

## **TOTAFOT / Arik Weiss**

**Curator: Dr. Guy MoragTzepelewitz**

The ceremony of putting on *tefillin* – phylacteries – for the very first time, marks the coming of age of the young Jewish man when he reaches 13. The boy is now considered an adult who takes on the responsibility for performing the religious precepts. One of these precepts, the commandment to “lay *tefillin*” is mentioned in the Bible several times. In Deuteronomy 11:18, Jewish males are directed to “Bind them as a sign upon your hand, and let them serve as frontlets (*totafot*) on your forehead.”

The binding, the connection between the wrapped object and the body, has performative, ritualistic, and artistic elements. Out of the entire 613 Commandments, the binding of the *tefillin* is one of the few for which it is difficult to find a rational justification. Because there was no clear cut “reason,” the early kabbalists were the ones to raise various explanations for them. Archaeological findings from the Qumran caves show that the shape of the *tefillin* has remained unchanged since the Second Temple era; neither has their raw material or the parchment with the scriptural passages they contain.

Both the *tefillin* – the two black “little cubes” with black bindings – for the head (symbolizing the brain, the rational) and for the arm (symbolizing the heart, the emotional), are made of cowhide, from an animal ritually pure. Drying and tanning the hide requires great skill to produce a durable object.

**Arik Weiss** (b. 1966) is a multidisciplinary artist who examines various aspects of Judaism in his works. His oeuvre ranges across many mediums (sculpture, photography, printmaking, and design). Weiss uses Jewish philosophical ideas from various periods, such as biblical verses, sayings, customs, and rituals, intertwines them with the contemporary objects, charging them with new meanings. The artist uses these Jewish elements in an attempt to find their parallels in contemporary art, and many of his artworks have an iconographic feel.

In recent years, Weiss has focused on researching the philosophical and formal aspects of the *tefillin* – the phylacteries.

To borrow Foucault’s concepts of discourse and power, we may say that Weiss uses the existing discourse in the art world mainly to provide an opportunity for a different kind of thought to be heard, and he stretches its boundaries. He engages in an exposure of the mechanisms of power between Man and God as well as between Man and his fellow

man, examining the connection between Judaism and accepted and unacceptable categories in the art world. He exhibits the *tefillin* as a symbol, but also applies formal and spiritual reduction to them. Weiss dreams of the *tefillin*, attracted to their blackness, but changes them, deconstructs, assembles, reconstructs them, thinking of them as a kind of “black box” which absorbs and documents human thoughts and deeds, encoding within itself a mystical, secret explanation.

Weiss thinks about their visual look, attempting to understand the gender differences attributed to them; he examines the meanings of the elements of binding and wrapping, essentially linking his soul through the continuous attempts to capture the power relations between the brain and the heart. Through these powerful, monumental images, so frequently seen in daily life, he has created new relationships between the physical and spiritual, between human beings and the environment, based on traditions such as Conceptualism and American Minimalism.

Binding in Weiss’s works functions as an element in the traditional ritual, but also acts as an element in violent performative gestures, primarily self-inflicted during body art performances, such as by artist Chris Burden. Weiss corresponds with gestures in Israeli art that are almost sadomasochistic, as in artworks by Moti Mizrachi, Micha Kirschner, and others. His works give rise to questions such as whether there is a dichotomy between religious art which formed the basis of western art for centuries, and between contemporary art, or between body and soul, between the masochist and the sadist. After all, if the masochist asks the sadist to cause him pain – isn’t he himself acting like a sadist?

When Arik Weiss’s works are viewed against the backdrop of the current art discourse, they create a link that is definitely hallucinatory and illusionary. In this sense, Weiss gives voice to issues that have been silenced in the contemporary art discourse for many reasons. Weiss addressed not only the power structures, but madness, as well. As Foucault wrote in his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961): “Religious beliefs prepare a kind of landscape of images, an illusory milieu favorable to every hallucination and every delirium.”