

Jean-François Chevrier – Sigalit Landau

Territory is associated with survival, intimacy, struggle. A territory is also a land, an inhabited landscape. Before it was taken up by sociology, the notion marked the meeting point of geography and ethnology. When the land corresponds to a political identity, and particularly to the definition of a national entity (the nation-state of the nineteenth century), the territory defines a legal space of community belonging - and the stakes are effectively political. I have consistently found this dimension at work, in various ways, among the artists I have met during my visits to Israel. The historical and political influence seems almost too obvious, as though it conditioned the visitor's perception, as well as the artistic activity itself. But to consider Sigalit Landau's work, I must examine this 'conditioning.'

Cultures with a pictorial tradition have consistently produced an imaginary translation of their territories, corresponding more or less directly to that first domestication of nature which is the cultivation of the soil. Since the days of Brunelleschi and Masaccio, the mosaic of cities and country side that is Italy knit itself together through its painting, forming what Federico Zeri calls a 'visual myth' before actually constituting a nation (whose political and cultural unity remains fragile). In the painting of Masaccio, the description of an urban site and of the population inhabiting it forms an archetype of the theatricality that defines the ideal locus of community in the European tradition. Pictorial description is an image of pacification, transforming the conflictual space of the territory into a landscape; thus in *Sauvé qui peut (la vie)*, Jean-Luc Godard speaks of 'des pays sages comme des images,' lands as tranquil as pictures. The pictorial form of the tableau, whether painted or photographic, is in itself, structurally, a form of pacification: it condenses, frames, knits together, composes. (In French the word 'composer' also means to 'come to terms': with an enemy, with adversity, etc.)

The representation of nature in the West has been infused, at least since romanticism, by the recurring temptation of quietism, which identifies harmony with the absence of conflict. But this temptation is never more than an extreme form of dedramatization. In narrative paintings, the drama often contrasts with the peaceful (and indifferent) beauty of nature. Bertolt Brecht remarked exactly that in Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus*: 'The particular beauty and gaiety of the landscape during such a horrible event.' The gap has to do with the 'distancing effect': 'No painter, perhaps, has painted such a beautiful world as Bruegel, nor at the same time represented the frenetic activity of men as being so illogical. To his clumsy, ignorant, lost men, he has bequeathed a peerless world.'

This pictorial tradition, associating the distance of the represented landscape with an imaginary pacification of the territory (in contradiction to drama), is precisely what Jewish Israeli culture lacks. Here, as in many Western lands - not to speak of other civilizations - contemporary art cannot be the transformation of an indigenous pictorial heritage. The image-models come from elsewhere, from other cultural horizons or from more recent

domains: the media, the cinema. Because it is situated between the fine arts and the media, photography can constitute an alternative to pictorial space. Until abstract expressionism, the American pictorial tradition was essentially photographic (in the nineteenth century, Carleton Watkins is more interesting than the painters of the sublime landscape). But it is understandable that this solution should appear as a kind of substitute, which does not give the artist a sufficient grasp of the environment. One problem is that photography has more to do with seeing than with making. Another is that the photographic image tends to be forced unequivocally to the side of the media, when it cannot somehow place itself within a well-established pictorial tradition. Still more, when the pictorial form of the tableau is lacking - and with it, the ideal of an autonomous space of representation - artistic activity must constantly produce its own limits. This necessity has gained a legitimacy from the avant-garde's suspicion toward the ideas of representation and autonomy. In the absence of a pictorial tradition, Sigalit Landau has inherited a tradition of suspicion. She invents territories and appears to refuse any imaginary resolution of conflict.

In the history of modern art, the constructive principle and the model of montage derived from cinema have largely replaced the idea of composition. But a difficulty remains, that of understanding construction without representation - lest the expressive and dramatic dimension of art be sacrificed to a functionalist norm, which then must be submitted to critique, which itself tends to be normalized by an almost automatic effect of institutionalization. Sigalit Landau's teacher, Nahum Tevet, has met this difficulty. In an exhibition entitled *Painting Lessons, Sculptures*

1984-1990 in 1991 at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, he presented landscape-assemblages with an exuberant mix of nonfigurative constructive elements and found functional objects (tables, chairs, etc.). Like Guy Bar-Amotz, who also studied with Nahum Tevet and with whom she exhibited at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Sigalit Landau prefers to turn away from the lessons of painting and to introduce the dramatizing procedures of performance into assemblage. But where Bar-Amotz conceives his environments as integrated circuits whose range of expansion is strictly limited within the exhibition space, Landau occupies the space with a profusion of obstacles and involutions, shot through with breaches and thresholds. This double bid toward regressive accumulation and transgressive breakout was manifest in the exhibition at Witte de With. Each visitor could experience the artist's rage of intervention: the intro version of the constructive assemblages and the will to break out, to literally pierce through the limits of the institutional frame. Far from Israel, in a prosperous and relatively peaceful European city, the installation flung down the image of a conflictual territory.

As the insistent motif of shelter bears witness, this territory is also and above all a territory of intimacy. But it is an intimacy constructed in the terms of conflict, as seen among communities which cannot achieve social integration and are left adrift in urban, capitalist modernity. The *Sandblasting Lighthouse* (1996), without any rotating lantern and cut off from communication with the mainland - for its radio is broken - has washed up on the beach

like a stranded bark. Sand shot from a pistol-grip used for cleaning facades has invaded the hull of this lighthouse metamorphosed as a boat; ants tunnel through the drifts. The lighthouse is no longer a landmark but a shelter wrenched open, 'exposed' (exhibited). In the adjoining gallery, a tent, bent from a battered door of rusted metal rather than a folded canvas - forms another shelter, more enclosed, but pierced nonetheless by five small eye holes, and filled with monstrous heaps (rugs, blankets various accessories) . Protection and accumulation are associated in this symbol of survival, the pile, so often found in assemblage art. This act of piling is analogous to the idea of the wrapper-man (*homme-emballage*) in the theater of Tadeusz Kantor, inspired by the sight of the homeless: 'the itinerants, circulating outside society in a perpetual wandering, without hearth and home, fashioned by their maniacal urge to wrap up their bodies in coats, covers, and shredded sheets, steeped in the complicated anatomy of clothing, in the mysteries of the packages, sacks, shopping bags, straps, and strings that serve to protect their bodies from the sun, the rain, the cold.'

In 1994, during the weeks of Art Focus, Sigalit Landau occupied one of the empty spaces of a shopping center nearby Tel Aviv's new central bus station. She chose the most reclusive, secret spot to construct a shelter which was also a semi-public studio. Two components of this installation were transported to Rotterdam: *Compressed Household*, the mattresses compressed by two scaffolding tubes (jammed between the walls) and *Many Scratched Doors*. The stacked doors form a layered volume in which an obsessive, animal gnawing has hollowed an obscene hole. This exit less depth hewn into the thickness of the wooden panels plays simultaneously against the twin suggestions of passage and obstacle contained in the motif of the door. The figure can be interpreted as an ironic allegory of pictorial illusionism, comparable in an equally ironic mode to the final, voyeuristic environment of Duchamp (*Etant donné* [Given...], 1946-66). The compulsive triviality and patient brutality of the process is above all an imitation of animal behavior, referring us back to the ethological notion of territory.

Another, more clearly allegorical piece presented in Rotterdam deals explicitly with this theme: *Wounded Territory* (1995), a damaged land of refuge for Life under a Stone, the life of *animalcula*, the parasite crowd of the Fungus which infects the domain of the sacred (symbolized by an evocation of Temple Mount) and corrupts the work of art. While the other works of comparable size are conceived at the scale of the body, this one is presented as an imaginary landscape in relief, laid out at the visitor's feet. Even though it is constituted of heterogeneous elements, it is composed as much as it is assembled, because it combines figures through a metaphorical slippage, rather than assembling symbols: the checkerboard base of the landscape is formed of mouse pads, the mouse is transformed into soap (for purification), while the fungi become figures of a virus infecting the computer network. It's a funny montage. But this play of metaphor is less convincing than a violence that proliferates as it roams from place to place, unappeased, with no outlet.