



# Toony and Leibniz: A Comment about Works with a Soul, and Another Comment about the Sociology of Knowledge

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About ten years ago, when I was tasked with feeding Toony's blind black cat Latchi, I accidentally left a copy of *Discourse on Metaphysics* by German Renaissance man Leibniz in her apartment. When I came to collect the forgotten book a few weeks later, I found that Toony had leafed through the text and found an affinity between Leibniz's philosophy and her art. "He's really talking about me," she said.

I would like to dedicate this short essay to two questions arising from Toony's remark. The first question touches on the crux of the matter and has accompanied me (faintly) for the past ten years. Why did Toony find links between Leibniz and her own works? Not Pinchas Eshet or Reuven Berman Kadim, not Michael Argov or Dora Gad, but rather Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. What is the connection between the intricate worldview of the great 17th-century scholar, and the young artist's abstract marker drawings and colorful office equipment installations created at the beginning of the 21st century?<sup>1</sup> When I turned the question to Toony, she tried to answer using body language — a circular, fisted hand movement, a slight twitch of the face, and an abstract popping sound. I thought I understood her intention at the time, but for the sake of readers who did not witness these gestures, let me try to put them into words. In a nutshell: Leibniz is the great philosopher of self-contained complexity. The universe, for Leibniz, consists of countless self-sufficient microcosms — little worlds, closed upon themselves, which transpire according to their own inherent nature without external influences. Leibniz sometimes calls these little worlds entelechies, at other times souls, but usually he calls them monads. Almost every existing thing is a monad — a closed system with its own internal logic. People are monads with self-consciousness, but every plant is also a world unto itself, and every rock has an innate idiosyncratic logical structure.

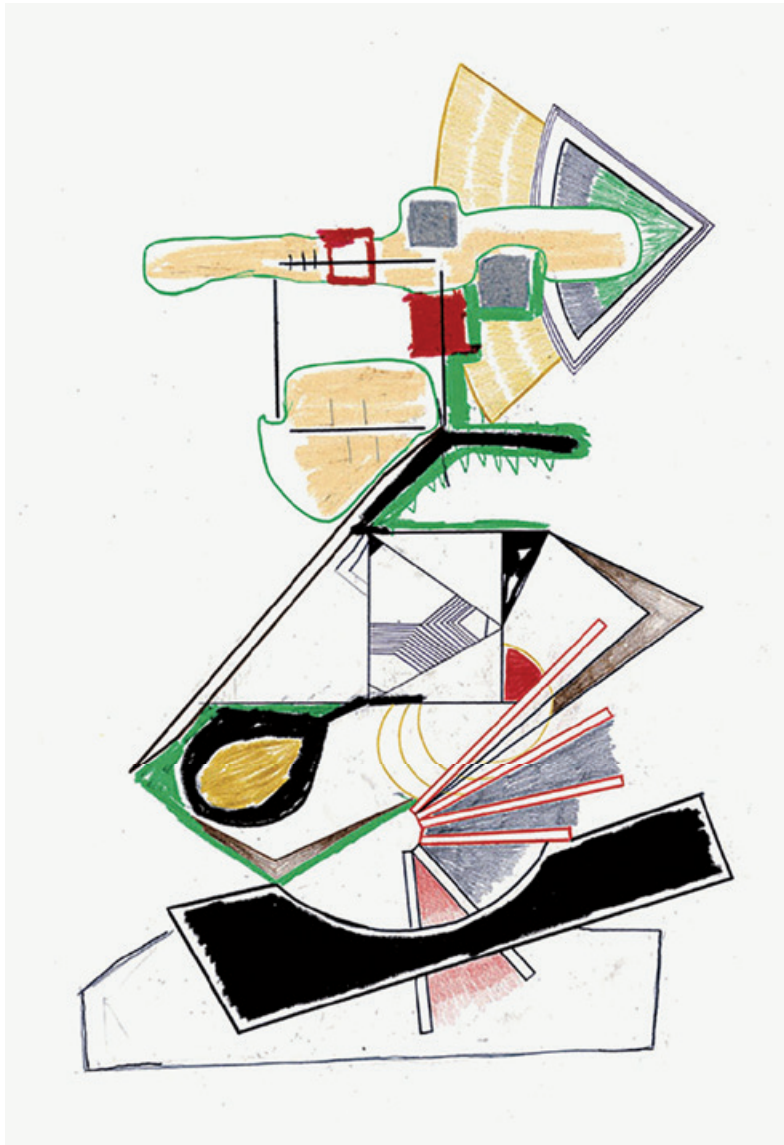
Leibniz, then, is the metaphysician of self-contained microcosms: hence the link to Toony's art. She is, after all, busy

doing exactly that. Toony organizes very specific closed worlds, with internal orders that are difficult to put into words, based on various checks, balances, and formal reciprocities. If I may use a somewhat festive tone, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that Toony orchestrates visual monads. Moreover, it seems reasonable to argue that the main thrill from her work — the profound thrill, which goes beyond the surface thrills of materiality and cultural contexts — stems from the strong but implicit presence of the work's organizing principle, which is unique and individual to each work (infusing the works with a kind of individuality or personality). The manner in which the works contain plurality implies an inherent logic, which dictates the various choices and internal choreographies: this logic is the entelechy — the organizing principle, the work's soul — and its presentation has been Hilla Toony Navok's endeavor in the last decade.<sup>2</sup> And if this is indeed the case, then Leibniz helps infuse spiritual content in Navok's formalism.

The second comment is not directly related to Toony, but rather belongs to the sociology of knowledge. Leibniz is not often discussed in art schools or in curatorial texts: his place is taken by more "respectable" thinkers, who inspire greater awe (but less wonder). Why? In some respects, his absence is a symptomatic matter: how did it happen that political thought and critical theory, of all fields, have taken such hold on the art academies, while metaphysics — which is always speculative and farfetched, and in this sense similar to art — is rarely mentioned? How is it possible that a wonder-inspiring thinker, blessed with a plethora of talents,<sup>3</sup> a broad-minded, wide-ranging polymath,<sup>4</sup> and an ideological outsider such as Leibniz is not granted a place of honor in art schools? What can be learned from the fact that the "critical" artist is a more cultivated, valued, and rewarded model than the wondering artist? How open is the "thinking artist" model, which the art academies



*Compressed Drawing*, 2008, colored pencils  
and pastel on paper, 60x42  
רישום דחוס, 2008, עפרונות צבעוניים ופסטל על נייר, 60x42



*Compressed Drawing*, 2008, colored pencils and pastel on paper, 60x42, private collection  
 רישום דחוס, 2008, עפרונות צבעוניים ופסטל על נייר, 60x42, אוסף פרטי

have undertaken to train? How did it happen that colonialism is perceived as intellectual material more worthy of study and response for artists than the depths of the sea or the bowels of the earth? Since these questions are beyond the scope of this essay, let us leave them rhetorical for the time being.

1 At the root of things there are also broader, meta-questions: What does a fruitful coexistence between art and philosophy look like? As long as art is destined to transpire alongside philosophy—are there different types of uses of philosophy in art, and can one devise a taxonomy of these types? I, for one, belong to the "absorbing artist" type, who feeds himself with theories and philosophies, takes them in, and hopes for an indirect enhancement of the work as a result of these absorption processes. Toony, as described above, belongs to a different breed: the artist who is preoccupied with distinct problems, internal to art, and finds writers who articulate and conceptualize similar problems. While in both instances there are no direct, linear connections between philosophy and art, the indirect connections are formed differently in each case. As art scholar Hanna Freund-Chertok often says, theory is yet another kind of material for artists to work with, thus implying a third type of connection. In short, there seems to be research potential here; curious doctoral students are welcome to contact me by e-mail.

2 In some, somewhat abstract, respects, orchestrating works with a soul is art's general task. One may describe the beginnings of aesthetics as an independent field of study in the 18th century around this concept: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the father of aesthetics, worked within a Leibnizian framework and perceived aesthetics as a way to sense structuring principles. Readers curious about the evolution of this idea are referred to Frederick C. Beiser's book, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).

3 In *Encyclopédie* (1775), Denis Diderot, the great French encyclopedist, wrote about Leibniz: "When one compares the talents one has with those of a Leibniz, one is tempted to throw away one's books and go die quietly in the dark of some forgotten corner"; quoted in Brandon C. Look, "Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz/>.

4 In the first volume of *Miscellanea Berolinensia*, the journal of the Berlin Academy of Science, published in November 1710, Leibniz contributed no less than a dozen articles on a wide variety of topics, such as the accuracy of clocks, the health records of Paris, the discovery of phosphorus, and the cause of the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights).