



Ezra Orion (1934–2015) was born in Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan. In the early 1950s he studied at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, and in the mid-1960s he continued his studies at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and the Royal College of Art in London. When he returned to Israel in 1967, he moved to Midreshet Sde Boker in the Negev, where he founded the Desert Sculpture Gallery, taught, and created until the early 2000s. Alongside his work as a sculptor, Orion was a poet and philosopher, and he also founded and edited the periodical *Svivo* t.

During his studies Orion focused on iron and stone sculptures in dimensions suited for gallery spaces, but after he completed his studies and moved to Sde Boker in the Negev he began thinking about sculpture that is no longer limited to gallery and urban space dimensions: sculpture that would envelop the spectator, contain him, and evoke in him a spiritual existential experience. From then on Orion began to create situations, moments, and environments that were designed to serve as “launch sites” for human consciousness. The aspiration to create an experience that confronts human beings with the transcendent and the cosmic became the increasingly irrefutable logic throughout Orion’s work. His field of action moved to the desert expanse, to movements and changes in the Earth’s surface, and then to outer space. This exhibition traces Orion’s creative development from Architectural Sculpture, through Tectonic Sculpture and the Mars Project, to Intergalactic sculpture. All these are examined through original works alongside documents from the artist’s archive, which are presented here for the first time. A clear line can be drawn from Orion’s early sketches in the 1960s to his space projects. According to him, they were all part of his attempt to engender a unique human and personal observation.

Orion’s work is located between two fields of action: land art and conceptual art. On the one hand his desert sculptures connect with artists like Richard Long and Robert Smithson (albeit his action differs from that of artists who go out of the city to the natural environment, as has been argued in the past, since it emerges from his own life in the desert expanse and the edge of the frontier). On the other, especially with regard to his outer space works, Orion is revealed as a conceptual artist in terms of the way the aesthetic visual aspect is neutralized in some of his works, and in terms of the mental experience these works seek to create.

Orion’s Romantic and Modernist logic poses a single universal challenge and dismisses out of hand any transitory and local question concerning the artistic act. This is an impressive approach in its ambition, which at times also seems naïve and narrow: Orion dismisses the importance of the context of his action as an artist, as an Israeli-Jewish-man acting in this place and at this time, the historical and military contexts in which he developed – and which erupt from his tongue in every description of a sculpting act – and the context of the act of conquering the desert. In their place he proposes a language of transcendence, of a view from above. A universal language that is timeless and placeless. In this regard it is interesting to examine the political letters he wrote to Israeli leaders in which he is troubled by the affairs of the country, and proposes overall solutions, in outline form, while completely disregarding the passion and instinct that drive the struggles being waged on this land.

Launch Sites is presented as part of the activities of the Institute for Public Presence, and as the first chapter in the Monument/Action exhibition series that will examine strategies and forms of artistic action in the local public domain during the twentieth century, and propose contexts and responses in contemporary art. Even today Orion’s activity

in the extra-gallery space, the desert space, and outer space is impressive in its dimensions, ambition, and form, while the scope of his work makes him a unique artist who did not gain sufficient recognition during his lifetime. The exhibition focuses on Orion's proposals, sketches, and ideas in an attempt to investigate and explore the logic of the action, not only its products. Now, from the perspective of time, observing Orion's work is also an invitation to examine his contemporaries, as well as the local context which he sought to overcome with an overview perspective, to trace the political aspects of the artistic act, and consider the limits of imagination concerning the space in which the action takes place and the people on whom it acts.

ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE

Orion abandoned gallery sculpture early on in his career. In addition to installing sculptures and monuments in public spaces – including the Golan Brigade Monument in Mitzpe Gadot (1972), Ma'alot in Jerusalem (1980), and Identity to Yeruham (1990) – he engaged considerably in designing and developing architectural sculpture. Orion created architectural spaces whose vast height and sunlight constitute central sculptural motifs. In his view, these spaces should rise to a height of several dozen meters in order to totally contain humans, to demonstrate to the spectator his minuteness in comparison to the universe, and to evoke in him an experience of spiritual transcendence.

Cathedrals, 1965

A series of sketches made by Orion during his studies at Saint Martin's School of Art in London, after visiting churches all over Europe. Orion, who was impressed by Gothic architecture, abstracted the specific spaces he visited and extricated their inner logic. The cathedrals presented in the sketches are designed as unique, almost otherworldly sculptural elements that demonstrate how the spaces function for the benefit of those present in them. This is an early stage of inquiry in Orion's endeavor to create spaces that evoke a religious experience, that challenge the movement and self-perception of the people in them. This experience, according to Orion, should be secular and human in the face of the sublime and the infinite.

Sculpture Field, 1968-1972

One of the monumental works Orion designed is a series of enormous sculptures that were meant to be installed at a single site on the banks of Zin River in the Negev. 'There is no existence for a sculpture as a solitary unit, but rather as part of a "community of sculptures" – a "field of sculptures" – a system of forms above and below ground – which are a single massive composition extending over an expanse – people will move between tall and deep forms, between squares of intense sun and dark shade, enter them and move within falling and rising spaces, pressing and loosening between dark and high pale light, and sudden bursts of intense light on the edge of a high plateau,' he wrote. Orion worked on planning and advancing the project for many years; his models and sketches were exhibited at the Israel Museum as early as 1974. Ultimately, sculptural elements from the field were installed at various sites around the country (such as the Tilted Power Field element in Ramat Aviv), but the full project was never realized.

Orion VR, 2016

Plaster and metal scale models of various elements from Sculpture Field are still stored in Orion's Desert Sculpture Gallery. Their presence as a monument to an unrealized act, coupled with the desire to find a new way to document and preserve the objects, led us to an attempt to bring Sculpture Field to life with contemporary technology and recreate it in reality. The models were scanned in 3D and adapted for latest generation VR glasses, enlarging and adjusting them as required. The result is a first opportunity to experience the sculptures in the huge dimensions Orion intended for them, and thus realize in virtual space the experience of the wandering spectator he saw in his mind's eye.

Sculpture Field models : Ezra Orion | Concept: Udi Edelman | Scanning, modeling and VR environment building: Ziv schneider and Shirin Anlen | Sound Design: Dani Meir

TECTONIC SCULPTURE

If in Sculpture Field Orion began developing sculpture that connects with expanse and land, in Tectonic Sculpture this concept is the point of departure that increasingly intensifies. The result is sculpture that focuses on the inner geophysical forces that shape the Earth's crust, and views them as sculptural elements in and of themselves. 'Plate tectonics is sculpture,' Orion wrote with reference to the faulting, folding, and movement of mountains that form and change over many thousands of years. In the Negev and the Himalayas he created sculptures comprising stone lines, positioning rocks, and making grooves in the ground, which were meant to join and emphasize the sculpture made by natural forces, and thus create loci for human observation and connection with this universal-cosmic making.

'It is important that the spectator understands that we are building something human, geometric, that allows him to technically gather height through something solid that is built from rocks, which are themselves a billion years old. Launching his consciousness simultaneously cognitively and spiritually, to the extreme, in escalation, in acceleration, to a scale far, far beyond the everyday. Beyond our homeland, beyond the Earth, to ranges that are in effect our astro-homeland, our universe. This is meta-geo-sculpture. And beyond it, the silence.'

Stone Lines, Sde Zin and Har Ardon, 1980-81

The stone lines Orion created in Sde Zin and Har Ardon direct the spectator to the edges of the craggy landscape, and function as what he defines as "launch pads for consciousness". In Sde Zin rocks and small stones combine into a single line extending across 800 meters. The path ends at the edge of the rock face, and focuses the spectator's gaze on the peak of Hod Akev. In Har Ardon the stone line is more subdued and dense, and it too ends at the edge of the rock face. Orion used local stones and transformed sculpture into an inseparable and almost indistinguishable part of the landscape.

Towards the Rift, 1983

Orion was particularly attracted to local phenomena created as a result of the Great Rift Valley. In order to deepen the presence of this geological rift, he created a sculpture in Tel Hai Valley that flows parallel to the rift, in which he installed huge rocks in the middle of the riverbed, and even left the drag marks in the soil as indicators of the land's drifting.

Towards Annapurna, 1981-1996

One of Orion's biggest and most familiar projects was done in the Annapurna Valley in Nepal, where he created a staircase from slabs of slate. Like his desert sculptures, the sculpture in Annapurna is what he defines as a "launch pad for consciousness". The staircase sculpture faces the highest pinnacles of the Himalayas, one of the highest points on Earth, and is designed to evoke in human consciousness a moment of coming face to face with human minuteness in relation to the universe. Construction of the sculpture in the Annapurna Valley was carried out by Israeli expeditions alongside local porters and sculptors. Four expeditions took part in the construction over more than a decade: the first in 1981, and then for restoration and documentation in 1982, 1993, and 1996.

Photos: Avraham Hay

SCULPTURE IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM, 1978-1997

Orion's extraordinary artistic conceptions, alongside his aspirations and ambitions, gains clear expression in his Mars Project on which he worked for two decades. This is a direct development of tectonic sculpture, but not on Earth: Orion sought to perform a sculpting act on another planet in the solar system. The planet chosen was Mars, following plans to land the first man made vehicle on it. Orion sought to sculpt a stone line, like the one in Sde Zin, in Valles Marineris, a system of canyons that runs along the Martian surface for over 4,000 kilometers. Orion contacted scientists in Israel and around the world, met with the Jet Propulsion Laboratories in the United

States, managed to enlist the help of then Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres, and even met for discussions on the matter at NASA. The work itself was to be carried out by the Mars Rover, which was en route to Mars at the time. The plan was to aim the vehicle towards the edge of the rock face and instruct it to create the stone line upon completion of its operational mission.

‘Since the erosion process on Mars is as slow as astronomical time, these geometric stone outlines will not be erased for billions of years. This is a development of the launch pads for consciousness hundreds of millions of kilometers from here, to the astro-chasms,’ Orion wrote.

INTERGALACTIC SCULPTURE, 1986-2001

The time has come for sculpture to break out to the speeds of light – to hidden energetic entities of vast dimensions, to intergalactic space.

‘Orion’s engagement with philosophical questions concerning human existence, and his attempts to break through the boundaries of material sculpture, led to one of the most significant and radical developments in his work: Intergalactic Sculpture. Orion viewed intergalactic sculpture as a necessary continuation of visual sculpture in general and tectonic sculpture in particular, and developed timeless and immaterial sculptures throughout the solar system. He worked to advance and implement his ideas in this regard from the 1980s till the end of his life. The central of these ideas was to launch beams of light towards the Milky Way: a sculpting act he called Super Cathedral.

On 27 April 1992, as part of the events of International Space Year, Super Cathedral I was performed, launching laser beams billions of kilometers into space from various locations around the world, parallel lines perpendicular to the Milky Way, creating a space cathedral of light: a sculpture that exists in movement, and constantly and forever draws further and further away from Earth. The main launch was performed in Bar Giora, near Jerusalem, and lasted 55 minutes and 33 seconds. Additional laser stations participating in the launch were located in Helwan in Egypt, Simeiz and Zvenigorod in Russia, Potsdam in Germany, and Graz in Austria. The project was supported by the Israel Museum, the Israel Space Agency, and the global Wegener Laser Ranging network. In subsequent years Orion attempted to advance the next stages of the project, but these plans have yet to be carried out.

‘This is the departure of sculpture from its visual, tangible history,’ Orion wrote. ‘It is a departure from matter and mass to which sculpture has been bound from prehistory onward – to an unseen, intangible sphere of huge energetic entities, cruising at the speed of light, through the intergalactic vastness – onto cosmic infinity – -’

LETTERS

Orion’s private archives provide an opportunity to observe his distinctive style and admirable (and sometimes astonishing) ambition. Exhibited here are some of Orion’s correspondence and the political and social ideas he put to Israeli leaders in different periods – always very concisely, without going into detail, as if from an outer-space perspective. At times it seems that the possibility of impossibility never occurred to Orion, who tended to offhandedly disregard complexities as trivial.

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