Host and guest
NY curator opens ambitious program
at TA Museum of Modern Art

Tel Aviv Museum hosts a 40-guest show

New York-based art critic and curator Steven Madoff presents a program of nine exhibitions and events with over 30 international artists and thinkers examining the theme of hospitality

By MARION FISCHEL

A n experiential exhibition "Host and Guest," opened May 2 at the Tel Aviv Museum of Modern Art, curated by Steven Henry Madoff, self-styled "art critic, curator, teacher and art historian, based in New York."

MADOFF, who recently joined the board of Artis, a nonprofit organization that promotes Israeli art within the global community, "in order to be able to come back to Israel often," was invited to curate an exhibition by Rivka Saker founder of Artis, and the museum.

When he received the request he was visiting California, writing a book at Stanford University and reading Jacques Derrida’s Of Hospitality, which inspired him to make the show an entry into the notion of hospitality and its offshoots.

"This project is not a traditional exhibition, it is an invention. There are nearly 40 participants, including artists, architects, writers and philosophers. It is a huge project," he says.

The first space introduces Dora Garcia from Madrid. Under the title "Exile," she refers to the situation in which the guest does not want to be a guest. The section includes five other artists and is curated by Suzanne Landau. There are nine tables on which objects are exposed, things received by mail throughout the duration of the exhibition; another table displays reference books on geography and politics.

THE NEXT space contains photographs of Bedouin territory, "the way they live, where they host, what they look like," says Madoff.

Guest curator Hou Hanru, from China, chose three Israelis and one Chinese for his section of the exhibition: Michal Kranzler, Michal El Zidem, Nir Evrez and Liu Xiongqiang. The latter toured all over the country, including Ramallah and made 36 paintings, among them eight paintings. Zidem lived in Hebrew for two years and gave the Arab residents cameras to photograph their daily lives. The result is 24 video tapes and other projects.

Kim Goo is from South Korea. Her project, "A Needle Woman," is a series of six videos, filmed in six cities, screened simultaneously. She stands in every video, filmed from behind, with hundreds of people walking in the street captured as they pass her.

The Rag media collective, composed of three artists from Delhi who work together, reflects the concepts of host and guest in terms of language itself. They offer live performances in Arabic and Hebrew. Additionally, the works of Arab poet Elsab Dajane and Hebrew poet Yehuda Smithe are read aloud in English.

"They are using [English] the language of the previous occupier," says Madoff, explaining that this creates a symbiosis between host and guest and occupies. The area hosts 20 metal frames from which hang 500 sheets of paper with the poems printed on them.

Another section, titled "Dis-aced," highlights a video by Roei Rosen, The Creation, in which illegal workers who do not speak English read his works. "In a sense they are inhabited by Roei Rosen, and are acting as ventriloquists; they speak him," says Madoff.

This space is the result of cooperation between Madoff himself, Rosen and philosopher Raphael Zagury-Overly. Madoff began to write a text, and then passed it over to the others to add to it, then back to him and so on.

"We each wrote a part, commenting on each other's words, something between a game and the Kabala," says the curator. "I ended up writing a play and had it performed by a theater company in New York and then videoed. There are no people in it, just objects talking to each other. I am making a political point: Workers are objects, they are manipulated."

This space hosts two vitrines, one in turn hosting a button and the other a piece of thread, the two main characters of Madoff's video.

"It is about how we use objects to animate and manipulate things. It is about the symbiosis between host and guest, about being inhabited," he says.

Other objects in the section include a gun, a bullet and salt shakers.

"Even the air speaks," Madoff says. "The idea is that in 1942 when the Paris Jews in Vel d’Hiv were taken ["hosted"], before being sent to be gassed in Auschwitz, a [fictional] little Jewish girl is grabbed on the street, the button and the piece of thread are pulled off her dress. They roll into a corner and there is a dialogue between the button, the thread and the corner."

On the walls of this section are 13 quotations on anti-Semitism and politics and a light box display of Eli Zadok's photographic work on Palestinian prisoners and their jailors.

ELSEWHERE, DAVID Tartakover, a major-language graphic designer displays a poster project. He has created four different versions of images of suitcases, "with stamps, maps and 1,000 copies of these posters will be printed and given away for free," says Madoff.

On three days in May and another three in June, Joshua Simon of the Bat Yam Museum will stage "Over-time," a four-hour trial on the exploitation of the cultural worker in which the public can participate, says the American curator. "What is a cultural worker?" asks The Jerusalem Post. "I am," he answers.

Brazilians Ana Paula Cohen will screen six videos of German, Danish, Brazilian and Israeli artists, and Madoff invited his longtime colleague, Prof. Jeffrey Schnapp, co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, to come up with an online show.

"Here the question is of borders," says Madoff. "What if we can erase the borders? This part is called 'Ghost.' It is a play on the name of the exhibition, 'Host and Guest.' Then there are other words that derive from the same root... hostile, 'hostage,' 'hospital,' all these refer to the host-guest complexity. Sometimes there is tension between host and guest."

Madoff's hopes for the exhibition are "to expose these host artists to an Israeli audience and that these curators and artists have an experience and maybe invite Israeli artists to their countries, thus is my goal. My goal as a curator is to show that there are many different ways. The exhibition is a living organism, it changes all the time and the audience takes part. It is alive."

Madoff, whose first visit to Israel was only three years ago, already knows here 10 times.

"I keep coming back because of the art community. The art being made here I think is quite exceptional. It is very exciting and there are many good artists, I didn’t know. He constantly visits studios and art schools and believes that "this is a really interesting time for Israeli art."

"As a Jew," he says, "I am engaged with what is happening with the Palestinians. Politics are not black and white, says Madoff. "I wanted to examine all the different notions, how people from different places see the subject. I am asking a question, I am reflecting, I am engaged with artists and thinkers. His enquiry is about the notion of guests and hospitality. It provoke a "thinking through.""