



# A Toony Field Guide

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As the title suggests, I intended to write about Hilla Toony Navok in the third person. But as I was sitting at my softly humming laptop, the penny dropped for me, or rather the *asimon* dropped (a blank coin once used in Israeli payphones). That strange, somewhat ridiculous coin is no longer a fixture of daily life — having slipped and fallen into the cracks of disuse sometime between the 1980s and the 1990s (the period which many of Toony's works conjure up). Nevertheless, I felt that this once ubiquitous object, whose motion and clattering in the belly of the payphone declared the opening of a communication channel, connected with something at the heart of all of Navok's works, which are characterized by the movement of an object and the opening of a communication channel. Thanks to that coin dropping, I realized I could stop writing about you, Toony, and simply talk to you. It is liberating and activating like your works themselves: they are liberating because they are funny and speak in the language of the everyday, and they are activating because they take my behavior, and that of other people in our lives outside the exhibition, to the extreme.

Your language belongs to the world; it is not your private language. The structures, compositions, shapes, and colors belong to the objects you choose from the world, and to the people who place these objects on store-shelves and in showrooms, or to the people who take them home or to their office — not exactly using them, but mainly putting them somewhere and neglecting them, hanging and storing them, in a variety of ways and forms that catch your eye. These objects do not masquerade as something else or take on another appearance. Their materiality, shape, color, and surface belong to them, as do the compositions you create when you organize them, which say something about "what things in the world look like."

Your art does not transform material into representations of something else, but rather enhances the appearance and movement of things in the world. In each and every installation

or action, you punctuate the inseparable relationships between humans and objects in the world. You don't take common objects or readymades from the world, but rather the visual evidence of acts with and in relation to objects. I shall call this *found performance* — ordinary manifestations of objects in the world, in diverse postures, after, before, or during someone's action.

Marcel Duchamp showed us that it was not the object that mattered, but the human action performed on it or with it, the event that constituted it. The readymade is not the object itself, but the radical action that the artist performed with the object and in relation to the object, when he moved it to a place that was "unnatural" to it, and transformed it into a performing object, a work of art. This elicits thoughts about the relationship between an actor and the character he plays, or between an actor off-stage and the same actor on-stage. Your objects, whether kinetic or static, are charged with this performative manifestation that derives from actions, transformed into living entities each time, by a variety of means. These entities conduct themselves in relation to one another, behave, and relate to each other, and as such they also fill the space with different dimensions of time.

In your work, readymade takes on the quality of abstract art, mostly geometric abstract. This quality emerges because you work with very generic modern and contemporary objects that are found practically everywhere. You don't leave any specific identifying marks on them; for example, if there is an identification label on an object, you remove it, leaving the object naked. Going back to the telephone coin for a moment, I'm reminded that the original Greek word, *asimon* (literally "unmarked"), denotes a coin that has not been marked with a fixed value, or a coin whose original value-markings have worn away, making it even more abstract than money. Often you even

detach the object from its use until it becomes raw material. Therefore, in your exhibitions, I often wonder whether it was a specific object that you used, or only its material. From these materials of the world, you uncover and highlight the primary colors and pure geometric shapes — circle, triangle, square — hidden within them.

In "Rounding Up the Hours," your solo exhibition at CCA, Tel Aviv, you staged a spectacle of objects that came to life in a kinetic array of actual, motorized movement. Although you did not appear in person, you created actual movement of objects on a human scale (or ones intended for human proportions, as in a clinic, an office, or an amusement park), and the viewers received a surgical view from the outside in, into their bowels and their coordinated movements.

Similarly, in "Waiting for the Sun," your solo exhibition at Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, you activated kinetic mechanisms, this time of shading apparatuses. The audience moved around, sat, and acted within an array of arbors, awnings, and benches that you installed in the space, and one could imagine you, too, moving about in it. Towards the closing of the exhibition, you realized what was previously visualized, and added body actions of your own to the array of objects, within and in relation to the far-fetched shaded environment you created in the closed gallery.

In Kibbutz Cabri, in the exhibition "Extensions," you attached PVC tarpaulins, awnings, and colorful plastic chairs to Yehiel Shemi's sculptures. At first glance, I thought these additions were an invitation to the audience to sit in the shade for a moment and get closer to Shemi's sculptures, not only as observers but also as users — but then I realized that the extensions to the sculptures were not intended for visitors. They were colorful accessories with which you furnished Shemi's heavy steel sculptures as though to awaken them, to turn them into moving

entities that make use of these accoutrements. The sculptures resembled children who were given new, colorful toys to play with while splashing in the pool.

In a long underground passage in Jerusalem's new train station, you installed a bi-polar work on a gray wall. I cannot think of a more static medium than a wall-relief, but as we walked through this long, dark tunnel together, when I oversaw the project on behalf of the Israel Museum, you talked about the movement of pedestrians through it, about the thousands of people who pass through the tunnel in the morning and then again in the evening, at the end of a day's work. Their movement back and forth in these two parts of the day made you think about two opposite foci of time and movement, about sunrise and sunset. You gave the image of a sunrise to the eastern part of the passage, and one of a sunset to the western part, as in the sea here in Israel, and titled the relief *Entry (East), Exit (West)*. You installed the two reliefs on the tunnel's parallel walls, one at its beginning and the other at its end, so that the movement of passersby charged them with the same vivacity innate to your works. Unlike other works, in which the sun was perceived as a disturbance to be avoided by means of pergolas and tarpaulins, this time you introduced heat and brilliant sunlight into the darkness of the cold passage. As always, however, at the forefront you placed time, or more precisely the transience of the performance, in the form of the sun, the shadow, the calendar, and the whole hours.

Performance, more than any other artistic medium, is characterized by transience. The roots of your work are anchored in physical actions, which have always referred to movement and to human and interpersonal gestures with objects. Your performance gestures were also drawn from the everyday and extended it. I will mention only one example: *Give & Take* (2005) was an action that lasted three days along





pp. 113-114: installation views at the exhibition "Waiting for the Sun," Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2021: wooden pergolas, glass handles, PVC fabric, aluminum bolts, blinds, retractable motorized awnings, decals, tubes, leaves  
 עמ' 113-114: מראות הצבה בתערוכה "להמתין לשמש", מוזיאון הרצליה לאמנות עכשווית, 2021: פרגולות עץ, ידיות ברזל, שמשוניות, בריחי אלומיניום, תריסים, סוככים, מדבקות, צינורות, עלים

the main streets of Tel Aviv (and later Jerusalem), in which you gave a random person a bouquet of flowers and asked him to pass it on to another person, from hand to hand. You followed the path of the bouquet between the streets and the people, as well as the interrelations that formed between them. In every sculpture, installation, work, relief, video, or drawing you have created since then, I find this bouquet of flowers: passing multiple hands and entering from the street into the exhibition, inspiring joy, uplifting; above all, its importance lies not in itself as such, but in the interpersonal gesture and in the relationships formed around it.

Because of the performance, movement, and human interaction inherent in all of your works, and because time and again you build an illuminated bower, and also because your works show that the common and the found are better than gold — I was reminded of the tale "How the Hoopoe Got Its Crest" — an Arab legend about King Solomon, as told by H.N. Bialik. You, too, have a magnificent black crest on your head, and in my field guide I will call you "Common Crested Toony."

Legend has it that on one of his journeys on the back of an eagle, King Solomon fainted from the heat of the sun. A flock of hoopoes noticed his distress, joined wing to wing and flew in formation over the king's head, creating a canopy that sheltered him from the blazing sun. As a token of gratitude, Solomon turned to the king of the hoopoes and asked what reward he would like in return, and the latter asked for a golden crown for himself and all the members of the flock to wear upon their heads. King Solomon warned him of the gold but granted his request. Since that day, hunters began to ambush the hoopoes and hunt them for the gold on their heads. The king of hoopoes returned to King Solomon and begged him to remove the gold from his head, and thus the golden crown became the feathered crest adorning the hoopoe's head to this day.