**Transparent Memories: Immigration, Gender, and Materiality.**

**The Case Study of Artist Alina Rom Cohen**

**Introduction**

Semiotic theories distinguish between the artistic-material artifact and the cultural-social meanings it signifies (Barthes, 1998), and thereby redefine the conventional relationship between the artifact and the viewing audience. Roland Barthes’s (2006) semiotic paradigm suggests that under the artifact’s surface is the myth, a comprehensive system of cultural-social meanings. Accordingly, artifacts are part of a complex visual culture, whereas the viewer “reads” the culture through artifacts while selecting the message most suitable for them and their social world. Barthes claims that without the narratives derived from it, the visual object lacks meaning. This paper takes a different approach—a postmodern approach suggesting that the artifacts themselves “speak,” and are not absolutely dependent on their viewers’ reading of them. What follows is informed by theories developed over the past two decades under the title of “the material turn.”

This study focuses on works by artist Alina Rom Cohen (b. 1975), an Israeli who immigrated from the former Soviet Union and who deals with creating representations of memory affected by immigration. In her glass sculptures, memories from the old homeland surface and emerge, and it is these memories that she formalizes in the material while conceptualizing the ways in which they are preserved.

How does the material in works of art represent the artist’s immigration experience and memories? What are the ways in which objects and materials participate in the political life and to what extent is agency identifiable in them? What are the means by which to discuss artifacts, whether in terms of their carrying meaning and memory or participating in social life? Finally, how can “material turn” theories be intersected with theories of gender, immigration, and transnationalism in discussing the artworks of women who create objects of memory related to their immigration, and which are intertwined with feelings of exclusion and marginality as a result of their social position?

To answer these questions and explore issues of materiality and memory work, I draw on Alfred Gell’s anthropological theory of art first introduced in *Art and Agency* (1998). This theoretical framework repudiates the conventional view of representations as providing cultural explanations or the exploration of creative artistic processes within social-cultural contexts and proposes a horizon of agency for the works of art themselves, which function in the world alongside other actants[[1]](#endnote-1) operating in the field, such as human beings (Gell, 1998: 17). Both works of art and human beings, according to Gell, act within an intricate and dynamic framework of power relations in which they are mutually influenced by one another. Thus, Gell’s theory will serve as a theoretical foundation for my explanation of materiality and memory work while facilitating the extraction of insights regarding Rom Cohen’s issues of identity. From this perspective, I will propose that the material itself—glass—innately subverts the common perception of temporality and problematizes the conception of time that leans on the modernist principle of linearity, as spanning from early to later years in sequential continuity. In other words, the material, glass, will help substantiate the argument that immigration is a continuous process, which moves forward and backward in a fluid and dialectic manner upon the continuum of time, thereby fusing past and future, memory and present.

This study employs an integrated methodology. I will draw on both cultural criticism affected by the material turn, and theories from immigration studies, sociology, and anthropology, in conjunction with a qualitative study in the form of a personal interview with the artist. I will begin with a short description and analysis of *Hamtana* (Waiting), a sculpture created by Rom Cohen in 2014. Next, I will present an in-depth analysis of the artist’s *1700 Kilometers*, an installation exhibited in 2019 at Nulobaz Gallery in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. My motivation for discussing this artist in particular stems from both her choice to work with an unconventional material, glass, and the unique technique she has developed.[[2]](#endnote-2) I aim to show that this particular material expresses the artist’s hybrid marginal position constituted in an identity split upon axes of gender and nationality. Just as the status of sculpting in glass is considered unusual and inferior in Israel’s elitist art world, relegated to its margins, so too Rom Cohen—as a woman, immigrant, and female artist—has so far not received significant recognition in the art field. For Rom Cohen, glass constitutes a means by which to express the social navigating instruments of her layered identity. In addition, I will suggest that Rom Cohen’s use of glass constitutes a deliberately defiant and oppositional statement—she allows the material speak in her place, to say what she cannot, or does not wish to, say.

**The Material Turn**

The material turn is one of the most significant theoretical developments in the social sciences, humanities, and arts (Barad, 2003; Barrett and Bolt, 2013; Bennet and Patrick, 2010; Lange-Berndt, 2015; Riggins, 1990; Turkel, 2007). This turn explores the roles that material objects play in various forms of praxis and aims to disclose the ways in which materiality produces and exercises complex power relations. This is not to claim that material or material objects inherently possess power, in deterministic terms; on the contrary, they should be examined in terms of their properties of effect and agency. That is to say, objects and materials exercise power and actively participate in complex systems of power relations (Miller, 2005).

The fundamental principles of the material turn lean upon criticisms of other turns in the contemporary postmodern era, which oppose the dualist-deterministic view of the difference between the material and the conceptual and between the material and the cultural. Put differently, this is a shift that strives to move beyond positivistic documentation. This position aims to blur, and even obliterate, the dichotomic distinction between the natural and the social, between the human and the nonhuman (Barad, 2008; Haraway, 2000).

Amongst the prominent thinkers in this context of understanding the dynamics of the social field and powers structures operating within it is Bruno Latour, who explains that the different actions of all the actants in the field are part of a complex and intricate system of “establishing social meaning” (Latour, 1993). The ability to think about material and objects as acting in the world—that is, the recognition that not only humans act in the world—is largely based on Latour’s philosophy. Latour emphasizes the ways in which human and nonhuman agencies are connected in the form of a complex network as a result of the fact that agency is always related to positioning and location, and is not manifested in a void but rather in a system of relationships (Latour, 2001; 2006). In contrast to other theorists who recognized the necessity of materials for humanity and wrote about the ways in which they participate in the construction of social relationships, but did not acknowledge their agency, the theoreticians who developed the trajectory of the material turn aim to render the discussion more multifaceted than in the past, and point to the agency of objects and materials and their active power within a system of social-cultural power relations (Appadurai 1986). In this context, the human “I” is not an independent subject but rather a player who is itself semiotic-material; it is also an element simultaneously made of the human and nonhuman, the social and physical, the material and a-material in formations that invite comprehension from a perspective other than the outdated dichotomic view. Similarly, materials also need to be liberated from the dichotomic perception of their being mere-objects, and one must understand the ways in which materials actively participate in social dynamics motivated by the agency enfolded within them.

**Glass as Material, Glass as Art**

Henrietta Eliezer Bruner claims that glass is inherently highly dichotomous, and that this dichotomy has always challenged and enchanted artists, and even prompted philosophers to think about the affinity between the artistic object and its materiality (Eliezer Bruner, 2015: 13).[[3]](#endnote-3) During the melting process, glass takes on a molten form, which as it cools, gradually hardens into its solid form. In other words, glass is a solidified liquid that can behave as both solid and liquid, and is often referred to as “super-cool liquid.” The material is comprised of silicon enriched with metallic oxides, which determine its level of opacity—from completely transparent to opaque, and tonality—from mono-toned to multi-toned (Eliezer Bruner, 2015: 13). While the surface of glass is characteristically inert and resistant to chemical treatments or mechanical manipulations—such as cutting, engraving, etching, sand blasting, partial or complete coloring, and printing or painting on the surface with enamel and other materials—it invariably fractures rays of light in a distinctive manner. In contrast to other solid materials, such as wood or cloth, the molecular structure of glass, like water or air, is characterized by relatively large distances between its molecules which enable the transmission of light, resulting in its transparency (Direktor, 1993: 8).

Glass—simultaneously visible and invisible—is considered a type of mediator between the interior and exterior, at once physical and metaphorical. Its diverse and contrasting properties result in artworks in which the material is the message (Eliezer Bruner, 2015: 13). The capacity of glass to diffuse and transmit light, and particularly its transparency, forge its strong linkage to light and energy, and to notions of brightness and clarity, concealment and discovery, presence and absence. According to Eliezer Bruner, these qualities of glass, and its capacity for conversion from one state to another, are what render it appropriate for the visual expression of abstract concepts, such as time, memory, forgetfulness, body, and spirit (Eliezer Bruner, 2015: 13). In his seminal work, *Art as* *Experience*, John Dewey addresses the essence of the artistic experience (1934). According to Dewey, the totality of a work of art is constituted in the materials from which it is made and the choice of artistic medium. Moreover, he argues that the material is not only the means by which the artist arrives at their objective but rather an integral part of the artistic product (like paint is the painting, notes the music, and the body, the dance). Following Dewey, we will discover in the process of analyzing Rom Cohen’s works, how her complex installations lead us to a more sophisticated understanding of glass as an independent entity that speaks and conducts a multifaceted and fruitful dialogue with us.

**Working in Glass—A Performative Act**

Rome Cohen’s installation *Hamtana* (Waiting) (2014) portrays a young girl (Fig. 1). The physical body is sculpted down to the waist and its lower part is a skirt made of glass beads assembled on an iron structure. The figure is made of pre-cut slivers of glass glued together with strong adhesives. This volumetric figure, whose internal part is also filled with glass shards, has sharp and distinct facial features—lips, nose, eyes, eyebrows, earlobes—and long flowing hair. Her thin arms are seen through the singlet that stretches from the shoulders to the waist. The girl’s hands are resting on the table that doubles as her skirt.

Figure 1: Alina Rom Cohen, *Hamtana*, 2014

Like in all of this artist’s glass sculptures, here too the materials and method are constant and the process is unique. In contrast to most other glass sculptors, Rom Cohen does not melt and blow glass, but rather works with sheet glass manufactured for windows installed in residential buildings. This sheet glass is considered “pure” in the sense that its thickness is uniform, it contains no air bubbles, and is completely transparent. Rom Cohen’s technique includes cutting, breaking, and gluing together shards of glass according to a meticulously planned design. This is physically difficult and complex work, and she often cuts herself and injures her hands. Through the arduous process of connecting thousands of pieces of glass, Rom Cohen constructs figures in lifelike proportions. Despite what may appear as the jumbled assembly of glass shards, Rom Cohen follows a detailed blueprint to give the sculpture an authentic semblance of the human form. This approach of deconstruction and re-assembling is characteristic of her sculptured works, which all portray isolated and unique figures. Like in the case of all of her sculptures, here too, the viewer’s first impression is of an unfinished work, as if it were abandoned on a metal cart formerly used as a worktable. The residue of glue on the glass enhances this impression of something unfinished, anticipating completion, in both the physical and metaphysical sense (Eliezer Bruner, 2015: 29). The figure, a young girl in real-life dimensions, sits and waits in anxious anticipation. The position of her body seems rigid, frozen; however, the material property of transparency combined with the assembly of multiflorous planes of glass and the light reflected between them, provides this ostensibly-frozen figure of the girl with a dynamism, which in turn, facilitates our understanding of the sculpture’s rich internal movement—light, reflections, rhythm, etc.

Rom Cohen immigrated alone to Israel as a young woman. She began her academic education in mathematics, however, despite her success in the field, transferred to art studies, first at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and later at the Kalisher Academy of Art in Tel Aviv (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019). She experimented with a variety of techniques and materials, and finally chose sculpting in glass. Curator Eliezer Bruner writes, “The first glass sculptures by artist Elina Rom Cohen were produced in 1997 as part of a series of figurative works. The qualities of glass spoke to her artistic scrutiny of various abstract concepts, such as death and human existence, and gradually, glass became the principle element in her work” (2015; 29). This raw material poses a contrast between glass shards, which perhaps imply breakage and loss of control, and the assemblage of an organized and cohesive form made of shards converging into stable and distinctive sculpture.

In my work I am constantly breaking glass. This is a routine act of cutting and breaking. I make a line with a knife, apply precise pressure, and break it. I don’t see the breaking as the end, rather the beginning of building [...] within every sheet of glass there is such a space [...] the empty space is the transparency and the sculpture’s identity is formed from pieces of life that were erased and reconnected. (Rom Cohen, 2017)

The artist describes the unique technique she developed and explains that breaking the sheets of glass is an opportunity for her to retell life stories in a different way. She says that it was only as an adolescent, while still living in Russia, that she began to ask herself and her mother questions regarding her national and religious identities. In a position paper, Rom Cohen writes,

At age thirteen, the order began to break, all at once articles exposing horrifying facts, contrary to everything we believed about communism, appeared. I remember standing, at this age, waiting for the trolley car to go to school. The trolley approached speedily, and it had this characteristic sound that grew louder, a sound that reminded me of glass breaking. My chest was filled with the sound and I had a physical sensation of glass breaking inside me. (Rom Cohen, 2017)[[4]](#endnote-4)

Rom Cohen describes her immigration to Israel as another significant crisis experienced after facing the truth about communism. While she admits that this experience aroused in her a sense of anger and instability, it was through her art studies that she first experienced open-mindedness and curiosity, and became familiar with fascinating materials with which to create art (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019).

Rom Cohen believes that the glass sculptures illuminate complex, and often contrasting, social situations, or in her words, “The sculptures are made of glass shards and touch upon human situations of belonging, being an integral part of society, on the one hand, and of being a fragment, completely separate from the ‘whole,’ on the other. The shattering of sheets of glass into tiny pieces charge the figures made out of them with the force of this contradiction” (Rom Cohen, 2019). Elsewhere, she adds, “When I break the beautiful sheets of glass into pieces, a new order comes into being. A glass sculpture constituted as an independent presence in the space, which carries within it a transparent protest” (Rom Cohen, 2017). Her attitude toward glass is explicable as well in terms of the “displaced life” she experienced as an immigrant. “In the work process, I undercut the extremely structured order around us, subvert the ‘natural’ role of glass. When we enter a museum, there is a lot of glass; the amount of glass is blinding—vitrines, sliding doors, café counters, signs. Glass is there in excess, but not as a work of art on exhibit” (Rom Cohen, 2017). Rom Cohen claims that by reassigning the material from its original role—as window, vitrine or sign—to a different, unconventional usage, it is possible to charge it with a new meaning that communicates alternative messages.

**Sculptures that Speak**

A 125х225cm metal frame enclosing forty-five 25x25cm transparent glass panels, is erected on the gallery floor. The glass panels, some colorless, some tinted brown, are arranged alternately, like a chess board. Two human figures and two animal figures, all made of glass, are positioned upright on the surface. Glass boxes containing various objects hang from the gallery walls. From the vantage point of the entrance, one initially observes the entire installation, as its many details gradually come into view.

Figure 2: General view of installation *1,700 km*, 2019

Near the entrance, a dark figure of a wolflike animal—with four legs and a tail—is erected, facing away from the viewer. The figure is laying on the sheets of glass, facing three other figures. To its left and slightly behind, a light-toned figure of an adolescent girl lays in an embryonic position, her knees folded toward her chest, arms embracing knees, her hair scattered around her head on the floor. Behind her is another dark animal, standing on all four legs, its head bowed toward the floor. At the farthest area of the installation is a figure of a girl sitting on a stool made of two glass cubes, the top one brown, the other, colorless. The figure’s left foot rests on the floor, while its right leg is slightly bent, mirrored by the right forearm leaning on the right thigh. The left arm is straight, leaning on the stool, as if supporting the weight of the girl’s body. The figure is not looking at the other three, rather her gaze is directed toward a distant horizon, her dark hair resting on her shoulders.

Two 16x4cm glass boxes are hung on the walls. One contains a pair of hands made of glass, and above them, a girl’s head also made of glass; the second contains an intricate structure consisting of small model houses.

*The Figure of the Sitting Girl*

“I was a girl who looked like all the other Russian kids. Children with light-colored eyes, blue-green-grey, which are also the colors of glass. Although my entire family was Jewish, nobody even considered talking about it. We were deep in the communist story. We believed in equality between the nations, between people [...] the experience was one of complete transparency and equality” (Rom Cohen, 2017). In her writing, Rom Cohen speaks of the image of the adolescent girl, a recurrent figure in her work, and admits that it is related to her own childhood. “The exhibition was created as a result of my journey into my childhood [...] it recreates childhood events of mine, which were shuffled like a deck of cards [...] this girl connects me to myself. From within the suppression, apathy, and silencing, she connects me to my dreams and memories” (Dekel and Rom Cohen 2019). Indeed, the sitting girl carries her head high, seeming to look forward to a distant point in time.

Figure 3: Detail

The sitting figure represents the experience of waiting, anticipating, reflected in Rom Cohen’s own words,

To this day, I define myself as a Russian in Israel, and I have not yet arrived. For many years I camouflaged. At the beginning of my artistic path, I tried very hard to be an Israeli artist, that is, I constructed iron sculptures like the famous Israeli sculptor, Yehiel Shemi, and others, because they were the bon-ton, the symbol of the rough-edged Israeliness—iron, rust, huge sculptures. Sculptures related to nationalism. These were my attempts to fit in. But in time, I decided to go against the grain, to sculpt human figures, in a period when it was less acceptable to create figurative sculptures. (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019)

In their paper “An Introduction to Visibility in Immigration: Body, Gaze, Representation,” Lomsky-Feder, Rappaport, and Ginsberg write about the immigrant’s experience of visibility while making a place for themselves vis-à-vis indigenous Israelis whose hegemonic visibility is prominent within the visual cultural space (2010). The immigrant’s visibility or lack thereof is a social phenomenon that links the foreign and local, the individual and the ethnic, gender, or national group. Visibility is something we are all concerned with, but more so, the immigrant, whose presence in the social field of vision is not obvious and who is defined as foreigner (Lomsky-Feder, Rappaport, and Ginsberg, 2010; 11-12). While leading theoreticians, such as Sigmund Bauman, perceived immigration in terms of the foreigner whose presence calls attention to and challenges extant social boundaries (Bauman 1990; 1991), Lomsky-Feder, Rappaport, and Ginsberg’s novelty is in their focus on the areas in which the gaze, the body, and the representation overlap, and the notion that the gaze constructs the contours of the field of vision, thereby defining both the visible and the invisible in the context of power relations (2010). The sense of transparency Rom Cohen speaks of accords with both this innovative theory and glass—the transparent-present is the most appropriate for raising and exploring these issues of visibility and power in the field.

*The Figure of the Laying Girl and the Wolves*

The figure of an adolescent girl laying on the floor between two dark animals appears to be unaware of the looming danger. She is as if “devoured by the wolves,” the artist claims in a text written about the exhibition (Rom Cohen, 2019).

Figure 4: Detail

Like in all of Rom Cohen’s works, here too gender is a significant aspect of the installation. The girl in the embryonic position reflects “body comportment,” a term coined by Iris Marion Young (1991), who distinguishes between ways in which male and female gendered bodies conduct themselves and focuses on the social construction that causes women to limit their bodily motions, to diminish them, and to believe that their bodies are fragile and weak. According to Young, this perception carries ramifications in terms of women’s self-esteem and their ability to achieve desired goals in the future.

In the field of gender studies and in feminist criticism, the female body receives much attention and is understood as a site upon which social powers are imposed. A gendered analysis strives to decode the ways in which these forces police the body and deny it agency. A body is, therefore, a site for control and supervision on part of the social order, and one can discern that different gendered bodies are permitted to be in different spaces and domains: the female body ostensibly “belongs” to the personal domain, whereas the male body “belongs” to the public domain (Dekel, 2011). Female artists who work in view of these feminist positions strive, through their art, to expose the ways in which this policing operates, to promote the discourse surrounding it, and even endeavor to abolish it.

In the *1,700* *km* exhibition brochure, the curator writes, “The wolves are charged with contrasting forces: on the one hand, they are made of glass sourced from windows. A window is intended to protect, its function is to envelop or surround the home; but unexpectedly, this glass stabs, revealing the teeth of a coyote” (Rom Cohen 2019). “The wolves symbolize for me the human condition, the idea of ‘dog-eat-dog,’” the artist notes in an interview. “People act like wolves toward one another because of the difficult human condition, in general, and this is true for immigrants, in particular. These people are full of anger, living in survival mode. The expression ‘lone wolf’ prompted me to create wolves because, in many ways, I am like that, a perpetual immigrant, I never really integrated into Israeli society” (Dekel and Rom Cohen 2019). The artist explains that the wolves are a metaphor for people in a state of immigration whose relationships with others of the same sex are charged and who live in a constant mode of survival. Rom Cohen explains further,

These wolves are of a distinctive gender; the choice to position them in this way is intrinsically gendered, as if they are about to attack the girl. This girl is devoured, she embodies physical sensuality, she is the one with strong emotions, transparent, and they attack her. I genuinely believe that the pressure on men in the Israeli context is immense, there is a tendency toward violence, which is related to their uncompromising and demanding social roles. Both where I come from and in Israel, the male roles are very demanding. Extreme pressure is put upon them, and consequently, women in general, and Russian women immigrants, in particular, suffer. From the perspective of the wolves about to devour the girl, this is a quintessential Israeli situation. (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019)

In other words, for Rom Cohen the metaphor of the wolves about to pounce on the girl and consume her, represents the charged power relations between men and women in general, and especially in regard to Russian-speaking, female immigrants in Israel (Dekel, 2016; Lemish, 2000).

Studies by Canadian scholar Carla Rice and others dealing with the gendered development of women’s body image and self-perception of their bodies, demonstrate that adolescent girls and young women tend to construct the image of the female body according to the accepted standards of their society and not in accordance with their subjective feelings about it. In Rice’s words, “The looks others give them, position the girls as objects, as if their essence is to have their bodies be constantly scrutinized. Therefore,, girls learn at a very young age to examine their bodies from a pseudo-external point of view, that of the society that sees them, not their own.” (2014: 71). Rom Cohen describes the adolescent girl in the embryonic pose in similar terms, thereby creating, as an adult artist, a young woman aspiring to understand and reconstruct the adolescence she experienced by creating sculptures. Following scholars, such as Anita Harris (2004) and Marnina Gonick (2006) whose work focuses on gendered analyses of adolescent girls and young women, the question arises as to whether sexual behavior is indeed indicative of these girls’ strength and empowerment. Gonick’s position, for instance, is that the notion of a young woman’s autonomy and free choice is no more than a smoke screen devised by the liberal discourse to mask the fact that these young women are part of an intricate system of restrictions and oppression (2006). Other studies emphasize the gendered aspect of oppression exercised toward young women who, more than young men, become victims of sexual assault, acts of brutality, and violence, as well as the fact that there is significantly more pressure put upon them to strive for perfection in different areas of life—in education, professional life, social behavior in peer groups, and even in the family, and especially in terms of their physical appearance (Dyhouse, 2014). This propelling of female adolescents and young women toward sexual contexts is exacerbated by the ordeal of immigration, which necessitates the disintegration of systems and the construction of a new identity on several levels simultaneously, both gendered and national-communal.

*The Glass Boxes*

Two glass boxes hang on the wall to the left of the gallery entrance. They resemble windows, the upper part is arched, and the base, a straight-lined square. Contained in one is a sculpture of a girl’s face under which lay a pair of sculpted hands. The second box contains an intricate construct made of miniature models of classically structured houses—cube base with slanted roof.

Figure 5. Detail

All of Rom Cohen’s works deal with issues of gender—several including the word “house” in their titles. The house is a domain ostensibly identified as a female space associated with domesticity, as Rom Cohen writes, “If we think about the role of glass in architecture, than it is to define boundaries, to preserve and protect the house against rain, wind, darkness, and all harm. Glass protects the value that is ‘home’ without enclosing it within sealed and obstructive walls. Glass contains the house in a way that enables looking both inward and outward” (Rom Cohen, 2017). The artist emphasizes the house’s functionality as a shelter, a private protective space, however, against the background of the art world and with the desire to make present themes related to the house in the context of public space and social issues, she stresses aspects widely discussed in feminist criticism. Thus, for Rom Cohen, the window symbolizes the traditional division of gender roles. Her distinct interest in glass as part of residential buildings is related to the perception of the home as a female space. She writes,

Glass is transparent. A simple washing with water and everything is erased [...] all of these attributes of cleanliness, beauty, the ability to contain, to renounce identity for the benefit of the designated role, are traits that society ascribes to women. Consequently, there is in my work a feminist element: in my work process, I undermine the extremely structured social order and the “natural” role of glass. When I break the beautiful sheets of glass into pieces, a different order is assembled. A glass sculpture that assumes an independent presence in the space and which carries within it a transparent protest. (Rom Cohen, 2017)

In an interview, Rom Cohen elaborates on the aspect of gender in her work:

Gender is indeed a theme featured in my sculptures, constituted in my deliberate choice of this material. Glass protects the house against the outside—rain, dirt, noise. It must be clean and aesthetic, and this is the role of women, to be responsible for cleanliness. Glass enables the penetration of light, and protects and defends like the traditional role of the wife and mother. But it is not seen, glass, it is transparent, it has no body, no presence. And we must remember that when glass is melted, its shape is completely changed, it loses the memory of its original shape, it can be used for something entirely new. Wipe it with a cloth, and all memories are erased, like cleaning dirt off a surface [...] There is a distinctive “double standard”: to a large extent, women have obtained equality, but there is still a great deal of silence surrounding gender and gendered power relations in the home, in the community, in the state” (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019).

Thus, the artist identifies with feminist politics that aspire to abolish gender essentialism, and argues that there is an urgent need to eliminate the identification of women with the home given that it binds them to traditional gender roles and restricts their agency in the world.

Regarding the hands, Rom Cohen recounts, “We had a family photographer who photographed us in black and white. For my photograph, he brought a sheet of glass and told me to position my face and hands close to its surface, then took a few pictures. He also splashed some water on the glass. I remembered this when I made the boxlike window with the hands placed in it” (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2020). The windows, like the checkered floor, were inspired by a place the artist frequented in her childhood. These are the windows of the train station where she often visited while still in Russia. The face and hands trapped inside the glass window are hers (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2020).

*The Checkered Floor*

The floor is reminiscent of a chess board, a game popular amongst immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Israel. Positioned upon it are figures, assembled like chess pieces. The choice of this surface invokes the common practice in chess in which the players are required to plan ahead and meticulously calculate optional moves. While the chess player must strategically plan several moves in advance, they may find themselves caught off guard by an unanticipated move on part of their rival. The positioning of the figures in *1,700 km* raises the question of whether Rom Cohen is a lone player, without partners, or are there other players with whom she takes turns, moving the pieces, implementing strategic maneuvers. Is she free to move the figures on the board at will, or are there other forces manipulating the game, making moves to shift the balance of power?

Beside the symbolism of and reference to a chess board, the checkered floor carries a concrete memory for the artist: “The exhibition references the train station in the town where my father grew up. It was an old station with a checkered floor, like a chess board, that’s how I remember it. So this is what I did in my installation [...] This exhibition constitutes a transference of the experience I had as a child” (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019). In a later conversation, Rom Cohen adds,

The installation relates to a place called Navel, a remote village in northern Russia where I once had a grandmother and where my father grew up. I wanted to create an entirely different installation, but I did not succeed. The memory took hold of me and I could not escape it. I do not like nostalgia and believe that one needs to go forward in life. But usually, when I need to create something new, the memory takes hold of me like a small child holding on to a parent’s legs, not letting them go [...] it does not let me. Does not let go. (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2020).

**Transnational Memory**

For Rom Cohen, glass functions as a metonymy for her social position as an immigrant in a liminal space, an “in between” place. Through her sculptures, she strives to establish a new transnational space (Dekel, 2016), a place that resists classification of being either inside or out, constituted in its function as a partition in the structure and at the same time a transparent material one can see through. Through it, one sees many layers of glass shards that simultaneously render present different times and places.

Glass plays a key role in decoding the power relations involved in processes of immigrant women’s identity formation in the framework of the nation state and in terms of the logic of transnationality. Analysis of Rom Cohen’s glass sculptures provides tools for understanding the ways in which the material’s agency and the body’s agency are intertwined to forge a unique power dynamic discernable in the specific context of Israel as an immigration state (Dekel, 2013), while the “material turn” underlines the material’s ethical and political aspects and facilitates the conceptualization of social organization in a globalization era of a rapid growth in immigration mobility.

However, glass is not only a bearer of a situation comparable to the layered and dynamic agency of women in immigration in the national state of Israel, but rather in terms of Judith Butler who argues that gendered political work is done by means of rendering the body present and visible—the body that is itself an intersection of identifications, identities, and identifyings (recognitions) and emphasizes the body as observed and performance (acting) at the same time (Butler, 1990), one can say that through visibility, the body internalizes and externalizes social meaning it contains within – both self and communal identity. Rom Cohen effectively expresses this simultaneity by virtue of her use of glass. In this framework, glass can also be understood from the perspective of feminist criticism in terms of the complex agency it represents—fragile but strong, transparent yet solid and present, dividing and separating but also protective. In this vein, glass also calls to mind ideas put forth by feminist theoreticians who address the material turn from a feminist perspective, including, Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hackman (2008), and Karen Barad (2008).

Rom Cohen’s glass sculptures, therefore, can be analyzed in terms of the degree of agency and power that subjects, both human and nonhuman, have. The works also prompt consideration of the extent to which immigrant subjects experience and mediate silencing and exclusion. One can think of glass as a material, which, on the one hand, swallows memory, while echoing and enhancing it, on the other, and this duality is indicative of its intrinsic sophisticated agency. In Rom Cohen’s words,

I have many thoughts about silencing and censorship. In other words, even if no one actually censors me, I feel and realize that society is asking me not to speak about the difficulties of absorption. But because I want to speak, regardless, I choose to work with material that speaks for me: glass does not hide anything. Everything is transparent. And in my sculptures, there is not only one layer, but many—achieved by way of my technique of assembling multiple shards of glass one on top of the other. I love that you can see through the sculpture, you can see the inside of the figure, so that there is nothing to hide. You see the truth, everything is out in the open [...] My sculptures remind us that many times we subject ourselves to self-censorship, it is not only the silencing imposed upon us by society. Because it is difficult for me to speak, it is good that my sculptures can [...] I chose glass because it enables me to experience distillation, cleansing, a departure from censorship [...] They do not want to hear that I am Russian, that perhaps I do not fit in, not always feel like I belong. For me, the choice of this material is related to immigration, to the fact that I am an immigrant. I will always define myself as Russian. Even though people are not always comfortable with it. (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019)

Multiple theoreticians, who frame foreigners and foreignness in terms of an obstruction of order, have addressed the issue of the varying degrees of immigrants’ visibility (Schuetz, 1944; Simmel, 1950; Bauman 1990; Ahmed, 2000). It was, however, Homi K. Bahbah who argued for the disassembly of the dichotomic paradigm which distinguishes between the oppressor and the oppressed (or in our terms, the immigrant and the veteran local), while proposing that they are intertwined, influenced and influencers, dependent on one another, embodying contradictions and ambiguity (Bahbah, 1994). As Lomsky-Feder, Rappaport, and Ginsberg have suggested, “Bahbah’s criticism of the dichotomy is significant for us because she proposes a way by which to view the immigrant not only as an object of observation but also as an observing subject. Taking this approach, which challenges and suspends the binary division of seer and seen, one can release visibility in immigration from the confines of local fixedness and the obstacles of essentialization” (2010: 16). Similarly, we can say that the glass used by Rom Cohen functions not only as the object of the gaze, but that it also reflects back to the viewer, even reconstructs representations, and perhaps also calls attention to the “transparency of the hegemony.” Moreover, we must not lose sight of the fact that although the immigrant’s invisibility can lead to vulnerability, at the same time, it enables flexibility, creativity, and the ability to maneuver. Transparent glass facilitates, therefore, scrutiny of the un-signified, the unseen, in conjunction with what is seen—of both the immigrant and the veteran society. In this regard, Rom Cohen notes,

There is something frustrating in my work. I plan, cut, build, and glue, and at the end, you can hardly see the sculptures; the exhibition looks empty to me because everything is transparent and you hardly see them. You have to really make an effort, to want to, to invest. You have to walk around, experience the sculptures from different angles in the space, get all of the information. And even then, this does not always happen. I work for over two years on every sculpture and in the end, I understand that much of it is comprised of shadows, emptiness. The shadows and the nothingness are also part of the work, they also participate and create volume. The material and nonmaterial are combined [...] Glass is a hard material, not only physically but conceptually as well, you get no feedback, you can even say that there is an erasure of the work because a significant part of it is transparent and invisible. (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019)

Rom Cohen, who immigrated to Israel in 1992 at age seventeen, constitutes a case study, which prompts and facilitates contemplation on the ways in which female immigrants manage their hybrid identity and dynamically negotiate their simultaneous— excluded and integrated—position in narratives and memories that claim a rightful place and representation in the new nation state.

As a Jew, I grew up in a southern village in Russia, I was not really connected to my identity as a Jew, obviously, it was we knew about it, but only in theory. We lived in a very communist atmosphere, which does not encourage religious identity. I was in a youth movement and all kinds of groups. First time I thought about religion at all, and my Jewish identity, was at age thirteen, that was in 1986. Soon after, things changed, then the iron curtain fell, newspaper articles were published, and we were exposed to American movies. Suddenly, we thought about other identities, we were exposed to people’s lives in other places...It was a crisis to discover the West. Our entire reality shattered to pieces and everything had to be rebuilt. This is why I express myself through broken glass, which I reassemble from my memories. (Dekel and Rom Cohen, 2019)

These memories of female immigrants exists both internally, within the “self,” and externally, vis-à-vis other subjects as part of their attempt to reestablish a transnational gendered subjectivity, one that insists on containing the memories “from there.” Through material means and the analysis of the works of art, discussing the form and content in conjunction with theories of materiality, memory, and identity in the nation state of Israel, one can extract knowledge and new insights.

In her paper, “The Archive of Memory: Technologies and Communication and the Struggle for Memory,” Naama Shefi argues that despite the common assumption that rulers, victors, and men dictate the documentation and preservation of memory and remembering, aggregated memory includes many details about the lives of less powerful groups (Shefi, 2012: 163). Shefi explains that frequently, the pressure to drive a group out of the public discourse leads to a significant effort on part of that group to deepen its presence in the discourse. Shefi’s paradigm sheds light on the expansion of the circles of those joining the social consciousness in terms of “history from the bottom up.” A leading approach in the current discourse, “history from the bottom up” allows for a society’s cumulated memories to include not only those sourced from the higher echelons of leadership and power, but also those originating in excluded and marginalized groups, especially those experiencing crisis. This is evident in the art field, where “others,” who were excluded from the principle discourse, occupy more space than ever before.

Shefi’s insights facilitate thinking about materials used in various art forms. Given the very essence of its materiality, artistic material can itself embody memories and it is perceived as a bearer of memory, as a subject of meaning and agency. Rom Cohen deliberately chose glass given its potential to communicate the experience of her excluded identity in Israeli society. In the mainstream art field, glass is considered an “inferior” medium relative to others (such as marble, iron, and certainly photography, painting or video art). In “Glass as Periphery,” Dafna Kapman argues that glass artists were excluded from the artistic discourse because they were considered competent craftsman, albeit creating utilitarian art, but not artists of “high art” (Kapman, 2015). In a text written by Rom Cohen on the occasion of the opening of her one-woman show in 2017, she wrote,

Sculpture is working with material, and the material has a biography of its own. The time and place in which it was produced and its existence until it arrived in the studio [...] The material has a life story, into which the artist weaves their own human story. Both stories need to work together. The choice of material is a genetic matter. It is possible that sculptor and material both come from the same place, from before they met. (Rom Cohen, 2017)

The figures sculpted by Rom Cohen are always of adolescent girls, never mature women. Elsewhere, I argued that immigrant artists who arrived in Israel as young girls or teens, undergo a long process as gendered subjects through which they gradually assume a new status and hybrid identity. These women reconstruct a national and professional identity (in the case of Rom Cohen, of a professional artist), sometimes, only after establishing a new familial identity. At a relatively late stage, they are free to reflexively contemplate their adolescence of many years prior, the many changes it entailed, and their distinctive status as immigrants (Dekel, 2019). According to Mirsky and Prower (1992),

The identity crisis in adolescence [comes with] the immigration crisis, but it is hard to define the absorption process in terms of time. Each Oleh experiences it differently and at an individual pace [...] a number of years are necessary to live and placate the pain of loss, to solve the inner struggle that began already in the Soviet Union and come to terms with the decision to immigrate and the Israeli reality. (1992: 15)

In a similar vein, Horowitz noted that “it is only after the mental process is over, that the Oleh is able to explore their past and Israeli society from an integrative and broad perspective, to sift and sieve, and begin to consolidate an image as human being and as Israeli” (Horowitz, 1998: 393). In my aforementioned article (Dekel 2019), I demonstrated how many years after these experiences female artists become deeply invested in contemplating reflexive memories, a belated consideration of the gendered aspects enfolded in their positioning as women who experienced a doubled and simultaneous experience—of both the consolidation and formation of their gender identity and the shaping of a new communal and national identity—as a result of their immigration. In this earlier paper, I argued that it is only when they are strong and confident enough in their identity, do they find the mental strength to face the tumultuous periods they experienced in the past as safe bystanders positioned in the relatively stable place they carved out for themselves. Rom Cohen exercises this in her artworks, which faithfully reflect and scrutinize her reflexive insights associated with her gendered and national identities while extracting the memories of the liminal space she has occupied since adolescence.

**Simultaneous Temporality – Time and Memory Intermingled in Material**

A prevalent term in the humanities and social studies since the 1990s, “the material turn” challenges the traditional perception of time as the sole trajectory for lineal and unilateral development. This new approach stipulates that time is not unified and hegemonic but rather characterized by a simultaneity of times, thereby undermining the autocracy of modernism’s perception of unified and consistent time. The material turn allows for thinking about time from a perspective of complexities, and proposes its comprehension as a system of modi facilitating an experience of temporality that is multilayered and simultaneous, even if it involves discord between different temporal contexts—past, present, future (Ross, 2014). Time can be suspended, regressive, partial, accelerated, compressed, and frozen. All this, simultaneously.

In this sense, Christine Ross argues, the concept of the transnational experience is especially helpful in understanding works of art that feature the term “deep time.” As Ross has demonstrated in her monograph, *The Past is Present; It’s the Future too – The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, which focuses on the variety of times in social and transnational contexts, the temporal turn problematizes of the notion of time, opening it up to new possibilities of understanding (Ross, 2014). For example, this critical turn advances the notion that the experience of time is not universal but rather culturally contingent and deeply impacted by life-changing events, such as immigration and displacement.

In Rom Cohen’s works, time is manifested in a variety of forms: objective, subjective, phenomenological, physical-bodily, etc. It can bend, expand in a fluid, non-linear manner that synergizes periods, thereby liberating past, present, and future to discuss the immigrant body amongst themselves. By entangling the links between different times, by activating the past within the present, it appears that Rom Cohen manages to connect narratives from different time frames to form new combinations. This is because her glass sculptures speak of the simultaneity of a body concurrently existing in a number of cultural spaces and times. These are micro-narratives that teach us something about the ways in which the artist’s body is constituted as a fused form, which provokes discordance between early and late. This is a body that binds together memories from there and here, memories derived from the trauma of immigration, which, although occurring decades ago, may in fact have never ended. Glass helps undermine the autocracy of the modernist perception of immigration as an event that takes place at a specific point in time, and advances the understanding that the immigrant continues to exist in numerous temporal spaces simultaneously. Glass enables to experience time, body, and movement in a condensed and complex manner. It tells the story of the body in immigration in the transnational era, in a pragmatic, but also inclusive and fluid, manner. As a result, there is no obligation to choose a binary form between past and present, because these are not necessarily arranged linearly—glass is the substance upon which different and simultaneous times can exist, side by side, while exchanging information and narratives.

Rom Cohen’s glass sculptures become, therefore, a site at which traumas are focalized—recent and distant traumas communicate. In terms of materiality, the visible is manifested in the material and the invisible needs to be discovered and decoded. The clues are embedded in the material and erupt from within it. The material speaks what the artist silences, what she does not or cannot say. Like the glass that cuts, but which is also fragile and shatters, so too the artist’s immigrant body is vulnerable and fragile. The material’s element of transparency serves the artist as a forceful and effective metaphor for the collapse of the distinction between past and present, between private and public—that is, prior to immigration and after—between the former place and the new place, between her being a woman in a patriarchal and nationalist world and the private narrative of her gendered body. There is a simultaneity of the gaze because the material enables it, which unlike opaque material, enables vision through the different spatial layers and different times.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The glass sculptures are therefore bearers of memory that tell the story first-hand. Indeed, this is a heavy burden, sometimes unbearably so to the point of causing breakage and shattering, and consequently, the redeployment and reorganization of inner strengths. By means of Rom Cohen’s treatment of the material and its various “reincarnations,” she performatively expresses her narrative as an immigrant from the former Soviet Union. Initially, the glass was arranged as large and flat windowpanes, then they are cut precisely into multiple shards. Finally, they are reassembled as volumetric forms simulating human and animal figures. The same material, in different forms and manifestations. The same material, in its evolving and changing meanings. Just like the reincarnations of the female immigrant (Lomsky-Feder and Rappaport, 2010).

**Conclusion**

Research in memory studies, which draw on material culture or thoughts about materiality and memory, help understand the ways in which material can serve as a bridge between the present and past, especially the personal trauma of immigration and the shared trauma of large groups within society. In this context, Elizabeth Crooke’s work, in which she deals with the analysis of personal memory objects and how they constitute political object, as well as the processes of grieving and trauma they embody, is of special importance. Following Crooke, I find that the private emotions of female artists in Israel who experienced immigration, find an outlet for their expression in artistic objects, which serve as agents and conveyers of a complex political narrative—a narrative about power relations—and in so doing actively participate in the social dynamics of the Israeli nation state (Dekel, 2016). I wish to argue that the material Rom Cohen chooses does not only speak and exercise its own agency but that its speech is characteristically subversive: the sculpture says what the artist does not say. It assumes the liberty to entangle times and memories and can convey narratives in a condensed and non-linear manner. Thus, the agentic role in Rom Cohen’s sculptures is particularly significant.

My motivation for discussing Rom Cohen’s sculptures is to understand issues related to immigrant and gendered identities by way of discussing the material. My interview with the artist, which called attention to other aspects of her work while complicating its narrative underpinnings, culminated in a better understanding of spaces of multiple meanings—both the artist’s personal-subjective space and of the glass that speaks, and also the social-national space of Israeli society.

In this study, I aimed to argue that the issue of materiality is central to the artist discussed. The raw material of her works is in fact synonymous with her biography. In Cohen Rom’s work the themes of breach and transparency are associated with the immigration experience and the attempt to speak about her hybrid and disjointed identity by means of fragments of memory literally constructed from glass that she breaks and reconstructs. The objects she endeavors to freeze in time, as memory capsules from the old homeland carried into the future, enable the existence of these memories in the new post-immigration present in a new nation state. The integrative theoretical discourse in this paper represents gendered views and feminist criticism enfolded in the works of art of female immigrants, which deal with their memories and transnational identity. By using glass, the artist effectively conducts a dynamic negotiation between past and present, which exists within her and between her and the members of her family, as well as between her and different and various communities living in Israeli society and through them she reflects the processes of constructing her identity.

Research from a gendered perspective of processes involving young women’s transition to maturity have become a focal point and topic for intense debate for many scholars from a variety of disciplines (Aspola, Gonick and Harris, 2005; Cote, 2000: Lev Ari, 1994; Rice, 2014). These studies identify that circumstances of shock and extreme change, such as extraction and immigration, catalyze young women’s processes of identity solidification. This is precisely the experience of girls who arrived in Israel during the first wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union during the 1990s and 2000s.

This paper discusses a mature female artist who is equipped with means far more sophisticated than in the past for contemplation and reflection on the period of adolescence she experienced when arriving in Israel. The discussion surrounding the artworks she created as a mature woman reveals the ways in which subjects that experienced immigration express the complex and continuous system of constructing identity, both in gendered terms and in national and communal terms. These include the visual expression of a system of expectations and of processes of social negotiation involved in the consolidation of their changing identity, their social criticism toward the situation, and their subsequent insights—both personal and general-political. Rom Cohen’s glass sculptures constitute windows into types of knowledge and perspectives which contribute to the understanding of the private biography of the immigrant and her memory stories. While bearing the unique stamp of its subject, each female immigrant’s immigration narrative is representative of a common female immigrant experience. In Tamar Elor’s words, “The private story of a certain individual has double value: it is precise and outlines the transitory, and at the same time, is set alongside other stories, which position it in a public, social, and historical context. Thus, the importance of the private biography enhances as a source of social insight, and how social insights unravel into endless one-time stories” (Elor, 2006: 230).

Indeed, in the analysis of in-depth interviews and the literature on artist Rom Cohen, the topic of the difficult duality of the identity crisis against both a gendered and communal-national background, comes to the fore. Analysis of this paper’s findings correspond with the professional literature; however, it is innovative in the sense that it appropriates a unique perspective from which to draw a significant amount of the information—works of art. Given that the present paper proposes a discussion rooted in material and memory studies, it expands the extant theoretical knowledge on the topic and raises issues that call for further investigation. One can say that the insights arising from analysis of the case study discussed in this paper, reveal that works of art can facilitate and nurture research in other disciplines. Additional research in this field is surely needed. To accomplish this, the number of interviews with young women with a similar background in immigration should increase significantly and coincide with analysis of and discourse on works of art. Moreover, it would be advantageous for continuing studies of this sort to expand the examined social groups, and compare between immigrant female artists who arrived in Israel from different countries around the world. Such a study will examine the points of similarity and difference between women from different social groups living in Israel today, and will provide insights into main forms of action that will benefit female immigrants arriving in Israel in the future.

1. Latour coined the term “actants,” which refers to both human and nonhuman players who take an active role in any given field. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To the best of my knowledge, Rom Cohen is the only artist in Israel who engages in this work method. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For further reading on work in glass, in general, and glass artwork produced by women, in particular, see:

   Beretta, Marco (2009). *The Alchemy of Glass: Counterfeit, Imitation, and Transformation in Ancient Glassmaking*. Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, USA.

   Brandhan, Gail (2010). *Breaking the glass ceiling: Women working with glass*, *The Flow* (Winter, 2010).

   Ritchie, Ian (2004). Aesthetics in Glass Structure, In: *Structural Engineering International Quarterly Journal* (Switzerland).

   Morris, William and Elliot, Kate (1989). *Glass: Artifact and Art*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.

   Layton, Peter (1996). *Glass Art*, London: A & C Black Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In this quotation, the artist is referring to the time when the former Soviet Union was experiencing “perestroika,” which entailed all the political reforms and reorganization of the economy between 1987-1991 led by Mikhail Gorbachev. Another term related with this era is “glasnost,” which was perceived in the West as a bent toward more freedom of speech and democratization, however, Gorbachev perceived it more in terms of adopting transparency and lack of censorship in all things related to the economical restructuring and government practices (from this there was slippage to the general concept of freedom of speech and relief of censorship for all citizens.) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. And still, we should remember that immigration is not only a wound and crisis for the individual but also for the absorbing social group, and therefore, for the entire society (Lomsky-Feder, Rappaport, and Ginsberg, 2010). Thus, the installation does not refer only to the female immigrant, but also society in its entirety. If the immigrant is injured or “broken,” so is society. In other words, there is a dynamic of reciprocity, and it is impossible to scrutinize only the narrative of female immigrant subjects, rather it is necessary to see the comprehensive system of power relations operating at the time at which a significant wave of immigration arrives, like the immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s.

   Shards provoke aesthetic sensibilities. Glazes contrast rough surfaces of discarded china. The roundness of a piece from a broken doll’s face stops abruptly at the edge of a break. Shards of glass share a sense of clawing back time: a facet emerges out of the soil. Artists ask how long has it been there and who dropped this fragment? What was the whole shape before the break? These questions provide the basis of exploration for a series of images involving shards.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)