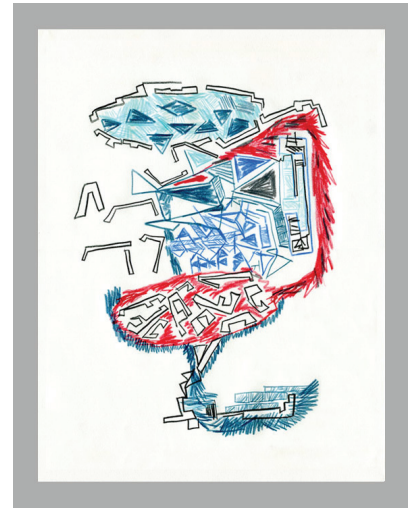


## A Functional Reality

In the works she has created in recent years, the artist Hilla Toony Navok studies sculpture and the public sphere in Israel – in peripheral cities such as Ashdod, Yavne or Netanya, and now also on Kibbutz Cabri.

Setting out for neighborhoods and cities on the country's margins, Navok examines manifestations of a declining modernism: peeling, faded, cheapened vestiges born of Ideologies with a capital I. Her camera documents the struggle unfolding between the sphere of planning and that of everyday use, the limited lifespan of design, and the implications of choosing inferior materials. She identifies the humorous moments produced by acts of improvisation, as well as its touching ingenuity. Navok's gaze searches for the cracks appearing in modernist design and architecture, and above all the fissures created in them by actual *people*. Modernist living environments were planned, to a large degree, based on the idea of *how one should live*, without taking into consideration the everyday needs and wishes of the residents – comfort, tradition, habit – which impact life no less than planning-related ideals. Navok's works reveal the unbearable gap between the modernist ideal and its encounter with reality.

Navok is interested in colors and forms. Although she composes her sculptures using functional objects, her sculptural works always contain an abstract element. One could state that more than being interested in art itself, she is interested in the people who observe the artwork, and in the manner in which it reveals something about their lives. In recent years, while seeking inspiration for her exhibitions, Navok has repeatedly posed as a potential buyer for various



Untitled Drawing, 2011,  
pencils on paper

apartments in the residential towers that have sprouted up in the new neighborhoods of Ashdod, Petah Tikva and Netanya. She exploits these apartment-hunting forays in order to learn how the residents have chosen to design and organize the boxed-in living spaces that modernism and postmodernism have created for them. Navok studies the choices made in designing these apartments – furniture, décor, storage solutions and electric appliances – as a sign language revealing the hidden fantasies of the apartment owners concerning their life, and the deep and touching schism between this fantasy and the cheap, generic reality, which is composed of mass-produced objects.

## **Between Ideal and Reality, the Public and the Public Sphere**

**Hila Cohen-Schneiderman**

Navok's works seek to pinpoint the ideals underlying these generic objects, everyday things whose forms are so familiar to us that we have ceased to see them or ask questions about them. Her works produce mechanisms of estrangement, by means of which the viewer is given the possibility of re-examining something that is sickeningly familiar and discovering in it suddenly new, abstract qualities.

One could state that Navok is concerned with *abstraction* in the deepest and widest sense of this word. She explores the abstract forms to which modernism has given rise (circles, triangles, squares), and the related use of primary colors (blue, red, yellow and even green). Yet "abstraction" is also inextricably associated, for Navok, with the concept of *simplicity* – everyday materials and everyday reality, the hidden and most basic aspirations and yearnings experienced by humanity. Moreover, it seems that Navok not only *abstracts* and *simplifies*, but also *denudes* – stripping modernism of its values. She reveals its declining presence as having undressed itself, appearing in a heartbreaking state of nudity. Her works seem to demand of us: Do not focus on what was supposed to look like art, but rather on art as it emerges out of banal moments within lived reality.

#### The Forces of Nature

The video work "With the Wind, With the Water" (2015) is composed of two square projections that appear one above the other, like a multi-storied building. It begins by following a gigantic blue ball measuring five meters in diameter – a sort of enlarged beach ball that rolls into a parking lot, tramples the parked cars, and is then ejected through an arched gate

into one of Ashdod's central squares. Once in the square, the ball continues to roll. At first it seems to be moved by the wind, until we discover that Navok herself, wearing a red dress, is the one rolling it, with no small effort, against the direction of the wind. Heavy, labored breathing is heard as Navok attempts to direct the huge ball back through the gate from which it was ejected, while the modernist forms (a circle, arch, and line) strangely come to life.

The second scene in this work reveals the source of inspiration for the performative action featured in the previous scene – another square, this time in Yavne, where a sculpture of a large blue ball is placed at the center of a fountain, at the foot of a high-rise building constructed in the 1990s.

Navok dangles a yellow stretch of cloth from the balcony of an apartment located on the sixteenth floor of the tower, perhaps seeking to give expression to the manner in which artists impose aesthetic ideas on the public sphere. She does so with a sharp sense of humor, which is directed first and foremost towards herself. As she marches backwards into the basin surrounding the fountain in an attempt to further pull the cloth and stretch the line it forms, the fountain's spigots spray the artist with water, weighing down her dress and hair. She seems to be surrounded by an entire chorus, a crowd composed of numerous mouths that are spouting out water. The artist, however, feels neither despair nor humiliation. Nothing will stop her from stretching the line she has planned and completing the collage.

Navok's engagement with the presence of art in the public sphere thus also gives rise to a reflection on the forces of nature – wind, water, and sun. After all, public sculpture must meet multiple demands: it must be strong and durable,

and withstand vandalism and changing weather conditions. It must be safe and a-political, and thus preferably abstract. It must also occupy the space and appear monumental, holding eternity within itself. Navok observes the way in which artists (herself included) who place a sculpture in space are in fact attempting to appropriate it and impose upon it an additional presence, a sort of supreme power. Yet in Navok's case, not only the sculptures, but also the people, must withstand changing weather conditions. They are the ones who must cope with the resistance of the wind, the pull of the water, the blazing sun that beats down mercilessly on their heads. Can art not only occupy a place, but also create a place?

### Extensions as a Sign of Resistance

“Extensions” is a familiar term in an architectural context. A person feels that their home is too small, and seeks to extend it. “Building extensions” are a common sight in modernist buildings in Israel, mainly in public housing projects and two-story houses. In answer to the question of how one should live, these buildings offered minimalist, carefully defined, box-like modules, which imposed impossible limitations. The apartments in such housing projects were too small, and the surrounding public spaces remained largely useless and neglected. Over time, the residents thus invaded these shared spaces, extending their apartments. The aesthetic ideal did not withstand the test of functionalism. Function trumped aesthetic form.



With The Wind, With The Water, 2015,  
video, 6:12 min.



**Bat-Yam, 2017**



**Internet image of PVC-  
enclosed extension**

Yet an “extension” is also a modest, minor comment in relation to a major event that has already transpired. It bespeaks an understanding that a fundamental and wide-ranging development has taken place, and that all you can do is add something to it. It is an action that involves a degree of modesty, even generosity – it extends of an earlier idea and refreshes it, transforming it into something that appears relevant and easier to understand at the present time. What,

then, do Navok’s extensions do to these spaces, and what kind of clarity do they introduce into them?

Shemi’s sculptures can be viewed from a 360-degree angle, whereas in Navok’s case the sculptures surround the people lingering within them. They serve neither as an altar for the sublimation of art “for art’s sake,” nor as the object of a gaze seeking to produce an experience of transcendence. Rather, in these sculptures, Navok flirts with functionalism, providing the viewers with space and shade. She does not seek out their gaze, but rather produces an environment that will facilitate observation.

### Cheap Monumentality

How can one define the monumentality created by a woman artist in 2018? Perhaps as one that is not aggressive. Navok reveals the softness missing from Shemi’s sculptures, providing them with a generous offering of shade and the vitality inherent to primary colors, which is absent from the iron and steel. Her interventions in Shemi’s sculptures are certainly monumental. They have volume, and take up space. Yet they do so using cheap, simple means, which are both subtle and ephemeral. Her extensions appropriate the space, yet are at the same time vulnerable and easy to dismantle. Navok’s sculptures constitute a display of presence, a cheap form of monumentality of the kind associated with discount stores. Inherent to her materials is a relationship to both appearance and disappearance, to the momentary and transient occupation of the space.

Whereas Shemi directs his sculptures towards eternity, declaring “I am here forever,” Navok makes use of disposable

materials that bespeak an awareness of their inability to make such an offer. Her drawings similarly explore situations in which complex and convoluted structures attain stability, yet nevertheless appear ready to collapse at any moment. They capture a vulnerable moment, a transient and fragile instant in which things are at once organized and ethereal. Navok's disposable material forms stem from an understanding that eternity is granted only to entities that raise doubts, repeatedly reexamining and offering themselves anew. Facing these forms, Shemi's fantasy of eternal life seems somewhat old-fashioned, almost touching. Paradoxically, Navok's "parasitical" attention to Shemi's sculptures extricates them from the realm of what is taken for granted and renders them highly relevant. Her actions, which would probably have deeply shaken Shemi, are motivated by deep respect and a critical stance that are inextricably intertwined. The ephemeral, ethereal characteristics of Navok's extensions etch themselves into memory, and in doing so, they touch upon the eternal. Now one can no longer imagine Shemi's sculptures without these colorful extensions, which are filled with vitality and generosity towards those viewing them. History has been diverted from its course.