The Censored Chapter

What is it about a book that makes it a metaphor for the subject? Why do we want to identify with a book, to become a book? Liran Razinsky writes for Tohu about the fetishistic aspect of books and the relationship of books to the subject and the human body, as represented in “Bi-bli-o-logia: The Book as Body,” an exhibition at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art.

Critique / Liran Razinsky July 19, 2016

The exhibition “Bi-bli-o-logia: The Book as Body” at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art, curated by Raphaël Sigal and Drorit Gur Arie, places the book at its center. The focus is not the book’s content - the ideas behind the words - but rather the book as an object. The various exhibits investigate the books' materialness. The meticulous curation has created a tight ensemble, which tells a real story. Three main interrelated axes address the question of materialness in three ways. The first looks at the book as an object: its object-ness, its texture, and its physical aspects, which remain when the content, the essence of the book, is removed. The second axis is the emotional investment in the object, the fetishistic aspect of our relationship with books: collecting, touching, holding, and being curious about them. This axis is the irrational aspect, the desire, in our attitude towards books. The third axis is the most important, an investigation of the affinity of the book as an object to the human body and of the book to the subject.

מראה הצבה ביבליולוגיה.jpg



[1]Bi-bli-o-logia. Installation view. Petach Tikva Museum of Art
2016. photo: Elad Sarig

The first axis centers on the physical aspect of the book, the object, the printed letter, the writing, as in Micha Ullman's work *Peh Heh* (2015), named for the Hebrew letters that spell the words for "here" and for "mouth." Ullman has dug two pits in the courtyard in front of the museum, in the shape of the two letters. They can be read as *poh*, "here," a word that fixes a location, and at the same time as *peh*, "mouth," the organ that produces the sound and the word. Materialness is already evident here, even before entering the museum, in the letter-shaped pits dug into the earth - matter in its most basic form. In Avital Geva's work from 1978, *Wall of Books*, materialness is prominent again. In this work, the old books intended for recycling are used by Geva as raw material, along with concrete and sand for building a wall. He shows the book as an object undergoing a process of organic degradation and extinction, being stripped of its symbolic content, but at the same time consecrated, *hallowed* (the name of the work in Hebrew is *Kotel Sfarim*. The word *kotel* is used in Hebrew to refer to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem). A similar duality can be discerned throughout the exhibition.

photo by Netaly Aylon.jpg **[2]**



[3]Micha Ullman. Peh Heh
2015. Photo: Netaly Aylon

The second axis of the exhibition explores the fetishistic dimension of our attitude towards books, in a non-judgmental fashion. This dimension is the object of scrutiny, but not rejection. The fetishistic dimension is related to the fact that while the meaning we attribute to books certainly goes beyond their materialness (a book is not just any object), the emotional connection is to the book as an object, and not to its content (there is no known fetish towards digital books, for example). The focus of the exhibition is on the physical aspect, but this is exactly where the symbolic aspect asserts itself, since the physicality is dense, in itself symbolic, or an object of care, desire, or pleasure, as can be seen in the work *Notebook (2015)*, by the curator, Raphaël Sigal: an elderly collector's hand, slowly paging through a book. A quote from Walter Benjamin's essay "*Unpacking My Library*" accompanies the exhibit (it seems to have been an important, hidden source of inspiration for the whole exhibition): "One has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired."[1] The erotic aspect of the relationship between book and collector also appears in this quote from the same essay:

> On the other hand, one of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned on the market place and bought it to give it its freedom – the way the prince bought a beautiful slave girl in the Arabian Nights. To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves.[2]

P.T.M_017.jpg **[4]**



[5]Raphaël Sigal. Notebook. Petach Tikva Museum of Art
2016. Photo: Elad Sarig

The fetishistic dimension is evident in several other works, such as the installation *Broken Horizons - Shtiebelekh* (2015) by Maya Zack and Stuben21 (Peter Daniel and Nicole Horn), which reminisces about the lost libraries of the Jewish people, and gathers their finest (somewhat uncritically) in some kind of a new library. Zach approached various intellectuals and academics and asked them to name what they saw as the most important books, in order to create a new Jewish canon; these books sit on the shelves of her work. The nostalgia for books, regarding them as the keepers of history and the unifiers of culture and identity, the need to gather, to collect, to put everything in one place - all these are expressions of collecting and of fetishization.

P.T.M_031.jpg **[6]**



[7]Maya Zack and Stuben21. Broken Horizons - Shtiebelekh, Installation view. Petach Tikva Museum of Art
2015. Photo: Elad Sarig

Is the fetishistic passion for books a thing of the past? The exhibition does not raise the question directly, but it seems that its very focus on the book as object and its materialness, in the context of the current culture, cannot but be interpreted also as an examination of this question. Is this Digital Age, when print is ostensibly dead, post-fetishist? The answer appears to be in the negative. Rather, this passion bubbles through our veins precisely because a book is not just a book, precisely because the interaction between the book and the human subject is more than usage or observation. The book is a metaphor for the subject.

The connection between the fetishistic attitude towards the book and the book's being a metaphor, as well as an embodiment of the subject, is hinted at in Benjamin's essay, mentioned above. Benjamin stresses the collecting dimension, unique to books: "For a collector [...] ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects, Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building blocks, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting."3

Indeed, the exhibition's third axis examines not only the body of the book but also the subtle bonds between the book and the human body, as well as between the book and the human subject. This similarity, the interface of book and human, is addressed by several of the works. For example, the interesting work *am Anfang ist Kaputt* (In the Beginning is Kaput) (2011), by Wanja Jonathan Schaub, features a dead-alive book. The work stresses the material aspect of the book discussed previously but connects it more fundamentally to life and corporeality. Schaub embeds seeds in books he manufactures from mold-made paper and binds them. The seeds germinate, grow into plants, thrive, then wilt and shrivel. The book is green, it blooms for a while, lives, and then it wilts, dries up, becomes corrupted. The corrupted, decayed book in the exhibition takes us back to the biological, to the organic. This book is not just a letter (or a dead letter) but a body, a dead body; it is a thing, an object, and not in a sense of a square box containing symbols but in that of an entity that has lived once and is now dead. We usually think of books as stable, perhaps in contrast with the transient biological, but Schaub confronts us with a book that undergoes a whole life-cycle, is exposed to the ravages of time (however, it does not wear out but rather wilts and ages like any other organic creature), and finally dies.

P.T.M_065 (1).jpg **[8]**



[9]Wanja Jonathan Schaub. am Anfang ist Kaputt
2011. Photo: Elad Sarig

The book as a whole is a metaphor for the corporeal, as are the signs inside it: in a beautiful work, a video documentation of a dance piece, the choreographer Marie Chouinard pours life into dead letters. Chouinard's piece resuscitates and dances the strange signs - half letters, half drawings, perhaps body drawings - in "*Movements*" (Mouvements), a book by the French poet Henri Michaux. The ink marks - a new language? The purest poetry, which lets the words and the signs speak, without the thoughts? - become movements of dancers in black, human letters, animated and realistic on the stage.

Other exhibits refer to the symbolic connection between the book and the subject, not necessarily the body. So are two complementary exhibits: books that were sold by Walter Benjamin to the National Library, with the assistance of his friend Gershom Scholem, were pulled from the shelves of the library and exhibited in a glass box. According to the curators' exhibition text, these books, by the German philosopher Franz von Baader, have been a part of Benjamin's library for nine years, and he considered them first-rate books, his prize possessions. When he decided to sell them, in 1934, he had already been in exile and had experienced stress and deprivation. Benjamin sent the books to his friend Scholem and wrote: "May they find a safe haven in Israel, be it in the library of the university in Jerusalem or in yours" (July 9, 1934). Benjamin himself considered immigrating to Palestine and joining the Hebrew University, but he was unsuccessful in his attempts to do so. When he had taken his own life, his body was never found, the text next to the glass box reminds us. The allusion is clear: Instead of the lost body the books are here, present. Benjamin's words, quoted above, take on a new meaning: "I have erected one of his dwellings with books as building blocks, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting."[4]

מראה הצבה ביבליולוגיה 2.jpg **[10]**



[11]Bi-bli-o-logia. Installation view. Marie Chouinard (video), Noga Inbar. Petach Tikva Museum of Art 2016. photo: Elad Sarig

Yet another exhibit comprises archive photographs of mounds of books owned by Jews, which the Germans looted and confiscated to establish a library. In contrast to the familiar images of book burning, the Nazi aim was not only to eradicate but also to collect, study, and preserve the Jewish books in an archive, as a museum of Jewish life.5 The piles are disquieting, in the way piles in Holocaust photographs usually are, and again we get rescued books representing flesh-and-blood people who have died.

In both exhibits, then, a human subject disappears and the book that replaces him/her is collected, cataloged, preserved, archived, and it survives. The installation by Zack and Stuben21 likewise shows photographs of reconstructed schoolrooms (midrash and heder) based on photos by Roman Vishniac and contemporary *shtiebelekh* (religious schools) in Jerusalem. We see wide unpeopled spaces, which store books, but also a long coat on a hanger, a hat: signs of an absent human presence, underscored by the strong presence of books.

The affinity of subject and book has a long history and many expressions. Jacques Lacan, for example, defines the unconscious in a famous quote, as "that chapter of my history that is marked by a blank [...] it is the censored chapter."6 This metaphor points to the absent, to the torn pages, but they are ripped from a whole, and that whole is compared here to a book: a book that requires reading, deciphering, and even detecting what might have been in the missing pages.

In many autobiographies, the book is not just an image of the self or an interesting metaphor: the linking of self and book becomes an ambition, an identification, a life/writing project. In an autobiography, the fusion of subject and book is the most intimate: a relationship of not just ownership, reading, or even writing, an author writing any book. Rather, a whole life progression is

written and condensed into a volume, and the finished book represents and embodies its author. The subject writes itself until it becomes a book.

What is it in a book that makes it a metaphor for the subject, and even more than a metaphor, in the sense that there is a real wish for identification, a wish to become a book? Apparently a part of the answer lies in the duality mentioned above, the book being at the same time a plain object and one that has a symbolic life through its content (words, ideas, thoughts), whose value and existence are far beyond the ink marks of the letters, beyond the printed pages. The book is an image of the human, who also lives simultaneously in symbolic worlds and in a creature body. Noga Inbar reminds us in her work, *Phantom (2015)*, that even the physical has a symbolic dimension: she shows images sampled from her own body and processed through an MRI machine or a scanning electron microscope (SEM). These images are printed along vertical axes on suspended sheets of paper, so that the body too becomes information, an archival site.

The book, seen from a different angle, is the closeness, the beginning, and the end of one subject, a narrative and a life progression. The book is an independent complex with connections to other complexes, and it speaks. At the same time, despite the closed, hermetic completeness of the book, it is also the multiplicity of real and possible life progressions, a workshop for the tempering of thoughts and feelings. Michael Sheringham, a scholar of autobiographies in French literature, writing about the idea of "the self as a book," which is prevalent in French autobiographical writing, discusses the seduction of the book as a metaphor for the human subject, in this case the subject who had written the particular book:

On the one hand, the book is solid, portable, voluminous, legible, authoritative, permanent: a monument, a mausoleum. The imagery of the self as volume could be pursued from Montaigne, to Rousseau […], to Chateaubriand, Leiris, and Laporte. But, on the other hand, the book is also voluminous in an earlier sense: “full of turnings or windings, containing or consisting of many coils or convolutions” (OED): in the same writers, from Montaigne to Laporte, one could pursue identifications where the twists and turns of writing are felt to mirror the self’s plurality, its resistance to capture. In this case what is fetishized is not a stable mirror-image of the self, which can be exported from text to life, but the profusion of signs, tokens, and traces of selfhood which are generated as the autobiographer “processes” memories, conjectures, and documents.7

The book is singular but also a multitude, stable, eternal, but changeable and internally rich. "Bi-bli-o-logia" offers an investigation of these aspects and many others. A wonderful, thought-provoking exhibition.

"Bi-bli-o-logia: the book as body" [12] was at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art from 26/11/2015 through 26/03/2016. Curators: Drorit gur Arie and Rephael Sigal.

- 1. Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library” Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books; New York, 1968, 61.
- 2. Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library,” 64.
- 3. Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library”, 67.
- 4. Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library” Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books; New York, 1968, 67.
- 5. See: Mcgrane, Sally. “What Became of the Jewish Books?” The New Yorker [13], February 28, 2014.
- 6. Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in Écrits. A selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989 [1966]), p. 38.
- 7. Michael Sheringham, French Autobiography: Devices and Desires (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 7-8

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