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# A Night at the Museum With Kant and Derrida

Rivka Saker is the driving force in Artis, a nonprofit that labors to raise the profile of contemporary Israeli art internationally. Her organization is also behind an exciting new exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Elie Armon Azoulay | May 06, 2013 6:39 PM



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Last Thursday "Host & Guest," a "platform of nine exhibitions, workshops and events" by artists from around the world "following from Jacques Derrida's book, 'Of Hospitality,' and Immanuel Kant's essay, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,'" according to the [project's website](#), opened at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

"Host & Guest" as a whole was curated by the American author and critic Steven Henry Madoff, who put together the projects that are presented throughout the museum. Each of the nine projects was organized by a curator, artist or a collective, drawing from the fields of philosophy, politics and culture.

"Exile," an installation by Spanish artist Dora Garcia, who represented her country at the last Venice Biennale, will consist of documents and objects that she and her friends will mail to the museum in the course of the overall event, which is scheduled to run through June 30.

Ana Paula Cohen, a curator from Sao Paulo, Brazil, will present "Embodied Archaeology of Architecture and Landscape," a series of public screenings and conversations with artists Cohen has collaborated with.

Madoff himself is curator of "Dis/placed," a collaboration between Israeli artists Roe Rosen and Eli Petel and the philosopher Raphael Zagury-Orly.

"Host & Guest" reflects the spirit of the organization that is behind the project: the New-York-based Artis, which was founded in 2004

for the purpose of promoting Israeli art in Israel and abroad.

These endeavors began with the organization's presentation in that year of Israeli Art Week in New York, which was timed to coincide with the 2004 Armory Show and was conceived by the founder of Artis, Rivka Saker.

Artis has gone on to support dozens of projects by prominent, young Israeli artists including Yael Bartana, Gilad Ratman, Naama Tsabar, Ariel Schlesinger and the Public Movement art collective.

Saker has been an art collector since the age of 20. In an interview at a café in Tel Aviv's Basel Street neighborhood - her base when she is not in New York - Saker speaks with a frankness that helps to dispel the suspicion that tends to surround such activities. What comes through most of all is her love for, and blind faith in, Israeli art.

A central force in the Israeli art world, Saker is a very influential figure at home and abroad. The chairwoman of Sotheby's Israel, she serves on many prize juries as well as on the boards or friends' associations of programs and institutions including the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the M.F.A. program at Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, the Jerusalem Season of Culture and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Saker was also a co-founder of ART TLV, Tel Aviv's international art biennial.

Saker says she wants to expand Artis' "field of struggle" beyond the United States. She also hopes to raise Israeli awareness about the success of local artists abroad and to encourage support for Israeli art at home.

In 2008 Saker, together with curator Yehudit Shapira-Haviv and gallery owners Shifra Shalit-Intrator (Dvir) and Irit Mayer Sommer (Sommer Contemporary Art), founded ART TLV. But, Saker says, Israeli institutions were unenthusiastic about the biennial format and she "was unwilling to run around after private money."

A Tel Aviv native, Saker has a bachelor's degree in economics and art history from the University of Haifa and a master's in urban planning from Haifa's Technion - Institute of Technology. She lives with her significant other, Uzi Zucker, and divides her time between Tel Aviv and New York.

Saker began working at Sotheby's Israel in 1982. In 2004, when the local branch of the auction house decided to return the focus of its activities to New York, in the wake of the second intifada, Saker saw an opportunity to promote contemporary Israeli art there.

"It would be more correct to use the term 'art from Israel' because it includes, from my perspective, Jewish and Arab artists," she emphasizes.

Saker makes extensive use of her wide circle of connections to achieve her goal of extending support to Israeli artists.

"I felt the huge lacuna in Israel, in terms of personal support for the artist, in terms of promoting the artist as an independent agent operating within the international scene," she says, mentioning with

evident envy the work of organizations such as the British Council and Los Angeles' Getty Research Institute.

"An artist like Anselm Kiefer, look how much the British government has spent on him over the years," Saker says, "nearly four million euros" on "printed material and books" alone, not to mention the cost of mounting exhibitions.

"Obviously," she continues, "there is a big gap between what we can afford as a state and what is happening in other countries. But there is no individual, no organization, no agency here that is trying to develop this area and to promote a greater understanding of the international art market," Saker says.

Artis is working to change this, by cultivating relations with the international art world and collaborating with existing organizations.

The organization, whose executive director is Yael Reinharz, brings artists, museum directors and art journalists to Israel for brief professional visits twice a year.

One of the first guests, Saker notes, was MoMA PS1 director Klaus Biesenbach. Soon after, the Israeli artist Sigalit Landau had a solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, followed one month later by an exhibition at MoMA PS1.

Saker emphasizes that in these visits the guests meet both young and established Israeli artists. Artis also sponsors a scholarship for Israeli artists at New York's Columbia University, whose first recipient was Guy Ben-Ner.

The organization's annual budget for disbursement is \$700,000 to \$750,000. Allocations run from \$500 to produce an exhibition brochure to \$25,000 for a major project.

Each year the Rivka Saker and Uzi Zucker Fund for Israeli Contemporary Art acquires works of art for the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Does she see a problem with wearing so many different hats?

"There are situations of involvement in institutions that are connected more closely to financial support," Saker says, adding, "In the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, for example, the team decides which works it wants."

Each member of the team, she explains, which once comprised the museum's director and chief curator, Mordechai Omer, who died in June 2011, as well as art historian Lea Dovev, artist Michal Na'aman, curator Ellen Ginton and Saker herself, "proposed acquisitions and we chose a group of works."

Continuing, Saker says, "All the works that were acquired belong to the museum, not to us. Since this subject is so important to me, I find no conflict of interests in my broad exposure to various institutions. I see no clash of interests. I am connected with many people and many organizations and I try to use my connections to promote goals that are important to me and to Artis, which is 'my baby.'"



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