



The Mound and the Pit

Gideon Ofrat

I.

There was a house. And the house saw merriment and sorrow, life and death. Its builders constructed it on the ruins of its predecessor, which likewise treasured the memory of ancestors in the depth of its soil. And even if it was unaware, its past was layer upon layer. There was a house. And one day it was deserted, possibly destroyed, perhaps its dwellers had been banished, or maybe slaughtered. Its remnants withstood heat and chill, until it collapsed in the winds of space and time, covered with dust and sand, and only a mound remained as a secret-concealing protuberant sign. Researchers of the past came, marked the mound and dug it up, and the mound became a pit, and the pit was a repository of traces, row after row, layer upon layer, past over past. The totality of traces form chapters in the story of a house; ancestral chapters, *Pirke Aboth*.

A mound is memory and oblivion; the one digging in it seeks the ghosts and bodies of his ancestors. For only upon encounter with his ancestors will the digger know himself. And a mound is Psyche; its digger descends into the chasms of repression. Because every soul, every psyche, is a mound and a pit. Ask Nona Orbach.

A mound is a palimpsest. Signifiers inscribed on parchment, where the new is stratified over the old, over an erased or faded text. Like the wall *mezuzah* drawn by Orbach in 2003 ('Thou Shalt Make...: The Resurgence of Judaism in Israeli Art,' Time for Art – Israeli Art Center, Tel Aviv), text over text, around a "dent" she carved in the wall (or



the 2005 video work *Incessant Mezuzah*, in which she documented the writing-covering-writing-and so on of a *mezuzah*). Much like Talmudic exegesis which accumulates over time, crowding together around verses of the Mishnah, awaiting the next commentator, awaiting Nona Orbach to come and inscribe her signifiers on the transparent Talmud page being studied, there, at the Oranim Seminary. Perhaps such is a man's life—the story of the recovery of a house and the digging of a pit, the construction of the story of your life and death, your life deriving from your death, your life as a settlement on a knoll, where you are a futurologist (studying your future) and an archeologist (studying your past).

Archeology: the study of the *Arkhē* (*arche*), and *Arkhē* is the word of the *archon*, the ruler. And the voice of the *archon* is the voice of the father.¹ To pursue the *Arkhē* is to pursue the original, the origin:

"*Arkhē*, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*.

This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: [...] *there* where things *commence* [...] *there* where men and gods *command*."²

Nona Orbach digs. Her art is the act of taxonomy, classification, stratification. Unlike the modernist distinctions between aesthetic function (icon) and scientific function (proposition),³ Orbach affirms the unity of the aesthetic and the scientific in the spirit of Claude Lévi-Strauss's "savage mind" (*La Pensée sauvage*), where the scientific is understood in terms of taxonomy, and the aesthetic—in magical terms.⁴ Orbach is like Lévi-Strauss's "*bricoleur*"; she is the one whose set of means is



"the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. [...] He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize..."⁵

What are the signs which the *bricoleur* collects?

"[s]igns allow and even require the interposing and incorporation of a certain amount of human culture into reality. [...] Those [messages, t.n.] which the '*bricoleur*' collects are, however, ones which have to some extent been transmitted in advance."⁶

Indeed, behold Orbach, in 1998 (in the show "Restless Torso" at the New Art Gallery, Kiryat Tivon), exhibiting—possibly as a geologist, possibly as an archeologist—"fossils" which she ostensibly gathered (namely, created and processed in mixed media), imprinted with the signs of the *Oikos*, the house: wheel, ladder, table, jug, boat, cypress (the boundary of the orchard), leaf (the garden)... The remains of a house culled by the occupant exiled from it. And behold her—still the "archeologist"—exhibiting in 2001 (in Haifa) and in 2008 (in Beer Sheva) "Tel Nona: Finds from the Mound" and "**Woman's Treasure**" where she sorted and classified findings in museum showcases: stones, scraps,



pieces of steel and boards, ancient fibers, and even buttons etc., constructing a biography, the "story of a life," the story of her life ("I am putting my whole life into this"; and on another occasion: "I am the digger and I am the one being dug"), or the fictive story of a business woman in the ancient Mediterranean basin.

Orbach gathers and classifies. She constructs archives. Ever since her visits as a child to the Archeology Wing of the Israel Museum, she has been fascinated by the archival aesthetics. The one enchanted by Avraham Ofek's lexicon of "hieroglyphic" signs⁷ now endeavors to construct "lexicons" of shapes and objects; in 2003 she exhibited "Pocket Dictionary" in which she addressed Avraham Even-Shoshan and Dov Yarden's old dictionary, underscoring key words and inserting signs into its pages, the images of a "place" and her own childhood photographs. The lexicon as a personal diary and as an archive fusing the personal to the collective, the present moment with the archaic. Now, the spirit of the early Yitzhak Danziger was also intertwined in the artistic act of digging/gathering.

In all her aforesaid acts Orbach affirms the work of art as a structuralist practice which brings together systems of knowledge, conduct, myth, etc. from different, far-removed places and times, while seeking the one common genetic structure. In her works she combines alleged pre-historical fossils with modern technological objects, pseudo-finds from the Stone and Iron Age, as well as Canaanite "figurines," "classical" relics, etc. Since 2007, for example, she has been creating "Cyprian icons"—time-worn wooden boards on which she has marked Christian, Islamic, and Jewish signs in gold and white combined with iconic images of boat, cypress, house (the "house" sign from Ofek's dictionary), and



others. Although her interest is fixed in the Mediterranean basin, namely her-our cultural sphere, she constructs one (imaginary, as aforesaid) "historical order", one narrative. The multiplicity of her finds reaffirms the deconstruction of a personal and collective I/us, whereas the uniform-patterned archival display is the attempt to re-stitch and affirm the self. The deconstruction of the self and its affirmation are congruent with the deconstruction and affirmation of the house. The excavation of the mound, the ambiguity of the mound and the pit. In a series of oils on paper from recent years—"The Four-Room House" (an archeological concept denoting an "Israelite House" or "Israeli home")—she "stained" abstract, light-colored and transparent spaces, "desert-like" in spirit, marking them with archeological drawings and sketches of the remnants of a house. Truth and fiction blended together, as a sketch of Tel Qasila, Tel Aviv's Philistine *Arkhē*, also finds its way into the series.

II.

In 2009 Orbach created the series "**Mending Tools**": small envelopes "stained" with linseed oil and inscribed with India ink. The drawings allegedly represent prehistoric "tools", and are partly accompanied by Phoenician letters or (once again) by various configurations associated with the "house" sign. One notices that the pseudo-archeological gathering of the tools, the household tools, now carries the title of correction, mending (*Tikkun*) with it. These are tools for the mending of the house, the artist's self-mending. For, shortly thereafter, Orbach began a series of "**Mending Tools**" centered on "rectifying my relationship with my father." Archeological tools gave way to another "archeology" and to



different "instrumentation"—the punched cards which once served Abraham Patchornik, the artist's father, former senior organic chemist at the Weizmann Institute of Science. The cards—an early computer method for the concentration of knowledge and its sorting—were originally typewritten, and they are filled in with diverse chemical research data.

Orbach is still fascinated by the archive, but when she revisits it in 2010, she comes to the repressed strata of her memory and to the memory of an old man in a state of increasing oblivion. Orbach's treatment of her father's scientific cards is, thus, treatment of memory and forgetting. She extracts—underscores, isolates, groups—select words from the texts (from the card index's memory fort. Somewhat like Menashe Kadishman in his late 1970s telephone directories, she erases with a pen and/or frames words (in gold), taking them out of context to generate new verbal arrays "which trigger something in me."

Orbach confronts her father. Her archeological act leads to an encounter of the *Arkhē* with the archon. The act of "digging" the "Tel" and the descent into the dark "pit" of memory is her renewed reading in and into her own "ancestral chapters," her private "*Pirke Aboth*." The grown daughter, who found herself in art and therapy (of herself and others), re-encounters her father after many years of distance and alienation. In his cards, which became hers, she restitches the "deconstructed" home: she attaches to the cards collages with her familiar semi-abstract signs of a "house" (including the house sign from Ofek's dictionary); she punches, draws "Petri dishes," a protractor, and a pattern—as laboratory signs, the traces of her chemist father. Creating her own sentences from her father's isolated words, she ostensibly affirms a domestic narrative of a homemaker—"bath," "fire," "water," "coal," "oil," and "we left to consolidate overnight." Perhaps—as she attests—in



her sentences she affirms an alchemy of cooking opposite on the fire, hoping for the best. The father has flipped over in the daughter (who grew up and became a mother and a family woman, a "home-maker" herself). The chemist has metamorphosed into the alchemist.

The acts of erasure, punching, and concealment in collage, color, etc., are acts of "forgetting" (*hashkacha*, השכחה) or "denial" (*hakchasha*, הכחשה), two neighboring words in Hebrew. Memory and forgetting operate simultaneously in the card works of "Mending Tools." The one who in 1994-95 created the slide installation *Pit of Memory and Oblivion* where she dug holes in the sand (combined with drawn archaic images) washed by the waves—has returned to the enterprise of mound and pit, her life's work, the life's work of us all: the "pit" she digs in the "mound" of the card index is the pit of the subconscious from which repressions burst forth so as to allow the suspended, rejected embrace between daughter and father. From the "pit" which she digs, from the reopened grave, the specter of the father-who-wasn't erupts to guarantee the desired encounter between the "living" and the "dead," to revive him, to revive her.

Orbach's archives are subject to constant threat. They are constantly challenged by "Archive Fever": the destruction drive, or death drive, sets out to destroy, erase, eliminate the archive. The death of the archive is present not only in forgetting, but also in the very pattern of repetition innate to the syntax of classification:

"[T]he logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction. [...]"



introducing, a priori, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument.⁸

Also:

"The injunction (the archonian injunction, the commandment of the father: *Zakhor!* [Remember]—G.O.), even when it summons memory or the safeguard of the archive, turns incontestably toward the future to come. It orders to promise, but it orders repetition, and first of all self-repetition [...] If repetition is thus inscribed at the heart of the future to come, one must also import there, *in the same stroke*, the death drive, the violence of forgetting..."⁹

Referring to the slide installation *Pit of Memory and Oblivion*, Orbach seems to affirm the above:

"The memory of walking around a pit and creating connections and meanings for our life. [...] Image comes and image goes—memory is the opposite of forgetting. What remains is found only in consciousness. The images are not unequivocal; they arise from a collective memory of cave drawings, the vestiges of primitive handwriting, drawings and carvings on stone, figurines, ritual acts, without explicitly hinting to any of these. The installation addresses the obscure locus between memory and oblivion, between wakefulness and sleep."¹⁰



Let us add: between life and death.

The archival journey of the daughter to the *archonic* father, to the originary source, thus carries with it the nucleus of the *an-archon*, namely anarchy. The classifying, sorting power in Orbach's work is juxtaposed with the dissolving, deconstructing, abstracting, consuming power. This is the aspect of lyrical abstraction in Orbach's art and its affinity with Arie Aroch's paintings. This is the facet of emotion, melancholy, and anxiety. Such are the etched scribbles and the amorphous color stains (the watery "stainings" which, as much as they express the sensitivity of a soul, equally undermine the stability of the house signs floating in them, responding with the uniqueness of hand and brush to the patterned regulations of the "archives," paving the way, as it were, to the life-death unity of the monumental three-dimensional leaf-boat-sarcophagus created by the artist between 1997-2000 (the series "Large Remains"). It is not accidental that quite a few of Orbach's "Arochic" abstractions were created in the wake of the second Lebanon War, and are characterized by manifestations of a "stricken, loved landscape," to quote the artist. Here, the mother's anxiety for the sons' fate—the undermining of the house—is inundated in signs of abstract loss and mourning.

The archival and painterly journeys are journeys of the soul. "Went and wandered about and returned," Orbach quotes from a Midrash in Tractate Berachoth (18b:13) recounting a conversation between two spirits in a cemetery, one sets out to wander about the world and see "what suffering is coming on the world." The artist's soul journey is, hence, a journey to calamity, or to the anxiety of calamity, and it is taken in a "boat" (drawn,



etched, sculpted, etc. in the artist's various works—both archival and painterly), which recalls Aroch's memory boats and Ofek's life-death boats. Thus, it is a boat also revealed, as one may recall, as a sarcophagus, namely a burial coffin or as a (wooden and steel) "votive boat"—a miniature in ancient Egyptian style, and is even revealed in the duality of the boat and cypress images, where the cypress now symbolizes a cemetery (and the boat is yet another journey to the "island of the dead"). The journey of the soul that "went and wandered about and returned" from the world of the dead to the world of the living and back is akin to the journey of Egyptian soul god back and forth, echoing Orbach's myriad journeys between the mound and the pit, between the desire for life (the house) and the excavation into its remains in an attempt to encounter the father of the house. These are dangerous journeys in the routes of memory and the storms of oblivion, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the cabinets of the archive which are also cabinets of death, coffins

Nonetheless, there is no escape from the journey. Paradoxically, the house will remain intact only if a great pit is dug beneath it.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).



2. Ibid., p. 1.

3. Charles W. Morris, "Science, Art, and Technology," in E. Vivas & M. Krieger, eds., *The Problems of Aesthetics* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), pp. 105-115.

4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans.: George Weidenfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

5. Ibid., pp. 11-12.

6. Ibid., p. 13.

7. Gideon Ofrat, *Avraham Ofek: House* (Tel Aviv: Hapoalim, 1986), pp. 158-159 [Hebrew].

8. Derrida, op. cit. n. 1, pp. 11-12.

9. Ibid., p. 79.

10. From the introduction to the cat. *Tel Nona: Nona Orbach* (curator: Daniella Talmor), (Haifa: The National Maritime Museum, 2001), p. 14 [Hebrew].