Amikam Toren: The Phenomenology of the Fragment
In a seminar at the Courtauld Institute Research Forum on the 6th of November, Amikam Toren - born in Israel, but living and working in London since 1968 - disclosed to a small room of students and 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. This essay will attempt to unravel Toren’s practice by examining works from different periods of his career, from the 1970s – when the sizzling energy of conceptual art first ignited the London art scene and Toren became part of the ‘Wallpaper’ group – 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.

One could 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) (fig. 2), 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

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1 Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren in Conversation with Sarah Wilson, Courtauld Institute Research Forum seminar, 06/11/’14. A full sound recording of this seminar, which was organised and hosted by Professor Sarah Wilson, is provided in CD-form as an appendix to this essay.
2 As founder and co-editor of Wallpaper magazine, which appeared in London between 1974-1976, Amikam Toren was part of a loosely defined group of creatives made up of the artists, composers, poets and writers that contributed to the magazine. Others included Susan Hiller, Richard Bernas, Bill Shepherd, Sue Bonvin and Anthony McCall. The ‘Wallpaper group’ experimented artistically at the same time as Art&Language (Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin and Charles Harrison amongst other) were conducting their enquiries into the linguistic nature of art. However, as explained by Hiller and Toren in the seminar, the Wallpaper group was more concerned with poetic collaborative practice than analytical philosophy. The activities of the Wallpaper group thus forms the ‘other’ story to the historic narrative of early British conceptual art, a narrative dominated by Art&Language in the scholarship.
4 Courtauld Institute Research Forum seminar, 06/11/’14
Fraction IX (1975) (fig. 3) 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. Furthermore, Toren took the propositional nature of his work 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 (1978-1979) (fig. 4) to question the nature of representation and the functioning of language and thought much in the way Magritte’s Ceci n’est pas une Pipe had done. Taking a chair for this practice (Neither a Chair nor a Painting, fig. 12) 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 (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. One can draw parallels between Toren’s concerns and those of now canonical conceptual artists such as Kosuth, LeWitt or Duchamp. Amongst these are: i) 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’; ii) 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 – akin to Marcel Duchamp’s Three Standard Stoppages; iii) 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).

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5 Toren explained during the seminar that, once he realised he could only get better at painting, this ‘depleted’ his interest in pursuing it further
6 Courtauld Institute Research Forum seminar, 06-11-’14
8 ‘What fascinated me is that even when you break something and there is a kind of spontaneity in the act; it is uncontrolled and at the same time actually it is incredibly precise’ - Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum seminar, 06/11/’14
9 ‘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.’ - LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs’, p. 14
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 the big objection raised against his practice at the time was his appeal to senses other than the mind. The ‘high priests’ at the forefront of the conceptual discourse 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, unexpressive and devoid of an ‘emotional kick’. Toren’s work, despite closely reflecting many of the revolutionary qualities associated with the new conceptual art, was ‘overly sensuous’ and not ‘cool’ enough. It seems the works raised the purists’ suspicion that his art was in fact, 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. His drive towards materiality led to works that one cannot but 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.

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10 Courtauld Institute Research Forum seminar, 06/11/’14
11 During the seminar, this is how Susan Hiller and Amikam Toren referred to the critics of the time that were concerned with trumping a type of ‘pure’ and exclusively rational analytical conceptual practice and denied the significance of art beyond their restrictive definitions. Although no names were mentioned, it can be assumed that amongst these were the critics involved with Art&Language.
12 ‘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.’ - LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs’, p. 12
13 Although Lucy Lippard and John Chandler assert that ‘intellectual and aesthetic pleasure can merge […] when the work is both visually strong and theoretically complex’, it has been argued by Jörg Heiser 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. See Lucy Lippard, John Chandler, ‘The Dematerialization of Art’ (1968) in Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (eds.), Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology (Massachusetts, 2000), p. 49; Jörg Heiser, ‘A Romantic Measure’ in Jörg Heiser and Ellen Seifermann (eds.), Romantic Conceptualism, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Nuremberg, 2007, p. 140
14 ‘The danger is, I think, in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work (another kind of expressionism)’ - LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs’, p. 15
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 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 insisting upon any one meaning, 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’, 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

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15 Last year, Toren admitted that ‘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.’ – Kenneth Baker, ‘Amikam Toren finally able to live by his art’, *SFgate*, December 11, 2013, http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Amikam-Toren-finally-able-to-live-by-his-art-5056227.php, accessed on November 20, 2014

16 Interestingly, LeWitt was very much aware of the potential for an irrational, otherworldly dimension to conceptual art, as demonstrated by the first of his ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’ published two years after his ‘Paragraphs’: ‘Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.’ – Sol LeWitt, ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’ (1969) in Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Massachusetts, 2000), p. 106

17 The oscillation between reason and emotion is evident in practices other than Toren’s, such as those of Susan Hiller, Robert Barry and Bas Jan Ader. The fact that their works also betray an undercurrent of the intuitive, of the emotional, has led them to either be excluded from the central discussions on conceptual art, or discussed only to the extent that their work demonstrates adherence to the dominant concerns. See Jörg Heiser, ‘Emotional Rescue’, *Frieze* no 71, November/December, 2002; *Romantic Conceptualism*, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Nuremberg, 2007

18 The term ‘Romantic Conceptualism’ has come to refer to a variety of things in the works of a diverse group of artists. For a concise summary of the use of the term see Peter Osborne *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, note no. 46, p. 229,

19 Jörg Heiser, ‘Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism and After’ in *Eflux*, journal #29, November 2011
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.’\(^{20}\)

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 *Het Romantisch Verlangen in (Post)Moderne Kunst en Filosofie* in which he argued that the Romantic spirit provides a way out of the unproductive modernism/postmodernism dichotomy characterised by a paralysing opposition between naïve enthusiasm and nihilistic irony.\(^{21}\) 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.’\(^{22}\) 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.\(^{23}\) Finally, Peter Osborne discusses the Romanticism inherent in Conceptual Art in his latest book *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. In it, he locates the Romanticism in Sol LeWitt’s ‘Sentences’, stating that in the context of *Art-Language*, their poetic dimension was downplayed, but that placing them in the context of Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘*Athenaeum*’ *Fragments* allows for an appreciation ‘of their formal dimension unrelated to the kind of philosophical work that so fascinated *Art&Language*’. Osborne argues provocatively 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.\(^{24}\) Consequently, the turn of discourse that the recent interest in


\(^{21}\) In 1882 Friedrich Schlegel defined Romantic desire as ‘an eternal oscillation of enthusiasm and irony’ as quoted in Jos de Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)Modern Art & Philosophy* (New York, 1999), p. 10


\(^{23}\) Jelle Bouwhuis, I Commandeur, et. al. (eds.), *Now is the time: Art & Theory in the 21st century* (Rotterdam, 2009)

\(^{24}\) Osborne uses Walter Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, as set forth in one of the notes for his *Arcades Project*, to justify drawing a connection across a gap of 170 years and two different continents: ‘It is not an arbitrary connection – the method of what Walter Benjamin called the construction of ‘an image at the now of recongizability’, or what we might call the experimental method of montage as the means of production of historical intelligibility. This is the basic method of
Romanticism has created can provide a ‘container’ – to borrow a concept from the psychoanalyst 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.25

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 constituted the bedrock of my work from then on.’26 This fascination manifested itself in London’s urban environment; 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.27 However, since Toren rarely discovered a complete set of pieces, there never was a true original to return to, only a semi-wholeness that formed only one of many possible versions.28 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 as mental images in the audience’s imagination (fig. 5 & fig. 6). 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.29 Toren’s fragments, both

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25 As explained by Thomas Ogden, for Bion, psychoanalysis without Freud was like a thought without a thinker: A thought awaiting a thinker to conceive it as a thought. What we call psychoanalysis is an idea that happened to be thought by Freud, but had been true of the human psyche for millennia prior to Freud’s ‘discovery’; Thomas Ogden, ‘On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming’, The International Journal of Psychoanalysis. Vol. 85, No. 6, December 2004, pp. 1349–1364


27 Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 06/11/’14


29 This forms the basis for much conceptual art in general: The idea is actualised through an appeal to its audience to realise it within their own minds. The reduction of form, or in Toren’s case, the fragmentation of form, simultaneously signifies the expansion of conceptual space; Marcel Duchamp, ‘The Creative Act’ (1957) in Aspen Magazine, no.5+6 (sound recording) (New York City, 1967)
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 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’.\(^{30}\) 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.’\(^{31}\) 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.\(^{32}\) Schlegel conceived of the idea of the fragment not only as 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.\(^{33}\) Peter Osborne thus 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 fragment, at that of each collection of fragments and at the *speculative* level of the totality of all possible fragments.\(^{34}\) Hence, Toren’s concern with fragments aligns both with Duchampian conceptualism and Romantic dialectics.


\(^{33}\) Heiser, ‘Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism’, n.p.

\(^{34}\) Osborne explicates that ‘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.’ in Osborne, *Anywhere Or not At All*, p. 59-60
Furthest 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’. 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. 7 & fig. 8).

Amidst the fragments, irony presents itself not only in 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. 8). 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. 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 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. Albite less violently, the two-dimensional map of the fractures in the glass bottle of Simple Fraction IX disturbs the unity of the object he previously resurrected (fig. 3). The drawings in the Simple Fraction series present the idea of openness as juxtaposed with closedness more effectively than the earlier photographs 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 is equally liberated. Besides

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35 Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 06/11/’14
36 De Mul, Romantic Desire, p. 10
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. 11 & 12).

The *Simple Fraction* series was of immense importance to Toren, because it showed him it was the idea of representation he had been concerned with all along. Toren now felt free to explore his ideas in painting again, ‘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 (fig. 4 & 13) 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. Correspondingly, the artwork challenges the viewer to determine the physical location of the chair, asking where exactly the object resides: in the functionless skeleton, in the two-dimensional wholes or somewhere in between? 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.

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37 ‘In essence, the notion of representation was at the heart of what I wanted to do.’ - Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 06/11/’14

38 In the seminar, Toren was careful to stress that his return to painting was not because of a renewed interest in the medium per se: ‘It is a comment I have to make, particularly in relation to the fact that by the 1970s there is a resurgent interest in painting through image painting. This is the time when painters like Julian Schnabel in America begin to surface with a very heavy style of painting. That kind of aspect of painting does not interest me.’

39 ‘The style of the painting did not matter to me at all. I just wanted to make it look as if it was a documentary painting if you want. Or archetypal painting. I am not interested in finding my painting ‘style’ as it were.’ - Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 06/11/’14

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.\textsuperscript{41} 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{42} 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 difficult to verbalise. It is this dimension, this simultaneous reverence and dread, that sets Toren’s proposition apart from the dry logic of Joseph Kosuth’s \textit{One and Three Chairs} (c. 1965). Instead of purporting 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{43}

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 employed often by 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 \textit{Hand in Glove} from 1996 (fig. 14). In it, he repeats his method of producing pigment from real commodities, but here chose

\textsuperscript{42} Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 06/11/’14
\textsuperscript{43} Friedrich Schlegel, \textit{Dialogue on Poetry} (1800) as quoted in Verwoert, ‘Impulse, Concept, Concept, Impulse’, p. 167
not to represent them literally.\textsuperscript{44} Instead, the black PVC gloves used to smear the canvasses 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 on the canvasses.\textsuperscript{45} 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 having been left behind. The work orchestrates an oscillation between the impersonal and the personal through its neutral presentation of a lifeless commodity that 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.\textsuperscript{46} 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.’\textsuperscript{47} 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 \textit{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 \textit{Burglaries} series of the mid-eighties, with which Toren commented on the rise

\textsuperscript{44} Adhering to indexical representation while abandoning illusionistic rendering of objects might have provided Toren the solution to his problem of avoiding ‘style’ after he abandoned making paintings of his objects all together throughout the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{45} For this aspect, Toren’s work was taken up in George Didi-Huberman’s exhibition \textit{L’empreinte} at the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 1997, examining the direct physical transference of a form or configuration from one surface or material to another. See George Didi-Huberman (ed.), \textit{L’empreinte}, exh. cat. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1997

\textsuperscript{46} Brown states ‘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 \textit{thing}, in contrast, can ‘[…] hardly function as a window. We thus begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us.’ - Bill Brown, ‘Things’ in \textit{Critical Inquiry}, Vol. 28, No. 1, Autumn, 2001, p. 5

\textsuperscript{47} Brown, ‘Things’, p. 5
of Albertian Renaissance painting in Europe as a way of putting ‘windows into the world’.\(^{48}\) 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. 15). 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. 16-19). 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.\(^{49}\) 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. Furthermore, Toren comments on the tradition of illusionistic painting, here dwindled into commercial kitsch,

\(^{48}\) Notably, the teapot painting is also placed on a shelf, identical to where a regular teapot would appear in a household; Amikam Toren, Courtauld Institute Research Forum Seminar, 06/11/’14

\(^{49}\) It is worth quoting Toren at length here as he speaks of this series, since his statements reveal the artist’s own understanding of the meaningfulness of his practice: ‘What happens with this particular intervention, 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 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. At the same time it’s been cut away, the painting has been destroyed. It’s a simultaneous act of destruction and creation, using any kind of painting - the cheapest crap on the market. Any image, any sort of kitsch, it doesn’t matter. Anything can be made fulfil a useful function within art.’ – N.P. James, Amikam Toren: Actualities, p. 9
questioning the value of these objects by turning them into artworks worthy of intellectual contemplation. Toren carves out significance for these works, conceptually animating material he considers lifeless. 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 diverse oeuvre of conceptual art, one has to consider him in light of the vital artistic moment in London when simmering conceptual energies found their forms, such as in the practices of the ‘Wallpaper’ group during the 1970s. However, Toren cannot simply be slotted into a discussion that is framed by the dominant, analytically inclined discourses on conceptual art as they arose at the time. Those aspects of Toren’s 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’ and since ‘no absolute perfection exists until death’, a ‘play of communication and approximation’ will have to suffice.50

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