

## Michail Grobman: Acts and Words

In the early seventies, Michail Grobman immigrated to Jerusalem from Moscow. In his homeland, in the sixties, he was among the active members of the Second Russian Avant-Garde,<sup>1</sup> and in the mid seventies he founded and led the Leviathan group in Jerusalem. The "rectification" [Heb. *tikkuri*] power of man in general and of the artist in particular was emphasized in the introduction he wrote to one of the Leviathan group catalogues:

"Cockroach, butterfly, rhinoceros, tree - perfect works of art.

"Landscape - an environment with perfect aesthetic values.

The composition of these works may be limited or endless. It is the work of God.

"He who copies these works - a thief, a plagiarist, a poor imitator, whose sense of freedom has been extinguished.

"We were created in the image of God, which means we are, potentially, capable of creating new worlds. Such an act of creation is the supreme sphere of human deeds: to resemble God.

"Image, letter, a white plain — these comprise the way of refusal. It is the way of liberation and transcendence, the way to the perception of and adherence to the spiritual.

"White paper, letter, image - means of memory passed from one generation to the next, of knowing the world, a way to release energy and purify the soul.

"Magical symbolism is a method that enables intuitive attainment of the world through visual means.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Beautiful Sixties in Moscow: Ilya Kabakov - Michail Grobman*, esh-caL, cd. Mordechai Omer (Tel Aviv: The Genia Schreiber University An Gafleiy, Td A» University, 1989).

"An object that meets the standards of magical symbolism appears in a visual-static form. The interpretation and attainment of that object is tantamount to attaining the world. Observing a symbolic-magical object leads man into the sphere of Kabbalistic concepts, into a religious-mystical experience of the soul, and from there to wisdom and love - namely, to happiness. The word of Kabbalah is directed to Kabbalists.

"Magical symbolism regards the form as a rare opportunity to convey mystical knowledge to wide circles without violating that knowledge".<sup>2</sup>

Grobman's plastic language during these years can be divided into two practical areas, which were at times complementary and at others, independent of each other. On the one hand, he continued painting figurative images, which constituted points of departure for the intimate language of his symbols: hands, eyes, heads, human figures, plants, animals, birds, fish, etc.; on the other hand, his use of the living human body and of graphical, typographical and textual images - all figments of his conceptual thought - gradually increased.

Works such as *Jerusalem Construction* (1978) or *Aleph —Earth*<sup>3</sup> (1978) are dominated by monochrome colors that almost completely fill the surface of the painting; only the textual writing - sometimes in Hebrew, sometimes in Russian - interferes with the monochromatic perfection, disquieting the viewer. The beam of light bisecting *Jerusalem Construction* lengthwise conceals the biblical Creation command of the First Day - "And God said, 'Let there be light': and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness" — as if the

<sup>2</sup> The Leviathan group pamphlet (Kibbutz Ashdot Ya'acov Meuchad: Beit Uri and Kami Nechushtan, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> *Aleph* is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; it is also the first letter of the word *Adama* - earth.

'zip', Barnett Newman's shaky string, has been replaced by the **act** of a scribe, a copyist of the Scriptures who believes that by the power of his actions he can reconstruct the primeval act **of** Creation. In the upper right-hand side of *Construction*, Grobman inscribed in Russian excerpts from his poems: