> is titled after the famous photograph of Earth taken from Apollo 17 in 1976. In this work the artist followed the first practice mentioned above, and then positioned the canvas upside down, facing the floor on which a nylon sheet was spread. Many days she acted on the back of the canvas, while spilling, draining, whirling and sweeping the liquids. She walked around the center of the painting in circular steps, as if it was a pilgrimage around a scared place. Each of the actions initialized a process of fixation of the pigments on the canvas, and required long days of waiting and examining the next step in the process. Using rollers, squeegees, rags and her own body movements, the artist created the different levels of compression seen in the image, its gravity centers and homogenous surfaces. The liquids were sink into the fabric by various pressures activated for varying degrees of absorption (deep or light, dispersed or condensed), until fixed. Only then did the artist peel away the canvas from the nylon, which left its slits and folds in the final image.

The work *Palestine Railways*,<sup>16</sup> depicting Rosh Ha'Nikra Grottoes, is also based on a strict grid and is in fact a drawing of an image. After establishing the geometric grid, Turjeman followed the creases of the organic fabric and exposed them using graphite and baton. Then, she affixed the image while smearing, deleting, rubbing and kneading the materials onto the canvas. Respectively, she stressed the area of the sky in the painting by preserving the fabric's original qualities such as its heterogeneous color, the fiber's changing directions and the various degrees of compressions throughout the fabric. In this work the artist used sticks, powders, large-scale erasers and various sponges. The actions were done while she was sitting and kneeling in front of the painting, and so her body marks remain engraved in the final image, much like the fabric's character.

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<sup>13</sup> For the definition of systematic minimalist painting see: Mel Buchner, *Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism*; Peter Hautchinson, *Mannerism in the Abstract*; Lawrence Alloway, *Systematic Painting*; in: *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, (ed.) Gregory Battcock, University of California Press, 1968

<sup>14</sup> This phase was described in the famous essay by Tillim, see: Sidney Tillim, *What happened to Geometry: An Inquiry into Geometrical Painting in America*, Arts, New York, Vol. 33(9) (June 1959), pp. 38-44

<sup>15</sup> Lihi Turjeman, *Blue Marble*, mix media on canvas, 380x400 cm, 2016

<sup>16</sup> Lihi Turjeman, *Palestine Railways*, charcoal, graphite and baton on canvas, 300x423 cm, 2016

The traces of the artist's actions are also seen in the work *Center of Gravity*,<sup>17</sup> which is based on the architectural floor plan of the Dome of the Rock. The artist drew these plans (which can be found in Google Earth and Google Maps) and spread the canvas on the studio's floor. For its dimensions, perspective and esoteric geometry, the Dome of the Rock is considered a divined structure. The work is composed of layered materials, such as golden leaves, pigments, various lacquers, glues and alloys made of tiny gravel. The artist pressed these into the fabric, while laying on the painting and marking in it her own body traces, her fingerprints and private gestures. The surface of the final Dome is not smooth; it is far from perfection, and contains many traces and evidences of the artist's labor. The artist's temperament is also present in the strangeness of the various shades of colors (which is achieved through repeated brush strokes) and in the layout of the golden leaves patches.

The work depicts an existing image, and yet it is not mimetic. It does not produce a perfect compatibility between the aesthetic perfection and the sentiment that the representation of the original should arouse. And yet, the work does maintain the original structure's illusion of perspective, and reinforce this through the use of gravel alloys and the employment of paint. Its representation seems almost structural, volume infused. But this is not a divine or sublime representation, as it reveals the original texture of the canvas and the traces of the artist's action.

In this sense, I would like to offer Turjeman's perspective as critical and feminist. Working within mainly masculine practices (action painting and minimalism),<sup>18</sup> Turjeman articulates her own unique practice as an alternative to this common masculine manner of work. As opposed to the common attempt to obscure the canvas' presence, she always uses its nature as her starting point. Moreover, in Turjeman's work the fabric not only gives away to the image, but becomes a part of it. Likewise, the pictorial image adopts the canvas on which it lies.

The actions of scrubbing, pulling and plucking and the use of various cleaning supplies also present an alternative to the dominant manner of action painting. The particular arms length, weight, physical size and subjectivity of movement – all these factors, which are central for action painting, are present in Turjeman's works, along side the adoption of domestic terms<sup>19</sup> and physical movements which have to do with the choreography of the feminine body. These are combined with the central place the fabric's nature receives in the image.

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<sup>17</sup> Lihi Turjeman, *Center of Gravity*, mix media on canvas, 400x400 cm (octagon), 2016

<sup>18</sup> "The Minimalist movement took shape in the 1960s and 1970s, largely in reaction to spontaneous and subconscious furls and splashes of Abstract Expressionism, making waves with its paired down vocabulary, and a focus on color, geometry and line. Fifty years later, artists are still aligning themselves with the movement, continuing the evolution with experimentation in surface, color and texture. Big names from the early days of Minimalism - Dan Flavin, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt - remain the key artists identified with the movement, and are predominantly males that work in a larger than life size", <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mutualart/minimalist-voices-of-the-b-5969464.html/>; "Art historians now tell us that the grids and cubes of 1960's Minimalists like Frank Stella, Robert Morris and Donald Judd were inherently masculine forms: thinly disguised symbols of the oppressive military-industrial complex", <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/15/arts/art-review-women-inside-and-outside-the-grid.html/>; <http://hyperallergic.com/313450/why-were-so-many-women-excluded-from-the-history-of-abstract-expressionism/>

<sup>19</sup> For further reading please see: The Art Story Foundation, <http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ARTH208-7.4.1-FeministArt.pdf>

In a similar fashion, also Turjeman's time perception contradicts the gestural practices of action painters, whose central movement is characterized in its adoption of the present and in its focusing on the moment of action as a short and precise present. However, in Turjeman's works time is translated and imprinted onto the canvas in a durational, prolonged work, which marks its traces onto the canvas, whether by fixating the remaining creases in the fabric or by the consolidation of color onto the painterly surface. Turjeman's craft is characterized by multiple repetitions and intensive physical effort.

Ariella Azoulay, in her important essay 'On the Possibility of the Existence of Critical Art in Israel and its Condition' (1992),<sup>20</sup> seeks to define critical art as a discourse which does not diminish the artwork to the examination of aesthetic parameters, usually those related to forms, structures, series, harmony, geometry and scientific models. Rather, she asks to expand this discourse to encompass the political, formal and materialistic implications of these parameters while exposing the conditions of possibility for the act of representation. Likewise, Turjeman does not articulate new aesthetic terms, and her use of matter does not stem only from her attraction to the 'beautiful substance'.<sup>21</sup> But rather her use of practices, substances and forms seeks to turn a critical gaze towards the formal and political fields in which she operates.

### **Corpse Star**

In *Center of Gravity* and also in *Palestine Railways* the artist used gravel alloys, perhaps in order to assert the absurdity of preferring the worshiping of stones to people's freedom of movement.

Assaf Inbari, in his essay 'The Stone Age', writes:

The death of a star is the moment when it is surrendered by its gravity, is sucked inwards and becomes a small, condensed body, whose mass is heavier than the mass of the sun. While this cosmic phenomenon was discovered, a company of paratroopers stood around a rock peeking from the top of a mountain in Jerusalem. Apparently, it was a normal rock; a grey, protuberant, limestone rock. But this may have well been a **corpse of a star**; there was something in it that made it feel like the world was drawing to its gravity pull. The rock will further accumulated meanings, compressibility and mass, like it did for thousands of years... Judaism, like Islam, will keep drawing from it its *raison d'être*. To draw and be drawn...

In 4,000 years a historian will sit to his desk, maybe not here, maybe already on a different planet, to write our history from Father Abraham to the last Western man. He will ponder how to call this present time, the longest and most persistence in the history of humanity. He will think some more, scratch his head, and then will write at the top of the page, or screen, the title he's been looking for: '**The Stone Age**'.<sup>22</sup>

The Dome of the Rock was build in the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century – beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup>, and is considered to be an architectural and aesthetic masterpiece, as far as its architectural dimensions and geometric proportions are concerned. It was built around the Foundation Stone, which many believes to be the origin of the universe.

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<sup>20</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *On the Possibility of the Existence of Critical Art in Israel and its Condition*, Theory and Criticism, no 2, Summer 1992

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 95

<sup>22</sup> Assaf Inbari, *The Stone Age*, Ha'Aretz, 2000, translated from Hebrew by the translator, <http://inbari.co.il/articles/stone.pdf>

The gravel alloy from which the part of the Dome are composed in Turjeman's work is the same alloy used in *Palestine Railways*. These stones, cheap gravel compressed into a thick substance, are a common, available art supply material. The site of dispute, which is considered to be sublime by at least two religions, is positioned on the floor, asking to be look at from above, to activate a reflexive gaze on the gloom situation it is located in.

### **The Fetishization of the Sanctified**

The tunnel, the Earth as seen from the moon, the plaque on Mount Nebo as well as the centralized nature of the swing – all these are conjured together to form a phrase which seeks to indicate not their political bearings, but the contingent fueling of these sites with meanings, borders, regimes and separations. Together, the works articulate the arbitrariness of these symbols, which become attempts to police elements such as gravity, space, landscape and land under various ideologies and agendas.

The appropriation of these sites seeks not to emphasis their mythology, but rather to point towards their absurdity, and to reveal the forceful effect created by the myth surrounding them. In this sense, the artist duplicates the astonishing gaze towards these sites in order to pierce through its mythification. Her gaze is ironic, much like other feminist tactics,<sup>23</sup> but this ironic gaze is not shared by the effects of these myths. These effects may manifest themselves in the presence of our passports or their deprivation, in the possibility for free movement, for freedom of assembly, for freedom of speech and artistic freedom. The range of these effects is wide and deep, and is common to all aspects of joint living.

In this sense, Turjeman offers a mini- fetishization of these sites; as objects of a glorifying gaze, she exposes their arbitrariness, their coincidental construction, which is possible due to a game of forces and balances, constantly seeking to maintain this mythization, in order to preserve the power structure in a certain state.

The nostalgic deliverance which first appeared while watching the works, slowly accumulates into an argument about the contingent construction of borders and nationalities. This deliverance seeks to indicate a new structure suitable to its aesthetic position: a structure which seeks to rioter the existing order and the regulating grid, while considering its organic parts with their different histories, alongside the adoption of particular and singular positions, all towards a re-organization which will annihilate the existing aggressive regulatory forces.

Finally, I would like to conclude with an image by Waking Times, uploaded to Bidoun Magazine Instagram account (a magazine dealing with the Middle East), in which two images are seen one on top of another: in the top one, a man on his knees is dragged reluctantly by two uniformed men in a desert landscape; in the bottom one an image of Earth taken from space appears under the phrase: "You're under arrest for crossing an imaginary line on a giant rock flying through space".

Text by Noam Segal

Translated from Hebrew by Keren Goldberg

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<sup>23</sup> Sheri Klein, *Art and Laughter*, NY: I.B Tauris and co. LTD, 2007; Andrea List, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, University of Minnesota Press 2009