



## Aluminum, *Ya Ayouni*\*

# Anat Danon-Sivan & Hilla Toony Navok: A Correspondence

\* Aluminum, my love

I suggest we begin our correspondence with the title of your exhibition at Tel Aviv Museum of Art: "Through the Window." In one of my visits to your studio, you said that the exhibition would address the threshold conditions of in-between spaces, of entrances and exits. I remember some of the photographs scattered on the table: your studio keys, blown up and pixelated. You were trying to figure something out, maybe about your relationship with the world. You told me that since you started this work a few months ago, you lost your keys several times. The idea of using the private key went through another material transformation. In the current exhibition, keys are everywhere: locked in mailboxes, on a bulletin board, or stuck forever in the glass ceiling. Oddly, the unbearable lightness of the inserted keys makes them immediate suspects. The appearance of the key seems to dissolve the tension between us and the desired object. A small click, a quick turn, and we're in! Does opportunity indeed make the thief? Could the key be warning us about what appears to be obvious? That the object coded as a means for opening a door is, in fact, a poisonous flower?

The decision to enter "through the window" hovers over the exhibition like a question. The window's appearance in the building suggests the ambivalence of the individual's relationship to society — it is both open and closed. The opening is essential: to let in air and light and establish a connection to the outside world, but at the same time, it makes us vulnerable and exposed. In three videos presented in the exhibition, you "home in" on the façades of three commercial buildings erected in the 1990s in the Israeli cities Rishon LeZion, Ashdod, and Hadera. In the video filmed in Ashdod, you enter the building by climbing a ladder you built from aluminum rods handed to you through a window. The video traces the act

of penetrating the building. To sneak in, you need to get the raw materials, assemble a ladder, and climb up dangerously. Climbing up the makeshift ladder you built puts you in an exposed, vulnerable, and even dangerous situation. Your body is strained, alert, heavy and clumsy, and the viewers follow you out of suspense and curiosity. The act culminates in an absurd, desperate moment when you fall into the building, nothing like an accomplished thief. This climb requires so much effort. How strange it is to see you being swallowed up in the black hole without any reward for your efforts.

When I saw you in the photograph, hanging from the façade of a building, I was reminded of an iconic image from the film *Safety Last!* (1923), in which Harold Lloyd is seen hanging from the hands of a clock on the façade of a skyscraper above a busy street. The film's protagonist is a young country boy who tries his luck in the big city as a junior employee in a large department store. He carries out this showy, dangerous act to be paid a sum of money for advertising the store where he works so that he can win over his beloved with expensive gifts. The scene represents the tragicomic existential state of the desperate little man who longs for love and success and finds himself suspended between heaven and earth.

- From: Toony
- Date: November 14, 2022
- Re: An interior designer looking at living rooms for French clients in Netanya

You talked about sneaking in, and indeed, in the beginning, I always have to sneak in. I entered the kingdom of Mobilia — a store operating in Ashdod's industrial area since the 1960s, selling wooden furniture imported from Italy — by pretending I was an "interior designer looking at living rooms for French clients in Netanya." I knew that otherwise — since I came on my own, and given my appearance — I didn't stand a

chance of getting a grand tour of the store's three floors by the shrewd saleswoman carefully checking me out. And I wanted to see everything.

Mainly I wanted to see the inside of a sun-like window, which I first encountered back in 2016 and which I have since filed away as a window that I would use one day. I didn't know exactly how. Even later in the process, after I had already introduced myself as an artist to Arie, the youngest of the three brothers who ran the store, I didn't tell him what I was planning. I knew they wouldn't let me climb in through the window. He was shocked and quite terrified when he saw me suddenly emerge inside the shop, but it was too late. The film crew was there, and I was already in the air.

Vertical movement is present in almost all of my drawings: the movement along the vertical axis has the dual potential of both exaltation and collapse. While writing this, I am reminded of a photograph I took in 2018 during a visit to Rosh Hanikra. Like many artists, I am drawn to the ladder as an object that connects "above" and "below." A ladder is a functional tool that allows one to perform an action high up. But what would happen if we didn't climb down? I remember being fascinated at the time by the long ladder I saw at Rosh Hanikra, a ladder that led to the sea, and from there to the sky. Like the window in Ashdod, this image, too, waited for the moment when enough energy would be gathered up for me to act.

I am picking up on another phrase from your question: "a desperate moment." I regard my artistic act as a response oscillating between enormous desperation and an inexplicable outburst of hope. This desperate, hopeful act leads to a sense of the absurd. Its performance is only possible in an emotional state that contains both poles. When this moment arrives — integrating the image of the sun window from Ashdod that waited there since 2016, the ladder that presented itself to me



at Rosh Hanikra in 2018, and the consent (though partial) of the relevant authorities — my performance is possible, and the work is created.

The act of entering and exiting has interested me for some years as a reaction to the axis of linear movement — a predetermined structure with a beginning, middle, and end. And, in fact, as a reaction to death. I first touched on this theme in "Outlet," my exhibition in Berlin (2017). I thought of the "outlet," a concrete, familiar place, as an abstract transition that a product undergoes, starting as a desirable object for which a lot of money is paid, and ending up as raw material once again, with no value.

Passing "through the window," the exhibition title, also explores these linear transitions. The title suggests movement but does not reveal whether one goes in or out through the window, that is, whether one moves forward or backward. While shooting, when I positioned my body on the window itself for several long seconds, I felt that I was performing an act of childish denial of the end, of disappearing. I experienced this kind of disappearance in full force with the sudden death of my mother, Rachel, at the beginning of 2021. This denial enables the burst of action and hope (in the film you mentioned, it may be love itself). I climb up to pass through a sun-like window from day to night. I put myself at risk to use my own body to probe if it really is final or to discover if there might be a way back. Meanwhile, the repeat feature in the video allows me to create cyclical motion and go down again. As always, art saves me.

● From: Anat ● Date: November 16, 2022 ● Re: Intermediate spaces

One can imagine the moment of rescue in the transition to another work in the exhibition, when the exhausted body lands on a soft innerspring mattress. In the sculpture *Disappearance (Homecoming)*, you signify the transition from the vertical to the horizontal axis by means of the mattress,

where the vertical axis is the axis of exaltation and meaning, while lying on the mattress is associated with sleep and dreaming, but also with sex and death. In this sculpture — a structure cast in granolithic concrete, with a single-size innerspring mattress embedded in the center — you link the exterior with the interior since the image of the bed ends up in a public square. The focus is on the absent body as if it were a mausoleum. When you first told me about your idea of casting a bed in granolithic concrete, I immediately thought it was an act of mourning, even though the work tied the act of disappearance to homecoming. The quality of disappearance bound up in homecoming is also the detachment that comes with introversion — but this dissociation does not really happen; instead, you emphasize the inseparability of public and private spaces, the interdependence of the exterior and interior spheres.

The fusion between exterior and interior also appeared in the exhibition "Rolling Rooms" in Zurich (2020), in sculptures that simulated makeshift residential structures for a single person, made of inexpensive, readily available materials. These models, however, were not sterile; they contained signs of life (a pot, rolls of paper, a sooty wall), and they were reminiscent of temporary residences for vagrants, refugees, or the homeless. Like the concrete bed, in these sculptures you also contracted the spaces and fused the house's façade and interior into one unit. The sense of falling is suggested by the position of the colorful plastic awning, which touches the floor rather than offering shade. A standard functional element requires viewers to linger in front of it, an object devoid of purpose or value. You mentioned the exhibition "Outlet"; in your attempt to stretch or suspend time, to imprison the object in an eternal cycle, you propose an alternative economy, which writes off the material's use value.

*Disappearance* is the only horizontal work in the exhibition: it remains grounded and offers no sense of transcendence. An imaginary body lies within it in a reclining position, sinking inward; only abstract form — the diamond-shaped grid that unifies the granolithic surface and the mattress — comes to the rescue and brings comfort to the eye and soul, a momentary visual gratification.

While I was working on it, the project scared me. It felt too static. Usually, I prefer to work in a state of ignorance, letting the loose ends connect and become clear only later, during the installation phase. This work felt a little too "resolved" because I could more or less imagine the final image from the beginning, and I always try to resist that. But in the end, this was the work that surprised me the most in terms of its presence and sense of energy in the space. Despite its material heaviness, I feel it managed to convey an elusive feeling that oscillated between the concepts of rest and death (in Hebrew *menuha* vs. *menoha*), situating the viewer in that intermediate realm you talked about.

The interdependence between inside and outside you mentioned is at the core of the ambivalence here. It reminds me of how I found myself crying in public places after my mother's death. Those long bouts of crying that year made me rethink the separation between the private and the public realms. The intermediate spaces at the entrances to apartment buildings (where I cried most of the time) are places you are meant to pass through quickly to get somewhere else. Aesthetically, they appear to be neutral environments suited to casual moments of transition. But suppose we suddenly find ourselves sobbing there or get stuck there for a long time in a way that doesn't correspond with the nature of the space (let's say you forgot your key or you accidentally arrived when no one was home). Then these spaces

suddenly open up to us in all their particularity: the signs of wear on the handles, the layers of dirt. The sense of time that we expect in such places changes and stretches. Usually, we glimpse our reflection in the lobby mirror fleetingly, but when we linger, our view of ourselves takes on a different duration and validity.

You mentioned my exhibition "Rolling Rooms," held in Zurich in 2020. In hindsight, I would say it was a prelude to "Through the Window." In Zurich, I created transitional elements with residues of life embedded within them, and in "Through the Window," I try to reduce these transitions, thinning them down to their essence. I am trying to allow more ambivalence in the works and to flicker between presence and absence. The mailbox sculptures in "Through the Window" also relate to the concept of display I have engaged with over the years. The façade welcomes us with its metallic smoothness, but the sculpture also presents the interiority and intimacy from which the public realm protects us.

The idea of a showcase is associated with visual stimulation, and states of arousal that attract consumers to the objects presented. For example, we wander through home design stores and imagine how these objects might fill our empty spaces, literally and metaphorically. Your works deal with how the material embodies a promise or a fantasy. (In a previous conversation, you called these materials "emotional conduits.") Since the relationship between the corporeal body and the soul is difficult to untangle, to understand how this complex machine works you first have to stop and look. Your work creates that disruption, interrupting the processes of production and consumption, perhaps to reveal the patterns in which the individual is grudgingly caught up. In the videos, you become a "parasite" on commercial centers or furniture



stores in industrial areas, suspending the action by performing strange rituals inside these buildings: acts such as splitting exterior walls and passing aluminum rods from hand to hand; or washing the building façade and catching the water in stainless steel bowls. You emphasize the suspension of the production mechanisms through the manual processes of destruction and reconstruction. The disruption of movement can also be seen in the process in which you engage to create your sculptures. You insist on working with skilled tradespeople (aluminum manufacturers, shutter installers, factories that manufacture mailboxes), even if it is inefficient and involves endless wandering around the city searching for the right screw or iron rod for the next project.

● From: Toony ● Date: November 24, 2022 ● Re: Aluminum, Ya Ayouni

The three videos present the façades of three commercial buildings, each with a distinct basic geometrical shape: a triangle, a semicircle, and a square. When I started working on the videos and became closely acquainted with the story of each building and its owners, I learned that each façade was the result of an inexplicable surge of stubbornness on the part of the owners regarding the architectural use of these forms on the façades. These are merchants without any artistic background or visual training, but they insisted on this conspicuous and (economically) unprofitable visual overstatement. Their sentimental insistence also got them into trouble with their partners. As an artist, I could relate to this insistence. Working with them made me profoundly understand the powerful and fundamental meaning of the concept of "basic form." Despite the differences between us in age, education, and occupation, the owners of these buildings in Ashdod, Hadera, and Rishon LeZion and I experience a similar sensory thrill from form and color.



Souvenir, 2003, walking performance,  
Tel Aviv; with Karin Mendelovici  
סובניר, 2003, מיצג הליכה, תל-אביב; עם קרין מנדלוביץ

Working with tradespeople, for me, is not just about instructing them how to get a job done. These people have chosen to dedicate most of their time to a single material or object. I am filled with respect for them and want my work to absorb their accumulated knowledge and experience. I want it to be updated and to change according to the "truth" and the limitations of the practice. A few years ago, I went to Kibbutz Cabri with Ami Falah, an awning manufacturer from Netanya, to install the exhibition "Extensions" (2018) together. I noticed that his eye caught every PVC shade structure we passed on the road, in residential areas and in playgrounds. PVC is the prism through which Ami sees the world. I want to bring this way of looking into my work.

In return, these artisans also get something from me: that pause you mentioned. Working with me is usually not profitable, and I'm also very demanding, calling them at all hours and continuously working under stressful deadlines. When I suddenly show up in the middle of their workday routine, it's as if they have gone back to that moment in which they first chose their trade, to their initial love and excitement with the material. Through the connection with art, I also reveal to them new layers and meanings of their materials.

By the way, I feel very comfortable in these workshops. As a child, I spent whole summers in "El-Gev," my father's aluminum warehouse. Undoubtedly, the quality of the work I did there was questionable. Still, for one or two months every year, I saw older people passionate about aluminum, moving it from place to place. My father enjoyed inventing all kinds of aluminum profiles that later became standard in the market. After every such invention, I remember him leaning back in his chair and saying, "aluminum, *ya ayouni* (my love)." This relationship to the material became ingrained in me: in a practical sense, as a source of livelihood, but also in an emotional sense, as a partner and a friend. I think my approach to materials came from there.

The love of form and material you described attests to the nature of your work, which is rooted in the banality of everyday life: a poetics of inferior materials and the ordinary people who create complex connections between inanimate objects and life. The pause created by art is likened to that moment when the worker leans back in his chair and sings a love song to aluminum. This story reveals something about your near-far view of the world, which is also discernible in your drawings. You can see them as a magnification of living cells viewed through a microscope, or a diagram mapping a built environment.

The tension between the animate and the inanimate is evident in early performance works such as *Souvenir* (which you presented together with Karin Mendelovici) or *Give & Take*, whose titles are associated with mutual relations and the exchange of goods, with human survival and sentiments within the object. In *Give & Take*, you applied a new set of rules to public space, asking strangers on the street to pass a bouquet of flowers from one to another. In this way, you disrupted the commercial rules of the game, which are based on exchanging goods for profit. Through a game or an artistic ruse, you created a new spatial choreography that disrupted familiar habits, allowing new meanings to resonate regarding the individual's relationship to society. In this sense, the performance work exposes something in your sculptures that blends life and art, dream and reality. Introducing everyday materials into the museum also blurs the distinction between physical and symbolic space. We enter through a generic building "lobby," but get nowhere. The void confronting us intensifies our experience of a cyclical, Sisyphean, and absurd movement between entrances and exits.

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes about the individual who operates in society as a tactician:





he positions himself as a user of the production systems and creates new meanings. Behavior patterns are imprinted on the body. The law is enacted via unceasing processes of education, socialization, and identity. The body is perceived as a text that reproduces norms. At the same time, however, by exploiting opportunities to deviate from the norm, one may expose power relations and change social systems.

- From: Toony ● Date: November 29, 2022
- Re: Sometimes, when there is no other choice, you have to go in through the window

Appearance and disappearance are movements that keep me alert. I started engaging in performance art because I wanted to make art, but I didn't know how. Working with the presence of my body allowed me to mark a place for myself, to declare: "I am here." *Souvenir* and *Give & Take* were walking performances in Tel Aviv. They were actually the first artistic dialogues I had with people; back in 2003, I could do it only through the mediation of objects. Since I created these performances long before I studied art (I only studied art at the graduate level at Bezalel Academy), I had to find my own path, discover the hole in the fence: the urge was *to enter*. My first acts as an artist happened while moving through urban space; the city gave me a place, a kind of studio. Over time, I needed less external approval of my physical presence, and I could step out of the frame. From performances involving objects, only the actions and objects remained, namely sculpture.

Between performance and sculpture, I also went through a long period of abstract drawing. Even today, drawing is a generator of movement in the studio for me. It is intuitive and raw, and I can always count on it as an emotional seismograph to guide me. Drawing is the bubbling lava beneath the sculptural works. It encodes the sculptural act for me, in which I "undress" objects or discover the hidden traces of the abstract, while the drawing itself always remains abstract. "Through the Window" is my first solo



exhibition that does not include drawing. I have reached the stage where the act of drawing is already embedded in everything: the videos in the exhibition fuse drawing, sculpture, and performance into a new aggregate form.

My work stems from a desire to decipher the emotional baggage concealed in the objects and environments that people create for themselves, the places in which we live and work. I am interested in what different objects reveal regarding the gap between how we imagine ourselves and our actual lives. I am constantly gathering information, *entering* spaces where people live and work, wandering in and sneaking into random office buildings, people's yards, apartments (as a potential buyer), warehouses, and department stores. I cannot get enough of these places and the visual phenomena that human existence leaves in them.

In the exhibition "Through the Window," the work that greets visitors is a kind of transitional sculpture through which the body is guided. I think about the choreography of the viewers in space: where does the body locate itself in the space? What are we permitted or prevented from doing? I wanted to create the physical sense of entering and exiting for the viewers as part of a visit to the exhibition to arouse awareness of the body as it performs these actions. At the same time, I wanted to allow the viewers, who are already inside the exhibition space, to observe other people coming in or going out — hesitant, embarrassed, or perhaps walking confidently.

In the videos, too, the assorted objects that enter and exit the buildings undermine their stability and the grid while also breathing life into these structures. The sculptural act is based on assembling and a constant search for the point of equilibrium in the vertical axis noted above. I cannot stay in one place too long. I must keep moving; and sometimes, when there is no other choice, you have to go in through the window.

