

REPETITIVE
MOTIFS IN RITUAL
OBJECTS AND IN
CONTEMPORARY ART



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Repetitive Motifs in Ritual Objects and in Contemporary Art

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On the Idea of "Repetition": Jewish Ritual Objects Encounter Contemporary Art

"Repeating is the whole of living and by repeating comes understanding."

(Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 1925)

Art has engaged with the idea of "repetition" throughout its history. Artists of all periods often chose to create series, reproductions, and copies of their works. Philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, writing in the first half of the twentieth

century, was the first to express theoretical interest in the status of the reproduced work, as opposed to the single work that is deemed "original." Ever since then, the subject of originality versus reproduction has figured prominently in contemporary artistic discourse.

In 1968, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze published his famous work *Difference and Repetition*. The principles formulated in it became the basis of an artistic discourse addressing the issues of representation, language, history, and capitalism. Deleuze asserts that "repetition" in artistic practice was always considered negatively; it was only the work's unique qualities that endowed it with vitality. He discusses the importance of understanding the concept of "difference" between one work and another, and proposes seeing "repetition" as re-invention, "an active force that creates difference."¹

These ideas are examined in the present exhibition through historical and contemporary artworks. The Mané-Katz Museum Judaica collection includes, among other things, Hanukkah lamps, Torah finials, Torah pointers, spice towers, Shiviti and Mizrah plaques, Kiddush cups, and more. The collection contains hundreds of replicated items, with dozens of exemplars of each ritual object. Yet a deeper

examination of these objects reveals essential differences between the replicas. These differences form the basis of a study investigating the social and political conditions in which

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 70.

the various ritual objects were created, the historical characteristics of the culture that enabled their production, and the degree of individual expression of the artists who created them.

The exhibition shows items from the museum's Judaica collection alongside works by contemporary artists who address the ideas of repetition and difference. These artworks focus our attention on the small details – the nuances expressing criticism of the world of mass production, consumption, and advertising. They seek to soar above the monotony of everyday existence, urging us to take another, different look at our own being.

The works of Yanai Segal, Lilach Bar-Ami, Lihi Turjeman, Maya Attoun, and Gal Weinstein question the significance of the artist's unique touch in the creative process. They illuminate the boundaries of the physical effort involved in artistic creation, which is naturally limited by the vulnerability of the artist's body and the transience of the work's physical and spiritual existence. The root message these works seek to convey is the principle of cyclical, unending destruction and rebirth, as part of artistic and existential creativity. According to art scholar Gideon Ofrat, "A creative life based on this principle display a repeated pattern of destruction and rebirth, destruction and creation, in a cycle that only ends in death."²

Creative principles based on images of destruction also appear in the work of Gil Yefman, who addresses the dismantling and reconstruction, in a repetitive pattern, of charged historical contexts involving the horrors of World War II. In addition, Yefman creates complex repetitive elements in a labor-intensive environment by using knitting practices.

The works by Michal Raz, Judith Weinshall Liberman, Hanan Shlonsky and Allan McCollum challenge the standardization of our society through the mechanisms of political regimes and the consumer culture. Their works examine serial production as the terminal condition of late consumer capitalism. Economist Jacques Attali emphasized that no society can exist without constructing a space intended for diversity and the subtypes that

2. Gideon Ofrat, "Eternal Return – A Nightmare or an Escape?", from: *The Warehouse of Gideon Ofrat*, 2014, <https://gideonofrat.wordpress.com/> (Heb.).

create differences between the individuals constituting it. In his words, "No organized society can exist without structuring differences at its core." Yet he also states, on the contrary, that "no market economy can develop without erasing those differences in mass production."³ The main contradiction in developed societies involves the never-ending search for these lost differences, under the guise of a logic that, by its very nature, denies any difference whatsoever.

As remarked by theorist Jean Baudrillard, no object sold on the market today appears as one-of-a-kind, but rather is always created as part of a series of objects with marginal differences between them. These differences are meant to create for the consumer an illusion of choice. The covert intention of mass production is thus to control the nature of difference itself.⁴ Allan McCollum's installation illustrates the nature of a culture in which difference "is artificially recreated through the proliferation of quasi-identical objects."⁵ His work emphasizes the disappearance of creative potential in a world saturated with images. The installation is made of framed pictures that become meaningless – the place in which the image is supposed to appear remains empty.

Repetition in art may be related to biological patterns, and often attains new power and content when informed by a scientific context. Various artists tend to examine natural processes through repetitive arrangements. Repetition is a necessary step in proving scientific hypotheses. Recurring shapes in the natural world have historically been a source of inspiration for many works of art. **The installation created by Keren Anavy and Tal Frank** is informed by the scientific field of crystallography – the study of the structural organization of atoms and molecules in crystals. The images created,

which undergo transformations and deformations, recall their precedents to some degree. They are represented, formally and conceptually, in universal contexts that draw a connection between nature and culture.

Finally, the exhibition includes works by Jenifer Bar Lev, Benni Efrat, Michal Na'aman, and Moshe Kupferman, who use the grid as a

3. Fredric Jameson, "Introduction to Jacques Attali", in: *The Political Economy of Music*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 17.

4. For an in-depth discussion see: Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects: Radical Thinkers*, trans. by James Benedict, London: Verso, 2006.

5. Fredric Jameson, *ibid.*

a source of repetitive units. The grid structure, in its various material manifestations, resurfaces in these works, bringing to the fore the principles of twentieth-century Modernism and Minimalism – principles that shifted artistic practice towards abstraction. They generated an artistic idiom based on an aspiration to objectivity, on neutral anonymity, on the lack of narrative, and on the ongoing marginalization of expressive or decorative elements. Many works from the minimalist period in Western art were based on “pure” geometric shapes or on recurring grid patterns, not just as a structural basis but as an element that expresses, in the clearest and most concise way, the essence of the representational and utopian relation between nature and culture.

The act of embedding a text in the grid of a painting, in works by Bar Lev and Na’aman, echoes the words of Roland Barthes, who emphasized the etymological origins of the word “text,” originally meaning a weave or woven cloth (a textile). The idea of the text, contends Barthes, implies the warp and woof, the work of weaving a yarn next to another yarn and the totality of connections between the yarns.⁶ The contemporary artist or writer does not “create” an original “textile,” but rather weaves a text by using the “yarns” of whatever has already been created or written. In the words of Ilana Elkad-Lehman and Hava Greensfeld, “He weaves human culture, already woven in the past, into a textile that seems new, though its yarns are familiar.”⁷

6. Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text”, in: J.V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 73-88 (76).

7. Ilana Elkad-Lehman and Hava Greensfeld, “Intertextuality as an Interpretive Method in Qualitative Research,” *Dapim* 46 (2008), p. 122 (Heb.).

✦ Participating artists ▶

Maya Attoun
Benni Efrat
Andi Arnovitz
Jenifer Bar Lev
Lilach Bar-Ami
Gal Weinstein
Judith Weinshall Liberman
Jan Tichy
Gil Yefman
Allan McCollum
Michal Na’aman
Yanai Segal
Keren Anavy
Ashraf Fawakhry
Tal Frank
Shaul Tzemach
Moshe Kupferman
Galya Rosenfeld
Michal Raz
Hanan Shlonsky
Lihi Turjeman

