The Wound by Deganit

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In a 1993 interview for the Israeli magazine *Olam Ha'Isha* ("Woman's World") Deganit Berest says: "My painting was never expressive. I tried to create painting that does not put the "self" in the center, but rather looks toward the outside – at the world, at nature; the world through cultural apparatuses. I perceive this as an attempt to paint a picture of the world, a view of the world in the most literal sense. And I myself am not the world; I am merely an observer."

A wonderfully simple picture of the world emerges from the above quote: Out there is a world, nature, and a tiny little self observing it; not simply observing it, we are told incidentally, but rather through cultural apparatuses. Either this tiny little "self" is big enough to develop cultural apparatuses, or it remains tiny, and the culture created by other, more pretentious "selves" alights on it as if it were yet another natural element. Looking at the paintings in the catalogue accompanying Berest's 1989 exhibition at the Israel Museum, I can tell she is well-aware that the cultural apparatuses have changed the picture of the world. I cannot tell, however, whether she is more fascinated with nature or with the cultural apparatuses. (It seems that for Berest, culture in general, and science in particular, is a type of sublime too). Well, there is culture, but there is no "self". According to Deganit, consciousness is turned outward, and it is not distinguished by the ability to introspect.

I can tell that Deganit's need to kick the knight of the "self" out of the game derives from its becoming the virtually exclusive subject of modernism. The world and all its furnishings have been inextricably enwrapped and entangled within the webs of the "self". Any attempt to break free only generates another ring of webs. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote: "within matter – that shapeless infinity – there seems to be some deep-seated need to turn back on itself in order to know itself. To shed light on its obscure infinity, matter seems to produce those shreds of fire, those tatters of thought, called man."1
Is there a better way than this to describe Deganit's dozens of bather paintings, where matter is encapsulated, time and again, in the shape of a human body?

Modernism introduced two different, even contradictory, types of "self" that share a single body in a shimmering mode of existence reminiscent of the optical illusion in *The Circle by Virginia* [fig. 1]: You perceive either the white sun (or full moon), or the two black crescents.
One is the "self" of psychology, which is constructed as a receptacle, and separated from all other things by the boundaries of the body. And lo and behold, surprisingly it is

precisely this closed-in “self” that contains the “unconscious” – an element within the “self” which is an “other” (According to Jung, the bulk of that hidden inner treasure, is shared by all). In this case, the term “consciousness” relates to the capacity to know the latent contents of the unconscious.
The second “self”, which may be dubbed the “philosophical”, is the negating mechanism of self-consciousness, which looks inward and sees an infinite self-doubling that generates a void. To quote Sartre: “He sees the world *through* a sort of windowpane and then again, his reflexive consciousness thinks it can *see* the reflected consciousness which is doing the seeing. Thus [perhaps like Deganit], by taking refuge within reflexive consciousness […] we succeed in saying that it is not we who are seeing the world shimmering out there.”2 Unlike the psychological “self”, the reflexive “self” knows itself through and through, only there is nothing to know; the internal and external have devoured one another without leaving a trace. If the former “self” is represented by a receptacle, a container, then the latter, namely self-consciousness, may be represented by a fan, as in *Berthe Morisot with a Fan* by Manet (who was a friend of Mallarmé with whom the above-quoted book by Sartre deals, and who wrote at least three poems about fans), in which the fan is located where the face ought to be [fig. 2].

A text I wrote in one of my paintings (1984) takes *ad absurdum* Mallarmé’s point of view as described by Sartre. It ends as follows: “It still remains to discuss: whether the wound provides Man with a concept of the world, or whether there is some middle-man who absorbs the blow for him, while he is being nullified. Out of embarrassment, out of transparency, he assumes vulnerability, love, preference, will, while in actuality, stands in the background, indifferent, the “mechanic” of self and circumstance.” It seems to me that an “indifferent mechanic” is an apt name for the persona introduced in Deganit’s *oeuvre* spanning some twenty five years, and to the “middle-man” I will get back later.

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In 1997, following a personal crisis in a love relationship, which, according to Deganit, was the strongest emotional experience she had ever faced in her life, she turned to her private photograph archive (to the past), containing personal as well as artistic materials, and created photographs consisting of several negatives projected one on top of the other. In the work process she imposed several home-made rules upon herself: 1. Each work will include frames belonging to a single film, namely ones exhibiting temporal affinity. 2. Each work will contain no more than six layers. 3. The black-and-white negatives will be printed in a color photo-enlarger, so that each frame will acquire a different hue, and as in print, the hues will be superimposed in transparent layers.

During the work process Berest came across the following lines from Freud's lecture "The Dream-Work," discussing the notion of "condensation": "You will have no difficulty in recalling instances from your own dreams of different people being condensed into a single one. A composite figure of this kind may look like A perhaps, but may be dressed like B, may do something that we remember C doing, and at the same time we may know that he is D. This composite structure is of course emphasizing something that the four people have in common. It is possible, naturally, to make a composite structure out of things or places in the same way as out of people, provided that the various things and places have in common something which is emphasized by the latent dream. The process is like constructing a new and transitory concept which has this common element as its nucleus. The outcome of this superimposing of the separate elements that have been condensed together is as a rule a blurred and vague image, like what happens if you take several photographs on the same plate."3 Under the guise of a logical syllogism (if a dream is comparable to several photographs you take on the same plate, then photographs projected one on top of the other are a dream), the photographs were baptized under the name *Dreams*, and the task of their interpretation, or in Freudian terminology, exposing their latent content (for reasons which may be elucidated later), was assigned to me.

In a conversation, Berest explains that her initial intent was to project multiple frames on the same paper until it blackened, so as to generate a "container of blackening light" (which contains the past). Ultimately, however, she decided to "salvage" the images, and restricted herself, as aforesaid, to a limited number of layers. Furthermore, she says she perceives painting as male, and photography – as female (She describes the camera as being penetrated by light); that throughout her artistic career she never thought her mission was to invent, but rather to unveil. Like John Cage, she believes that "the function of Art is to imitate Nature in her manner of operation,"4 thus preserving an affinity to art's traditional mimicry enterprise, with a slight shift. Over and over again she stresses the importance of the procedure, which is, perhaps, another facet of the absence of a "self"; however, as it is well known, it is not God setting the rules here, and the very need for them may well be a trace of yearning to fall back on him. Even though she clings to the procedure, denying an inner essence, she says she expects someone to write about the emotions. She strives to abide by the rules, to stick to the framework, hoping that the content, the core, will surface and rise by itself.

The photograph archive is at hand, and in the process of printing the images drop onto the paper, which passively absorbs them. However, Deganit never takes the easy way. She talks about a passive stand, yet this stand (perhaps like women's labor from time immemorial) must involve hard work. Thus, adjusting the images, whether they conceal

or reflect one another, involves numerous shifts and effacements, so as to attain fine-tuning. Thorough and diligent as she is, she produces prints of varying sizes, and since the final product has no negative, the re-printing act requires accurate sketches and maps depicting the exact relations of the frames to one another.

Some of the photographs feature a key image, while others, those exploiting the method fully, exhibit total chaos – portraits, body parts, objects, and works of art are bound together with no apparent order. The majority of photographs portray figures of women, I am even tempted to say "girls", for there is something boyish, youthful about the portraits as well as the bodily images. These are the artist herself, her friends, and her former intimate partners. The first thing that strikes me is a sense of a sheer girlish joy, a perfect juvenile bliss in the faces turned toward one another. This bliss renders them all alike, reflected in each other's eyes, unaware. The "self" is the "other."

According to Freud, in the dream "a manifest element may correspond simultaneously to several latent ones, and, contrariwise, a latent element may play a part in several manifest ones."5 Similarly, several figures in the photographs merge into a single figure, whereas in other photographs, a single figure splits into several. Elsewhere Freud maintains that "dreams are completely egotistic and… the person who plays the chief part in their scenes is always to be recognized as the dreamer."6 In this sense, there are no fixed roles – Deganit's ex-girlfriend who left her, the one who mistreated her, is the one lying diagonally on a hotel bed, in a helpless position, with arms spread out like a crucifix, embodying suffering [*Dream # 8*]. Her figure is projected several times, from slightly different frames, one on top of the other, perhaps in a reversal of the Christian tradition (the crucifixion is also inverted in the photograph) as it appears, for example, in Rogier van der Weyden's painting, *The Descent from the Cross* (*The Deposition*) [fig. 3]. There, Christ is surrounded by four women, whereas here, the suffering from the margins, that of the women, was brought to the center, albeit that center has become flattened and incorporeal due to the act of re-projecting; the more you project, the more absent the figure is, generating a void in its place. All four women in van der Weyden's painting (who are, most likely, different embodiments of a single entity) are named Mary: The Virgin Mary, mother of Christ; Mary Magdalene; Mary Cleophas, her companion; and Mary Salome, who doubted mother Mary's virgin birth, and setting out to see for herself, her hand withered and dropped off, thence she gained her faith.

Several photographs of nascent female nudity [*Dream # 32*] touch explicitly upon the New Testament repertoire, when the index finger of one of the characters is pointed at a wound-like mark, reminiscent of Doubting Thomas' finger. The wound is pale white, and it hovers over the faces of the interwoven figures, transcending the body's boundaries.

The wound is called into question and a refusal to ascribe it to the body is conspicuous. Christ and Doubting Thomas were bound together here, and a wing-like growth protruding from one of the shoulders suggests another figure, that of an angel, possibly the one that helps carry the instruments of the Passion, as in Moretto's painting [fig. 4].

Amidst the innocence, softness, refinement and freshness (qualities commonly associated with the virginal) typifying the female figures depicted in the photographs, there is one exception. It is my own figure appearing thrice in one of the works [*Dream # 18*]; a figure that has been clearly touched by the hand of time, and the only one wearing a dress. The dress is modest, densely buttoned. One of the buttons merges with the eyeball; you may button the eye, see yet see-not, see inward and outward. It is a woman who can pull the eye out of its socket with her bare hand, consciously. If one may ascribe virginity to her, it is only in the sense of "spinster". "Spinning" denotes both weaving and unfolding a story – acts associated with the concept of time. Indeed, my watch is the most illuminated area in the entire photograph. The bulk of the photograph is covered with the dress' vegetal pattern – entwined leaves and flowers – and in that it is reminiscent of the photograph of the artist's late parents (and her ex-husband), where foliage gnaws upon their faces, as though exposing their skulls [*Dream # 17*]. The Tree of Knowledge that rendered Man conscious of his nakedness, also bequeathed him with the notion of time, and with it – the awareness of death. One of the doubles holds two glasses close to her chest, as a metonymy for breasts. In alchemy, the expression "virgin's milk" symbolizes the "life-giving power of the unconscious."7 Well, I was assigned to spin the story, to bring it from the darkness of the unconscious out into the open. Two plates also "hover" in the photograph. According to the Even-Shoshan Dictionary, the Hebrew word for "plate" (*tsalaxhat*) denotes, *inter alia*, a "pocket," as in the Biblical verse "The sluggard buries his hand in the *dish*" (Proverbs 19:24); and I, "burying my hand in the dish", am supposed to delve into that which is hidden.

Also floating in the same photograph are obscure details from a 1991 painting of mine entitled *The White and the Black*. In my painting, a photograph of a young girl sleeping within a circle is glued alongside images of a full moon and a crescent comprised of photographs of a pharmacist and a pharmacy, set against a black background – whether skies or sea [fig. 5]. The text inscribed in the painting tells about a white moon and a black moon, as well as about alternating states of understanding and misunderstanding. Black moons, as aforementioned, appear in the work most identified with Deganit Berest, *The Circle by Virginia* [fig. 1], where "Virginia" may also be read as "Virgin".

What I am trying to say is, that hidden alongside (or behind) the "indifferent mechanic", or the "investigator", who is the explicit content of Berest's work, is another figure, that

surfaces in the *Dreams*, namely – the "virgin". And perhaps an invisible battle is taking place or a hidden drama between the active "investigator", the painter, who wishes to turn on the light, and the sleeping "virgin" who cloaks herself in darkness. In her 1989 painting, *The Swimmer*, the figure turns an oar formed by circles of light toward a boat (a quintessential symbol of the female genitalia) whose side-wall is made of black circles [fig. 6]. The photographic technique is the "virgin's" ploy for confronting the "investigator": In the process of printing, which is exclusive to these works, the more light is shed, the darker the photographs grow.

In the *Dreams* series, the investigator is represented most distinctly in the photograph where the image of the artist's ex-husband appears several times [*Dream # 1*]. The photograph portrays a man standing at the edge of the frame, looking at his own image located at the center, which is comprised of several doubles projected one atop the other. His hands, in-between which a light bulb rolls, are stretched forward, penetrating the dark body of the other, blurred multi-layered figure, so that the bulb occupies the heart's place. This Thomas Alva Edison counterpart, inquisitively surveying the light bulb, finds it concealed and extinguished in the darkness of the body, and his own hands holding it appear to have been amputated. The attempt to look at the light bulb, to explore an object, has failed; the "self" has overshadowed the picture. But it is precisely in the darkness that the outstretched hands, delicate like the artist's hands, have grown wings to the bulb. Hanging on the wall behind the figures is an earlier work by Berest, *Twists of the Jordan River* [fig. 7], where she constructed the river's course out of wood. The scene of Jesus' baptizing by John inevitably springs to mind, where the latter tells the Pharisees and Sadducees: "…he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Matthew 3: 11), and after the baptism, Jesus sees "the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him" (Matthew 3: 16). The figure occupying the center here, like other figures in the photographs, is constructed like a fan – several prints of the same figure superimposed, each slightly shifted being extracted from a different frame – and in this respect, it is associated with self-consciousness. On the other hand, the act of re-printing darkens the figure, thus alluding to the artist's original intention to create a "container of blackening light" akin to the "unconscious". The Cyclopean eye directing a gaze at the viewer, lights up on the dark figure's forehead concluding a process replete with metamorphoses, that originated in the innocent inquisitive gaze.

A single eye also appears in the photograph where the key image is the faces of the artist and her ex-girlfriend, turned toward one another, smiling blissfully, as if consumed by each other [*Dream # 10*]. The center of the photograph is filled with their intermingled hair. Due to the reprinting technique, the faces are mutilated, and in the stead of Deganit's nose appears a pleat-like depression. This, however, does not interfere with

the sense of bliss, and as happens in dreams, the images open up to unexpected meanings. Thus, for example, Freud maintains that "'there's something missing' [the nose in our case] described the principal feature of the female genitalia."8 As opposed to the scene of bliss, the wide open eye in the upper right-hand corner of the photograph is directed at the viewer with horror. It is an eye that has just woken up, that all of a sudden sees something, perhaps the possibility of being watched, which makes it conscious of itself (the upper right-hand corner repeatedly functions as the locus of consciousness in other photographs too, as we shall see). The distancing from the present generates awareness of the temporal dimension, which may account for the three deep wrinkles across the forehead, also rendered by pleats. It seems to me that the "virgin" image is linked to the quest for eternal youth, possibly the hidden wish expressed in *Dreams*.

Freud writes: "The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. 'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity…"9 Freud repeats this idea at the beginning of his lecture on "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," where he analyzes an essay in linguistics exploring a common phenomenon in ancient languages, of words that are their own opposites. Freud compares this tendency to the dream-work. Thus, it is not surprising that these photographs, where everything penetrates everything, where penetration is the underlying visual principle, are distinctly oriented toward the notion of "virginity".

In the photograph discussed above, the strap of an undershirt crosses the smiling partner's cheek. The very same undershirt appears intact and illuminated by an ellipse of light (another plate) in another photograph [*Dream # 9*], highlighting the absence of secondary gender indications. Laid on the plate, albeit seemingly suspended from the strap, is a pair of cherries. According to the Random House College Dictionary, one of the denotations of "cherry" is "the state of virginity." The girl-woman with the undershirt touches upon a man whose figure appears twice successively, evolving into a figure with an obscure sexual identity, who eventually touches upon a bespectacled boy looking at the camera. The structure of the photograph calls to mind the children's game "Broken Telephone" (or "Chinese Whispers"), the title of Berest's 1997 exhibition at Julie M. Gallery, where the kisses may be interpreted as whispers in the ear. There is a spectrum of figures that seem to be conveying something to one another, but the center of the photograph is occupied by a cross-like chair back where the man's smile is distortedly reflected. The man is the middle-man through whom the virgin pushes the cross away from herself, while the bespectacled boy appearing on both ends of the spectrum, looking at the viewer, is a bud of new awareness. Next to the boy, at the

corner of the photograph, is a flower pot with heart-shaped leaves. The spectacles of the boy, another figure of whom at the upper right hand corner dominates the entire photograph, are juxtaposed to the layers of various sunglasses the virgin puts on in other photographs. The sunglasses are tantamount to the layers of color covering the photographs, masking them. It is the virgin who refuses to see and show. However, in this photograph, which I regard as central to the series, the oval of light is pointed at her; she is prepared to illuminate the blackening container, and perhaps it is the very fact of its existence that she whispers in the man's ear, making him laugh.

The boy's figure, combining the eye and the heart, takes me back to the other end of the generational spectrum, to the spinster, the storyteller. At the beginning of this essay, when discussing the photograph embedding my own figure [*Dream # 18*], I left out a conspicuous image in the upper right hand corner – that of the ventilator, the electric fan, which compensates for the head cut off by the frame of the figure on the left hand side. I would like to once again quote an excerpt from the text appearing in my aforementioned 1984 piece (Jung suggested that sometimes in order to perform an analysis, one must also analyze one's neighbors,10 all the more so when one's neighbor appears in the dream): ",,, They'd say that 'words are but a means to say it, and that which is existent is solid and sealed, that words were matched to feelings, to facts, and even if those picked were not the most accurate ones, the truth still remains.' And those who had not seen? And those who had not felt? And those who learned about the world from language? It still remains to discuss: whether the wound provides Man with a concept of the world, or whether there is some middle-man who absorbs the blow for him…". In so far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the wound is the truth, and this truth is concealed in a black container deep inside the body.

Berest attests that the photographs were created against the backdrop of the crisis, but in practice she still clings to the procedure. She expects the procedure to create apt conditions to refer to the wound. The wound cannot be approached directly. It calls for some ritual of encircling, going around it. However, for modern man, the reality of the wound is doubted as long as it has no expression in language, for according to Mallarmé "there is no reality left; it has evaporated into writing,"11 or as Sartre says at the beginning of the book: Upon learning that God is dead, "Nature had become nothing more than an infinite dance of dust particles".12 Language, like the ventilator, revolves in its own circle around a flickering core whose identity is unclear. Deganit's intent to posit container-like photographs allowed, through a psychoanalytic analysis, acquaintance with the "virgin" who hides herself in the dark. However, in Mallarmé's *oeuvre*, the virgin is the one whose face is a fan and whose features are purity, absence, sterility, and whiteness. The "virgin" bequeathed by religion has come to

occupy the empty center, and the white circle created by two black crescents may serve as her sign.

Sartre writes: “Mallarmé’s first move was to recoil in disgust and reject all forms of life in a blanket condemnation. But […] he suddenly realizes that universal negation amounts to an absence of negation. Negation is an action. And every action must be inserted within a time frame and act on a particular content. The negation of *everything* cannot be considered a destructive activity; it is simply the representation of the idea of negation in general.”13 Had Deganit realized her initial intent to project multiple images until the paper blackened, namely, until there were no more images, then the black square could not have provided an abode for the virgin. It would have become a manifestation of a self-exhausting logical reflection; to wit: it would have become, in fact, an illuminated blackness. Alternately revealed and concealed, the “virgin” allows for an infinite sequence of lights-out.

Based on Sartre’s assertions, I would like to distinguish between the two types of negation in modern art associated with two types of consciousness. When Formalism alludes to “awareness of the act of painting,” it refers to the flatness of the surface, which is a metaphor for the flatness of the world and the flatness of the soul. By restricting itself to the painting’s physicality, it generates a global negation, which is, in fact, an affirmation of the self-consciousness whose independent air fills the entire universe. Surrealism, on the other hand, relying on psychoanalysis, refers to particular contents, which, through an elaborate process of rendering conscious and comprehensive, recurrently produce the depth of the void.

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé or the Poet of Nothingness*, Trans. Ernest Sturm, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, p. 136.
2. Ibid., p. 107.
3. Sigmund Freud, “Lecture XI: The Dream-Work” in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916-1917 [1915-1916]), Trans. James Strachey, Vol. I, The Penguin Freud Library, 1974, p. 206.
4. John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 1980, p. 31.
5. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, p. 207.
6. Sigmund Freud, “A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams*”* (1917), in *On Metapsychology*, Trans. James Strachey, The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. XI, 1984, p. 230.
7. Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge, London, 1953, p. 409.
8. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 446

9. Ibid., p. 429.

10. Jung, *Dream-Analysis*, Part 1, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 135.

11. Sartre, *Mallarmé or the Poet of Nothingness*, p. 140.

12. Ibid., p. 19.

13. Ibid., p. 131.

Fig. 4

Moretto, *Christ with the Instruments of the Passion*, 16th century