Art and Subjecthood

TONI HILDEBRANDT WITH MENASHE KADISHMAN

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Toni Hildebrandt in conversation with Menashe Kadishman
Tel Aviv, 1-6 June 2012

T.H.: I think a good way to start talking about your work, the process of its making and your thinking as an artist would be to focus on one single image transfer from a found photograph to drawing and sculpture.

I am thinking about the photograph of a Dog eating a Dead Soldier in Sinai by Yasha Agor (fig. 3). It's a photograph from 1956. Years later it became important in your work.

M.K.: I did drawings of this photograph, to transfer the meaning of the image, but these were already images of memories from what I saw in my own lifetime (fig. 4). I made the drawings, which are now in the British Museum in London, in 1985, some sculptural works even later, but the photograph is actually from 1956. I was in the war in 1956 and I remember very strange images from that time. I remember being on an empty road on the way to the canal in Egypt, airplanes were shooting at the camion buses; many soldiers and officers were wounded and killed. When they were killed, they were sitting like marionettes. I remember, in particular there was this one dead soldier lying in the field and his penis was swollen like a hand, it was all blown up in the hot air of the desert and because the penis doesn't have a bone it started to move in the afternoon wind. When I saw this it was like a dog eating a steak.

Only later I saw this photograph you are talking about. I didn't take the photo, but it was the real place where I was. I know the photographer and journalist Yasha Agor, a wonderful friend, and when I told him about my memories in the 1970s he showed me this picture.

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T.H.: Please tell me more about how this image affected you in relation to your images from memory and the sketched images that evolved from it.

M.K.: I thought about those memories all the time. I saw a dog and the body covered, and suddenly the hand is taken out. The dog went and pulled the hand. When I saw the dog in the Sinai desert I was only 25 years old. I had an uncanny feeling when I later saw the photograph by Yasha Agor. You know, feelings change, but their definition remains, like a memory, or like a drawing. I made the drawing in free relation to the photograph. When I draw, I arrest my thought, to see what I think, because drawing is the wish to understand the form behind the form, the form behind the feelings and memories. I first drew a dog eating the body, then I drew a dog howling, like a lamentation, mourning along side the dead soldier (fig. 5).

T.H.: You express a sharp empathy without sentimentality in your work. Your statements and attitudes are always very clear, yet also evocative and touching, so that they require empathy from the beholder. In your earlier minimal and geometrical sculptures from the late 1950s and 60s it seems that this kind of emphatic expression was not of any importance.

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M.K.: I did my first studies as a sculptor with Moshe Sternschuss, but then in 1954 I met Rudi Lehmann. He came from Berlin to Israel and he had a master-attitude. In some way he worked like Ewald Mataré. He was thinking of the Middle East like an area, like a fluid culture – like there was the same cultural attitude from Assyria to Egypt. He was thinking in a way also of the attitude in Egyptian sculpture, which is very geometrical. If you look at the statues of one of the Pharaohs, it is like a circle, cylinder, triangular. Well, than a bit like Brancusi... In a few words this was his attitude to sculpture in general. But then the interesting point for me was, that the sensitivity came from the animals.

T.H.: Eugène Ionesco was probably the first to underline a special animal gaze in your paintings and sculptures.

M.K.: Yes, he said that the gaze was very «human». People like animals especially those they relate to, like the cat, sheep or donkey.

T.H.: This calls to mind first the way Lévinas' distinguishes between face and «visage», and then to David Grossman's The Smile of a Lamb *from 1982, a widely discussed book in Israel during the 1980s.*

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M.K.: These are complex issues, but let me first tell you something about the image of a donkey. The donkey was the only other person, I say «person», who saw Abraham, Isaac and the angel. So he knew a lot of things, but he is quiet, he doesn't talk. Nevertheless he asked himself why are they doing this to themselves? The donkey is like an ancient observer, a dogged survival and a peaceable companion (fig. 6, 7).

When I was young I was living in the kibbutz Yesreel where I was working as a shepherd. I liked very conceptually the «idea» of animals, not that I was directly influenced by Rudi Lehmann or Ewald Mataré to make animals like they did. I already made abstract sculptures in 1959, which I just called «Figures» (fig. 8), but I liked the attitude and the sensitivity a sculptor like Lehmann had for the animals, for the animals as an «idea».

T.H.: After your initial studies in Israel you went to London to continue studying under Anthony Caro at St. Martin's. Michael Fried, in one of his earlier essays on Anthony Caro, writes that «everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at is in its syntax.» And he puts his finger on another difference with traditional sculpture: «In Caro's sculptures, unlike Rodin's, the spectator is not made to feel that the artist has been closely and passionately involved with his materials.» [1]

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There might be a very important difference between the work of Anthony Caro and your work that I would like to question here. Fried underlines the importance of what he calls the «syntax» in Caro's work, but when someone experiences the spatial giving of Shalechet *at the Jewish Museum in Berlin (fig. 9), it becomes secondary, or at least questionable to think only about the formal grammar of that very installation.*

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M.K.: When Fried talks about composition, gravity, form, shape and size he talks academically. Composition-wise, if you make a sculpture like my Uprise from 1967 (fig. 10) with three circles, its shape of course makes it a self-contained piece. A circle doesn't care what people think about it, so you can talk about syntax, but if you make a sculpture that includes for example a human hand, that element can be disturbed, scared off; it can relate to a different meaning than the pure meaning of a compositional syntax. I have to say that I had a very different relation to Anthony Caro. First of all we are good friends. Second, we used to fight with each other.

T.H.: Ok, but these are personal issues, what about his work?

M.K. Well, in the beginning it was very much related to the work of David Smith, who was a very powerful personality. With Anthony Caro I had two basic arguments on sculpture: regarding tradition and abstraction. Caro was working as an assistant to Henry Moore in the 1950s; he was introduced to David Smith in the early 1960s and then he started to fight with Henry Moore. I remember he wrote an article in the London Times about Henry Moore and about how much he was *passé*... I didn't like that. I also didn't want to continue working with Caro, because I saw how systematically he destroyed the artists who worked with him. Not because he destroyed them, but you work amidst his work, and in a way you change your attitude, because you are involved with the work. Moore's ideas were classical, Greek, natural and fantastic unknown things.

Anthony Caro also used to work a little like Germaine Richier in the beginning. He made the *Cigarette smoker*, an *organic* work, but later when he met Smith he started to get involved with the shapes and forms, and maybe in a way even drawings. David Smith used to make a lot of shapes. What remained was the negative, and the negative was a solid shape; the sculptures were then more like drawings.

T.H. You are referring to the initial formal contours?

M.K.: Yes the intial contour, but the contour actually was not there because of the technique of the spray. The contour was not clear, and what was clear was only the line of the form; the surrounding.

I think for Caro it all developed out of drawing his work. For David Smith it was different from Anthony Caro. Smith was concerned with the relation of the sculpture to the subject, but Caro was more aesthetically concerned with form and shape. When Edward F. Frey wrote about Smith, Caro and me he related me more to Smith than to Caro and maybe it's true. [2] Maybe Caro is more «abstract» but my point is that sculpture cannot be completely abstract.

T.H.: Maybe we should here go back to the Kantian position on modernism by Clement Greenberg, who spoke about two constitutive conventions or norms in modernist painting: flatness and the delimitation of flatness. While Caro's sculpture, as Fried argued, did not draw attention to the objecthood of the material – while he respected the internal structure of sculpture – Smith would have at the same time allowed a more pictorial dimension in his sculptural works. I have the impression that what you call «attitude» exceeds the demand of any logical relation of the medium and its questionable pretension of a visual density; as if there is a critical sculptural imagination that goes beyond the self-criticism of structural abstractness in modernist art. After all, both Caro and Fried were maybe not concerned with how the attitude affects the shape, and I think this is very important in your case.

M.K.: I think Anthony Caro is a great artist, in the sense that he is a great manipulator of shapes and forms and parts. He is not an eclectic artist, but I don't know how much he changed the world of sculpture in general. Anthony Caro was Jewish. «Caro» was a great Rabbi, he was living in Tsefat, in the North of Israel. [3] He wrote a book, they call it «A set table», «The Prepared Table», or the «Well-Laid Table», about the way to live, about what you are allowed to do. It was not just theology, but about the living. What I want to say is that I always thought that Anthony Caro partially denied his Judaism.

T.H.: Your relation to Judaism, to the history and continuity of your society and culture certainly became very important, but in your earlier work you were strictly occupied with problems of high modernism, neo-constructivist abstraction and reduced geometrical figuration. So we are touching on both abstraction and its privation; an innovative sculptural impulse on the one hand and a critical perspective towards profanation of cultural ideas in our time.

M.K.: In the 1960s I did sculptures that somehow related to «minimalism». Let me tell you something about my *Broken Glasses* (fig. 11, 12).

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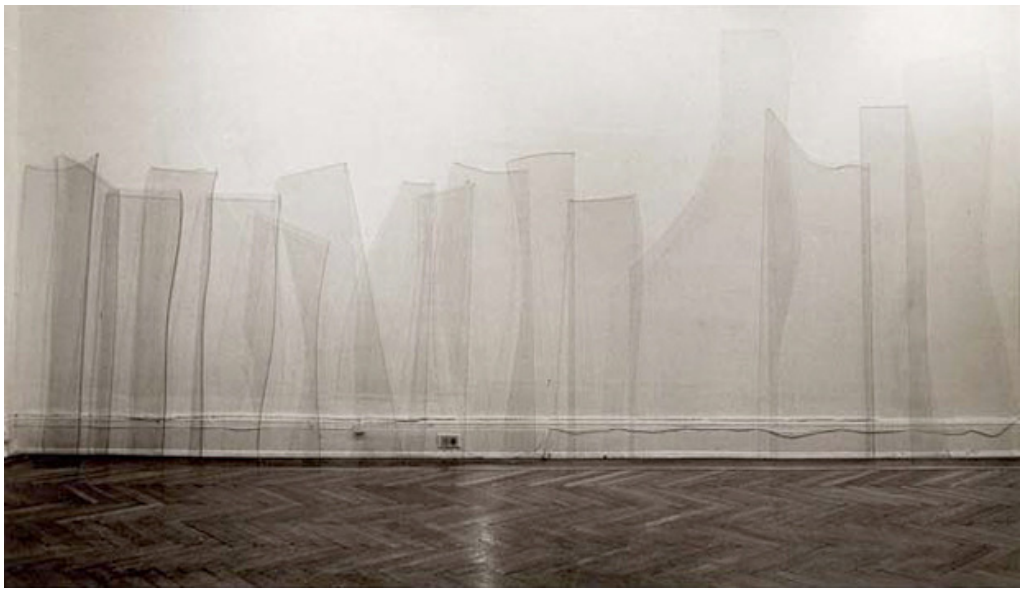

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Anthony Caro wanted to avoid material, to have no material at all. So you can paint sculpture and sculpture can still become a painting, but you cannot deny your knowledge of things and turn iron into pure colour. I have nearly an archaeological attitude in this regard. When I was young for example, I also used to make mosaics, affixing the tiny pieces together. Later when I had the exhibitions in Haus Krefeld this was again the point: how to make a sculpture where the material is still present (fig. 13).

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In 1968 I was invited to be the first Israeli artist at the documenta in Kassel. I met Rauschenberg and Christo; it was nice, but I realized it was not the main thing, but you have to go through it. Abstraction, Minimal Art, Expressionism, these are all gossip. Think of a simple candelabrum, a half-circle with lights. Let's say it's hanging upside down like a Readymade and you call that Minimal Art. Well, but how can we deny the meaning?

Let me tell you what I did with the notion of the upside-down. We all know the story of Abraham and Isaac. I made some drawings and a sculpture out of rough, raw, iron plates with a ram hanging on the wall; underneath is the head of a boy (fig. 14, 15, 16).

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I thought that every boy who died in the war was the figure of the ever-sacrificed son who didn't have a ram as a substitute. Isaac did when the angel said to Abraham «don't touch the boy» and they found a ram. As Amnon Barzel once wrote, the ever-sacrificed son symbolizes the non-appearance of the miracle, the non-involvement of God, and the continuation of the slaughter of the sons. The sacrifice of Isaac is not an abstract symbol for me. It is part and parcel of my own biography and that of my generation, and it may be the biography of my children after me. I consider the story of the sacrifice of Isaac neither as signifying a divine command nor as a decree of God.

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My father was in the Haganah and I was in the army too; I was Isaac and he was Abraham. Now I am Abraham and my son became Isaac.

My son didn't die, but I am talking about attitude, and you know, the attitude becomes form. The main thing, if you can think of it philosophically, is that nobody asks Isaac what he wants. I would say, nobody asks Isaac, but I would answer maybe, so at least hear him speak, because that's what Isaac wants. What is most frightening is that in every generation Isaac returns, and is again sacrificed. The ram will triumph over Isaac, the raven over innocence and the vulture over the fallen angel – each embodying the innocent Isaac.

If you look at my work *Shalechet* (fig. 17) you could also see heads falling down, it is a variation of this idea – Giuseppe Ungaretti once wrote in a poem, «fallen soldiers are like leaves in autumn.» [4] Arturo Schwarz gave me that poem.

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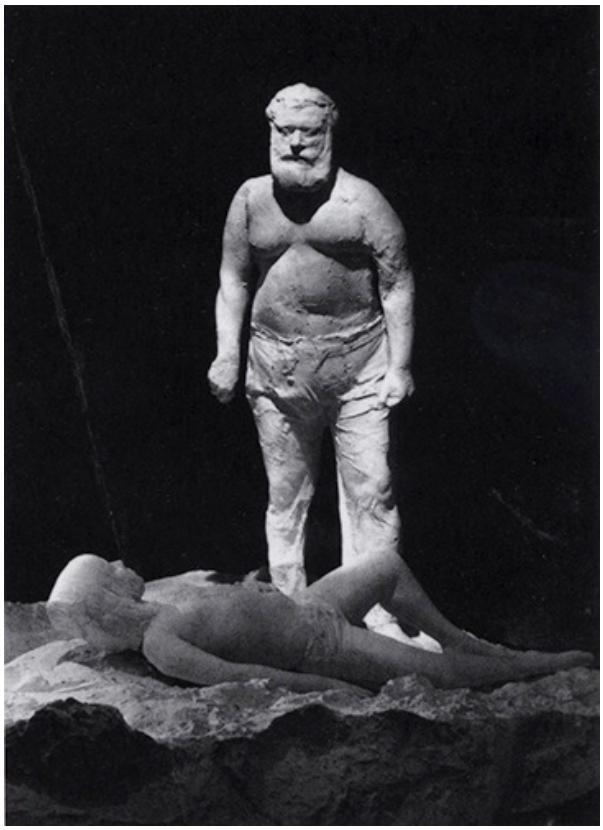
T.H.: Talking about your profane interpretation of the Sacrifice of Isaac reminds me of your dialogue with the American sculpture George Segal. You and your son Benjamin modelled for him in 1973, in fact as an Abraham-Isaac-group (fig. 18).



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M.K.: George Segal worked with an innovative casting technique, but in some way he also related more to the tradition of David Smith. When he came to Israel he had certain ideas of how Abraham should look. He was looking for a very skinny person, but everyone he asked was scared to be the model, so I said if you don't mind you can cast my 9-year-old son and me. When we went to Jaffa and I held the knife to my son, I remember that I really didn't like it. I wasn't scared superstitiously, but I felt in a way like someone who says «I don't like this kind of joke». I was really affected and it was a good experience for me too.

T.H.: We've talked about the narrative and metaphorical dimension of your work. I wonder how this relates to the material embodiment of the sculpture. The use of «material», of glass, wood, iron, and even living sheep was certainly very important for your work. In Shalechet *you were cutting faces, «visages» as Lévinas would have said, from hand (fig. 19). You used sheet iron, like in the monumental sculptures* Sacrifice of Isaac. *How would you describe the relation between the sculptural imagination and the way the material physically yields?*

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M.K.: I was never interested in any kind of material iconography. Necessity always made the relation. *Shalechet* is a very good proof of this approach. First my drawing on paper became a line cut in iron. The cutting line is sharp, and in touching my iron sculptures a caressing hand is liable to be grazed or even wounded. Nothing springs forth without pain.

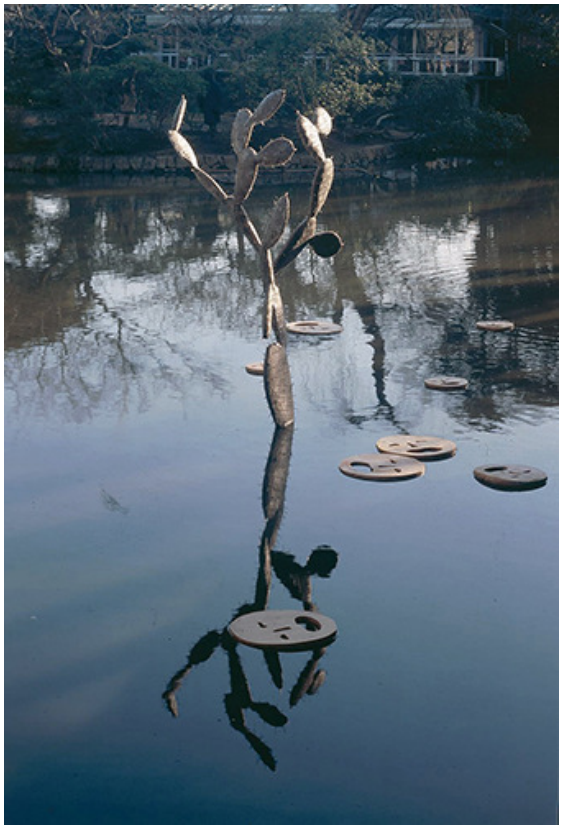
For the Jewish Museum in Berlin I translated Shalechet, the Hebrew one-word term for «fallen» or «dead leaves», to «Abblätterung». It's also the best translation for the material process, even if it is not communicable.

T.H.: Tell me more about that name.

M.K.: In the autumn all the leaves are falling. As Ungaretti wrote, «fallen soldiers are like leaves in autumn». But I never wanted to make a monument for the Jewish people. It could be for the First World War too, wherever people get killed. It could be for Hiroshima. We don't work for the past or the future, we talk about it, but you don't issue warnings. Art after all doesn't change existing situations like peace or marketing, business et cetera, but maybe art can alleviate a certain pain.

T.H.: So first of all, the context of your art is not specific, and second, your art is not compulsive. Your work reflects not on one single historical archive, but rather on the modern paradigm of sacrifice as such.

M.K.: I understand what you mean. If you take the sculpture that you have in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, people can say like this: «I can hear the train to the concentration camp when you walk on it, because the iron is hitting iron», However, when I had it exhibited with about 3000 pieces in Kamakura in Japan, in a very ancient Japanese city, it had a completely different contextual meaning (figs. 20, 21).



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I was there at the Museum of Modern Art with my friend, the artist Dani Karawan. We had a canal around the museum and I placed floating heads on the water. I carved them from wood. Inside of the museum there was a big window and I placed about 2000 heads wrought in iron on the floor, so you could see from those heads through the window to the wooden pieces. In the middle of the water Dani Karawan planted a cactus. Anyhow, in all my life I never did what they call «site-specific» art, because I wanted to realize an idea and not provide a place with mere decoration, however critical that might be, to a place. The idea leads to a work that takes on another shape, even another meaning when it is embedded in the specific situation of different places, with all their historicity of course.

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So as you said, *Shalechet* is a «paradigmatic» work. Any further translation is free, like the art itself should be free. The paradigmatic work has no defined place or space. I think an artist makes not one work in his life, but rather chapters.

Fussnoten

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Michael Fried, Anthony Caro, in: Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews, Chicago 1998, p. 273. This is the introduction to a catalog accompanying the exhibition Anthony Caro: Sculpture 1960-1963, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in September and October 1963; the catalog is unpaginated. The essay was also published in Art International 7 (Sept. 25, 1963), pp. 68-72.

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«In London during the late 1950s, Kadishman studied with Anthony Caro and subsequently became an internationally recognized minimalist and neo-constructivist sculptor. His works of that period are notable for their daring compositional tensions, frequent defiance of gravity and unusual combinations of materials, and also for the extraordinary range of imagery and expressive effect achieved through the permutations of a very few geometrical forms. What is also remarkable about these minimalist works is that they are almost always pictorial and have more in common with the sculpture of David Smith than with Caro himself.» Edward F. Fry, Kadishman, Myth, and Modernity (1987), in: Menashe Kadishman, ed. Jacob Baal-Teshuva, Munich 2007, p. 88.

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Joseph ben Ephraim Karo, also spelled Yosef Caro, or Qaro (1488-1575) was the author of the last great codification of Jewish law, the Bet Yosef («House of Joseph»). Its condensation, the Shulchan arukh, «The Prepared Table», or the «Well-Laid Table», is still authoritative for Orthodox Judaism.

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Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie, ed. Leone Piccioni, Milan 1970, p. 87.

Abbildungen

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Stanley I. Batkin, Portrait of Menashe Kadishman, 1979, Information Center for Israeli Art at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. (All images reproduced with kind permission of the artist © Menashe Kadishman.)

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Menashe Kadishman, Sculpture, 2001, corten steel, h. 100 cm. Family Plazza, Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, Jerusalem, gift of Ruth and Felix Zandman.

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Yasha Agor, Dog Eating a Dead Soldier in Sinai, 1956, photograph.

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Menashe Kadishman, Dog Eating a Dead Soldier, 1985, pencil on paper, British Museum, London.

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Menashe Kadishman, Dog Eating a Dead Soldier, 1985, pencil on paper, British Museum, London.

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Menashe Kadishman, Donkeys, 1983, temporary installation.

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Menashe Kadishman, Donkeys, 1983, temporary installation.

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Menashe Kadishman, Altar, 1961, bronze, h. 24 cm. Galia and Chaim Topol Collection, Tel Aviv.

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Menashe Kadishman, Shalechet (Fallen Leaves), 1997-99, installation of c. 20,000 iron heads. Jewish Museum, Berlin; permanent loan by Dieter and Si Rosenkranz.

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Menashe Kadishman, Uprise, 1967, corten steel, h. 1,500 cm. Square at Habima National Theater, Tel Aviv; Collection Tel Aviv Municipality. Photo: Toni Hildebrandt.

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Menashe Kadishman, Broken Glass Door, 1971, wood and glass, h. 200 cm, Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld.

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Menashe Kadishman, Broken Glass, 1976, Rina Gallery, New York.

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Menashe Kadishman, In-Out, 1972, glass wall and iron tube, 500 x 40 cm, installation at Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld.

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Menashe Kadishman, Sacrifice, 1983, pencil and panda pencil on paper, Telma and Abraham Ofek, Jerusalem.

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Menashe Kadishman, Sacrifice of Isaac, 1982-85, corten steel, 3 parts: ram 350 x 700 x 800 cm; weeping woman 250 x 500 x 300 cm; Isaac 240 x 220 cm. Tel Aviv Museum of Art; gift of Rachel and Dov Gottesman.

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Menashe Kadishman with his work Sacrifice of Isaac (1987).

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Menashe Kadishman, Shalechet (Detail).

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George Segal, Abraham Sacrifices Isaac, 1973, plaster, 214 x 275 x 260 cm. Tel Aviv Museum.

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Menashe Kadishman, Shalechet (Detail).

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Menashe Kadishman, Shalechet, 2001, Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura.

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Menashe Kadishman, Shalechet, 2001, Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura.