

Yaacov Chefetz: The Melancholy of a Revolutionary

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The oeuvre of Yaacov Chefetz (b. 1947), an Israeli artist whose career spans five decades of activity thus far, was consolidated around two critical ideological turning-points. The first occurred in his youth (ca. 1967), when he turned his back on the right-wing tenets upheld by his parents, both members of the anti-socialist Betar movement, and adopted Marxism as a life-shaping ideology – a decision that led him to choose a cooperative, egalitarian way of life on a kibbutz. The second turning-point occurred some 30 years later (1999), when he left his kibbutz, Eilon, and announced the end of ideology and the death of the kibbutz artist. Twice in his life he crossed the ideological watershed, in each case accompanying this act with art works that defined themselves as political, polemical, and critical.

As a member of Kibbutz Eilon, which belongs to Hashomer Hatzair – the most left-leaning faction of the Kibbutz movement – Chefetz underscored his identity as an artist working within the group, while providing a new interpretation of the traditional concept of a “kibbutz artist.” Traditionally, artists who belonged to the Kibbutz Movement willingly took upon themselves a collective vocation and

identified with it ideologically, upholding the community’s life and offering visual support for its ideological ethos – even if, unlike their Soviet colleagues, they adopted a modern Western style. These traditional kibbutz artists consistently contributed to the group by taking charge of the decorations for every holiday and significant event.

Chefetz, who became active in the early 1970s, no longer viewed himself as committed exclusively to the ideal of the devoted “kibbutz artist” who serves the needs of his community and follows its rhythms. Influenced by the critical spirit of the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam war protest art which he witnessed during a short sojourn in New York City and the 1968 student uprising in Paris, he adopted a reflexive stance, observing society with a discerning state of mind, asking for correction. In collaboration with a group of young artists from Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim who, like him, sought to reformulate their stance, he began to center his artistic activity on critically remapping the old group values and reexamining their validity. The manner in which Chefetz examined his own social milieu did not accord with familiar practices of studying socialist society. The values and phenomena with which he concerned himself with were

not related to politics or to the social structure, but to the mental texture of the cooperative, pioneering society in pre-state Israel, which was invisible due to its implicit presence on a deep psychological level. These included the identification with the surrounding environment and intimacy with nature; the relations between interior and exterior; changes in family architecture and the concept of residence; the tension between intimate marital relations and the common life of the group; norms concerning manual labor and autonomous action; modesty and asceticism; and, finally – the growing distance between lofty ideals and the mediocrity of everyday life on the kibbutz.

Critical statements concerning the gap between ideology and its realization were voiced in kibbutz society as early as the mid-1930s, while raising the issue of “the second day of the revolution” – the paradox inherent to the revolutionary logic: whereas the “first day” creates the “big bang” and generates radical change, the “second day” (a metaphor for the more advanced, less tumultuous stage of the revolution) requires the preservation of the change and the neutralization of the revolutionary mechanism’s dynamic. The question

of the revolution’s second generation appeared in the kibbutz discourse as soon as the kibbutz-born youngsters came of age and were required to conform to the stance of their parents. Although the kibbutz educational system aimed to shape a devoted personality type that would easily adapt to collective norms, rebellious voices were soon expressed: the members of this younger generation rightly argued that they were denied the ability to dream their own dreams, since they were required to sustain the ideology of the founding generation. Moreover, the longing for bourgeois comforts, for a taste of consumer culture, for a measure of hedonism and for liberation from the yoke of ideological and practical implementation hampered the sustainment of kibbutz society and eroded its ideological tenets. The question of utopia and its realization resonated powerfully: as the psychoanalyst Emanuel Berman wrote, “when the existing society has been repressed for the sake of an imaginary society belonging to tomorrow and to the day after tomorrow, the actual individual is trampled in the name of a hypothetical new individual. ”

Nakba 1948 Video, Photographs

The Nakba, over the years, the subject has not been removed from the agenda of Chefetz works and actions. These must be combined with political activism, so that in fact a situation is created in which almost every work has a discussion, touch, or presence of the subject. The highlight was the large project on Wadi Salib, a neighborhood in Haifa city. Most of its Palstiyens residents were expelled in 1948. As an initiator and curator, Chefetz created a complex event that also had social and political aspects. It consisted of two projects: a film shot over a period of time titled 'The Abandoned House' - depicting a villa that once belonged to a Palestinian family deported to the Gaza Strip in 1948 - and photographs, conversations, and discussions with a family that had been expelled from a village in the Galilee region but remained in Israel.

Measurements, 1974, black-and-white photographs

Chefetz came to live on Kibbutz Eilon, near Israel's northern border, as the deterioration of socialist ideology and its loss of meaning began to gain

recognition in kibbutz discourse. The gap between the ideal values of equality and the feelings of alienation and disappointment among community members were already acknowledged. Nevertheless, or perhaps even due to these growing sentiments, Chefetz began performing actions within the community, in the vicinity of his home. His advantage as one who had come from the outside armed with an authentic ideological vision, without carrying the burden of legacy, endowed his work with a pure, dynamic energy. The series of photographs titled "Measurements," taken in 1974 in a clearing close to the kibbutz, explores the positioning of the artist's body in the natural environment and his internal perception of it. Chefetz performed a series of gestures that responded to the wild, uncultivated nature of the Galilee's vegetation, and were concerned with restoring a primal experience. These gestures were also inspired by a poem written by the poet Gittel Mishkovsky, a member of the same kibbutz, who wrote about "the blazing rocks" whose scorching touch on the body acts as a "love resin" and promotes widespread fraternity. The writer A.D. Gordon, "the philosopher of the Labor movement" who worked in the fields of Kibbutz Deganya, on the

shore of the Sea of Galilee, had preached about communion with nature and with the earth as a revitalizing, fertilizing force. In the eyes of Gordon and in the mind of the generation of pioneers who founded kibbutzim in pre-state Israel, the return of the diasporic Jew to nature was at the root of the entire revolution, representing a radical turning-point in the history of the Jewish people: from the dark and gloomy Eastern European heider (traditional Jewish schoolroom) and shtetl (small Jewish town) to the light, air and soil of the rejuvenated homeland. In his "Measurements," Chefetz orients himself towards nature by means of bodily rituals and experiments involving fusion with nature, yet remains an external presence whose power in relation to the vastness of the surroundings is limited. The "Measurements" do not attest to the pathos of a healing connection, but rather to a reality of relativity and gaps.

"We Built It with Our Own Hands," 1978 (Dissolving Values)

Later on, Chefetz explored additional pioneering myths that arose and were reformulated during his conversations with founding members of the kibbutz, such as the myth of self-labor and building with one's own hands. "We built it with our own hands" was a recurrent pioneering mantra – one encompassing not only the values of work and determination, but also those of modesty and simplicity. Chefetz wrote this declarative sentence in chalk on a green blackboard. Below it, he positioned the geometric skeleton of simple furniture items made of wooden planks: a rectangle for a table, squares for chairs; Minimal furniture pieces designed to fulfill the basic needs of everyday life and of rest during moments of respite from outdoor labor. This work paved the path for another series of photographs, this time in color, concerned with what appeared, in the mid-1970s, as the "bourgeois interior" of a standard kibbutz living room: Chefetz documented himself alongside his wife, Hagar, sitting at a low table in the "living room" of their modest home, drinking tea in designed glasses while facing guests seated across from them – or perhaps,

heaven forbid, a private TV set. The practice of hosting guests in one's living room, an accepted social ritual in a chatty bourgeois society, stands out in contrast to the hard-working socialist society, representing the deep change in the domestic kibbutz sphere and its new function in everyday life. At the same time, Chefetz researches the connection between architecture and social concepts by presenting a series of four photographs capturing the "Villa" – a new architectural style of kibbutz apartments that were carefully planned and designed during late 1970s. The photographs feature a homeowner, Chefetz himself, playing with his dog on the lawn before the whitened façade. One by one, Chefetz attends to the signs of change that gradually transformed the kibbutz from a collective sphere defined by modesty and centered on public spaces serving the group, to more spacious private spaces that encouraged an intimate bourgeois lifestyle centered on the individual couple, their dog and children. The interior and exterior architecture of the house similarly represents ideological changes that developed gradually, culminating with the transition from communal sleeping arrangements for children to the construction of children's rooms in the parental home

and the shifting of emphasis to the family unit, as opposed to the collective body.

The ethical commandment expressed by the statement "we built it with our own hands," formulated in the first-person plural, is contrasted by Chefetz with the slow encroachment of a private, hedonistic way of life. As a participant observer – rather than an outsider, he examines the seemingly minor changes in the community, pointing to them as food for thought and material for discussion.

In the early 1970s, Chefetz also expressed his concern with the tension between nature and culture in an abstract language, in works exploring linearity and navigating between cutting paper and sawing stones to hanging works on walls or creating installations on the floor. The influence of New York Minimalism is both in terms of the withdrawal into a restricted linear sphere and in terms of the grayish, unseductive monochrome. The simplicity of the materials is compatible with the ascetic spirit of kibbutz socialism, which exists alongside constant contact with nature and with organic textures.

**"Rainfall Region,"
in Collaboration with Dov Heller,
1978**

The project "Rainfall Region," which was activated over the course of an entire year, was an unusual environmental project conceived of and created from the viewpoint of artists who were also agriculturalists. As such, charting the rainfall and evaluating its impact on the growth of their crops were central issues in their thoughts and life. The geographical extent of this project connected the northern tip of Israel, represented by Kibbutz Eilon, near the Lebanese border (Chefetz's kibbutz), with Kibbutz Nirim in the south, in the Western Negev bordering on Gaza (Heller's kibbutz). The two artists mapped precipitation from north to south, gathering statistical data and charting it with special signage along the trajectory. They themselves both appear wearing blue proletarian work clothes and representing a new type of proletarian artist, who rejects hierarchical relations between land laborer and "art worker." The metaphor of rain gives rise to a psychological discourse on the existential difference between arid and rainy regions, and about how the tension between high precipitation and drought impacts

the personality of those at the heart of this agricultural drama. Heller and Chefetz developed innovative rain meters ranging from cupped hands that gathered the raindrops to complex aqueducts that measured larger quantities. They gathered water containers used in local cultures, such as Bedouin or Palestinian culture, and pointed to natural sources of water such as springs or wells at the center of villages. Each of them photographed the water sources in his region: Chefetz photographed the waterfalls of the Galilee's valleys, and Heller photographed the water conduits channeling water in the desert from invisible sources. Heller built an aqueduct from handmade bricks he created by combining loess soil, straw and water – a technique he learned from the inhabitants of the desert in the vicinity of his kibbutz. "Rainfall Region" thus sought to link the expectation of rain, as a basic ritual pertaining to an uncontrollable climate system, with folkloric and technological knowledge and the attempt to experience some measure of control by collecting the raindrops and measuring precipitation. The range extending from traditional folkloric knowledge concerning measurement tools, containers and irrigation to modern

scientific knowledge concerning weather forecasting and meteorology reflects the artists' social stance not only concerning the "Rainfall Region," but also relating to the peripheral population in the local Jewish-Palestinian landscape. This project is an exemplar of Israeli art that knew how to translate the universal language of environmental sculpture and actions in space into local concerns, in particular ones relevant for the civic -agricultural kibbutz society – giving rise to a new school of Israeli art.

Mashhara, 1979

As part of his exploration of relevant local art-making that also touches upon proletarian issues and authentic knowledge, Chefetz studies the "Mashhara" – a structure composed of wood pieces that is slowly fired to produce coal. The Mashhara is the product of centuries-old Palestinian knowledge concerning charcoal production for hearth fires. It is constructed so that combustion remains internal and slow, rather than bursting into flames that would reduce the wood to ash. The construction of a Mashhara – a fully performative action – first took place at the Kibbutz Art Gallery in Tel Aviv in

1979, in collaboration with a Bedouin Mashhara builder named Diab. Its placement at the center of the gallery continued Chefetz's engagement with hybrid conceptual combinations of functional art and constructive art. Like the fusion of rainfall measurement and artistic action, so the construction of the Mashhara fused traditional Palestinian knowledge with what could be described as a pyramidal "sculpture" composed of wood pieces. A further radical step taken by Chefetz was the positioning of Diab, the Mashhara builder, at center stage, at the expense of his own centrality as an exhibiting artist.

Later on, Chefetz invited Diab to Kibbutz Eilon, where he initiated a group action: with Diab's assistance and guidance, young children and adult kibbutz members constructed a Mashhara from scratch – sawing the wood pieces, constructing the structure, and lighting the slow fire. The meaning of the action centered on collaboration and on the transmission of knowledge between cultures, with an emphasis on the idea that practical traditions are the product of accumulated collective knowledge, resulting in a precise and effective product. The members of Kibbutz Eilon not only experienced an afternoon adventure defined as "art-making,"

but also imbibed the sophisticated knowledge of a neighboring culture, as well as gaining political insight concerning collaboration. The Mashhara itself, with its precise, carefully built structure, could serve as a model of conscious management, ultimately centered on controlling the heat of the fire and avoiding conflagration.

The Red Gallery, 1980

"The Red Gallery" – an installation and performance at the Kibbutz Art Gallery – opened with a dramatic performance: The entire gallery space was draped in a red cloth, while a table in the entry space bore a pile of books: Karl Marx's early writings, Capital, and the writings of Engels. On the opening night, Chefetz and another collaborator read excerpts from the books in a monotonous voice while removing their clothes. The act of undressing embodied the liberation from the ideological yolk of classical Marxism. The icons of Marxist ideology, the underlying tenets of the 20th century's greatest revolutionary ideology, were ceremoniously read while simultaneously being crossed off the agenda. Did the artists remain naked not only physically, but also spiritually? Were they indeed divested of everything? In a well-known photograph

of this event, Chefetz is seen bowing his head over the red table, against the backdrop of the red space. The melancholic artist appears subjected by the authoritative pile of books, while the red expanse resembles an all-consuming fire in a destroyed, scorched world.

This exhibition and event were held as part of a series of actions initiated by the group HaMeshutaf Kibbutz (literally meaning "common denominator: kibbutz"), of which Chefetz was a member. They gave expression to the great crisis of faith concerning Marxist-communist ideology and the hope for a proletarian uprising against the ruling bourgeois class. Chefetz was still a loyal kibbutz member, yet was being consumed by doubts. He consistently interviewed the older members of his kibbutz, which was affiliated with Hashomer Hatzair – leaders, educators, teachers and writers. These figures – all pillars of the kibbutz idea and its greatest supporters, as well as close friends engaged in dialogue, gave expression to an encroaching sense of disappointment, as the red flag – designed to awaken hope – was transformed into a reddened space.

**"Path,"
the Tel Hai Events
for Environmental Art,
1980**

Within the framework of the Tel Hai Events for Environmental Art, curated by Amnon Barzel in the Upper Galilee, in the north of Israel, Chefetz chose to perform a live action pervaded by a pioneering spirit: accompanied by a group of adolescents and students, all dressed in blue work clothes and high work shoes and armed with pickaxes and spades, they set out to quarry a new path into the mountainside. Following in the footsteps of the pioneers of the First and Second Aliyahs, who shattered rocks to pave the road from Tiberias to Tzemach in the 1920s, Chefetz and his students marched in a long line, physically attending to the terrain. They removed stones, marked the outline of the path, and then paved it, transforming it into an inviting pedestrian trajectory. By means of this action, Chefetz conjured up the value of labor, which was central to the ideology of the early pioneers. In this spirit, he underscored the importance of manual labor that was supported by tools, yet not replaced by heavy machinery. Wrestling with the hard rocks, dust, sweat and dirt was part of the effort

invested in this project, which was observed by visitors and represented an active, dynamic presence in the environment.

**After His Death
(Life of an Artist in the Kibbutz),
1999**

In 1999, following a prolonged period of deliberation and conflict, Yaacov Chefetz decided to leave the kibbutz, and moved with his family to the city of Haifa. The final departure of a person who was not born on the kibbutz but rather chose to join it based on belief and ideological identification, is no small matter, but an expression of a deep disappointment. "They do not want a kibbutz as the cell of a new society," the writer Yaacov Shabtai wrote bitterly to Meir Yaari, the leader of Hashomer Hatzair, after leaving kibbutz Merhavia, where he had lived for almost 12 years. "They want to be like Tel Aviv, but even more philistine, more stupid, more purposeless, and more concerned with luxuriating in pleasure. Nor do they want to hear the truth." With great sorrow and pain, Shabtai wrote in this letter about the place in which he had invested so much hope, and which he discovered to be empty and strange, especially due to "its betrayal

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of ideological, spiritual, and even emotional values."

The installation "After His Death (Life of an Artist in the Kibbutz)", which Chefetz exhibited at the Kibbutz Art Gallery in November 1999, was a painful emotional processing of the biographical event of leaving the kibbutz during the same year. This personal decision involved a train of ideological disappointment and a disillusionment with the social utopia suggested by the cooperative socialist vision in Israel. The total installation, which extended through the two gallery spaces, included visual images, iconic texts and metaphors of an enlightened utopia that failed. At the center of the gallery, Chefetz positioned an enlarged historical photograph from the life of Kibbutz Eilon: a fire that broke out in the kibbutz fields in the summer of 1938, and a group of kibbutz members trying to put it out with their bare hands, using sacks. The photograph underscores the fragility of existence in the early years of the kibbutz, the lack of means and the devotion of kibbutz members to the land and to their fields, to the point of endangering their lives as they face the rising flames. Is this a natural conflagration? A case of arson? There is no way of knowing, but the drama present in the image attests to a deep

belief and to the struggle to defend it at any price. Chefetz distanced the photograph to the back wall, placing before it a metal fence that blocked its strong presence and created a frontal plane before it. This fence functioned as a plane supporting ideological fortresses in the form of books attached to illuminated lightbulbs, which represented the enlightened, utopian spirit that was supposed to change humanity's destiny. The same volumes of Marxist-socialist ideology which Chefetz had read from in "The Red Gallery" 20 years earlier were now scattered on the fence and on the floor, in front of the blazing fire

Books – containers for texts charged with a revolutionary, futuristic pathos – were piled up to form a column in the second gallery space, creating a sort of ideological totem suspended in midair and coming to a dead end at the ceiling. The text of a dramatic letter about the spirit of youth, which was filled with near-fascist pathos, was laid out alongside the books, completing the ideological circle of heroic promise, whose resounding drumbeat was replaced by frustration. A painting by an anonymous kibbutz artist named Mutzik Yoeli, who had painted the Eilon guard's tower, alluded to the historical moment of the kibbutz's establishment close to

the Lebanese border – another moment of hope ending in disillusionment.

Nevertheless, it is important to state that Chefetz's elegy is that of a lover. He mourns the death of his personal and ideological home, a place which he had deeply desired to be his own yet was finally constrained to abandon: "I leave with a sense of failure," he said. "Not as an artist, but as a man who tried to wed art to society and create dialectic relations between them." The artist's principled refusal to accept the existing reality, with its flaws and shortcomings, as formulated in the writings of Adorno and Marcuse, also points to the need for repair. Just as neo-Marxist undertook to revise Marxism and adapt it to contemporary reality, without abandoning its foundational principle of a just society, Chefetz returns again and again to the basic materials of Marxism: the red flag, the emblematic symbol, the textual–conceptual dimension, and the ideal of an egalitarian society that still stands, somewhere on the visible horizon, awaiting its ever-receding redemption.