Amikam Toren: The Phenomenology of the Fragment

Synopsis
This essay takes on the history of so-called ‘Romantic Conceptualism’ as a way to see, feel and resituate the work of Amikam Toren. Using Jörg Heiser and Peter Osborne’s recent re-readings of Romanticism for the age of conceptual art, it demonstrates how Toren’s concern with the fragment aligns both with Duchampian conceptualism and Friedrich Schlegel’s Romantic dialectics. Using the dominant narratives of analytical conceptual art - which argued against ‘expressive’ material qualities - as a counterpoint, it critically examines how Toren’s engagement with tactile materiality has underpinned his conceptual exploration of the expansion of meaning, the relationship between image and text, the themes of presence and absence, the sensuality and ‘thingness’ of objects and their potential for conveying the uncanny. Analysing Toren’s oeuvre in this light reveals that the sensual tactility of his materials – his conceptual raison d’être – works to reinforce the potency of his artworks, a dormant Romantic desire responsible for compelling the engagement of the viewer, not despite, but because of an alluring materiality.

‘The play of communication and approximation is the business of life, there is no absolute perfection until death’.
- Friedrich Schlegel

In a seminar at the Courtauld Institute Research Forum on the 6th of November 2014, Amikam Toren – born in Israel, but living and working in London since 1968 – disclosed to a small room of academics that he doesn’t feel his art has any particular meaning: ‘In the same way that life itself is meaningless, my art is meaningless.’ The unassuming nature of his statement characterises the manner in which the artist spent an hour presenting his arresting oeuvre of conceptual works, which spans nearly half a decade and consistently demonstrates his forte for self-reinvention and artistic ingenuity. At the start of his career, Toren made his earliest contributions to the London art scene as the founder and co-editor of Wallpaper magazine, which appeared in London between 1974-76. As part of a loosely defined group of creatives made up of the artists, composers and poets that contributed to the magazine, (including Susan Hiller, Anthony Howell and Richard Bernas) Toren experimented artistically at the same time as the renowned analytical conceptual art group Art & Language – consisting of Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison amongst others – were
conducting their enquiries into the linguistic nature of art. However, as explained by Toren in the seminar, the ‘Wallpaper group’ was more concerned with eclectic poetic and collaborative practice than rigorous analytical philosophy. The activities of the Wallpaper group could be said to form the ‘other’ story to the historic narrative of early British conceptual art, a narrative which is overwhelmingly dominated by Art & Language in the existing scholarship. Born out of the desire to help redress the relative lack of scholarship on this alternative history and out of personal enthusiasm for Toren’s art, this essay will aim to see, feel and resituate his oeuvre, unravelling his practice by examining works from the 1970s – when the sizzling energy of conceptual art first ignited the London art scene – up to his contemporary practice. Throughout, it should become increasingly clear that, despite the artist’s humble insistence to the contrary, an abundance of meaning and significance gushes from Toren’s art.

![Toren's art](image)

Toren once remarked that ‘every artist’s work is, in a broad sense, a self-portrait’. One could indeed describe Toren’s works in terms that might also describe him: restrained, serene and intriguingly thought-provoking. His early *Broken, Repetition* from 1971-72 (fig. 1) fits this description: it consists of three large pieces of wood, each made up of hundreds of small fragments of wood, that – in tautological fashion – together represent a larger piece of fragmented wood. Toren was fascinated by the ‘language inherent’ in the act of breaking the wood, which, albeit spontaneous and uncontrolled, he experienced as ‘incredibly precise’. Another work from this early period, *Woodcut* (1973), unobtrusively examines how the splitting of a wooden plank effects its own serial indexical representation in ink on paper, the process of splitting the plank becoming responsible for ‘revealing its woodenness’. Similarly, the idea of the fragment and its representation is explored in works such as *Simple Fraction*
XVII from 1975 (fig. 2), in which a broken glass milk bottle is presented in restored state alongside a two-dimensional drawing that traces the fracture lines present in the glass. Toren took this propositional method a step further with his practice of breaking and grinding down parts of objects to obtain the pigment with which to subsequently represent the object two-dimensionally alongside its remnants. He added titles such as *Neither a Teapot nor a Painting* (1978-79) (fig. 3) to question the nature of representation and the functioning of language and thought – not unlike Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. Taking a chair for this practice (*Neither a Chair nor a Painting*) (fig. 4) in 1979, Toren not only demonstrated his interest in provoking thought through the use of language, but additionally showed his engagement with Joseph Kosuth’s iconic *One and Three Chairs* from 1965.
Toren’s simple gestures, which employ seriality, aleatoric elements and propositional language in order to address problems of representation and meaning, came out of his attempt to develop a practice that stood in direct opposition to his painting practice in Tel Aviv, since his realisation that he could only ever get better at doing it depleted his interest in painting. One can draw parallels between Toren’s concerns and those of now canonical conceptual artists such as Kosuth, LeWitt or Duchamp. Amongst these are: 1) The methodological execution of a predetermined formula: ‘Essential to me was that there was a recipe, that I could give myself a set of instructions and follow through’ – echoing Sol LeWitt’s ‘The idea becomes the machine that makes the art; 2) The deskilling of the creative method: The aleatoric process of breaking wood or printing on paper meant that the artist himself had little to no control over the formal outcome (‘there is a kind of spontaneity in the act; it is uncontrolled’) – very much akin to Marcel Duchamp’s process of producing Three Standard Stoppages; 3) A surrender of authoritarian control over the final ‘meaning’ of the work to the viewer. Since stating that a work has no meaning is equivalent to stating that it could have any, Toren allows for a myriad of different, contingent meanings to surface (as also espoused by LeWitt who remarked that ‘once it is out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way’).

It might thus appear that Toren ticked most – if not all – the boxes necessary to receive praise from conceptual art’s most vocal proponents and theorists, yet an insurmountable objection to his art was formed by his appeal to senses other than the mind. The artist/theorists at the forefront of the conceptual discourse – or the ‘high-priests’, as Hiller and Toren liked to refer to the analytical thinkers of the Art & Language group, among others – were firmly against the cliché of artistic subjectivity that had dominated the artistic landscape in the decades after the Second World War in the form of expressionist painting, which they considered both lazily commercial and morally bankrupt. In opposition, they advocated an art based on ideas, stemming from the intellect, executed with an economy of means, that was impersonal and unexpressive. In LeWitt’s now famous words: ‘It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry […] The expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to Expressionist art is accustomed, […] would deter the viewer from perceiving this art’.

Although influential early critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler did assert that ‘intellectual and aesthetic pleasure can merge […] when the work is both visually strong and theoretically complex’, Jörg Heiser has argued that conceptual art’s status as ‘vehemently combatted from the outset’ demanded a clear and unequivocal opposition to everything Abstract Expressionism had represented (formalism, aesthetics, emotive content), leading the dominant discourses to disregard these dimensions. Consequently, Toren’s work, despite closely reflecting many of the revolutionary qualities associated with the new conceptual art, was ‘overly sensuous’, too dependent on the physicality of the materials and simply not ‘cool’ enough. It seems the works raised the purists’ suspicion that his art was in fact in danger of being, in LeWitt’s words, ‘another kind of expressionism’.
Indeed, it would be hard to view Toren’s artworks as cold and visually uninteresting. Despite its matter-of-fact aspects, Toren’s methods and materials produced artworks that convey a sensuality and atmosphere that affect one physically, as much as mentally. As Toren admitted in an interview last year ‘I was doing my best to become a conceptual artist, but in my nature, I’m a very sensuous person […] I had to incorporate into it something I could touch’.xvii This drive towards materiality led to works that one has to appreciate for their physicality: the elegant impression of large looming and irregularly shaped trees in *Broken, Repetition*; the delicate beauty of line inherent in *Simple Fraction IX*; or the haunting evocation of a skeleton chair in *Neither a Chair nor a Painting*. Attempting to retrospectively insert Toren into what constituted the dominant narratives on conceptual art at the time would do an injustice to this central concern with materiality, which – in all of its suggestiveness – undeniably inspires the ‘emotional kick’ that LeWitt argued against. However, where LeWitt believed this tactility would deter a viewer from perceiving the work clearly, I would argue that Toren’s work, which is evocative, ambiguous and sets off chains of associations without making any one meaning clear, demands the viewer’s continued attention and compels engagement. Here, thinking and feeling function in tandem, an oscillation between the two stimulating and reinforcing their respective potencies.

Over the past decade, attempts have been made to provide useful theoretical frameworks for thinking about this type of work, most famously by Jörg Heiser, who popularised the term...
‘Romantic Conceptualism’ in his 2002 Frieze article ‘Emotional Rescue’ in which he touched upon the practices of artists such as Bas Jan Ader, Robert Barry and Susan Hiller, leading to a 2007 exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Nuremberg. This term has gained momentum and spurred on renewed interests in re-assessing conceptual artworks that function according to terms other than those set by the purists. In 2011 Heiser asked: ‘Why should a viewer not be able to find a work ‘mentally interesting’ and be touched by it emotionally?’ The 2009 Walker Art Center exhibition The Quick and the Dead posed the same question, exploring ‘the Romantic legacy of conceptual art’ and reaffirming ‘conceptual art’s ability to engage some of the deeper mysteries and questions of our lives’, providing what Frieze called ‘a compelling push-back against a reductive “art-about-art” reading of the Conceptual turn’. It is key to understand that these exhibitions, although important in themselves, are symptomatic of a much denser turn towards the Romantic elements of post-modern philosophy and thought at large. As early as 1990 Dutch philosopher Jos de Mul published a book entitled Romantic Desire in (Post)Modern Art and Philosophy in which he argued that the Romantic spirit provides a way out of the unproductive modernism/postmodernism dichotomy characterised by a paralysing opposition between naive enthusiasm and nihilistic irony (since, in 1882, Friedrich Schlegel defined Romantic desire as ‘an eternal oscillation of enthusiasm and irony’). In the catalogue for Romantic Conceptualism Jan Verwoert connects Romanticism and Conceptual Art through what he perceives were their identical reactions to the exhaustion of artistic possibilities for agency in their respective times: a turn towards ‘the creation of a form of provocatively open work’. In 2009 both De Mul and Heiser spoke on Romanticism as a current interest in art and culture for the Stedelijk Museum’s Now is the Time: 21st century Art & Theory conference. Finally, Peter Osborne discusses the Romanticism inherent in Conceptual Art in his latest book Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art, published May 2014. In it, he locates the Romanticism in Sol LeWitt’s Sentences, stating that in the context of Art-Language, their poetic dimension was downplayed, ‘in favour of its ‘purely’ or ideally conceptual content’. However, placing the Sentences in the context of Friedrich Schlegel’s Α’θηναιον’ Φραγμετα (1798) allows for an appreciation ‘of their formal dimension unrelated to the kind of philosophical work that so fascinated Art & Language’. Using Walter Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image and ‘the experimental method of montage as the means of production of historical intelligibility’ as set forth in one of the notes for Benjamin’s Arcades Project, Osborne justifies drawing a connection across a gap of 170 years, provocatively arguing that, at the level of their critical historical intelligibility, philosophical Romanticism and conceptual art share a mutual constitution, which can produce a dialectical image of Romanticism as a conceptual art and Conceptualism as a Romantic art. Consequently, the turn of discourse that the recent interest in Romanticism has created can provide a ‘container’ – to borrow a concept from the psychoanalysist Wilfred Bion that indicates how certain thoughts cannot come to expression without the existence of a proper container to think them in – for thinking about Toren’s work retrospectively without falling in to traps of anachronism.
What is particularly interesting for my attempt to discuss Amikam Toren’s work on its own terms – beyond the traditional theoretical boundaries of conceptual art, the way Osborne does for LeWitt – is the concept of the fragment; a concern that was as central to the Romantics as it is to Toren. Toren describes how in the early 1970s, he ‘became fascinated by fragments’, an interest ‘that continues and constitutes the bedrock of my work from then on’.xxvi This fascination manifested itself in the urban environment of London, where Toren roamed the streets collecting fragments of broken objects, often mundane household crockery, such as teapots, dinner plates and milk bottles. Back in his studio, he attempted to reconstitute the original object using each collection of fragments as a ‘blueprint’ that could hypothetically guide him back to the original form.xxvii However, the resulting wholeness would inevitably constitute only one of many possible versions that Toren could have recreated. Never was there a true original to which to return, since Toren rarely discovered a complete set of pieces. Bits were inevitably missing and the resulting objects formed – as described in the 1979 ICA catalogue for Toren’s solo show Replacing – ‘a new class of the ‘almost complete’, the ‘imperfect’.xxviii Upon perceiving these imperfect fragmentary versions, a viewer is unwittingly spurred on to complete the object in his/her mind’s eye, thus creating yet more alternative versions of the original, existing in the audience’s imagination (fig. 5). This embodies Marcel Duchamp’s idea of the ‘art coefficient’, or that aspect of the artwork that is contributed by the beholder with the act of beholding and allows for the final completion of the work, bringing the ‘creative act’ full circle.xxx Forming the basis for much conceptual art at the time, the reduction of form, or in Toren’s case, the fragmentation of form, simultaneously signifies the expansion of conceptual space.xxx Toren’s fragments, both exhibited in pieces and in imperfectly restored state, demand to be finished literally, in material sense, and figuratively, in conceptual terms. His work thus stages a cooperative play between materiality and thought, the conceptual dimension heavily dependent on, as well as feeding into, the material.

The idea of the fragment as rousing imaginative thought relates strikingly to Friedrich Schlegel’s conception of the fragment as an ideal form of communicating ideas: Schlegel described a dialogue as ‘a chain, or a garland of fragments’.xxxi In his doctoral thesis on German Romanticism, Walter Benjamin already noted that Schlegel practiced a type of ‘reflective thinking’ that ‘won its special systematic importance […] by virtue of that limitless
capacity by which it makes every prior reflection into the object of a subsequent reflection.’.xxxiii The Romanticism of Schlegel thus favoured the fragmentary, the endless and the open over the systematic, finite and the conclusive and, much like conceptual art, explored the incompatibility of trying to create closed systems on the one hand and allowing artistic experiment to happen on the other.xxxiv Schlegel was the most important Romantic voice with regards to the fragment and saw its idea as not only a mediation between the open and the closed, but also between individuality and totality, the objective and the subjective, and the finite and the infinite.xxxiv As Peter Osborne points out:

The fragment acquired its philosophical meaning by being posited as the medium of reflection of the apparent contradiction between the finite and infinite aspects of an absolute knowledge. On the one hand, it epitomises self-consciousness of the finitude or partiality of knowledge […] On the other hand, constructed from the systematic standpoint of its negative relation to the idea of a system (totality or lack of limitation) it cries the idea of totality within itself, both negatively, conceptually, and – this is the important bit - positively, in its figural or formal self-sufficiency, its independence from other fragments.xxxv

Osborne notes that for the Romantics, the fragment became the basic unit of philosophical intelligibility, the possible object of experience of truth as a finite form that carries reference to the infinite and infinite possible definitions. The dialectics of completion-incompletion at work within the Romantic philosophy of the literary fragment play out analogously in Toren’s visual works, both at the level of the individual, self-sufficient fragment, at that of each collection of fragments and at the speculative level of the totality of all possible fragments.xxxvi Hence, Toren’s concern with fragments aligns both with Duchampian conceptualism and Romantic dialectics.

Further resonance with Schlegel can be found in Toren’s use of irony. Heiser describes the Romantic idea of irony as the humble awareness that any intellectual task is unfinishable in the light of an infinite chaos of possibilities. This kind of irony pours out of Toren’s work with ‘odd fragments’; fragments found with ‘no brothers or sisters’.xxxvii Toren used these lone souls to form hybrid objects, experimenting with the potential links that might appear self-evident or natural. The result are sets of humorous and endearing creations that, in their oddity, are even more functionless than their ‘normal’ counterparts. They spur on associations of the kind of fantastically made-up ‘natural’ marvels one might have encountered in an eighteenth-century Wunderkammer (fig. 6).

Amidst the fragments, irony presents itself not only in the fact that there exist an infinite number of possible teapots, cups, dinner plates and combinations thereof, but also in Toren’s practice of destroying his objects anew, such as the small porcelain bowl that was exhibited in photographs of its respective states at the ICA in 1979 (fig. 7). As De Mul describes, for Schlegel, there existed a crucial necessity for Romantic irony through which an artist would self-critically disturb the illusion created by his work in order to guarantee that the creative process would not turn rigid and conclusive.xxxviii For Toren, destruction thus is productive in
itself: wholeness broken open, completeness made incomplete, again. Both irony and humility simultaneously lie in the fact that Toren made futile his own painstaking labour of meticulously piecing back together an object that many would not have considered worthy of any time or attention in the first place. On top of the value of his labour, Toren questioned – in Duchampian fashion – the value of the ordinary commodity object, the status of which he had elevated to that of the art object through his initial intervention. Toren also ‘destroyed’ his newly assembled objects through representing them. Albeit less violently, the two-dimensional map of the fractures in the glass bottle of Simple Fraction XVII disturbs the unity of the object he previously resurrected. The drawings in the Simple Fraction series embody the idea of openness as juxtaposed with closedness more effectively than the earlier photographic works had; they show the same openness the broken bottles would have exhibited in fragmented state, but made more clear by being represented schematically, liberated from their material form. Since one might consider the lines part of an elaborate, yet unfinished, ‘join-the-dots’ game – about to manifest some latent recognisable form with the next line to be drawn – the viewer’s imagination can run free. Toren’s title for this series reads as both humorously ironic, since the chaotic patterns of cracks conscientiously traced by the artist are anything but simple, and as genuinely apt, considering the incredible precision Toren says he perceives in the act of breaking; the same exactness that characterises a mathematical fraction. Finally, besides presenting the concepts of unity and fragment, finiteness and infiniteness, objectivity and subjectivity, these works also achieve an extraordinary beautiful aesthetic, its quietude and solemnity enhancing the desire to contemplate the propositions.

Fig. 6
The *Simple Fraction* series was of immense importance to Toren, because it disclosed to the artist that it was the idea of representation he had been concerned with all along. It was at this point that he felt free to explore his ideas in painting again, though he stresses he was not interested in a return to painting per se, but in ‘investing into it’ all he had discovered. This resulted in the ‘propositional painting’ series that includes *Neither a Teapot nor a Painting* and *Neither a Chair nor a Painting* from 1979-80.\(^\text{xli}\) Like the *Simple Fraction* series, these paintings deal with the problem of representation head on. Reiterating their origin both representationally and materially, they were painted with the matter of the object they represent. Unlike the teapot, the chair in *Neither a Chair nor a Painting* is presented still recognizable as chair (albeit diminished, having been whittled away by Toren), alongside its multiple painted representations. The ten-fold representation, in which Toren tried hard to avoid any particular ‘style’, seems to propose the multitude of possible chairs imaginable; different forms stemming from an archetypal Platonic idea of a chair.\(^\text{xlii}\) Correspondingly, the artwork challenges the viewer to determine the physical location of the chair, asking where exactly the original resides: in the functionless skeleton, in the two-dimensional wholes or somewhere in between? As Richard Dyer asks ‘Which is more ‘really’ the chair? Is it the remaining skeleton or the representation made from the substance of the chair, which at least has the advantage of ‘looking’ like a chair?’\(^\text{xliii}\) The title could provide a potential answer through its hinting to its opposite: Aren’t these in fact both a chair and paintings simultaneously? And if they are, has Toren succeeded at singlehandedly multiplying matter, enlarging both our conceptual and physical experience of the chair? Again, through physical fragmentation, Toren throws the conceptual wide open.

Alongside the propositional dimension, a viewer is inevitably confronted with the uncanniness Toren’s work gives rise to. Not only is the chair itself presented as the ghost of a chair – a has-been chair, arrested in time and function through its devastation – but like its title, the work invites contemplation of its opposite: a chair in use, a chair ‘alive’. Described by Freud as the feeling of experiencing something familiar yet strange, something life-like but dead, the chair evokes an uncanny absence – the absence of a past sitter – thus touching upon the theme of death in very existential fashion.\(^\text{xliii}\) Moreover, the black colouration of the three...
far-right paintings stems from the fact that Toren burned the first attempts he made at painting the chair out of discontent with them.\textsuperscript{xlii} Out of the ashes of these works, he gave life to the three black works, which incidentally match the black colouration of the intact parts of the ghost-chair. On top of inspiring an aesthetic appreciation, this arouses a severely disconcerting sensation that is not easy to verbalise. It is this dimension, this simultaneous reverence and dread, that sets Toren’s proposition apart from the dry and self-contained logic of Joseph Kosuth’s \textit{One and Three Chairs} (c.1965). Instead of proclaiming the possibility of a perfectly self-contained system of logic, Toren allows for the play between objective and subjective, the present and the absent, between attraction and repulsion. As Schlegel stated: ‘The play of communication and approximation is the business of life, there is no absolute perfection until death’. \textsuperscript{xlii}

![Fig. 8](image)

Part of the compelling nature of Amikam Toren’s art stems from its tactile qualities. Toren’s own touch was heavily involved in his creative process through the manual labour he performed, grinding down his materials (providing a stark contrast to the impersonal, industrial manufacturing tactics often employed by, for example, Sol LeWitt). Additionally however, the objects presented convey the touch of an anonymous stranger. These are not brand-new warehouse commodities, but imperfect, second-hand objects that disclose their usage, as such implying a human absence/presence. Although the work as a whole is invariably displayed in a propositional, ‘impersonal’ manner, these objects allow for an aura
of the personal, the unique, to enter into it. A later example of this is Toren’s work *Hand in Glove* from 1996 (fig. 8). In it, he repeats his method of producing pigment from real commodities, but here chose not to represent them literally, which might have provided him a way of denying his paintings a specific ‘style’, something he had struggled with in his earlier *Chair* paintings. Instead, the black PVC gloves used to smear the canvases are represented by their pairs, lying purposelessly on the floor in front of the paintings. These, besides reminding the viewer of the physical constitution of the paintings also function to establish an additional visual relationship: that between the painter’s hand and its trace in the act of painting, alluded to by the visible finger streaks and smudges on the canvasses. Although conceptually presented as pairs, the physical relationships between the gloves are obviously severed, fragmented. They have entered different states of being, literally having been made separate from one another in their material composition: one whole, the other dissolved, one three-dimensional, the other flat. Again, the evoked uncanniness stems from the association with human absences, both in the form of the dissolved identities on the canvases and the abandoned, lonely wholenesses on the floor. Our relationship to the lone glove grows more involved as we consider its condition, inspiring sympathetic feelings of despair and pity for it being left behind, unable to overcome its own physical form the way its partner has. The work orchestrates an oscillation between the impersonal and the personal through its neutral presentation of a lifeless commodity that also triggers private memories and associations.

The confrontation with the physicality of Toren’s objects is made more potent by the fact that they no longer function as they were meant to. According to Bill Brown, there is a difference between the way we confront functional ‘objects’ and broken-down ‘things’ in our day-to-day lives. Brown explains that ‘we look *through* objects to see what they disclose’, since ‘[…] there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts’, while a *thing*, in contrast, can ‘[…] hardly function as a window. We thus begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us’. This is less to do with the changed nature of the object itself as it is with its changed relationship to us: ‘The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject.’ This altered relation makes for the arresting effect Toren’s works have upon the beholder, his ‘thinglike’ materials inspiring thought beyond our normal everyday musings. Toren’s latent understanding of this already led him to insist upon his teapot painting leaning against a wall, instead of allowing it to be hung from it. The idea of undermining the historical tradition of hanging paintings relates directly to his *Burglaries* series of the mid-eighties, with which Toren commented on the rise of Albertian Renaissance painting in Europe as a way of putting ‘windows into the world’. In it, he showed broken, dismembered sash-windows, which, despite being hung up like paintings on the wall, do not allow a view *through* them, since all they reveal is a solid, white gallery wall (fig. 9). Due to the way in which these works assert their ‘thingness’, our appreciation of the sensuality of the glass, which reflects the light in its shards and crumbles, is very different to our utilitarian involvement with these types of windows in their everyday environments: we are made aware of their beauty and the way it affects us. As has repeatedly been the case in Toren’s works, it is not merely the thing itself that provokes thought, but also its relation to a human touch. Here, the mysterious anonymity
of the human absence/presence is partly resolved by the work’s title: Toren introduces violence into the work through insinuating that it was a burglar who smashed the glass and forced his way through. The serenity and material beauty of the broken glass is juxtaposed and confused by the threatening idea of an intruder having brought about this composition. More powerfully than anywhere else in his oeuvre, Toren stresses the disconcerting potential of his materials working both in alignment with and against the grain of the proposition inherent in his work.

Toren achieved the same disconcerting ambiguity in the works with which I will conclude this discussion: his Armchair Paintings. This series has continued since 1989 and is constituted by a range of kitschy paintings of clichéd Romantic subjects that Toren comes across in flea-markets and second-hand shops (fig. 10 & fig. 11). Toren stencils letters out of their ground, violently destroying the mollifying illusionistic scenes represented upon them and rectifying the ‘over-predictable’ nature of these ‘crap’ paintings. Toren stated: ‘[…] when you cut the words out of the canvas and then hang the canvas on a white wall – the intervention destroys expectations. The surface becomes truly ambiguous, which is what is lacking in all these so-called paintings. They’re over-predictable and that’s what kills them’. The Armchair Paintings tie together many of the concerns Toren has been addressing throughout his career. Fragmenting his material, he not only asserts the physicality of these objects, but also opens up their conceptual significance; the humorous, ironic, or baffling statements forming a dissonance between text and image that creates a multitude of disjunctive meanings: ‘The intervention suddenly places something on the surface which is totally ambiguous. It hovers in front of the image in an ambiguous way, and stimulates the surface into life’. Toren thus carves out significance for these works, conceptually animating material he considers lifeless. Furthermore, Toren comments on the tradition of illusionistic painting, here dwindled into commercial kitsch, questioning the value of these objects by turning them into artworks worthy of intellectual contemplation. Toren: ‘Any image, any sort of kitsch, it doesn’t matter. Anything can be made fulfil a useful function within art’. Moreover – and this is ironic in light of my discussion of his earlier works – Toren here openly, albeit ironically, references Romanticism, perhaps admitting to the dormant Romantic desire that has been invariably present in his works. However, instead of giving in to sentimentality, Toren shows that his work literally and figuratively cuts through clichés. It engages with Romanticism in an ambiguous, disconcerting and therefore highly stimulating fashion.
In all, in order to properly come to terms with Amikam Toren’s oeuvre of conceptual art one has to consider him in light of the vital artistic moment in London when sizzling conceptual energies found their forms, since many of his concerns find resonance within this context. However, this does not mean limiting a discussion of his work to the manner in which these concerns were framed in the dominant discourses that arose at the time. Those aspects of his work that are crucial to his intelligibility – his conceptual raison d’être – such as the deeply sensual tactility in his fragmented materials and the emotive sensibility in his most disconcerting propositions, cannot be overlooked. Although I have attempted to deal with these aspects through Romantic, psychoanalytic and phenomenological lenses, the profoundly open-ended nature of his practice means that any attempt to capture Amikam Toren in itself can only aspire to the condition of the fragment. Toren’s works will undoubtedly, in Schlegel’s words, ‘continue to release new meanings for hundreds of years’ after the artist’s death and since ‘no absolute perfection exists until death’, a ‘play of communication and approximation’ will have to suffice.\[li\]
Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Amikam Toren for his openness and enthusiasm in sharing his work with us at the Courtauld Research Forum seminar. Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge the guidance of Professor Sarah Wilson in developing the themes for this essay.

Notes

1 Schlegel, F. in Ernst Behler (ed.), *Kamikamische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 2, Munich, 1967, p. 286

ii Susan Hiller, Amikam Toren and Anthony Howell in Conversation with Sarah Wilson, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 6 November 2014. An edited audio recording of this seminar, which was organised and hosted by Professor Sarah Wilson, can be provided upon request.


iv See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

v See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

vi See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

vii See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above


ix See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

x See LeWitt at n.8 above, p. 14

xi See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xii See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xiii See LeWitt at n.8 above, p. 12


xv See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xvi See LeWitt at n.8 above, p.15


xxi De Mul, J., Romantic Desire in (Post)Modern Art & Philosophy, New York, 1999, p.10


xxiv Osborne, P., Anywhere Or not At All, London, 2013, pp.54-55


xxvi See Baker at n.17 above, n.p.

xxvii See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xxviii See Kent above at n.3 above


xxx See Verwoert at n.22 above, p.168


xxxiv See Heiser at n.19 above, n.p.

xxxv See Osborne at n.24 above, p.59-60

xxxvi See Osborne at n.24 above, p.60

xxxvii See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xxxviii See De Mul at n.21 above, p.10

xxxix See *Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren* at n.2 above

xl See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xli See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above


xliv See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above

xlv See Schlegel at n.1 above, p.286

xlv See Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren at n.2 above


xlvii See Brown at n.47 above, p.5

i See James at n.49 above, p.9


List of illustrations

Fig. 1: Amikam Toren, *Broken, repetition*, wood, glue, nails, 1971-72, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Fig. 2: Amikam Toren, *Simple Fraction XVII*, Glass, araldite, shelf, drawing 1975, Jessica Silverman gallery, San Francisco

Fig. 3: Amikam Toren, *Neither a Teapot nor a Painting*, mixed media, pulverised ceramic and pva on canvas, canvas, 1979, MOTinternational, London

Fig. 4: Amikam Toren, *Neither a Painting nor a Chair*, Sawdust, ash, PVA on chair, chair, 10 panels, 1979-80, Jessica Silverman gallery, San Francisco

Fig. 5: Amikam Toren, *Replacing No. 3*, bowl fragments, digital print on Somerset Velvet paper, 1970s, Jessica Silverman gallery, San Francisco

Fig. 6: Amikam Toren, *Replacing – Untitled (hybrid)*, crockery fragments, photographic print, 1979, private collection

Fig. 7: Amikam Toren, *Replacing – Untitled* (An object found broken… restored and smashed), crockery fragments, digital print on Somerset Velvet paper, 1970s, private collection

Fig. 8: Amikam Toren, *Hand in Glove*, pulped glove and pva on canvas, glove, 1996, Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Fig. 9: Amikam Toren, *Burglary 7*, sash window frame, wood, string, glass, 1984-85, Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London
Fig. 10: Amikam Toren, Armchair Painting – Untitled (New Media New Arse), oil on canvas, 2001, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

Fig. 11: Amikam Toren, Armchair Painting – Untitled (Worship Here), oil on canvas, 2007, Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London