

# Osnat Zukerman Rechter

## Contemporary Curating in Israel 1965–2010

**Contemporary Curating in Israel** is the first publication to offer a systematic and comprehensive account of curatorial practices in Israel, as they developed during the country's formative years. The book tracks the changing status of contemporary art curators in Israel and the growing visibility of their professional role over the course of five decades, while examining the affinities of this process with parallel processes in the international art field. Osnat Zukerman Rechter's clearly delineated account presents contemporary curating as the profession that transformed the contemporary art discourse, while establishing itself as a new discipline.

**Contemporary Curating in Israel** is divided into two parts: the first part is concerned with the exhibition as an independent medium characterized by its own operative logic and history. The discussion in this part encompasses a wide range of exhibitions and art events curated in Israel in both the recent and the distant past, while examining numerous curatorial approaches – including independent, activist, establishment and anti-establishment practices – which contributed to changing this professional field. In the second part of the book, curating is defined as an ongoing, long-term conceptual strategy that exceeds the scope of any one specific exhibition. This part presents seven curatorial biographies – those of Elisheva Cohen, Yona Fischer, Gideon Ofrat, Sara Breitberg-Semel, Galia Bar Or, Mordechai Omer, and Ariella Azoulay, which demonstrate that an evolving body of curatorial work, like an artistic body of work, can be interpreted as a complete unit of meaning. This approach

to the work of eight different curators reveals their position of power and their potential social, cultural, economic and educational impact.

The book engages with key issues in contemporary curating: the relations between artist and curator, the changing position of the viewer, the rise of the curator-as-creator and the artist-as-curator, various exhibition genres including a-historical, thematic exhibitions, and more. The book offers a new perspective on prevalent historiographical approaches and key trends in Israeli art, while revealing how the curatorial perspective is vital to understanding of the conditions of artistic action and display in our contemporary, digitally connected, global world.

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# The Curatorial Perspective

## Introduction

This book is concerned with the curatorial perspective and its examination. A history centered on art curating, in contrast to a history focused on the art object or the artist, first requires an exploration of the conditions of visibility of art in the public sphere, hence its importance. Curatorial decisions determine what is exhibited in most (national, municipal or private) public art spaces, and thus control what enters the public's field of visibility and is excluded from it, even if the "visiting public" remains unaware of this. At present, there is widespread awareness of the fact that curators fill a central function in the art field. This function is due to their role in selecting, organizing and displaying art in museums, galleries, and mega-exhibitions (such as biennials, triennials, Documenta and so forth), as well as at numerous additional events in which art is displayed and traded.

This awareness, however, is relatively new. Just a few decades ago, the role of the art curator was not highlighted in the same manner; hence, it was not perceived as influential, and therefore did not awaken resistance. The visibility of the curator's function and the formation of a related discourse are at the center of the paradigmatic shift taking place both in Israel and internationally over the past five decades. In this context, a distinction was created between museology, the field of knowledge concerning the study of museums, and of which curating was a part, and between contemporary curating as an independent field of practice and knowledge, which has given rise to distinct forms of study and training. The basic unit to which museology attends is the museum as an institution encompassing various departments (including conservation and restoration, cataloguing, registration, acquisition and education). By contrast, the basic unit to which contemporary curatorial practices attend is the tem-

porary exhibition. The process of differentiation that has served to distinguish curating from museology is related to the emerging conception of the exhibition as a medium, and as an independent statement made by a particular individual – the curator.

The mediating position of the contemporary curator expresses a rejection of the paradigmatic perception of a triangular relationship involving the artist, the artwork and the viewer. This relationship is given expression in the spiritual-metaphysical approach of Vassily Kandinsky, according to which the form of the work is merely a means of expressing its inner content, while its goal is to communicate to the viewer the contents of the artist's inner world. In the case of the contemporary curator, this triangle is replaced by a square of active relations between artist, curator, artworks (or actions) and "visiting publics."<sup>1</sup> The emergence of the contemporary curator's mediating presence shifts the emphasis from the treatment of an object to a collaboration with the artist, while underscoring the installation in the space as no less important than the stages of the work process in the studio. The relations between the four corners of the square change the viewers' passive stance, and enjoining them to engage in an active and exploratory mode of observation, which creates new meanings rather than merely deciphering and interpreting the intentions of the artist.

In the past, given the absence of awareness to the activity of curating, an art display was perceived as an existing fact, one that was both obvious and objective. Paul O'Neill has argued that the invisibility of the selection processes involved in curatorial activity at the museum served absolute values of neutrality and rationality, which constituted the basis for the development of the modern museum.<sup>2</sup> The changes that have led to the perception of

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will employ the term "visiting publics" to define the position of the visitors to art spaces and art events as that of active and involved observers, in contrast to the passive or distant positions expressed by terms such as "audience" or "viewers."

<sup>2</sup> Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012, p. 33.

contemporary curating as a field that is distinct from museology are related to the attrition of the values of objectivity and rationality. At the same time, one must also take into consideration the cultural and social importance given to choice as a value, as noted by Dorothea von Hantelmann, as well as the development of the idea of context as a value in its own right, as described by Brian O'Doherty.<sup>3</sup> Once the exhibition came to be viewed as a statement made by a specific individual – as the curator's creation – one could impose on it forms of evaluation and judgment similar to those imposed on works of art. In this light, one can understand the central debate accompanying the shift in the status of the curator, which showcased curators as creators or as artists in their own right.

As definitions of the profession in the international arena expanded, the sharp distinction between curators and artists became blurred following the actions of curators such as Willem Sandberg, Harald Szeemann, Walter Hopps, Seth Siegel, Marcia Tucker, Jan Hoet, Pontus Hultén, and Lucy Lippard, who were active and influenced the art world in the 1970s and 1980s. Such definitions were further impacted by the activity of curators including Hans Ulrich Obrist, Okwui Enwezor, Charles Esche, Catherine David, Ydessa Hendeles, Nicolas Bourriaud, Massimiliano Gioni, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, and Maria Lind, who have been active over the last three decades. At the same time, this blurring of boundaries was influenced by the actions of artists including Marcel Broodthaers, Claes Oldenburg, Joseph Kosuth, Haim Steinbach, Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, Fred Wilson, Rikrit Tiravanija, or Julieta Arana. These artists all responded to the changes in the making and display of art, adopting the exhibition as a quintessential artistic medium. In doing so, they contributed to formulating a critical stance in relation to the status of the curator. Parallel to processes unfolding in the United States, in South America and in Europe, one can identify in Israel key local figures, whose work has left an imprint in the field of visual art. These figures did not only create a fascinating body of exhibitions worthy of in-depth examination, but also performed actions leading to changes in the understanding of the curator's role, and in the perception of the temporary exhibition as a medium.

In Hebrew, the word for curator – *otzer* – comes from the root a.z.r., the same root of the word *otzar*, or treasure – thus conceptually pointing to a relationship between a valuable or important object and the person responsible for it. In English, the term “curator” includes

meanings pertaining to care and custodianship, which are identified in the contemporary world of museology more with the professions of restoration and conservation than with curating. David Levi Strauss has noted that under the Roman Empire, the title of “curator,” in the sense of a caretaker, was given to officials in charge of various public-works departments, such as sanitation, transportation, or policing. The *curatores regionum* were charged with maintaining the order in the fourteen 14 regions of Rome, whereas the *curatores aquarum* were responsible for the aqueducts.<sup>4</sup> Even today, the work of curators of national or municipal museums is supposed to preserve a dimension of public responsibility, even if these curators do not view themselves as public workers. However, the works of independent curators and of the curators of private collections or museums is free of such responsibility, and they may act based on private or other motives.

In Israel prior to the late 1970s, the act of organizing an exhibition was not referred to as “curating.” Art reviews written in the 1960s and 1970s utilized the terms “organizer,” “commissioner,” “responsible,” or “charged with.”<sup>5</sup> The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel's largest museum, did use the term “curator” from the time of its establishment (1965), yet mainly as the definition of an administrative rank. Martin Weil recounts that in 1973, when he was appointed as the director of the Israel Museum, he decided that administrative functions at the museum would be performed by a forum of curators rather than by operating managers. It was at this time that questions first arose concerning the skills required of curators and the expectations directed at them: “This had to do with the pressure of curators to be promoted, but it was also necessary in order to define the conditions for becoming a curator, an assistant to the curator, or an associate curator. At the time, we viewed the education of curators as a process of initiation unfolding over many years. I remember that we defined a curator as someone who has the talent to collect, as well as to study what has been collected, to stage exhibitions, and to have knowledge of public relations and fund-raising.”<sup>6</sup>

In December 1974, Yigal Zalmona and Ilan Tamir, who had both been working at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, resigned from their positions, arguing that the museum lacked an organized exhibition policy, did not promote young artists, and was plagued by administrative and managerial problems. Their letter of resignation, which was addressed to Haim Gamzu, the museum's director for 17 years (1947–1949; 1962–1976) was signed using the title “curator” –

3 Dorothea von Hantelmann, “The Curatorial Paradigm”, *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): 6-12; Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.

4 David Levi Strauss, “The Bias of the World: Curating after Szeemann and Hopps,” *Art Lies* 59 (Fall 2008): 37.

5 The terms “commissioner,” “responsible” and “in charge of” appear, for instance, in the art reviews written by Haim Gamzu on the international exhibitions held in the 1960s; see Gila Ballas, ed., *Haim Gamzu: Art Reviews*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2006, pp. 559, 561, 568. See also Joav BarEl's review of the exhibition “Labyrinth,” curated by Yona Fischer at the Israel Museum in 1967, in which the curator is titled “organizer”: Mordechai Omer, ed., *Joav BarEl, Between Sobriety and Innocence*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004, p. 190.

6 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, interview with Martin Weil, August 18, 2011, Jerusalem.

Zalmona as the curator of graphic arts, and Tamir as the curator of painting.<sup>7</sup> The Tel Aviv Museum itself only began employing the term “curator” several years later, when Mark Scheps assumed the role of director in January 1977. Scheps recounted that when he replaced Haim Gamzu, the museum had no clearly defined positions or departments. Scheps relied on the model of the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a departmental museum, established several departments at the Tel Aviv Museum, and appointed curators to head them.<sup>8</sup> Sara Breitberg-Semel, who was appointed as the head of the Israeli art department, noted that in 1982, when she was chosen to curate the Israeli Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, she was still not referred to as a “curator,” but rather as a “commissioner.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the first instances in which the word “curator” appeared in Hebrew in to refer to a person organizing an exhibition was in the May 1975 issue of the review *Musag* (“concept” in Hebrew), which contained a review by Dan Kedar of Robert Rauschenberg’s exhibition that same year at the Israel Museum. Kedar used the Hebrew word *otzer*, followed in parenthesis by the English “curator”: “I feel compelled to confront the worldview and policy of Mr. Yona Fischer, the curator of the Israel Museum.”<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to point to the precise moment in which the term “curating” was established in Hebrew as a term referring to the act of organizing or staging exhibitions. It seems to have remained a description of an administrative rank in a museum at least until the mid-1970s, and came to be regularly used in its current sense only towards the end of that decade. Later on, this term also came to be conjugated as a verb.



The viewpoint of contemporary curating is different than a museological viewpoint, and is distinguished from the well-established field of museum studies. The reciprocal relations between these two points of view, their areas of confluence and the manner in which the changes in curatorial practices have impacted museum systems will be addressed in this book only partially. Central and fundamental

themes that have remained consistent in museological discourse over the years, such as questions of authenticity, of institutional organization and definition, of collections and permanent displays, of museum architecture and of nationality in a museum context are not awarded a central place in the study of contemporary curating, and some of them are not relevant to it. By contrast, international mega-exhibitions (such as Manifesta, Documenta and the Venice Biennale) are a subject widely discussed in the context of contemporary curatorial practices, yet one that is less relevant to the study of museums.

The theoretical concern with contemporary curating began developing in the mid-1990s. The first important anthology devoted to the changes in the understanding of the temporary exhibition as a medium, and in the role of the contemporary curator, was published in 1996, and was edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne. The articles in this anthology were concerned, among other things, with the beginning of thinking about the exhibition as a statement, the rhetoric of exhibitions, international mega-exhibitions and the changes in the status of the viewer and in the roles of the contemporary curator. They constituted initial attempts to map the field, yet – as the anthology’s title, *Thinking about Exhibition*, reveals, they focused on the subject of the exhibition, and were only indirectly concerned with curatorial practices.<sup>11</sup> That year also saw the publication of documentation of one of the first seminars dedicated to a discussion of curating. This seminar took place at the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada on November 13–18, 1994, and encompassed hours of discussions concerning the nature of the contemporary curator’s role and its implications.<sup>12</sup> In the two decades that have since elapsed, several dozens of anthologies and collections of articles have been published on the subject of curating, alongside publications of discussions and interviews with curators.

A number of journals are dedicated to exploring various issues in contemporary curating. Prominent among them are the *Manifesta Journal* (published since Spring 2003), *The Exhibitionist* (published in print from January 2010 to 2016), and *Journal of Curatorial Studies* (published since February 2012). A number of art journals have dedicated issues to the subject of curating in recent years.<sup>13</sup>

7 For Zalmona and Tamir’s letter, see Tel Aviv Museum of Art, “*The Eyes of the Nation*”: *Visual Art in a Country Without Boundaries*, April 7–May 30, 1998, p. 66; for further mention of this affair, see Ellie Armon-Azoulay, “Yigal Zalmona: In Praise of the Canon,” *Haaretz*, June 17, 2010, in Hebrew. In 1980, Zalmona moved to the Israel Museum, where he served as the “Curator of Israeli Art” and later as “Chief Interdisciplinary Curator” until his retirement in 2012.

8 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, interview with Mark Scheps, September 9, 2012, Tel Aviv.

9 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, interview with Sara Breitberg-Semel, August 2, 2011, Tel Aviv.

10 Dan Kedar, exhibition review, *Musag* 2, May 1975: 37, in Hebrew.

11 Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibition*, New York: Routledge, 1996.

12 Peter White, Publication Coordinator, *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*, Alberta, Canada: Banff Centre Press, 1996.

13 See, for instance, *Art Lies* 59 (Fall 2008), which was dedicated to the subject of the “Death of the Curator,” as well as the ten issues of *Mousse Magazine*, which included inserts discussing curating as a special project edited by Jens Hoffmann: “Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating,” *Mousse Magazine* 25–34 (September 2010–June 2012).



In 2010, the first book in a series of “*Exhibition Histories*” was initiated by Charles Esche and Mark Lewis. These are in-depth studies of past exhibitions from the late 1960s onward, which were identified as groundbreaking in the context of the recent historiography of curatorial practices. In addition to this series, additional publications that focused on important past exhibitions include the two volumes by Bruce Altshuler that review the exhibitions that “made history” from 1863 to 2002, and Jens Hoffman’s *Show Time*, a book on the 50 most influential exhibitions by contemporary curators in 1989–2014. These publications have contributed to the structuring of the temporary exhibition as a medium that is fully and totally identified with curatorial practice.

In this context, it is important to note that despite the clear and deep affinity between the temporary exhibition as a medium and the work of the contemporary curator working in this medium, the temporary exhibition has also been related to the work of artists no less than to new curatorial activity. From a historical perspective, there exists a gap between the changes occurring in the medium of the exhibition and between those in the visibility of curating. The late 1960s are widely identified as the period in which the role of the curator evolved to acquire the meaning attributed to it today, yet the history of groundbreaking exhibitions began many years earlier. Paul O’Neill refers to El Lissitzky’s exhibition *The Abstract Cabinet*, which took place in Hanover, Germany, in 1927–1928; Frederick Kiesler’s exhibition in Vienna in 1924; Marcel Duchamp’s installation *Mile of String*, shown as part of the Surrealist exhibition in New York in 1942; and Lucio Fontana’s *Black Environment*, shown in 1949, as having impacted the perception of the exhibition as a distinct medium.<sup>14</sup> As O’Neill argues, these exhibitions redefined the position of the viewer as an active agent in the reception of the work of art, and while stressing the site-bounded nature of the artwork, they also defined the exhibition space as the main context and the primary medium for the realization of the artwork the creation of its meaning. Terry Smith devoted an extensive discussion to the artists Marcel Broodthaers, Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, among others, as artists who activated the exhibition as a medium even prior to the demarcation of a clear shift in the role of the curator.<sup>15</sup> In 2012, two books, by O’Neill and Smith, first attempted to systematically attend to major historiographical questions concerning curating, including the question of the connection between the medium of the temporary exhibition and the action of the contemporary curator. These books constitute important milestones in confronting central questions in this emerging field: What is contemporary

curating? In what directions is it developing? And what is the status and role of the contemporary curator?

O’Neill’s discussion pointed to discourse as a central term in this context. His attempt to explain the changes that gave rise to curating in the late 1960s, and more clearly during the 1970s, was predicated on what he called, following Seth Siegelaub, a “demystification” of the curator’s role. Mystification, in the sense of invisibility and a blurred definition, was created due to the fact that the curator’s role was long played out “behind the scenes,” in a context in which curators were part of the hidden structure of the art world. O’Neill argued that curatorial practice became visible following a process of demystification, which – as Siegelaub emphasized – was a necessary process of revealing and evaluating these hidden curatorial components of an exhibition. Visibility gave rise to a discourse that underscored the mediating function of the curator’s role and therefore turned curators into a central subject of critique. Thus, according to O’Neill, “The emergence of the curatorial position that began with the process of demystification – as an opposition to the dominant order of what, and who, constituted a work of art – became a discussion about the values and meanings of the work of the exhibition”.<sup>16</sup> In the late 1980s, the activists of the second wave of institutional critique, whose notable representatives in New York were Andrea Fraser, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, sought to translate this opposition into an examination of art institutions and their power.<sup>17</sup> They understood that without the institutions that are internal to art, there is no art. Hence, according to O’Neill, the curator was seen as a vital insider. These years, as O’Neill argued, also gave rise to a “remystification” process, as the curator’s position was once again blurred and recast as that of a single author redefining the framework of the creative process and the display of art. This position became dominant to the point that the exhibition narratives dictated by some author-curators in thematic, ahistorical group exhibitions juxtaposed the artworks themselves.<sup>18</sup> The visibility of the curator’s mediating position, which emerged in the 1960s and became increasingly dominant through the 1980s, reached, according to O’Neill, a new level of visibility in the 1990s. Curators internalized the potential power embedded in their position, defined art’s framework of production and shaped exhibitions individually, and almost as sole players.

In contrast to O’Neill’s book, Smith’s book marks the “contemporary” as a key term. He examined the question of curatorial thinking, and its uniqueness in relation to other forms of thinking, relying on “contemporaneity” as an ahistorical term bridging the gap between curatorial phe-

14 Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, pp. 11–13.

15 Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2012, pp. 103–116.

16 O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, p. 27.

17 The first wave of institutional critique arose in the late 1960s, and its quintessential representatives were artists such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and the Guerrilla Art Action Group.

18 O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, pp. 27–28.

nomena occurring in the 1970s and those of recent years. In earlier studies, Smith attempted to distinguish between modern and contemporary art, addressing contemporaneity as a defining condition of our historical present. In this book he argued that it was impossible to understand curating as distinct from contemporaneity, since beginning in the late 20th century, art became above all contemporary. Much like contemporary art, contemporary curating is embroiled in time, yet is not bound to it, and acts in actual space as well as in the virtual one. At the same time, the object of contemporary curating, he argued, is larger and more comprehensive than contemporary art. This is due to the fact that the role of the curators is to establish contemporaneity not only in relation to art created in the present (which is not limited to art considered “contemporary”), but also in relation to art created in the past, and even in relation to future art. Smith, in contrast to O’Neill, viewed the display and exhibition making, rather than discourse, as curatorial practice’s main tools of expression. And since curatorial thinking is always embedded in the actual practice of organizing an exhibition, “thinking curating,” according to Smith, means doing the exhibition as it relates to contemporaneity. Exhibiting artistic meaning is the contemporary curator’s main task.<sup>19</sup>

Smith exemplified his argument through the work of three curators. The first is Kirk Varnedoe, the curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988–2001. Varnedoe created a continuity of modernist values within contemporary art by *rethinking the museum’s* acquisitions policy and the display of the collection, as evidenced for instance by his initiation of the exhibition series “Artist’s Choice.” The second curator is Okwui Enwezor, who became known mainly as the curator of mega-exhibitions including the Second Biennale in Johannesburg (1997), *Documenta 11* in Kassel (2002), and the Biennale in Gwangju (2008), and whose curatorial work contributed to the exposure of African art and placed political questions concerning globalization and postcolonial constellations on the agenda of artistic discourse. The third example provided by Smith is Nicholas Bourriaud. A curator, theorist, co-founder of the Palais de Tokyo museum in Paris, and the director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 2011–2015, Bourriaud coined the term “relational aesthetics” in a book bearing the same title.<sup>20</sup> These three curators represent, for Smith, three respective curatorial tendencies in relation to the contemporary. The first tendency, identified with Kirk Varnedoe, is related to the continuity of modernist values; the second, identified with Okwui Enwezor, is related

to the postcolonial condition, while the third, identified with Nicolas Bourriaud, pertains to “relational aesthetics”—that is, the range of artistic practices based on relations among people and on the social contexts in which these relations evolve. Although these tendencies diverge significantly in terms of their extent and impact, Smith argues that they all required a new approach to organizing exhibitions. In this sense, curatorial thinking does not merely follow art, providing it with visibility and a context, since it precedes the critical response, the response of the visiting publics and its historical evaluation, which always arrives retrospectively.<sup>21</sup> Thus, as Smith argues, curatorial thinking advances hand in hand with artistic practices, and both comprise forms of studying contemporaneity.

O’Neill and Smith’s books were constitutive studies in the field. O’Neill provided a coherent historical survey of the development of contemporary curating and the discourse on curatorial practice, whereas Smith attempted to analyze the current and future possibilities of the profession by relying on “contemporaneity” as a key term. Together, these two books completed the first step towards a disciplinary definition of curatorial thinking, hence their decisive importance. At the same time, they did so from a restricted perspective of artist vs. curator.<sup>22</sup> Contemporary curating and art are both subject to economic and political mechanisms of globalization, and it is necessary to examine the “over-visibility” of curators, in terms of their excess power, from a wider perspective, one mapping the centers of power and the extent of their influence, and evaluating their interests. Moreover, the different approaches to the relations between the curatorial and the contemporary, which surfaces as a key point in Smith’s discussion, are worthy of an examination on the level of the infrastructure, not only from the perspective of the study of contemporaneity, but also from a curatorial perspective. In other words, there is both conceptual and historical meaning to the complex ties between the development of different genres of temporary exhibitions – ahistorical theme exhibitions, action and performance exhibitions, large solo exhibitions and mega-exhibitions – and between the status and roles of curators. The discussion of curating must take into account that the format of the exhibition is, as Maria Lind has noted, just one of the many possible modes of display by means of which one can become acquainted with art. Moreover, the conditions that have privileged this mode over the past century are changing, and may result in the loss of its power.<sup>23</sup> The technological developments of the past two

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, pp. 28–31.

<sup>20</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>22</sup> For a review of O’Neill’s book, Hyo Gyoung Jeon and Ambra Gattiglia, “Paul O’Neill: Curated Cultures and the Curator-as-Artist,” *Afterall Online* 22.7.2013, <http://www.afterall.org/online/8400>. See also the review by Gideon Ofrat, “The Victory of the Curator as Creator,” February 2013, <https://gideonofrat.wordpress.com>, in Hebrew.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Lind, “RSVP or: What Rhythm, Scale, and Format Can Do with Art,” in Brian Kuan Wood, ed., *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, pp. 137–150.

decades – the Internet, social platforms and cellular communications – are introducing significant changes into patterns of curatorial practice and into its character. The term “viral,” which pertains to dissemination through such information networks, may be extremely relevant in the context of modes of display and curating. The exhibition *Information* by Kynaston McShine (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970) marked, with an almost prophetic precision, the horizon of far-reaching changes catapulted by communication technologies. April 26, 2013, marked the debut of the first online biennale of contemporary art, titled *Reflection & Imagination*. This project was the result of a collaboration between Jan Hoet, a Belgian curator who had long been active in the international curating arena, and Art+, a social network established by members of the art world and amateurs. This was the first platform of its kind to create an online encounter between 30 curators, each of whom were asked to select five artists from among 180 artists hailing from a range of countries, based on medium-related categories.<sup>24</sup> The format of the online biennale was in fact a fusion of an exhibition and an event, which cancelled the differences in their temporal definition through the use of contemporary technology. This online biennale highlighted a set of terms that was highly relevant for a discussion of curating: contemporaneity, globalism, innovation, action, networks and imagination.

## TWO TURNS

In the professional literature, two main turns in the field of curating are outlined: the first took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period that gave rise to the first close collaborations between contemporary artists and curators; the second took place in the early 1990s, when this change was first defined from historiographical and theoretical perspective.<sup>25</sup>

The first turn was related to a large number of exhibitions that took place around the world, and involved important changes in the relations between the various components that were traditionally part of them, shifting the emphasis from art object to process and action and from institutional art spaces to additional types of

spaces.<sup>26</sup> Two of the curators which are representative of this shift are the Swiss Harald Szeemann in Europe, and Seth Siegelau in New York. Szeemann (1933–2005) was identified more than any other with the role of the independent author-curator, and with the shift in the status of the profession. He had originally studied theater, and subsequently established a one-man theater, in which he served as actor, director, and marketing professional. In 1961, when he was 28, he was appointed as the director of Kunsthalle Bern, becoming the youngest European person ever appointed to such a position.<sup>27</sup> He served as its director for eight years, before being constrained to leave this position in 1969 due to public criticism of the last exhibition he curated there, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*. The title of the exhibition underscored the concept rather than its realization, as detailed by the subtitle: “Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information.” The exhibition opened on March 22, 1969, with the participation of 66 Western European and North American artists, whose works were presented in the Kunsthalle galleries, and an additional 13 artists whose works were merely included in the catalogue.

Three of the artworks included in this exhibition serve to explain the opposition it awakened: in Michael Heizer’s *Bern Depression*, a crane brought a gigantic iron ball down on the plaza leading to the museum’s main entrance 25 times, shattering it again and again; in Ger van Elk’s action *Replacement Piece*, a square meter of the pavement in front of the Kunsthalle was removed and replaced with a photograph of that same square meter before its removal; and in Richard Serra’s *Splash Piece*, the artist splashed 210 kg. of molten lead along the intersection of the wall and the floor in the Kunsthalle’s lobby. David Levi Strauss argued that leaving Kunsthalle Bern following this exhibition was an act of rebellion on behalf of Szeemann, who sought to award himself a greater degree of freedom. This rebellious act, according to Levi Strauss, placed him closer to the ethos usually reserved for artists or writers, who are required to establish their authority through the quality of their work.<sup>28</sup>

Christian Rattemeyer compared Szeemann’s curatorial impact in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* with that of Wim Beeren in the exhibition *Op Losse*

24 Gideon Ofrat was chosen to represent Israel. For the list of curators see the biennale site: <http://www.biennaleonline.org/#work>

25 For a discussion of the evolution of the contemporary curator, see Beti Žerovc, “The Role of the Contemporary Art Curator: A Historical and Critical Analysis,” *Manifesta Journal* 5 (Summer 2005): 138-153. See also the studies by Smith and O’Neill mentioned above.

26 For a detailed list of these exhibitions, see Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

27 Kunsthalle Bern is an exhibition space resembling a public gallery, and was designed to display contemporary art. Unlike a museum, it does not have a permanent collection, and its activities do not include collecting and acquiring works. The curator at the Kunsthalle is thus freed of a number of the museum curator’s traditional roles, focusing mainly on temporary exhibitions.

28 Maria Lind, “RSVP or: What Rhythm, Scale, and Format Can Do with Art,” in Brian Kuan Wood, ed., *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, pp. 137-150.



*Schroeven – Situations and Cryptostructures*.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition curated by Beeren opened at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam a week prior to the opening of the exhibition in Bern (March 15, 1969), and was directly related to it.<sup>30</sup> With the exception of three participants, all of the artists whose works were exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum also participated in the exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, and many arrived to execute the work themselves. The openings of the two exhibitions were coordinated by the two curators in order to enable the artist to install their works at both sites in a manner compatible with both dates. Moreover, the production process of both exhibitions was also coordinated, since the funds that Szeemann received unexpectedly from the tobacco company Philip Morris enabled the American artists to fly to Europe and install their works both at the Stedelijk Museum and in Bern. Rattemeyer pointed to the fact that the exhibition curated by Szeemann became a milestone in the field of curating, whereas the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum received little attention, and until recently was almost absent from the historical narrative. The reason for this, in his opinion, was related to the different positions taken by the two curators. Szeemann enabled artistic production and was involved in the changes of the artistic practice, whereas Beeren, who was a product of a traditional art-historical education, observed the changes and sought to analyze them. Rattemeyer argued that this difference, in light of Szeemann's latter achievements, is what transformed the latter's exhibition into an important milestone, even though from a historical perspective it cannot be understood separately from Beeren's exhibition.<sup>31</sup>

Based on Rattemeyer's analysis and in light of Levi Strauss' distinction, one could argue that Szeemann's example is paradigmatic not only due to the quality of his curatorial work or thanks to its comprehensive and innovative nature, but also due to the construction of a new ethos, that of "the independent curator." This ethos,

which acquired a more distinct shape with every additional exhibition he curated, gained a conceptual framework when, in 1975, Szeemann established what he called "The Museum of Obsessions." Together with the "Agency for Intellectual Guest Labour," a one-man operational agency that Szeemann initiated already in 1969 and which supplied "intellectual production services" to his exhibitions and projects, the museum functioned as both a material and an immaterial entity.<sup>32</sup> The Museum of Obsessions actively included not only all of the exhibitions that Szeemann organized and the vast archive of materials he established in his home in Maggia, Switzerland, but also unrealized projects and potential exhibitions that he considered curating. Szeemann endowed the term "obsession" with a pre-Freudian tone of vital energy seeking a means of expression, rather than with the resonance of unconscious drives that must be transformed and become conscious. Thus, "The Museum of Obsessions" and its operational arm, the Intellectual Agency, enabled both the idea of the exhibition and its execution to exist in the curator's head only.<sup>33</sup> They allowed the art object to be brought to life by means of imagination and personal associations, while cancelling the need for a concrete space. Szeemann's strategy did not only emphasized the idea of the exhibition as a medium – an idea similarly underscored in the activity of other curators during these years – but also expropriated the exhibition from public or private institutions and exhibition spaces, transforming it into the figment of a single curator's imagination and into a personal object of desire.

Seth Siegelau (1942–2013) was an independent art dealer and exhibition organizer who owned a contemporary art gallery in New York in 1964–1966. Following the closing of his gallery and his work with a group of contemporary artists, he began organizing exhibitions in various available spaces. Siegelau was the first to organize a group exhibition in the format of a book (December 1968 – a product is

29 "Op Losse Schroeven" is a Dutch expression meaning "on loose screws" which points to an unstable structure incompatible with social or other norms, or to thinking outside the box. The term "Cryptostructures" in the subtitle underscores a blurry and unclear nature of the artworks and the installations in the show. See Christian Rattemeyer, "'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' 1969", in Christian Rattemeyer and other authors, *Exhibiting the New Art – 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes become Form' 1969*, London: Afterall Books, 2010, pp. 12–62.

30 Ibid., pp. 15–16.

31 Szeemann's professional resume included, among other things, *Happening and Fluxus* (Cologne, 1970), an exhibition based on installations, experimental theater and life events, in which the dimension of time played a more important role than that of space; *Documenta V* (Kassel, 1972); and the Venice Biennale (1980), in which, together with Achille Bonito Oliva, he initiated "Aperto" – a separate framework for the presentation of works by young artists. For a detailed list of exhibitions curated by Szeemann, see Tobia Bezzola and Roman Kurzmeyer, eds., *Harald Szeemann: with by through because towards despite* (catalogue of all exhibitions, 1957–2005), Zurich, Vienna and New York: Springer, 2007.

32 Originally, the name of the agency was "Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit." In Switzerland, the term *gastarbeit* refers to foreign work while alluding to the postwar period, when foreign Turkish, Italian and Spanish workers came to Switzerland and endured poor work conditions. By choosing this term, Szeemann provided the curatorial action with a socio-critical dimension, while endowing the curator with the status of a worker.

33 Harald Szeeman, "Museum der Obsessionen," in Bezzola and Kurzmeyer, *Harald Szeemann: with by through because towards despite*, pp. 370–379.



known as *The Xerox Book*, although Siegelau preferred to call it *The Photo-Copy Book*.<sup>34</sup> The book featured seven artists, each of which received a 25-page “exhibition space.” A month later, in January 1969, Siegelau curated an exhibition titled simply *January 5–31*, in accordance with the exhibition dates, in an office located in a New York City office building. Siegelau rented the office for a single month for 350 dollars, and presented an exhibition space that was nearly empty, even though it featured four artists: Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner. Robert Barry, for instance, presented a work that included two small, low-frequency transmitters. The transmitters, which broadcast on AM and FM radio stations, were invisible to the eye, and the transmissions could not be received in the exhibition space unless the visitor carried a radio. This work, which was imperceptible to the senses, composed as it was of electromagnetic energy, could only be studied by means of the catalogue, as was also the case with *The Xerox Book* and other projects initiated by Siegelau during this period. Although in this case the exhibition was “displayed” in a concrete space, here too the catalogue was necessary in order to inform the visiting public about its contents.<sup>35</sup>

Szeemann and Siegelau’s examples illuminate the changes that characterized the first turn in the field of curating, leading to a new kind of visibility and to a redefinition of the art curator’s role in the context of that period’s emerging conceptual and performance-art trends. These changes can be summarized by means of four principles: the first is the undermining of the art object’s status as artists began working conceptually, defining and describing their intentions in words rather than creating an object. This act of undermining positioned the curator and the artist at a similar starting point – the artist’s idea became the artwork, whereas the curator’s idea became the exhibition. The second principal was the renunciation of three-dimensional space, based on the insight that an exhibition did not require a museum or gallery space, or even an alternative space. It could be enfolded within a book, a catalogue, or even in the curator’s imagination. The inversion of the relations between the exhibition and the catalogue (which privileged the catalogue) strengthened the identification of the exhibition with the curator’s work

as the writer and editor of catalogues. A third principle, the collaboration between the curator and the artists, built on the curators’ choice of the artists they wished to work with, rather than the objects they wished to exhibit. The fourth principle was that curators began to adopt a strategy of rebellion as a curatorial ethos, in line with the artistic ethos.

The second turn, in the early 1990s, concerned the consolidation and growing professionalism of curating as a distinct discipline. This process involved initial forays into the study of curating. These included the gathering of historical data concerning curators; a historiography of exhibitions and a description of their syntax; attempts to define a canon of exhibitions and to define curating as a profession; and a growing number of publications by and about curators, which were concerned with different aspects of contemporary curating and with the temporary exhibition as its point of reference. The 1990s were also the climax of the phenomenon of the curator as creator or author. Michael Brenson termed these years “The Curator’s Moment,” since they gave rise to the first international meetings concerned with curators, and to conferences and public discussion devoted to curating.<sup>36</sup> This period also saw the opening of the first curatorial studies programs in institutions of higher education. The first program was inaugurated in Grenoble, France, at L’École du MAGASIN in 1987, and the second opened at the Royal College in London in 1992.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, these years saw the rise of numerous international mega-exhibitions predicated on the centrality of the curator.<sup>38</sup>

The quintessential example of a curator whose work represents this second turn is Hans Ulrich Obrist (b. 1968), who in November 2009 was ranked number one on the list of art-world “influencers.” The extensive curatorial activities of Obrist, who since 2006 has served as the co-curator and director of international projects at Serpentine Gallery in London, and in recent years has served as the artistic director there, includes hundreds of projects; two of them will be discussed below in order to elucidate his curatorial thinking. The first is *Do It*, an ongoing project initiated in 1993, which has already included over 50 exhibitions worldwide. These exhibitions are based on the execution of written instructions provided by artists, who do not participate in the process of the realization of their works. The artworks

34 Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, *The Xerox Book*, New York (December 1968), Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, p. 64.

35 The exhibition took place in Manhattan, at 44 East 52nd Street, and was visited by 488 visitors over the period of its display. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–73.

36 See quote and reference to Brenson in O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, p. 35.

37 Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta Decade*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005, p. 26.

38 The homepage of the world biennial foundation lists over 230 international mega-exhibitions held every two or three years. It does not include commercial art fairs and small local biennials. The majority of these exhibitions were founded from the 1980s onwards, and more than half of them were founded after the year 2000. The oldest among them are the Venice Biennale (established in 1895), followed by Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Sonsbeek in Arnhem, The Netherlands (1949); The Sao Paulo Biennial (1951); Documenta in Kassel, Germany (1955); Triennale – India in New Delhi (1968), and the Sydney Biennale (1973). <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennial-map>

are executed in new in different places around the globe, in some cases based on a translation of the instructions from the original language to other languages, depending on the site of the installation. Obrist's curatorial model for this project, which he defined as an "open-ended format" of exhibitions, is a direct continuation of conceptual trends defined in the art of the 1970s. It undoes the accepted relationship between the artists and the process of making and installing the artwork, enabling this process to exist independently based on written instructions. The execution process of the works is thus reinterpreted time and again, and the project becomes the work of an open-ended team of participants within global art networks, which endows it each time anew with meaning.

Obrist's second wide-ranging curatorial action is the Agency for Unrealized Projects – AUP. It began as an anthology of 107 unrealized projects by a range of artists, which were assembled in a book and were developed into an ongoing strategy of "open-ended curating." The "Agency," established as a collaboration between Serpentine Gallery in London and the online art site e-flux, presents these projects without realizing them, and invites artists to join in and present their ideas.<sup>39</sup> These two curatorial moves demonstrate how the curatorial approach represented by Obrist, a native of Switzerland, relates to that of his fellow countryman Szeemann, enabling him to further foster the ethos of the dominant, independent curator who activates the powerful institutions within which he operates, and recruits them to produce his ideas.<sup>40</sup>

Obrist's Agency for Unrealized Projects (AUP) continues the idea of Szeemann's intellectual agency, preserving the function of an "executive branch" responsible for realizing the curator's ideas. Yet in contrast to Szeemann, he does not retreat into his own head, but rather imposes his authority as a curator on the unrealized ideas of artists.

Another ongoing project by Obrist, which is not curatorial in the sense of organizing an exhibition yet is related to curating, is a project centered on documented conversations and interviews with key international professionals in the fields of art, writing, philosophy, science and architecture. This cumulative archive of conversations, which thus far encompasses hundreds of conversations and interviews and thousands of hours of recordings, also includes a large numbers of conversations he held with major curators, some of which have already been published in a book.<sup>41</sup> Obrist referred to the conversa-

tions with the curators as "a protest against forgetting." They were meant to prevent the loss of the stories of the generation of curators active in the second half of the 20th century in Europe and in the United States, whose members were responsible for transforming the profession and its visibility.<sup>42</sup> The presentation of the curators by name, and the documentation of their stories and the exposure of their professional activity, assist in clarifying the roles of the contemporary curator, and understanding the change they represent. Obrist's protest against forgetting is thus an additional stage in the process of underscoring visibility, a process shared by the current book, which involves, among other things, the gathering and dissemination of a corpus of information concerning curatorial activities. The intensive work of Obrist from the early 1990s to the present, and the numerous and widely disseminated materials he has created, are among the quintessential catalysts of the second turn – the reflective turn – in curating, which concerns questions pertaining to curating as praxis. The work practices of Obrist, who establishes archives composed of primary sources with no analysis and interpretation, and the dialogical format that has become identified with him, give rise to data inventories that constitute an infrastructure for the study of curating and the writing of its histories.<sup>43</sup>

The second turn also led to the initial definition of a distinction between curatorial practice and its theoretical consideration, as expressed by means of the term "the curatorial." Irit Rogoff was one of the first to formulate the distinction between "curating" and "the curatorial":

*For some time now we have been differentiating between 'curating', the practice of putting on exhibitions and the various professional expertises it involves and 'the curatorial', the possibility of framing those activities through series of principles and possibilities. In the realm of 'the curatorial' we see various principles that might not be associated with displaying works of art; principles of the production of knowledge, of activism, of cultural circulations and translations that begin to shape and determine other forms by which arts can engage. In a sense 'the curatorial' is thought and critical thought at that, that does not rush to embody itself, does not rush to concretize itself, but allows us to stay with the questions until they point us in some direction we might have not been able to predict.<sup>44</sup>*

39 The book containing the first anthology of projects is Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guy Tortosa, eds., *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealized Projects*, Münster, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1997.

40 Obrist's role at Serpentine Gallery was especially defined for him, and did not exist previously.

41 Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, Dijon and Zurich: Les presses du réel and JRP|Ringier, 2008.

42 This title was taken from an interview held by Obrist with the historian Eric Hobsbawm, in which the latter defined the work of the historian as a protest against forgetting.

43 For a discussion of Obrist's involvement in the creation of the archive, see Manacorda and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Archiving Time", *Manifesta Journal* 6 (Winter 2005): 322-332.

44 Irit Rogoff, "'Smuggling' - An Embodied Criticality", transversal 44 multilingual webjournal ISSN 1811-1696,

Rogoff suggested distinguishing between curating as a practice involving the installation and exhibition of art, and between the application of theoretical ideas about curating to ways of organizing cultural knowledge and forms of artistic action. She employs the term “the curatorial” to refer to this organizing thought process, which not only impacts the presentation of art, but also helps to reexamine the value of things, and is thus critical. The curator and scholar Maria Lind subsequently defined the curatorial as follows:

*“Curating” would be the technical modality – which we know from art institutions and independent projects – and “the curatorial” a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, a presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas.<sup>45</sup>*

Lind also proposed a parallel between the pair of terms “curating/the curatorial” and between “politics/the political,” based on the idea of “the political” as defined by the well-known theorist of political thought, Chantal Mouffe. Politics, according to Mouffe, is “the formal side of practices that reproduce certain orders,” whereas “the political” is the antithesis of consensus. An ever-present antagonistic potential that cannot be precisely located.<sup>46</sup> In a similar manner, Lind argued, curating was the sum of actions involved in organizing and staging exhibitions, whereas “the curatorial” was related to a methodology that challenged the existing order. By tying “the curatorial” and “the political,” Lind expands the limits of the definition of the curatorial and charges it with the potential of friction and confrontation with the system and with the institutional establishment.

Rogoff and Lind’s definitions conceptualize the curatorial as existing on a different level than curating as a practice of organizing and installing exhibitions, since it is a form of reflexive thought that also concerns curating itself. It offers a framework for curatorial practices and activities, enabling their examination by means of an organizing, critical gaze that suspends doing and the need to give ideas a body and form. Additionally, in the eyes of both scholars, the curatorial conceptually underscores a subversive dimension, which further establishes

the rebellious-critical ethos of action related to the new curating (and to modern art) since the late 1960s. At the same time, from Rogoff’s perspective, the curatorial’s level of existence is theoretical and distances itself from the concrete, whereas according to Lind, the curatorial is present as a set of relations and processes which, although invisible, have a concrete existence. The fine yet fundamental difference between Rogoff and Lind’s perspectives reflects a tension between thought and action that runs like a connective thread through contemporary curating, and which in fact exists – in the work of curators such as Szeemann, Siegelau and others – since “the first turn.” This tension between “concept,” “idea,” or “thought” and between “action” or “execution” was already inherent to conceptual art, in relation to which contemporary curating began to develop.

The year 2014 saw the publication of the first anthology devoted entirely to a discussion of the curatorial. Jean-Paul Martinon, the anthology’s editor, described the curatorial as a “philosophy of curating.”<sup>47</sup> According to Martinon, the curatorial is not necessarily beholden to history and time – neither the modern nor the contemporary – but is rather a way of organizing thought in its encounter with the other and with objects.<sup>48</sup> Martinon sought to examine the curatorial as a free principle of thought. By undoing its dependency on history and time, he sought to liberate it from the weight of the term context, as well as from the conventional division into historical periods. A reliance on philosophy rather than on history – as Lind similarly demonstrated in creating an affinity between the curatorial and the political – may attest to the attraction of thinkers to forms of thought characteristic of pre-modernity and antiquity, and to an avoidance of a reliance on modern forms of research and modes of thoughts. The attempt to anchor the curatorial, which grew out of the study of contemporary curating, in traditions of thought that emerged in antiquity, may thus also be relevant to the distinction between the discipline of museum studies – which is inextricably related to the birth of the modern museum as an institution – and between the emerging discipline of curating. Even if this hypothesis is far-reaching, one cannot ignore the fact that in order to characterize, define and conceptualize this young discipline and to consolidate its terminology, scholars of curating tended to rely on established disciplines.

2006: 3, [http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling/attachment\\_download/rogoff-smuggling.pdf](http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling/attachment_download/rogoff-smuggling.pdf) Rogoff was one of the founders of the doctoral studies program in which she then served as an advisor, as well as of the think group “Curatorial/Knowledge” at Goldsmith College, London; see [http://ck.kein.org/full\\_introduction](http://ck.kein.org/full_introduction)

<sup>45</sup> Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” in Brian Kuan Wood, ed., *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 64. This text was originally published in *Artforum* (October 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014. In recent years Martinon, a senior lecturer in the department of visual studies at Goldsmith College, London, has directed the doctoral studies program on “The Curatorial/Knowledge” together with Irit Rogoff. The anthology was produced within this framework.

<sup>48</sup> Martinon, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, location 368 (e-book).



Another term that emerged ca. 2011, alongside the distinction between “curating” and “the curatorial,” is the “paracuratorial.” Much like the “paramedical,” which is secondary and complementary to the medical, the paracuratorial is, according to Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell, everything that complements the exhibition and supports it, yet it does not involve work on the exhibition itself.<sup>49</sup> This includes all that is “curating without art,” i.e. accompanying texts, lectures, interviews, seminars, educational events, residencies, publications, screenings, readings and public talks; or, as Livia Páldi notes, everything that brings together, in different ways and by different means, artists, curators, and visiting publics.<sup>50</sup> The paracuratorial is not intended to create a hierarchy of primary and secondary fields, but rather to characterize a growing arena of activity, which developed alongside contemporary curating and in direct relation to the temporary exhibition. Vanessa Joan Müller has argued that much of this activity is born of the considerations of art institutions – galleries, museums and art centers – which seek to adopt an open and democratic attitude toward their publics, to render the exhibitions accessible and to include them in the process of their practices.<sup>51</sup> Müller identified the development of the paracuratorial as related to the second stage of the “institutional critique”: in contrast to the first wave, whose quintessential representatives tended to view the relations between artists and art institutions as containing an inherent conflict, the representatives of the second wave perceived themselves as part of the institutions and sought to utilize the exhibition as a privileged site in order to focus on sociopolitical issues – and, along with curators and museum directors, to extend art institutions’ scope of action. Thus, she argues, curators adopt for themselves the role of cultural critics (and often also of theorists and philosophers); with the support of the institutional platform, they expand the range to which curating applies, as does, for instance, Obrist. The paracuratorial attempts to relate academic and museum activities and educational-community activities, based on the understanding that they all entertain reciprocal relations with the market forces.

The terms “the curatorial” and “the paracuratorial” thus mark new developments, which could be identified

as a third turn in the consolidation of curating as a field of research and knowledge production.

## CURATING IN ISRAEL

As noted, the developments in the Israeli field of curating must be read in relation to those occurring in the Western world, since the local art field was influenced over the years by the events unfolding in this cultural arena. This book offers a comprehensive discussion of seven curators – Elisheva Cohen, Yona Fischer, Gideon Ofrat, Mordechai Omer, Sara Breitberg-Semel, Galia Bar Or and Ariella Azoulay – who all worked with a clear affinity to western culture and its history.<sup>52</sup> A number of them were also educated in academic institutions in Europe or the United States. This is also true of the decisive majority of the curators who were and currently are active in Israel. Thus, in examining the shifts in the fields of international curating over the past half-century, there is a fundamental compatibility in terms of turning points and emphases between these changes and local changes in Israel from 1965 onward. The study of curating in Israel is in its initial stages, and to date there exists no comprehensive publication on this subject. In contrast to the flood of publication that have appeared in the West in recent years (and which have yet to be translated into Hebrew), there currently exists no Israeli anthology presenting different aspects of contemporary curating.

Yael Eylat Van-Essen’s book *Rethinking the Museum*, published in 2016, is an important volume and the first of its kind to be written in Hebrew. It discusses the changes that have taken place in recent decades in the perception of the museum and its design in response to the digital revolution and to the penetration of new technologies into our lives. The book suggests rethinking museums as a hybrid site composed simultaneously of concrete and virtual spaces. Eylat Van-Essen examines the status of the museum as a site that must bridge the space between local and global arenas, and entertain reciprocal relations with the cultural, social and political sphere in which it is located. Her book touches upon the areas of interest explored by

49 Hoffmann and McDowell were among the first to use this term and to invite writers to attend to it in the framework of issue no. 4 of the review *The Exhibitionist*, where they were among the founders and editors; see Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell, “Reflection,” *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): 2-4.

50 Livia Páldi, “Notes on the Paracuratorial,” *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): 71-76.

51 Venessa Joan Müller, “Relays,” *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): 66-70.

52 Elisheva Cohen was born and educated in Germany. Many of the exhibitions she curated were concerned with European masters. Yona Fischer interned at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and at the Kunstmuseum in Basel, and worked over the years with a clear affinity to France. Gideon Ofrat based his work on Western philosophy, and in the last two decades on the thinking of Jacques Derrida, especially. Mordechai Omer was educated in New York and wrote his doctoral dissertation in London. Sara Breitberg-Semel worked as both a curator and as the editor of the art magazine *Studio* (which she edited in 1993–2003) with an exclusive affinity to Western culture. Galia Bar Or has comprehensively examined the history of art in kibbutz society and its European-born founders. Ariella Azoulay was educated in France, and her work bears a clear affinity to the thinking of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, as well as to French philosophy in the second half of the 20th century.



the current book, yet it is concerned with a new museology rather than with contemporary curating. Thus, its basic unit of investigation is the museum as an institution rather than the temporary exhibition, and its emphasis is on various types of museums, rather than exclusively on art museums. Additionally, Eylat Van-Essen's book is largely devoted to a discussion of international museums, with the exception of the last chapter, which is concerned with the renewal processes of the Israel Museum and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art as case studies. By contrast, the current volume focuses entirely on the Israeli art field.

Over the past three decades, much attention has been devoted to the history and historiography of art in Israel, while touching upon curatorial practices, and thus contributing significantly to the writing of this study. The first part of the book makes reference to numerous sources – historical surveys, articles in exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles and excerpts – that were vital to understanding the changes taking place in the field of curating, even if they did not directly or systematically address curatorial questions. Publications that have directly addressed contemporary curating are few and far between, thus stressing the need to gather, systematically organize, and analyze the relevant materials.

The series of books centered on the work of the three first directors of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, ending in the mid-1970s, made a highly important contribution in introducing the wide-ranging contributions of Karl Schwarz (1933–1947), Haim Gamzu (1947–1949, 1961–1976), and Eugen Kolb (1952–1959). Nevertheless, these three figures were mainly active in the period preceding the one studied here.<sup>53</sup> The two studies by Gilit Ivgi also make a significant contribution to understanding curatorial activity in the years preceding the framework of this book. Her first study centered on the activity of Mordechai Narkiss, the director of the Bezalel National Museum in 1925–1957, while the second centered on the stages of planning and establishing the Israel Museum in 1957–1965.<sup>54</sup> The publication mentioned above were all written over the past 15 years, and in this sense shed light on curatorial questions, although they were concerned with curators-directors whose actions do not reflect the spirit of contemporary curating and the changes in the field.

In 1992, Sara Conforti Gallery in Jaffa presented an

exhibition titled *Curators of Israeli Art*. The accompanying catalogue made a pioneering attempt to map the curatorial field of contemporary art through a division into four main categories of curators: curators working within the museological establishment, freelance professional curators, curators who are active artists, and curators who are gallery owners.<sup>55</sup> This was not an in-depth study, but rather a survey in the form of a gallery exhibition, which included an appeal to 44 curators by means of a format including five identical questions. The exhibition catalogue opened with a brief text titled “Towards a History of the Hebrew Curator (A Sketch),” in which Gideon Ofrat surveyed Israeli art from a curatorial perspective, from the foundation of Bezalel in 1906 to the early 1990s. Ofrat opened his essay with the argument that “Art in Israel got along nicely and for quite a long while without curators,”<sup>56</sup> and questioned the necessity of curating. Later on in the text, he suggested dividing curators into four categories, different than those formulated in the exhibition: “The curator as director” (such as Haim Gamzu or Mordechai Omer), “the curator as avantgardist” (such as Yona Fischer and Sara Breitberg-Semel), “the alternative curator” (Ofrat himself), and a category he called “the affluent society of curators,” which reflected a state (ca. 1992) of curating in which “anything goes.” Ofrat argued that curating at that moment in time had emptied the term “curator” of its contents, and thus rendered it superfluous. This essay, although short and non-comprehensive, served as one of the points of departure for a discussion of curating in Israel.

Ofrat expanded his concern with the question of curators and their status in the catalogues accompanying the two exhibitions he curated in the Israeli Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in 1993 and 1995. His online blog ([gideonofrat.wordpress.com](http://gideonofrat.wordpress.com)) in Hebrew similarly contains texts on curating. Especially noteworthy are the preparatory drafts for the unpublished book on “The Idea of Israeli Curating,” in which he discussed in detail the work of several local curators.<sup>57</sup>

The bulletin *BaMuzeon* (In the Museum), established by the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture's department of museums and the Museum Council (1989), regularly surveyed different types of curatorial activity in a wide range of museum contexts, which were not necessarily artistic. This bulletin contains valuable information, yet

53 Galia Bar Or, ed., *Building Culture in the Land of Israel*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2003, in Hebrew; Ballas, ed., *Dr. Haim Gamzu: Art Reviews*, 2006, in Hebrew; Chana Schütz, ed. *Karl Schwarz and Tel Aviv Museum's Early Days, 1933-1947*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2010, in Hebrew.

54 Gilit Ivgi, *The History of the Foundation of the Israel Museum as a National Museum, 1957–1965*, Thesis Submitted for the degree of “Doctor of Philosophy” Submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University Jerusalem June 2017; Gilit Ivgi, *The Bezalel Museum under the Directorship of Mordechai Narkiss as a National Museum, 1925–1957*, MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, June 2009, in Hebrew.

55 Sara Conforti Gallery, Jaffa, *Curators of Israeli Art*, May 1992.

56 Gideon Ofrat, “Towards a History of the Hebrew Curator (A Sketch),” in Sara Conforti Gallery, Jaffa, *Curators of Israeli Art*, 1992, pp. 9–17.

57 See, The Israeli Pavilion, Venice Biennale, “Avital Geva: Greenhouse,” 1993; The Israeli Pavilion, Venice Biennale, “Neustein, Tzaig and Grossman in the National Library Archives,” 1995. Curator: Gideon Ofrat.

its emphasis is not contemporary. References to specific curatorial activities, such as exhibition reviews, the exposure of collectors and their collections, and conversations with curators, were published over the years in different Israeli reviews, including *Musag, Kav, Prosa, Painting and Sculpture, Terminal, Musa, Plastica* and *Studio*, and in recent years also in online publications such as *Maarav, Erev Rav, Tohu* and *Harama*. These texts contributed significantly to gathering data and information concerning specific curatorial activities in Israel, yet were not developed into a comprehensive, theoretical body of research. In this context, it is worth noting the conversation with Israeli art curators published in 1988 in the monthly *Prosa*, with the participation of Yona Fischer, Yigal Zalmona and Sara Breitbeg-Semel, which was moderated by the scholar and art curator Dalia Manor.<sup>58</sup>

It was not until 2006 that the department of history and theory at Bezalel published *Protocols 2*, an online journal that was the first publication in Israel to devote itself entirely to aspects of contemporary art.<sup>59</sup> This issue included, among others, an article by Sophia Krzys-Acord that discussed contemporary curatorial actions as offering new perspectives on sociopolitical processes; a short text by Ayelet Zohar on “The Curator as Cultural Critic”; and the transcript of a talk given by Boris Groys at a conference held at Tel Aviv University, titled “The Curator as Iconoclast.”<sup>60</sup> This was an important point of departure for a discussion of different concerns raised by contemporary curating. At the same time, this issue did not represent an attempt to systematically map curatorial activity in Israel, or to analyze affinities between local processes and those unfolding in the Western world.

Three publications issued in recent years have surveyed and analyzed the activity of three unique galleries active in Tel Aviv-Jaffa: *Ahad Ha'am 90*, an anti-establishment, pluralistic cooperative gallery that provided artists with a low-cost exhibition space; *Limbus*, a cooperative photography gallery that exhibited various genres of photography; and *Hagar*, a gallery devoted to contemporary Palestinian art in Jaffa.<sup>61</sup> The research on *Ahad Ha'am 90*, performed by Dalia Manor, is somewhat different than the publications concerning *Limbus* and *Hagar*, which were written and edited by the gallery directors. However, these texts all look back retrospectively on the activities held in

these art spaces – and were motivated among other things by an attempt to confront questions concerning contemporary curating. Although from a curatorial viewpoint the perspectives of these three publications are restricted, they made a significant contribution to examining the way in which a gallery's curatorial policy is established to become an ongoing, unique statement, while underscoring the status of the temporary exhibition as the curator's medium.

Two recent publications in tribute to curators similarly devoted significant attention to the study of curating in Israel. The first was a special issue of *Assaph*, the journal of the art history department at Tel Aviv University, which was dedicated to the work of Mordechai Omer, and was published in 2010 on the occasion of Omer's retirement as a professor in the department of art history at Tel Aviv University.<sup>62</sup> This issue included an examination of Omer's curatorial biography and a list of the exhibitions he had curated; an interview conducted with Martin Weil, a former director of the Israel Museum; and an article by Yehudit Kol-Inbar, who had established and headed the department of museums at the Ministry of Education, and who was one of the founders of Tel Aviv University's museum studies program, the first of its kind in Israel. The second publication is a catalogue that accompanied an exhibition in tribute to Yona Fischer following his retirement from the Ashdod Museum in 2013. The exhibition included works contributed by artists who had worked with Fischer over the years, and which were assembled into an art collection named after him. The catalogue included, among other things, a full survey of the exhibitions curated by Fischer; two articles by Roni Cohen-Binyamini (one dedicated to Fischer's work at the Ashdod Museum, and another surveying the catalogues published during his years as a curator); and an article by the author of the current book on Fischer's work as a curator, an initial version of the chapter that explores his work in this volume.<sup>63</sup> Both these publications underscore the importance of observing a continuum of curatorial practice over time – a curatorial biography – as a continuous action.

My article on Yona Fischer's work was followed by two additional articles and a book chapter, in which I began inquiring into the roles, status and authority of contemporary curators. The first, published in the journal *Hamidrasha* 10 (2007), served as the point of departure for the current

58 Dalia Manor, “A Local Nuance in an International Language – A Discourse of Israeli Art Curators,” participants: Yona Fischer, Yigal Zalmona, Sara Breitberg-Semel, *Prosa* 100 (1988): 176–192, in Hebrew.

59 For the journal's website and issue no. 2, see <https://journal.bezalel.ac.il/en/protocol/issue/2617>; See also issue no. 4 for the articles by Dorothea Richter and Gail Pearce. <https://journal.bezalel.ac.il/en/protocol/issue/2621>.

60 Groys' lecture was published in his book *Art Power*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008.

61 Dalia Manor, *Ahad Ha'am 90: The 1980s*, Tel Aviv: Halfi, 2011, in Hebrew; Dafna Ichilov, Judith Guetta and Galia Gur Zeev, *Limbus. Locality. Photography*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008, in Hebrew; Tal Ben Zvi, *Hagar: Contemporary Palestinian Art*, Tel Aviv: Hagar Association, 2006.

62 Hana Taragan and Nissim Gal, eds., *Assaph: Studies in Art History*, vols. 13-14, Tel Aviv University, 2010.

63 See Roni Cohen-Binyamini, “Here Stands a Man,” and “Yona Fischer's Catalogues, In Themselves” in Ashdod Art Museum, *Curator: Yona Fischer*, January 2013, pp. 152 – 144, 140-138; Osnat Zukerman Rechter, “Yona Fischer: A Dialogue with Now,” *ibid.*, pp. 136-125.

book, and was concerned with the curatorial work of Sara Breitberg-Semel, Galia Bar Or and Ariella Azoulay.<sup>64</sup> A different and more in-depth version of the article, which focused on the work of Breitberg-Semel and Bar Or, was published as a chapter in a book on curating and feminisms.<sup>65</sup> In an additional article, I explored, from a curatorial perspective, the series of exhibitions titled “The Six Decades,” which were held at six museums throughout Israel in celebration of the 60th anniversary of Israeli independence (2008).<sup>66</sup> These three publications focused on points of encounter between curatorial actions and other fields: the first two were concerned with curating and feminism, and the third with curating and questions of national construction. They are thus distinct from the perspective of the current book, which distinguishes between contemporary curating and museology, maps the local curatorial field and its affinity to the international field, and examines key concerns essential to understanding the changes that have taken place in the field over the past five decades.

The first program for training curators was established at Tel Aviv University in 1985. Its founders were Elisheva Cohen, Martin Weil, Yehudit Kol-Inbar, Avner Shalev and Mordechai Omer. The program focused on training compatible with the model of “the encyclopedic museum,” such as the Israel Museum. It awarded a certificate in museology, and its orientation was practical rather than theoretical (the training of curators in affinity with the extensive needs of the museum system). Moreover, its emphasis was on the history of museums in general, rather than art museums in particular. Following the 2011 death of Mordechai Omer, who had headed the program since the late 1980s, the program underwent significant changes, and at present its status and curriculum are unclear. In 1995, the New Seminar for Visual Culture, Criticism and Theory, headed by Ariella Azoulay, was established in collaboration with the Tefen Museum and the Camera Obscura art school. This training program only existed for a few years, yet marked the beginning of a concern with curating in a context that was external to the museum and clearly political, with an emphasis on the study of visual culture rather than of art history or museum studies.<sup>67</sup> Since 2008, various types of training programs have opened at many of Israel’s institutions of higher education. The Bezalel Academy of Art, Ben Gurion University, and the University of Haifa inaugurated MA programs with

a specialty in curating, which all offer the possibility of writing a thesis; Ben Gurion University and the University of Haifa put a special emphasis on heritage and archaeology museums. Additionally the Kibbutzim Academic College offered an undergraduate program in curatorial studies that originally grew out of a collaboration with the Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv (CCA), as well as a graduate program that combines curatorial studies with visual literacy and a diploma program; Shenkar College offers a program in curatorial studies and design; and the Institute for Israeli Art at the Academic College of Tel Aviv-Yaffo offers a program in contemporary curatorial studies and museology. Many of these programs focus on the practice of organizing and producing exhibitions.

The programs for training curators, and the increasing exposure to curators who are invited – much like artists – to present their work in a range of frameworks, contribute to the growing visibility of the profession and to the systematic construction of the curator’s role as a sought-after profession. Yet while the number of graduates from these different programs continues to grow, only a small number of them succeed in integrating into Israel’s relatively small museum world, or in paving their path as independent curators.

Conferences devoted to curating (in distinction from museology) and additional para-curatorial activities began taking place in Israel only at the beginning of the 21st century. Especially noteworthy are the first international academic conference on the subject of contemporary curating (December 2005). This conference, which took place in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, was a joint initiative of the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University and the department of theory and criticism at the Bezalel Academy of Art, in collaboration with the Goethe Institute.<sup>68</sup> Also worth mentioning are two additional academic conferences: “Curating in the Digital Age” (May 3, 2011) at the University of Haifa, and the conference “Curators for a Day” at the Bezalel Academy of Art (January 11, 2012) in anticipation of the launching of a graduate program with a specialization in curating. Two other important conferences concerned with curating took place outside of academia: The Bat Yam Museum of Art held the conference “Aspects of Contemporary Curating,” with the participation of local curators (May 27, 2008),<sup>69</sup>

64 Osnat Rechter, “Ariella Azoulay, Sara Breitberg-Semel and Galia Bar Or: Three Women Curators in Israeli Art from the 1980s to the Present,” *Hamidrasha* 10 (2007): 89–121, in Hebrew.

65 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, “Reformulating the Code: A Feminist Interpretation of the Curatorial Work of Sara Breitberg-Semel and Galia Bar Or during the 1980s and 1990s in Israel,” in Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, ed., *Curating Differently*, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, pp. 41–63.

66 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, “In Between Past and Future: Time and Relatedness in *Six Decades Exhibitions*,” in Richard I. Cohen, ed., *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* vol. 26: *Visualizing and Exhibiting Jewish Space and History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 180–203.

67 See also the journal *Plastica*, edited by Ariella Azoulay (issues 1–4, 1997–2000), which was published at the end of each academic year as an inseparable part of the curriculum.

68 Among the speakers were Adi Ophir, Yigal Zalmona, Boris Groys, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Irit Rogoff.

69 This conference was held as part of the Bat Yam Biennale in 2008.



and the Center for Digital Art in Holon held an international conference on the “Museum and Alternative History,” the connection between museums and nation-states (June 18–19, 2008).<sup>70</sup>

In 2010–2012, the Outset Contemporary Art Fund initiated a series of activities and encounters with curators. Most noteworthy among these events were a visit by an international group of curators, including a lecture by the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist at the Tel Aviv Museum (November 2010); a research trip to London held by a group of Israeli curators (November 2011); a symposium organized by the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art (IKT), which was held in Israel (2012); and a conversation between Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the curator of *Documenta* 13, and Iwona Blazwick, the Curator of Whitechapel Gallery in London (2012). In 2011, Artport – a non-profit center for the promotion of contemporary art – was founded with the support of the Ted Arison Family Foundation. The center offers a residency program for Israeli and international artists and curators, and its activities include curator talks. Indeed, meetings with curators in conjunction with their exhibitions is standard today in all Israeli museums.

One can thus state that although the study of curating in Israel is still in its initial phase, this field is marked by extensive and robust activity. The current book constitutes an attempt to supply preliminary theoretical insights, and to systematically relate them in order to establish a point of departure for the examination of curating as distinct from museology.

Curating exists first and foremost as both an action and a practice, so that a full understanding of the curatorial strategy for a given exhibition requires a visit to the exhibition itself. Since this book attends to past exhibitions that are no longer accessible to us as spatial displays, it relies mainly on the documentation of the exhibition as an event, and thus, like every historical study, inevitably relies on partial information. Photographs of the exhibition spaces and installation views, if available, provide only limited data, yet are important and enable us to acquire an impression of the treatment of the space, the relations between the different elements, the hanging and the different perspectives offered by the display. Unfortunately, in most cases such photographs do not exist. Consistent documentation of installation views was not common in Israel until the turn of the 21st century. Catalogues are an inseparable part of the exhibition and function as an additional dimension of the curatorial strategy, and as a valuable source. The exhibition catalogue defines the curatorial approach differently than the spatial display, and usually supplies, together with a detailed list of the works, reproductions and additional details about the works, as well as a textual

elaboration of the curator’s stance and texts by additional writers. Curatorial approaches to the catalogue, and to its affinity with the spatial exhibition, express and reflect curatorial practices. Thus, an examination of the changes that have taken place over the years in the perception of the catalogue, its status, its degree of comprehensiveness and its expected contents is highly relevant to understanding developments in the field of contemporary curating, and the different emphases to which they have led.

The interviews I held with all of the curators attended to in this book – with the exception of Elisheva Cohen – as well as with numerous other curators, have provided me with vital information concerning work methods, collaborations, and the manner in which the curators themselves perceive and experience the changes in their profession. I also relied extensively on interviews published in the press, on reviews and on journal articles that examined curators, exhibitions, and the artists participating in them from a range of perspectives. These documents were enriched by more recent materials, most of which are accessible in a digital format. These digital sources were gathered from the websites of artists, galleries, critics and curators, as well as from texts appearing in the digital press and in online journals. The discourse concerning curating and exhibitions, which once unfolded mainly in the cultural sections of the daily press, of local newspapers and of monthly reviews and periodicals, also unfolds today online, and is disseminated through social networks. In this context, it should be noted that digital mediums and new technologies have entered the discourse, establishing themselves not only as platforms for documentation, professional criticism or the creation of archives, but also as a means of sharing and responding, which in some cases has become part of the artistic or curatorial action.

The study of curating as a practice, and of the curatorial as a dimension of observing this practice and what lies beyond it, involves a terminology of fundamental concepts that explicitly recur in the professional literature, or appear as relevant for a discussion of curating. These include “mediation,” the “contemporary”/ “contemporaneity,” “relatedness” and “curatorial authority.”

The question of whether the curator’s role is that of a mediator, and if so, of the nature of this form of mediation, is frequently raised in the professional literature. Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, who have extensively examined the question of mediation, tend to view the curator as a middleman, yet not as the product of a choice, but rather as based on the flow of objects, ideas, signs, money and so forth, and of the cultural and economic powers that curators participate in mobilizing.<sup>71</sup> The question of mediation – both in relation to single acts

**70** The list of participants included Charles Esche, Mordechai Omer, Ana Janevski, Ariella Azoulay, Galia Bar Or, Zdenka Badovinac, Rona Sela, Nina Möntmann and Dalia Levin.

**71** Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, *The Critical Mass of Mediation*, Copenhagen: Internationalistisk Ideale, 2012. See also their joint article: Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, “The Middleman: Beginning to Talk about Mediation,” in Paul O’Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects*, London: Open Editions, 2007, pp. 20–30.



of curating and as a general question concerning curating as a medium centered on mediation – is relevant to each of the issues under discussion, resurfacing anew in different ways in each one of this book’s chapters. Contemporary curating is perceived in this book as a productive profession, whose products are exhibitions and the catalogues accompanying them. The curatorial mediating position is defined in the book as a key position, although its productive character does not cancel the artist’s work, and is not in conflict with it. These understandings offer an infrastructure for a new understanding of the productive nature of additional mediating positions in the field of art – such as editing, educational guidance, production, restoration and so forth – that remain as transparent and invisible as curating was in the past.

The contemporary and contemporaneity are key terms for a discussion of curating. Whether one chooses to attend to their philosophical, historical and theoretical meanings, or whether one views them as given a priori, it is important to note that the debate concerning these terms is increasing significantly in volume. As noted, Smith’s book on contemporary curating, which treated this subject extensively, underscored the a-historical nature of the contemporary, while noting that as a term it possesses a history.<sup>72</sup> Giorgio Agamben described the contemporary as being in the time and out of time at the same time, while Boris Groys has analyzed the contemporary as “being with time,” (rather than “in time”) in the literal sense of con-temporary. These are just two prominent philosophical approaches concerning the question of the contemporary.<sup>73</sup> In 2009, the critical review *October* devoted an entire issue to this subject, featuring a questionnaire on the contemporary that was given to some 70 critics and curators in the United States and in Europe.<sup>74</sup> The book *What is Contemporary Art?* similarly brought together texts by 13 curators responding to the contemporary in the context of contemporary art.<sup>75</sup> In the current book, the contemporary is reexamined in relation to the point of view of each of the curators in question, and thus appears as an open, relative term.

The act of contemporary curating can be described by means of the function of relating, which forges connections and establishes networks of relations among the different participants in the creation of an exhibition. Artists, artworks, curators and visiting publics are only four of the numerous players involved in this process, which also includes designers, writers, photographers, gallery owners, collectors, donors, the directors of cultural foundations, journalists, media professionals and more. Each

exhibition is the product of collaborations and relationships among these players. Relatedness, as I define it in this book, attests to this set of relations in a general manner, yet also points to the distinct perspective of curators, and reflects the ties of closeness defined by their curatorial actions. Relatedness characterizes curatorial action as a cultural action, while carrying everyday connotations of concrete closeness, devoid of a metaphorical dimension and of mystification.

The question of authority in a curatorial context reveals the rupture created by the visibility of the curator’s role. From the moment that curating has become a visible function, curators have also become a subject of criticism, while their authority ceased to be taken for granted and began demanding justification. The ways in which curators establish their authority, and the forces they rely on to this end, change from one curator to the next. The model of “the independent curator” is a fascinating case study of the possibilities that were opened to curators to establish their authority independently from the power given to curators acting within a museum framework.



As noted, a critical analysis of the field of art curating in Israel is important for understanding processes, emphases, and hegemonies in the field of contemporary art that can no longer be attended to merely from the perspective of the artwork or the artist. This book is concerned with the last five decades, since it was during this period that curating came to be distinguished as an independent and contemporary practice. It is composed of two parts, whose main point of departure is the year 1965, which marked the inauguration of the Israel Museum – the first institution in Israel that systematically rethought the exhibition as a medium and investigated new approaches to curating.

The curators who participated in the establishment of the Israel Museum, and who worked there since its establishment, included Elisheva Cohen, Yona Fischer, and Ayala Gordon, as well as Willem Sandberg in the role of artistic advisor and later also Izika Gaon. Each of these individuals was uniquely innovative in perceiving the exhibition as a medium and understanding curating as an action. I focus here extensively only on the work of Cohen and Fischer, since they were responsible for the curating of art at the museum. Cohen was appointed in 1965 to direct the department of prints and drawings, and in 1968 was

<sup>72</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, pp. 144-146.

<sup>73</sup> Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, *The Critical Mass of Mediation*, Copenhagen: Internationalistisk Ideale, 2012. See also their joint article: Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, “The Middleman: Beginning to Talk about Mediation,” in Paul O’Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects*, London: Open Editions, 2007, pp. 20-30.

<sup>74</sup> Hal Foster, ed., “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 2-124.

<sup>75</sup> Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle, eds., *What is Contemporary Art?*, New York: Sternberg Press, 2010.

also appointed as the head curator of the Bezalel wing, the museum's art wing. Fischer was appointed at the time of the museum's opening to serve as the "curator of modern and contemporary art," and later as the "senior curator and art advisor." The two had begun working together at the Bezalel Museum, and years later were jointly awarded the Israel Prize for their achievements.<sup>76</sup> The activities of Ayala Gordon and Izika Gaon at the Israel Museum are beyond the scope of this discussion. Ayala Gordon had already worked alongside Cohen and Fischer at the Bezalel Museum, where she had established an education department in 1961. With the opening of the Israel Museum's youth wing in 1966, she was appointed as its head curator and organized interactive exhibitions. Although these exhibitions were groundbreaking both in terms of thinking of the exhibition as a medium and in terms of using artworks as objects on display in hands-on exhibitions, they were educational exhibitions tailored to children and adolescents, and will thus not be examined in the current context. Izika Gaon, who was also considered an innovative and original curator, was responsible for several major exhibitions curated at the Israel Museum, such as the exhibitions *Recycling* (1975) and *Lego* (1977). From 1973 until his death in 1997, Gaon worked as the head curator of design and architecture, fields that will not be attended to in the present context.<sup>77</sup> The highly influential work of Willem Sandberg, a curator, graphic designer and typographer who served as the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1945–1962, is vital to understanding the growth of contemporary curating, not only in Israel but also in Europe.<sup>78</sup> Sandberg served as the chairman of the Israel Museum's executive committee during its first years (until 1968). The approach he led to designing exhibitions and catalogues, and the decisions he promoted at the museum during its early years, deeply influenced the character of the curatorial work in the art departments, and especially the work of Yona Fischer. Although Sandberg's curatorial work is not examined here at length, it serves as the background for the discussion of the early years of the Israel Museum and of Fischer's work.

The first part of this book, "A History of Exhibitions," focuses on the temporary exhibition. It is devoted to an extensive survey of the Israeli art field from 1965 to 2010, which is undertaken from a curatorial perspective. It examines important exhibitions, dominant themes, artistic actions and various display spaces – ranging from museum display spaces to alternative spaces – in the context of curatorial practice. Various historiographic trends are mapped out, and the work practices of curators active in Israel over the years are examined. This part also mentions actions by artists that were marked by a curatorial character, or which employed the temporary exhibition as a medium.

The first part of the book includes five chapters. The first chapter delineates 1965 as marking the intersection of beginning that would directly impact the visibility of the curatorial function and the understanding of the temporary exhibition as a medium. The second chapter defines an affinity between the process of recognizing the temporary exhibition as an independent medium and the widespread concern during these years with the question of the medium. The different historiographies of art in the 1970s are reexamined based on a view of this period's exhibitions. The third chapter focuses on the genre of a-historical theme exhibitions and the phenomenon of independent curating, which came to prominence in the 1980s. This chapter suggests attending to the temporal confluence of these two phenomena as an important moment in the transformation of curating. Additionally, this chapter sheds light on the role of Israel's socialist agricultural settlements and kibbutzim in defining a consistent approach to curatorial action, which was dominated by self-observation, including a characterization of the socioeconomic shift taking place in the kibbutzim from the mid-1970s onward as representing a wider shift in Israel. The fourth chapter is concerned with the phenomenon of multiple curators, the reconstruction of past exhibitions, and thesis exhibitions, which characterized the 1990s and marked the formation of a discourse on curating. The fifth chapter explores the exhibition as a means of redefining history, as well as the curator's position of power in the context of international exhibitions and art events.

<sup>76</sup> Fischer and Cohen were awarded the prize in 1977 for their curatorial work, yet in absence of an appropriate category, they received the prize in the category of "design."

<sup>77</sup> See Yuval Saar, "15 years after his death, Izika Gaon's work is still innovative," *Haaretz*, May 27, 2012, in Hebrew. See also Sophia Dekel Caspi, "Izika was here (1938 – 1997)," *Hamagazine*, undated, [http://www.israelidesign.co.il/magazine\\_item\\_2199.html](http://www.israelidesign.co.il/magazine_item_2199.html)

<sup>78</sup> Willem Sandberg (1897–1984) began his curatorial career as a curator at the Stedelijk Museum in 1938. One of the radical actions attributed to him during his first year as a curator was painting the museum's highly decorative interior walls white, and transforming it into a white cube. During World War II, following the German invasion of Holland (1940), Sandberg was involved in forging and destroying civic administration documents in Amsterdam. This activity forced him underground, where he assisted, among other things, in saving works of art. At the end of the war, he was appointed as the director of the Stedelijk Museum. One of the first exhibitions he curated was devoted to the painter and typographer Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman, a native of Groningen, who was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis several days before the liberation of his city. For further information see Gregor Langfeld, Margriet Schavemaker and Margreeth Soeting, eds., *The Stedelijk Museum and the Second World War*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bas Lubberhuizen and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2015. For a biography of Sandberg, see Ad Petersen, *Sandberg: Designer and Director of the Stedelijk*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2004.

The second part of the book focuses on the curatorial biographies of seven prominent curators: Elisheva Cohen, Yona Fischer, Gideon Ofrat, Sara Breitberg-Semel, Galia Bar Or, Mordechai Omer and Ariella Azoulay. Their work defined new ways of thinking about curating, and the choice to focus on them becomes clearer against the backdrop of the extensive mapping of the field in the book's first part. An in-depth analysis of the curatorial work practices of these figures and of their theoretical positions allows for the formulation of insights about the act of contemporary curating. The discussion of the curatorial biographies of these seven curators centers on three key concerns, which are fundamental to understanding the local changes in this field in relation to changes in the international arena. The first concern is the status of the curator as author, and the complexity of the relations between artists and curators; the second concern is the status of the contemporary curator as a cultural agent, and the third is curating as a power. Each of these three concerns is explored through a detailed examination of the work of specific curators, which becomes a case study for a larger question, while situating their work in contexts that are relevant to the understanding of contemporary curating as a unique phenomenon.

The second part of the book includes three chapters. The first one (chapter 6) is concerned with the curatorial biographies of Elisheva Cohen, Yona Fischer and Gideon Ofrat, using them to map the growth of the “curator as author” and the different aspects of this phenomenon. The discussion of Cohen raises the question of connoisseurship and its meaning in face of the change in the curator's function. The discussion of Fischer examines the work methods of a figure who is considered to be the quintessential trailblazer of the new curating. The discussion of Ofrat, who to a large extent was a local prototype of the independent curator, leads to the climax of the debate concerning the curator as creator. The second chapter (number 7) is concerned with the museum curator as a cultural agent, as reflected in the work of two dominant curators: Sara Breitberg-Semel, who served as the curator of Israeli art at the Tel Aviv museum in 1977–1989, and Galia Bar Or, the director and curator of the Ein Harod Museum of Art, in 1985–2015. Breitberg-Semel's iconic status in the local curatorial field, and Bar Or's consistent and declarative undermining of iconic attitudes in the art field and of conventions concerning periphery and center, invites an observation of the power of the two as quintessential cultural agents, while calling for an investigation of their ongoing influence on the field of Israeli curating and culture. The third chapter (number 8) expands the discussion concerning the curator as a cultural agent, and is concerned with questions of power. Mordechai Omer

and Ariella Azoulay, who operated from remarkably different and even oppositional curatorial positions, represent two aspects of the relations between curating and power. Mordechai Omer was the director of the Tel Aviv Museum from late 1994 until his death in 2011, while simultaneously serving as the director and curator of the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery in Tel Aviv, whose establishment he initiated in 1977. His wide-ranging work as a curator, and his central role in establishing the field of museology in Israel, allow for an examination of a clear-cut institutional position of power. Ariella Azoulay's curatorial work from the early 1990s to the present sheds light on the use of the exhibition as a critical force and tool for sociopolitical protest. Azoulay saw the exhibition as a visual statement, and honed its use as a practice of resistance. Her work as a curator – alongside her theoretical writing and filmmaking – underscored the role of the exhibition as integral to critical discourse and to the discipline of visual culture.

Taken together, the first part of the book, which maps the field historically and chronologically, and its second part, which examines curatorial biographies organized according to key concerns along a temporal axis, offer a comprehensive picture of the changes unfolding in the local field of curating, while giving rise to three discursive registers: chronological, thematic and biographical-professional. The book establishes the power of the temporary exhibition as an independent statement made by a curator, and places the specific continuum of activities conducted by each of the curators in a context that facilitates an understanding of their practices and personal choices as an inseparable part of a wider shift. In this context, the approach of each of the curators is understood as an ongoing action, beyond its expression in specific key exhibitions.

This book, with its three discursive registers – the chronological, the thematic and the biographical – is concerned with contemporary curating in Israel and its affinity to changes and events worldwide. It offers a wide-ranging perspective on curating as a field of practice and knowledge situated in cultural, political, social and economic contexts that exceed the local sphere. The book underscores the vital role of the curatorial perspective for understanding processes and changes in the Israeli art field, and the necessity of establishing and anchoring this perspective. It offers an organizing framework for curatorial practices and for a range of related activities, and observes them with an analytic, critical gaze. The book establishes the understanding that curatorial practice should be examined as a long-term process, rather than as a singular action pertaining to a particular exhibition. It tells the story of curating in Israel, a story that has thus far remained untold.

# Chapter 1

## 1965

### THE INAUGURATION OF THE ISRAEL MUSEUM

On May 11, 1965, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem was inaugurated with four temporary art exhibitions:<sup>1</sup>

The first, *Bible in Art*, was curated by Karl Katz, an expert on Iranian art who served as the director of the Bezalel National Museum (1957–1965) and later of the Bezalel Wing at the Israel Museum (until 1968). Thirty-eight museums and collections around the world lent works for this exhibition. It featured 68 works created over a 1500-year period, and included, among others, oil paintings by Jan Bruegel the Elder, Rembrandt, Rubens, Poussin and Mantegna.<sup>2</sup> The second exhibition, which featured international artists – *Lipschitz and Chagall* – was likely curated by Elisheva Cohen, the drawings and graphic art curator, with the accompaniment of Willem Sandberg, who also wrote the catalogue texts. The third exhibition, *Rembrandt: Drawings and Etchings*, was curated by Elisheva Cohen. The fourth exhibition, *Trends in Israeli Art*, was curated by Yona Fischer. It was initially presented at the International Convention Center (ICC), and only later moved to the new

museum. The exhibition organized by Fischer was rapidly organized in order to address the total absence of Israeli artists, and especially of contemporary artists, from the large display. As Tali Tamir wrote in a text concerned with the early years of the Israel Museum:

*Only five months prior to the official opening of the museum, a member of the board of directors, Eliyahu Dobkin, announced that, “since at the time of the museum opening on May 11 we will be unable to present an exhibition of Israeli artists, for lack of space, a proposal was made to hold this exhibition at the International Convention Center.” In January 1965, Yona Fischer – then a young staff member at the Bezalel National Museum, who had already curated several exhibitions by young artists – was asked to submit a plan and a proposal for an exhibition of Israeli artists at the ICC. In February, the proposal was already submitted: Trends in Israeli Art.<sup>3</sup>*

1 These temporary exhibitions, in contrast to the permanent exhibitions, were under the responsibility of the Bezalel Wing of Arts (today the Lily and Edmond Safra Fine Arts Wing. At the time of its opening, the Israel Museum included three wings: The Bezalel Wing of Arts headed by Karl Katz, which contained the collections of the Bezalel National Museum, a Biblical and archaeological wing (the Samuel Bronfman Museum) headed by Penuel-Peter Kahane, and the Shrine of the Book, headed by Magen Broshi. The two first wings and the Billy Rose Art Garden (which was affiliated with the Bezalel Wing) were inaugurated on May 11, 1965; The Shrine of the Book (home to the Dead Sea Scrolls) was inaugurated several weeks earlier, on April 20, 1965. A year later, the Youth Wing headed by Ayala Gordon was also inaugurated. Featured alongside the temporary art exhibitions was a temporary archaeology exhibition titled *Bible in Archeology*. The permanent display of art and a chronological display of Israeli archaeology from the prehistoric period to the Roman period, based exclusively on locally excavated artifacts, were also opened. For a detailed description of the thought processes and established of the Israel Museum, see Karl Katz, P. P. Kahane and Magen Broshi, *From the Beginning*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968; Gilit Ivgi, *The History of the Foundation of the Israel Museum as a National Museum, 1957–1965*; see also Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, *From the Treasures of the Museum*, May 1965; see also Tali Tamir, “The Israel Museum: The Dream, the Realization and the Conception,” 1989, in Hebrew, in <http://talitamir.com/catalog/album/237>

2 Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, *Bible in Art*, May 11–June 28, 1965. See also: Protocol of meeting held by the Fifth Knesset’s Education and Culture Committee, May 26, 1965, p. 7, in Hebrew.

3 Tamir, “The Israel Museum: The Dream, Its Realization, and Conception,” 1989, in Hebrew.



The faulty organizational thinking that had allotted Fischer only four months to organize such an important exhibition highlighted the great sensitivity to the subject of contemporary Israeli art, signaling that the attitude of the curator towards Israeli art was to become a main concern for critics from that moment on.

The inauguration of the Israel Museum was an important moment preceding the further consolidation of the Israeli art establishment; moreover, the cultural vision underlying its foundation was, as noted in the British press, also a great achievement of statesmanship.<sup>4</sup> The curatorial team of the Israel Museum at this moment in time was required to outline unique modes of action, which would address the national expectations of a young state while adhering to international museum standards, based on a well-established and wide-ranging tradition. The opening exhibitions attempted to meet this goal: they underscored historical, biblical and Jewish contexts, mapped trends in an attempt to formulate a cutting-edge statement, and pledged their allegiance to international Western standards and to the presentation of international artists.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the exhibitions solicited strong criticism. Gabriel Talpir, the editor of the journal *Gazith*, devoted an extensive review to the new museum and its opening exhibitions on the journal's first pages. As he wrote among other things:

*Perhaps it would be worth considering a division between the administrative directors and a team of "experts," whether professionals or intellectuals, who must also participate in the activities of museums... for, as was discovered at the festive museum opening, "sin lieth at the door." We were all left crestfallen, noting the palpable absence of any acceptable perspective concerning our art-making in recent generations... the display of our artists was fragmented to the point of ridicule. The choices were arbitrary and distorted, attesting to a skewed and detached perspective. And the climax of stupidity was the exhibition titled Trends in Israeli Art, which, as promised, was organized by three Israeli museum directors. And if this is all true, as one may well assume, it just goes to prove what dilettantes these museum directors are, if they were capable of putting together such an arbitrary display of Israeli artists, which is completely incompatible with the country's artistic reality.<sup>6</sup>*

Given the fact that curatorial activities at the museum during its early years, and especially those of Fischer, were

viewed as groundbreaking, the sharp criticism expressed by Talpir – who might have known about the circumstances leading to the organization of the exhibition at the ICC – can be read today as a mere curiosity. Yet his review raises three important questions that remain relevant to the current discussion of curating, and which attest to his attention to the position of power occupied by curators in major museums. The first point is related to the determination of a professional standard, and hence to the question of how the profession of curating is studied, and how it must be acquired. The second point concerns the questions of whether institutional curating should be conscripted in the service of constructing a national identity, or whether it should avoid or resist this task (even though resistance also becomes, by means of negation, a form of active participation in processes of construction). This question, which usually arises in relation to the position of artists, is no less valid in relation to curatorial work, as outlined in Talpir's review. The third point concerns the question of arbitrary choice: Can a specific curator's evaluative skill and perspective, which are always personal, be expanded into an overall cultural statement?

The line followed by the opening exhibitions largely continued the curatorial orientation of Fischer and Cohen at the Bezalel Museum. Yet once the Israel Museum came into being, the voices of the curators, and especially Fischer's voice in his capacity as the curator of Israeli art, acquired an official, national weight, and thus also attracted much criticism. Miriam Tal, *Gazith's* art critic, wrote: "The organizer Yona Fischer chose an exhibition that is of interest, yet one that merely represents his personal taste, and certainly not trends in our country's painting and sculpture."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, *Trends in Israeli Art*, which appeared to the critics as rather arbitrary, expressed Fischer's own approach. It divided the history of Israeli art from 1918 to the 1960s into six subchapters, and represented each period by means of a selected group of artists, each of whom was represented by means of three or four works. This restricted selection reflected Fischer's curatorial signature, which had already been given expression in the exhibition *Trends 1* (The Levant Fair, Tel Aviv, 1962), and in the exhibition he presented at the Bezalel Museum. These were distinguished, for instance, from the Autumn Salons organized by Haim Gamzu at the Tel Aviv Museum, which did not presume to historically map different trends, and which presented an annual harvest of local art (the first Salon was organized in 1965, and presented contemporary Israeli art). The Autumn Salons were viewed as relatively organized in comparison with the multiplicity and excess

4 Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, 1965–Today, March–August, 2015, p. 5, in Hebrew.

5 One of the experts consulted in this context was André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture (1958–1969), who supported the idea of presenting the *Bible in Art* at the museum's opening exhibition. See Karl Katz, "Acknowledgments," in Jerusalem, *Bible in Art*, 1965, p. 1, in Hebrew.

6 Gabriel Talpir, "The Israel Museum," *Gazith* vol. 23, issues 1–2, 267–268, (June–July 1965): 5–7, in Hebrew.

7 Miriam Tal, "The Temporary Exhibitions at the Opening of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem," *Gazith* vol. 23, issues 5–10, 269–274 (August 1965 – January 1966): 106, in Hebrew.

that characterized the general exhibitions of Jewish artists in Palestine, which took place from the late 1920s to 1948; yet they lacked a clear organizational plan, and the artists featured in them (32 artists in 1965; 38 artists in 1966; 43 artists in 1968; 36 artists in 1969) were often involved in decisions concerning which other artists would or would not be exhibited.<sup>8</sup>

### 10+

Some seven months following the festive inauguration of the Israel Museum, the Maskit fashion boutique in Tel Aviv featured an experimental exhibition of artists' paintings on fashion textiles.<sup>9</sup> This was the first in a series of ten exhibitions by the group 10+, which took place in 1965–1970 and were led and organized by the artist Raffi Lavie. The group's first exhibition at Maskit was followed by nine additional exhibitions: *Large Works* (Artists House, Tel Aviv, February 1966); *The Smallest Works* (Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv, October–November 1966); *The Flower Exhibition* (Massada Galley, Tel Aviv, December 1966); *Exhibition in Red* (Katz Gallery, Tel Aviv, October–November 1966); *The Nude Exhibition* (Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv, November 1967); *For and Against* (Gallery 220, Tel Aviv, December 1968–January 1969); *10+ in the Round* (Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv, July 1969); *The Venus Exhibition* (Gordon gallery, Tel Aviv, May 1970); and the group's last exhibition, known as *The Mattresses Exhibition* (Dugit Gallery, Tel Aviv, September 1970). The choice of artists and their number changed from one exhibition to the next. The themes for the exhibition were decided on ahead of time for each of the exhibitions, and the works were generally created based on an affinity with this predetermined theme.

The importance of the 10+ exhibitions in the context of Israeli art-making and curating in the mid-1960s stems from the fact that the series of exhibitions held by the group in a range of sites reenvisioned the approach to exhibitions that had previously been in place. Clause 6 of the protocol of the founding team's first meeting, held on August 8, 1965, in Raffi Lavie's apartment, noted that, "It has been decided to recommend non-conventional exhibitions, such as: large works, miniature, collages, illustrations, slide paintings, collective works, a work of outdoor works, photographs, objects, paintings grouped by theme (nudes, portraits and so forth)."<sup>10</sup> For the members of 10+,

the ability to find new challenges in art-making and to rejuvenate thought processes was related, from the time of their initial protocol, to joint actions, based on an affinity for what Lavie described as an "external impetus." In other words, they relied not only on the forces driving each artist's own creative process, but also on the framework of the exhibition as fostering new patterns of thinking and art-making. The arbitrary, preconceived themes to which the exhibitions were devoted were perhaps "somewhat childish," as Yona Fischer noted.<sup>11</sup> Yet until the mid-1960s, these themes stood out in contrast to the local conventions governing group exhibitions. The titles and curatorial character of such exhibitions were generally related to the number of participants (*Exhibition of the 11*, 1936; *Exhibition of the Eight*, 1942; *Exhibition of the Seven*, 1947, and so forth); to the geographic affiliation of the participating artists (from Holland, France, Israel, Jerusalem, Haifa, or Tel Aviv); to their age (exhibitions of young artists); to their creative medium (watercolor, sculpture and so forth); or to the seasons of the year (autumn, spring and summer exhibitions). Lavie, as the "impresario" of the 10+ exhibitions, and later as the curator of the Kibbutz Gallery (1979), constituted an early example of an "artist-curator" (even if he was not defined as such), in the sense of organizing exhibitions with the participation of additional artists, and using the medium of the exhibition as a way to instigate meaning. As he himself put it: "10 Plus is like the Israeli government. It isn't something fixed, but rather a group that changes constantly, in accordance with the idea for each exhibition."<sup>12</sup>

The historiography of Israeli art gave rise to a debate concerning the innovativeness of 10+ and its relation to the charismatic figure of Lavie, who began establishing his power and status in the field of Israeli art in the early 1960s. In an extensive text published in the monthly review *Musag* in 1975, only five years after the group's last exhibition, Yigal Zalmona surveyed its exhibitions and defined it as a highly influential avant-garde phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, four decades later, Benno Kalev – who in 2008 curated a comprehensive retrospective exhibition dedicated to 10+ (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2008) – questioned the myth constructed concerning the group's activities. As he argued, "the 10+ group lacked a common artistic ideology. Its founders attempted to bring together a seemingly arbitrary collection of artists in order to undertake a carefully

8 Benno Kalev, *10+ – Myth and Reality*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, *The Ten Plus Group: Myth and Reality*, March 6 – May 31, 2008, p. 16.; on the Autumn Salon of 1968, see Avraham Rotem, "Bodies Cast in Rubber from Live Humans," *Maariv*, October 21, 1968, p. 11, in Hebrew; Moshe Ben Shaul "A Late Autumn," *Maariv*, November 8, 1968, pp. 50–51, in Hebrew.

9 Kalev, *10+ – Myth and Reality*, 2008, p. 27.

10 Ibid., p. 24.

11 Yona Fischer and Tamar Manor-Friedman, "Conversations," Ashdod Art Museum, Monart Center, *The Birth of Now: Sixty Years of Art in Israel – The Second Decade 1958–1968*, July–December 2008, p.10\*.

12 Idit Neuman, "Art Awakening – On a Mattress..." *Yediot Ahronot*, September 16, 1970, quoted in Kalev, *10+ – Myth and Reality*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2008, p. 56, in Hebrew.

13 Yigal Zalmona "10+," *Musag* 6 (November 1975): 66–73, in Hebrew.

planned and directed artistic task.”<sup>14</sup> According to Kalev the 10+ phenomenon stands in contrast to art groups that are consolidated due to a shared ideology, and which are characterized by a stable nucleus of members.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Kalev argued that “10+ was not the avant-garde group of the 1960s. Although it began its activity with a set of regulations and a core group of founders, it later became “‘Raffi Plus’ – a virtual group, whose existence was given expression solely through exhibitions and through their discussion in the media.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, 10+ was groundbreaking precisely because its existence was only given expression in exhibitions, but also because the attention it received in the media identified this group’s events with artistic freedom, with young art, and with the shattering of preexisting dictates.

### A COMMITMENT TO THE NOW

Young art or “youthfulness” is a seemingly common denominator that may explain both the “Yona Fischer phenomenon” at the Israel Museum and the appearance of 10+. Fischer’s work at the Israel Museum was identified with the presentation of young artists, and his image was that of “a curator of young artists,” despite the balanced display policy he presented over the years.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, 10+ was perceived as a group of young artists whose innovation stemmed from their youthfulness.<sup>18</sup> Yet the connection between youthfulness and innovation is not obvious. In a review of the *Exhibition of Young Israeli Painters* (aged 20–35) presented in 1965 (Helena Rubinstein Pavilion, Tel Aviv Museum of Art), the artist Joav BarEl wrote: “Despite the tendency to chart independent paths, the exhibition hardly relates to the extreme quests for innovation that

constitute a sort of ‘avant-garde’ in today’s plastic art.” Youthfulness, according to BarEl, does not promise innovation, and there was no innovation in the mere presentation of young art. The exhibition of young artists curated by Haim Gamzu featured 52 artists, and marked the apogee of the attention directed to the works of young artists. Both BarEl and Kalev undermined the argument that young artists had not been exhibited due to a dearth of exhibition spaces and commercial galleries. During these years, young artists had already been given exposure and opportunities to present their works, as Kalev noted in discussing the motivation for the organization of 10+.<sup>19</sup> BarEl even noted explicitly:

*Gone are the days when a young artist was unable to exhibit his works, and could only appear in general exhibitions as a surprise provoking curiosity. Today, the state of affairs is entirely different: the young artists, who are more dynamic active and ambitious, are known and exhibited frequently, whereas the more established ones do so more rarely.*<sup>20</sup>

The first general exhibition of young artists in Israel took place as early as 1954. The Artists Houses in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa presented the works of young artists, and a first biennial of young artists took place at the Museum of New Art in Haifa in 1960.<sup>21</sup> In Tel Aviv, young artists exhibited at Hamlin house, at Katz Gallery, at Dugit gallery, at Gallery 220 and at Israel Gallery, Massada Gallery, and most notably at Gordon Gallery; in Jerusalem, especially noteworthy were Rina gallery and Ruth Debel Gallery, but Ezri Gallery also exhibited works by young artists. The monthly *Gazith* regularly featured young artists and

<sup>14</sup> Kalev, *10+ – Myth and Reality*, 2008, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> Kalev revealed historical imprecisions that had contributed to the myth of 10+, arguing that many of them emerged in Zalmona’s text. Yet in contrast to Kalev’s argument, Raffi Lavie himself was actively involved in the creation of this myth. What contributed to it, among other things, was the exhibition that Lavie curated in 1978 (three years after the publication of Zalmona’s text) at Julie M. Gallery in Tel Aviv, which constituted a sort of memorial exhibition to the 10+ group. Also important in this context is the exhibition *A Concise History of the 60s– Bograshov 1987: Eight Artists*, which Lavie curated together with Dganit Berest (Bograshov Gallery, Tel Aviv, December 1987), in which he addressed the group’s historical presence and succeeded at once again calling the media’s attention to its activity. These two exhibitions are not mentioned by Kalev; see Kalev *10+ – Myth and Reality*, 2008, pp. 57–65, in Hebrew. See also the review by Adam Baruch (the editor of the journal *Musag*, in which Zalmona’s text had been published): Adam Baruch, “History as Side Project,” *Yediot Ahronot*, May 12, 1978, p. 7, in Hebrew.

<sup>16</sup> Kalev, *10+ – Myth and Reality*, 2008, p. 138. Concerning the question of the group’s avant-garde nature, see also Fischer and Manor-Friedman, “Conversations,” in Ashdod, *The Birth of Now: Sixty Years of Art in Israel – The Second Decade 1958-1968*, July–December 2008, pp. 10\*-12\*.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Baruch, “The Israel Museum: A Detailed Account of the Israeli Collection and the Acquisitions and Display Policy,” introduction by the editorial board of the review accompanied by an original report from the Israel Museum, *Musag* 4 (1975): 56–59, in Hebrew.

<sup>18</sup> Zalmona, *100 Years of Israeli Art*, p. 202, in Hebrew.

<sup>19</sup> Kalev, *10+ – Myth and Reality*, 2008, p. 18, in Hebrew.

<sup>20</sup> Joav BarEl, “Tel Aviv Exhibitions,” *Haaretz*, August 13, 1965, in Mordechai Omer, ed., Joav BarEl, *Between Sobriety and Innocence*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004, pp. 178–179, in Hebrew.

<sup>21</sup> Miriam Tal, “The first biennial of young artists,” *Haboker*, September 9, 1960, in Hebrew.



reviewed their exhibitions. In 1965, in an issue featuring Talpir's review of the Israel Museum, the section devoted to artists was entirely dedicated to "Twenty-Three Young Artists in Israel."<sup>22</sup>

Aside from the fact that young art did not necessarily carry a statement concerning innovation and change, what began to become clear in 1965 was that the translation of youthfulness into such a statement involved direction and mediation, organization and the delineation of a program of action.<sup>23</sup> Mediation began to appear as important as a function of the museum, of the artist-curator, or of a gallery owner making a dominant statement – as was done for instance by Yeshayahu (Shaya) Yariv at Gordon Gallery, and by Bertha Urdang at Rina Gallery.<sup>24</sup> The concern not only with the art of the "now," but also with the artists of "here," was especially important: museum curators who presented Israeli art were always the object of criticism, yet museum curators who were perceived as downplaying the presence of Israeli art also triggered critical attacks.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that women took an active and central role in the local art field during these years as gallery founders and directors (Bertha Urdang, Ruth Debel), as art critics (Hedda Boshes, Miriam Tal, Idit Neuman, Tzlila Orgad, Ruth Ben-Chorin), and of course as curators (Elisheva Cohen and Ayala Gordon, the director and curator of the youth wing at the Israel Museum). Women artists were also involved in the organization of artistic events. In the case of 10+, for instance, Malka Rosen and Siona Shimshi were part of the group of founders. Nevertheless,

the data reveals significant inequality in the inclusion of women and in the display of works by female artists in art exhibitions. The 10+ exhibitions maintained a steady ratio of one woman artist for every three or four men. The opening exhibitions of the Israel Museum hardly featured works by women. The exhibition *Trends in Israeli Art* included 29 artists, only three of whom were women. The review of the exhibition in *Gazith* attended to 23 young artists, among whom were only four women. Unfortunately, the same attitude persevered in many of the major group exhibition held until the turn of the 21st century.

The year 1965 brought together two events, which marked two very different curatorial trajectories: the inauguration of the Israel Museum, which began to develop a unique curatorial strategy and to establish influential patterns of museum acts, and the phenomenon of 10+, which underscored the status of the exhibition as a singular statement and artistic activity oriented towards a predetermined subject or theme. A retrospective gaze allows for the characterization of the years 1965–1970 as a time period in which the mediating action of selecting contemporary artists or organizing works of art while creating exhibitions was afforded visibility, and began to express – and to be interpreted as – a statement in and of itself.

22 Gabriel Talpir, "Twenty-Three Young Artists in Israel," *Gazith*, vol. 23, 1-2, 267–268 (June– July 1965): 5–17, in Hebrew.

23 Joav BarEl, "Tel Aviv Exhibitions," *Haaretz*, August 13, 1965, in Mordechai Omer, ed., *Joav BarEl, Between Sobriety and Innocence*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004, pp. 178–179, in Hebrew.

24 On the activity of Gordon Gallery during its first 15 years, and the achievements of Yeshayahu Yariv as the gallery director, see Adam Baruch, "Gordon Gallery – In Commerce as in Commerce," *Yediot Ahronot*, October 3, 1980, p. 25, in Hebrew. Bertha Urdang was the first in Israel to establish exhibitions reflecting a "collector's choice." She founded and served as the director of Rina Gallery in Jerusalem, and later ran a gallery out of her apartment on East 74th street in Manhattan, in the vicinity of the Whitney Museum. Urdang introduced numerous Israeli artists to the New York art scene. See Jerusalem, the Israel museum, *Artists' tribute to Bertha Urdang*, summer 1982.

25 One of the criticisms directed at Gamzu is that he rarely exhibited Israeli artists at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and held a clear predilection for French art; see Joav BarEl, "the Tel Aviv museum's treatment of art, artists and Israeli art," *Ha'ir*, September 8, 1989 (summary of a text written in 1965), in Omer, ed., *Joav BarEl, Between Sobriety and Innocence*, pp. 82–83, in Hebrew.

## Chapter 8

# From Institutional Power to Civic Power: Two Perspectives on Curating and Power

This chapter focuses on the curatorial biographies of two curators: Mordechai Omer and Ariella Azoulay, who held prominent and authoritative positions in the Israeli art field. Omer and Azoulay each forged a strong connection between teaching, academic activities and curatorial activities, while working in very different curatorial arenas, and in the name of different disciplines. Omer operated in affiliation with the discipline of art history, working at the very heart of the institutional museum world as the director of a major museum. Azoulay operated as an independent curator in affiliation with the discipline of visual culture, and was generally identified with opposition to the establishment. Nevertheless, both approached curating in a manner at once didactic and theoretical, and one can note parallels in their efforts to conscript curating for the sake of disseminating their ideas. The discussion of concerns relating to power and curating in the current chapter examines both the different positions of power from which each of the two operated, as well as the use of exhibitions as a means of educating visiting publics, and as a tool for disseminating specific messages.

Omer was one of the essential agents of museology in Israel, and consistently endeavored over the years to promote this discipline. Although he worked within the art field as an art scholar and as the director of art institutions, his approach to curating was museological. From his theoretical perspective, the exhibition was first and foremost an educational tool, and the museum was perceived as a site of informal education. In this sense, the work of the art curator was not different, in his eyes, than that of a curator in a science or natural history museum. This educational emphasis was given expression through his demand for academic recognition of the curator's work. He acted to establish an institutional infrastructure that would allow for such recognition, among other things by expanding the ties between the university and the museum as two complementary loci of formal and informal education, respectively. The work of the contemporary art curator, while undergoing various developments and changes, was perceived by Omer as

an inseparable part of the museum mechanism, and of its methods of action as an institution devoted to collecting, preserving and educating. Thus, despite his deep love of art, his didactic emphasis blurred the uniqueness and innovative nature of curatorial activity that emerged in the context of contemporary art.

The discussion of Azoulay's work is, to a large extent, a case study concerning the uniqueness of curating as a visual research practice. It touches upon the two key concerns presented in this section – the question of the curator as author (and its connection to the growth of independent curating), and the question of the curator as a cultural agent – while expanding the use of the exhibition as a means of expressing the curator's position towards the political and social spheres. Azoulay's curatorial approach questioned the distinction between curating and other actions centered on a political and social reading of the visual. Her critique of "the artistic" as a paradigmatic art-historical construction undermined the distinctions between artist and curator, as well as the status of the art object and the authority of the artist. The current discussion thus exceeds the questions concerning the authority of museum curators or independent curators and their cultural responsibility. Azoulay explicitly prioritized concerns involving civics and ethics, enlisting the exhibition as a civic statement. The range of visual materials she engaged with included photographs of disasters and human suffering, while focusing first and foremost on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli occupation. The point of departure for her work was photography as a medium, action, representation and form of bearing witness, and she relied heavily on studying archival photographs and reading newspaper photographs. In this sense, her work may be seen as continuing the art/chronicle approach represented by the Israeli journalist, writer and art critic Adam Baruch, which viewed daily newspapers and magazines as the most effective display spaces for Israeli photographers.

One relevant perspective for a discussion of Azoulay's work is the idea of the curator as a producer, expand-

ing and developing the idea of the curator as a cultural agent. Building on Walter Benjamin's essays "The Author as Producer" and "The Task of the Translator,"<sup>1</sup> Boris Buden elaborated on the idea that the curator's work involves translating the artist's work into something else by means of an imagined conversation between four generic art-world figures: an artist, a curator, a theorist and a sponsor. Inspired by Benjamin's abstract discussion concerning the question of whether a (linguistic) artwork can be translated, and by the question of the relations between origin and translation, which according to Benjamin are both fragments of a greater language of truth, Buden's theorist argues that the curator chooses a particular artwork when he recognizes translatability in it, and feels able to activate its original pure language. There is thus, Buden's theorist claims, no art as such prior to the encounter with the curator. The division into four speakers enabled Buden to point to the societal relations of exchange that exist in every action of translation while also exceeding it, and thus to the curator's role as an agent of translatability in the field of art. Buden located the curator's activity in the space between the art production and its consumption, underscoring the current socioeconomic system as one in which the focal point is no longer the "market," but rather society itself. He argued that the question of how products affect consumers is no longer relevant; instead, today we observe the relations between consumers themselves and the ability of products, brands and services to link people and produce societies or even tribes of consumption. The traditional marketing model that focuses on the relationship between producers and consumers has been exchanged, according to him, for a model in which the consumers are co-producers. In accordance with this model, the curators are "societers," or agents of socialization, and the products of their actions are social. The perspective offered by Buden is important here, since it is compatible with Azoulay's redefinition of curating as an action that diverges from the curator's traditional responsibility to the artists or art products – an action whose product is civic socialization and not necessarily art.

## MORDECHAI OMER – THE GRAND SYNTHESIS

Mordechai Omer (b. 1941–d. 2011) – a scholar, lecturer and faculty member at Tel Aviv University (1976–2011) – served during his period of tenure at the university both as the curator of the university art gallery (1977–2011), and as the director and chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (1994–2011). Due to the number of central roles he held over time, Omer was one of the most powerful and influential people in the Israeli art field. He was the only one among the curators I discuss at length who, alongside his ongoing curatorial work and role as a museum director, was fully active as an academic faculty member. I will attempt to present the totality of his work in these different fields as a grand synthesis, attesting to Omer's aspiration to create a fusion between the university and the museum, and between formal education and informal knowledge, respectively, while combining the visual and the verbal.

Mordechai Omer grew up in Haifa in an Orthodox Jewish family, and was educated in religious schools. During his military service, in his capacity as an officer in the headquarters of the IDF's Chief Education Officer, he worked at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art under Haim Gamzu, and in 1964 initiated the establishment of the Tel Aviv Museum's education department.<sup>2</sup> He completed a BA in art history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1961), and an MA in museology at Columbia University in New York (1968).<sup>3</sup> As a graduate student, he began working as a curatorial assistant in the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1968–1971), whose director at the time was René d'Harnoncourt.<sup>4</sup> In 1971, Omer returned to Israel with the hope of securing a position at the Israel Museum. When this plan did not work out, he left again for England, where he completed his doctoral studies at East England University in Norwich (1976).<sup>5</sup> That same year, he was appointed as a senior lecturer in the art history department at Tel Aviv University. In 1977, Omer initiated the first museology courses taught in Israel as part of the art history program, as well as the establishment of an art gallery located in the lobby of Mexico Building, the Faculty of the Arts building

1 Boris Buden, "The Wine Was Very Good: On the Task of the Curator," *Manifesta Journal* 10 (2009/2010): 5-11. For Walter Benjamin's essays, see Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Understanding Brecht*, translation: Anna Bostock, London: Verso, 1998, pp. 85–103. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, translation: Harry Zohn, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968, pp.69–82.

2 Emanuel Bar-Kadma, "Omer, the New Director: 'I'm a conservative? Ha,'" *Yediot Achronot*, 7 Days (weekend supplement), February 3, 1995, p. 66, in Hebrew.

3 The title of Omer's MA thesis was *Space-Time and Modern Architecture: The Concept and Sources of Space-Time in Cubism and Its Influence on Architecture*.

4 René d'Harnoncourt (1901–1968) was the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1949–1968. He was killed in a road accident in New York in 1968, while Omer was living there.

5 The title of Omer's doctoral dissertation was *The Iconography of the Deluge in English Romantic Art, With Special References to William Blake and J. M. W. Turner*; see Hannah Taragan and Nissim Gal, "Introduction," *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 13–14 (2010): 15–20.





Gideon Gechtman, *Mary Beebe*, 1990, PVC piping, height 400 cm. *The Column in Contemporary Israeli Sculpture*, the Levi and Fortuna Eskenazi Sculpture Garden, The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, 1990. Photo: Avraham Hay.

at Tel Aviv University.<sup>6</sup> In 1985, Elisheva Cohen, Martin Weil, Yehudit Kol-Inbar, Avner Shalev and Mordechai Omer initiated the establishment of the first Israeli program that offered a diploma in museology upon the completion of a two-year course of study. Omer initially served as the program coordinator, and later as its head (1988–2011). In 1988, the gallery moved to a permanent space built on the university grounds, thus cementing its institutional status; in 2001, its space was extended by means of a new wing, which almost doubled its size.<sup>7</sup>

The first exhibition that Omer was involved in organizing, as an assistant curator under René d'Harnoncourt, was devoted to Picasso's sculptures (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1967). The second exhibition, for which he served as a co-curator, was a tribute to d'Harnoncourt (Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 1970). The traveling exhibition *Turner and the Poets* (1975), which related to Omer's doctoral dissertation subject, was the first exhibition that he curated on his own. It was exhibited in several venues throughout England, as well as in Munich. He later curated additional exhibitions on this subject in Israel and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> In 1976, he curated two exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The first exhibition was of Avigdor Arikha's drawings of Samuel Beckett. The second, *The Seasons*, focused on various illustrations for a cycle of seasonal poems by the 18th-century Scottish poet James Thompson.<sup>9</sup> From 1977 onwards, Omer curated a significant number of exhibitions at the Tel Aviv University gallery; most of them were solo exhibitions of an Israeli or international artist, who was represented by a relatively small body of works. These included an exhibition of etchings for poems by Marc Chagall (1978), drawings and projects by Itzhak Danziger (1981), works by Giacometti (1983), views of Tel Aviv by Yosef Zaritsky (1984), works by Henri Matisse (1985), readymades, prints and reproductions by Marcel Duchamp (1987), prints by Picasso on literary themes (1989), and sculptures and drawings by Joe Pomodoro (1993).

The gallery's new space was inaugurated with a thematic group exhibition titled *Upon One of the Mountains* (1988), which was dedicated to images of Jerusalem in Israeli art. Other notable thematic exhibitions that Omer curated at the university gallery were *The Column in Contemporary Israeli Sculpture* (1990), *The Presence of the*

6 Yehudit Kol-Inbar, "On Museums, Programs and Magic," *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 13–14 (2010): 55–74.

7 The architects who planned the gallery were Dan Eytan and Eri Goshen and Chyutin Architects. Its original area measured 1,000 square meters, and the addition measured approximately 800 square meters. See Esther Zandberg, "A New Wing for the University Gallery in Tel Aviv," *Haaretz*, May 2, 2001, p. D3, in Hebrew.

8 London, a travelling exhibition organized by the Greater London Council, *Turner and the Poets*, 1975; Oxford, The Ashmolean Museum, *Turner and the Bible*, 1981; Boston, McMullen Museum of Art, *J. M. W. Turner and the Romantic Vision of the Holy Land and the Bible*, 1996. Two additional exhibitions held in Israel were an exhibition on *Turner and British Poetry* at the University Gallery in Tel Aviv, 1977, and an exhibition on *Turner and the Bible* at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1979.

9 London, Victoria and Albert Museum, *Samuel Beckett by Avigdor Arikha*, 1976; London, Victoria and Albert Museum, *The Seasons: Illustrations to James Thompson's Poem 1730–1830*, 1976. The exhibition was shown for the second time at the Tel Aviv University Art Gallery in 1982.

*Absent: The Empty Chair in Israeli Art* (1991), and *Water Towers in Israel 1891–1993* (1993). Prior to his appointment as the director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Omer also curated exhibitions of works by Michael Gross (Museum of Art, Ein Harod, 1980 and a retrospective exhibition, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1993); Itzhak Danziger (The Israel Museum, 1981); Pinchas Cohen Gan (Haifa Museum of Art and Museum of Art, Ein Harod, 1983); Zaritsky (a retrospective, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1984), and Jan Rauchwerger (Ramat Gan Museum, 1989). During this period, Omer also served as the curator of the Israeli Pavilion at the 12th Biennial of Young Artists in Paris in 1983 (with the participation of Joshua Borkovsky, Ami Levi, Yehudit Levin, Haim Maor); the 19th São Paulo Biennial in 1987 (participants: Pinchas Cohen Gan, Motti Mizrachi and Ofer Lelouche); the 20th São Paulo Biennial in 1989 (participants: Micha Ullman and Daniel Shoshan) and the Venice Biennale in 2003 (participant: Michal Rovner).

Following his appointment as the director and chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (September 1994), Omer curated numerous solo exhibitions at the museum – some of which were retrospectives accompanied by comprehensive catalogues – for numerous artists including Yaakov Dorchin (1995, 2005), Lucien Freud (1996), Itzhak Danziger (1996), Ra’anan Levy (1996, 2007), Arnon Ben David (1996), Micha Ullman (1996), Yigal Ozeri (1997, 2005), Lena Liv (1997), Dani Karavan (1997, 2007), Hedva Ser (1998), Avigdor Arikha (1998, 2010), Benni Efrat (1999), Zvi Meirovich and Yehudit Hendel (1999), David Smith (1999), Tomer Ganihar (2000), Dina Recanati (2001), Enzo Cucchi (2001), Ofer Lelouche (2001), Meir Pichhadze (2003), Arie Aroch (2003), Mordechai Ardon (2003), Izhar Patkin (2003), Giacometti (2004), Sigalit Landau (2004), Simcha Shirman (2004), Menashe Kadishman (2005), Avraham Hay (2005), Reuven Kuperman (2007), Michal Rovner (2006), Adi Nes (2007), Mark Rothko (2007), Jan Rauchwerger (2008), Michal Heiman (2008), Joseph Krispel (2009), and Aram Gershuni (2009). The last exhibition that Omer worked on, which was mounted and opened after his death, was dedicated to Anselm Kiefer (2010).

Among the thematic group exhibitions he curated as the director of the museum, especially noteworthy is the project *Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies* (1998), which included three exhibitions: *The Eyes of the*

*Nation: Visual Art in a Country without Borders* (curator: Ellen Ginton) and *The Boundaries of Language* (curator: Mordechai Omer), both presented at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art; and *Tikkun*, presented at the Tel Aviv University’s art gallery, which was one of the most prominent thesis exhibitions in his corpus of curatorial work.

Under Omer’s directorship, the museum was expanded twice. In 1999, the new Gabrielle Rich Wing added two galleries and storage spaces to the museum, enlarging it by approximately twenty percent. During the same period, the museum garden was renovated and transformed into a sculpture garden. In 2011, the new Herta and Paul Amir Building was inaugurated, doubling the museum’s exhibition spaces.<sup>10</sup> Mordechai Omer died on June 10, 2011, about three months prior to the official inauguration of the new wing, which was intended among others things to house a permanent display of Israeli art. Omer dedicated a decade to the establishment of this building, which was the largest and most ambitious initiative he undertook in the course of his career.

Omer’s influence was extensive, both as a teacher of art, art-history and museology students, many of whom currently occupy key positions in the art field in Israel, and as a museum director, who impacted the careers of artists and curators.<sup>11</sup> His approach is explored here from a curatorial perspective, in an attempt to follow two stages in his work as a curator and museum director: that preceding his appointment as director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and the stage following his assumption of this role.

## THE UNIVERSITY GALLERY

The story of the establishment of Tel Aviv University’s art gallery is, to a large extent, the story of Omer’s insistent vision. According to him, in 1976, following his sojourn in England, he was offered a teaching position at Tel Aviv University’s Faculty of the Arts, and agreed to return to Israel on the condition that the faculty would open a university art gallery.<sup>12</sup> Omer believed that the central aspect of the gallery’s importance was in its ability to expose the students to original works of art, and that art could not be studied merely by means of slides and reproductions, as was common at the time in Israel. He recounted that his work as

<sup>10</sup> The new building was planned by the American architect Preston Scott Cohen.

<sup>11</sup> Among his prominent students were Dalia Levine, the director and chief curator of the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art (in 1993–2014); Dr. Aya Lurie, who replaced Levine and had previously served as the chief curator of the Shpilman Institute of Photography (in 2010–2014); Drorit Gur Arie, the director and chief curator of the Petach Tikva Museum of Art (in 2004–2019); Yaniv Shapira, the director and chief curator of the Museum of Art, Ein Harod (2016–2023), and the former curator of HaKibbutz Gallery (2004–2009); Raya Zommer Tal, the director and chief curator of the Janco Dada Museum in Ein Hod (since 1988); Sarit Shapira, a former curator at the Israel Museum and later the curator of the Igal Ahouvi Art Collection (in 2008–2014); Tami Katz-Freiman, an independent curator and the former curator of the Haifa Museum of Art (in 2005–2010).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Weyl, “An Interview with Mordechai Omer,” p. 30; Omer, “Introduction,” in *Essays on Israeli Art*, Jerusalem: Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, 1992, p. 8, in Hebrew; Orna Kazin, “There Is Only One Motti Omer,” *Ha’Ir* weekly magazine, March 28, 1997, pp. 77–78, in Hebrew.



René D'Harnoncourt's assistant while the latter curated the exhibition *The Sculpture of Picasso* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1967) was, for him, a formative experience:

*The Sculpture of Picasso was my initiatory exhibition. It was the first time I held originals in my hand, and I must say it wasn't simple, especially not with originals that crumble in your hand like Picasso's early guitars, which are made of newspaper. My hands shook. Yet the experience of touching a sculpture or touching a material was surely one of the most powerful ones in my entire life. It prescribed a double trajectory that I continue to pursue to this day, one unfolding in both the academic world and the curatorial world, and I haven't given up on either one.*<sup>13</sup>

Moshe Lazar, who was Dean of the Faculty of the Arts, supported Omer's proposal, and the gallery opened in 1977 in the lobby of Tel Aviv University's Faculty of the Arts (Mexico Building). The gallery was inaugurated with an exhibition of prints by Turner created in response to the poems of British poets. The prints were from Omer's private collection. Later that same year, the gallery showed 24 prints by Chagall created in 1966–1968, alongside poems that Chagall wrote in 1909–1965. These two exhibitions, alongside the exhibitions that Omer curated in London (Arikha's portraits of Beckett and the illustrations of Thompson's poems) pointed to Omer's clear interpretive inclination – that of subjecting the visual image to the written word or vice versa – an inclination whose significance will be elaborated upon below.<sup>14</sup> During its first years of activity, the gallery featured, among other shows, an exhibition of drawings, sculptures, lithographs and etchings by Giacometti (1983) and an exhibition of sculptures and works on paper by Matisse from the Ayala Zacks Collection (1985). These exhibitions attested to Omer's vision and to his impressive abilities concerning work with benefactors and donors.

Whereas the other university galleries in Israel established following Omer's gallery – at the University of Haifa (1978, officially inaugurated in June 1979) and at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (1983) – mostly exhibited local art,

Omer focused during the gallery's first years on exhibitions featuring Turner, Picasso, Giacometti and Matisse, alongside well-known, prominent local artists such as Zaritsky and Arikha.<sup>15</sup> The model he strove to emulate was that of a gallery with its own building and collection, like those of large, prestigious universities such as Oxford and Cambridge in England, or Harvard and Yale in the United States. In Israel, as Naomi Aviv noted, such a vision could only be realized with the help of a donor, and it indeed materialized thanks to the support of Boris Schreiber, who named it after Genia Schreiber, his mother. Schreiber, remarked Aviv, gave the university one million dollars, insisting that the money be used solely for the establishment of a gallery – a fact that greatly chagrined the university's leading officials.<sup>16</sup>

In December 1988, the gallery's new abode was inaugurated with the thematic exhibition *Upon One of the Mountains*, with the participation of 34 artists (only three of whom were women: Anna Ticho, Lilianne Klapisch and Tamara Rickman). The exhibition featured works by a range of artists concerned with Jerusalem as a holy city during different time periods, and was divided into three chronological chapters: "The Forty Years before the establishment of the State," "The First Twenty Years After the Establishment of the State of Israel", and "Jerusalem after the Unification of the City" (1967–1988)<sup>17</sup>. In the introduction to the catalogue, Omer argued that Jerusalem was a symbol of longing and yearning for the spiritual and unattainable entirely overlooking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and some critical aspects in part of the works. As he stated in a newspaper interview:

*The idea was to show a retrospective of Israeli art, given that this is a festive exhibition. Since I am an academic, I sought a "thesis" and realized that Jerusalem – as a capital and a place (makom)– is one of the central motifs in Israeli art. This is truly a charged topic in the art of the last 80 years, since we have returned there after two millennia in the Diaspora. The thesis of the exhibition is therefore: How does Jerusalem shift from being a topographic-urban subject to an idea of place and myth.*<sup>18</sup>

13 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, interview with Mordechai Omer, June 15, 2009, Tel Aviv. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent statements by Omer were quoted from this interview.

14 Mordechai Omer, "Marc Chagall," in Tel Aviv, University Art Gallery, *Marc Chagall, 1977*, in Hebrew.

15 By comparison, the Haifa University Art Gallery, whose curators during its first years were Prof. Avram Kampf, together with Ilana Salama Ortar, featured exhibitions including *Samuel Beck* (1978), *Maryan* (Pinchas Burstein, 1979), *Modern Jewish ceremonial art by Hana Geber* (1980) and *Abraham Melnikoff* (1982), an exhibition of works by a young American artist – Nancy Goldring (1982), and an exhibition in tribute to José Gurvich. The gallery of Ben-Gurion University initiated by Professor Haim Finkelstein, who served as its curator, featured the exhibitions *Flesh and Blood* (1984, traveled to the Jerusalem Theater), *Images of Eretz-Israel: The 1920s to the late 1940s, From the Givon Collection* (1985), *Siege* (works by Miriam Niger alongside texts by Gabriel Moked, 1988), and *Dorrit Yacoby* (1989), an exhibition curated by Galia Bar Or at the Ein Harod Museum of Art, which later traveled to the university gallery.

16 Naomi Aviv, "And now he has a museum," *Yediot Ahronot*, December 9, 1988, 7 Days weekend supplement, p. 28, in Hebrew.

17 Tel Aviv, University Art Gallery, *Upon One of the Mountains: Jerusalem in Israeli Art, 1988*, pp. 9–11, in Hebrew.

18 Aviv, "And Now He Has a Museum," *Yediot Ahronot*, December 9, 1988, in Hebrew.





Views of the exhibition *The Presence of the Absent: The Empty Chair in Israeli Art*, The Genia Schreiber Tel Aviv University Art Gallery, 1991. Photo: Avraham Hay. **Top:** works by Igael Tumarkin (left), Pinchas Cohen Gan (back wall), Aharon Adani (center), Yehuda Porbuchrai (right wall). **Bottom:** works by Avi Ifergan (center), Philip Rantzer (right), Michael Druks (left wall), Maya Cohen Levy (left wall, far).

In fact, Omer's exhibition did not present a "thesis," but rather a motif or a recurrent theme in the work of numerous artists, without formulating an underlying argument about it. It was a thematic exhibition, as distinct from an exhibition organized around a theoretical thesis, which underscored the importance that Omer ascribed to the division of an exhibition into chapters, to his emphasis on iconography, and to his inclination to interpret visual art by means of religious meanings, sublimation and spirituality. Moreover, the exhibition featured artists whose work Omer affiliated himself with over the years. A number of them, such as Zaritsky, Arikha, and Cohen Gan, had already been extensively explored in his work, while others were explored in depth only later in his career.

The overall tone of the exhibition reviews was reserved. Itamar Levy wrote that, "The works in the exhibition are crowded together in a manner that does not allow for an artistic approach to the paintings," and noted that the curator was concerned with iconography rather than quality.<sup>19</sup> David Ginton noted the tension between the common theme and the different works supposed to represent it. "It seems that in this exhibition, the text is required to make an effort in order to salvage a disproportionately large part of the exhibition, which does not appear interesting," he wrote.<sup>20</sup> Dalia Manor wrote that a public gallery affiliated with an academic institution may be an important institution, yet added that the subject was trite, and that the exhibition was crowded and old-fashioned and presented a chronological continuum without any special emphasis. "In the meanwhile," she concluded, "one can take solace in the building."<sup>21</sup>

In 1990, the gallery was expanded to include a terraced sculpture garden built thanks to a donation of \$500,000 by Giulia Matatia in memory of her parents, Levi and Fortuna Eskenazi.<sup>22</sup>

The garden was inaugurated with an exhibition devoted to the column in Israeli sculpture that featured 19 artists, some of whom created new works that had been especially commissioned by Omer. Most of the works were loaned to the gallery for six months, and were subsequently returned to the artists. The exhibition extended throughout the garden and the gallery lobby, while the second floor featured photographs of columnar sculptures and caryatids by renowned Western artists including August Rodin, Pablo Picasso, Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, Barnett Newman, Constantine Brancusi and Joseph Beuys. Omer's text for the catalogue was mainly concerned with the development of the modern column from Rodin's caryatids onwards, presenting this motif both as an architectural unit and as a biblical or Kabbalah-related metaphor (a pillar of cloud or fire, the pillar of the world, Boaz and Jachin, and Solomon's Pillars in the Temple).<sup>23</sup> Much like the exhibition

<sup>19</sup> Itamar Levy, "Jerusalem After the Transfer," *Haaretz*, January 20, 1989, in Hebrew.

<sup>20</sup> David Ginton, "Who Is a Jewish Artist," *Jerusalem*, December 16, 1988, p. 34, in Hebrew.

<sup>21</sup> Dalia Manor, "Untitled," *Haaretz*, December 9, 1988, in Hebrew.

<sup>22</sup> Sigal Reshef, "Stimulus," *Ha'ir*, June 8, 1990, p. 72, in Hebrew.

<sup>23</sup> Mordechai Omer, "Fallen Caryatids and Broken Obelisks: The Column in 20th-Century Sculpture," in Tel Aviv,

*Upon One of the Mountains*, this exhibition surveyed a motif rather than offering a thesis. It underscored Omer's pattern of thought and scholarship, which was characterized by creating a double affinity between Israeli art and two different sources of inspiration. The first was ancient (biblical, Talmudic or Kabbalah-related) Jewish texts, while the second was modern Western art, and especially the work of major artists such as Picasso, Giacometti and Brancusi. This double affinity became Omer's underlying point of departure for structuring a vision of Israeli art based on several key artists.

In May 1991, Omer curated another thematic exhibition at the gallery, titled *The Presence of the Absent: The Empty Chair in Israeli Art* – the largest and most developed of the thematic exhibitions he would curate. In the catalogue, Omer noted that the idea for the exhibition was consolidated over time, both within the framework of a course he taught at Tel Aviv University's art history department and at Bezalel, and in two texts published in *Mishkafayim*, the periodical of the Israel Museum's Youth Wing.<sup>24</sup> As he wrote, "The tension pervading this image is generated by the interaction of the contrasting 'presence' and 'absence'. The empty chairs constitute a kind of negative pictures of ourselves, of our blurred identity, our secret desires, which are never crystalized or fulfilled."<sup>25</sup> The catalogue text was divided into two parts: the first was concerned with the empty chair in the art of the 20th century, while the second was concerned with the empty chair in Israeli art. The exhibition was exclusively devoted to Israeli artists, charting a historical axis of development from Elijah's Chair, created at Bezalel in 1918–1925, to chairs in works by Zaritsky, Streichaman, Aroch and Gross, and on to young artists and designers. Like Gideon Ofrat and Yigal Zalmona, and in contrast to Yona Fischer, Omer identified the point of departure for every discussion of Israeli art with the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts, which had been established in Jerusalem in 1906, and never sought to question this affiliation.

In his review of the exhibition, Äim Luski noted that Omer did not succeed in anchoring the display in a thesis capable of supporting the objects, adding that Omer's research did not give rise to a philosophical, social or cultural interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Ruth Direktor wrote that Omer's large exhibition underscored the character of his exhibitions as sectional rather than thematic, and observed that the "hard core" of artists featured in them recurred repeatedly, creating an official cross-section of the history of Israeli art. Any artists added in the course of different exhibitions, she noted, merely confirmed this official history, acting

as ornamental additions to it.<sup>27</sup> Much like Gideon Ofrat, whose group exhibitions included, among others, *The Sacrifice of Isaac in Israeli Art* (Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan, 1988); *The Portrait of the Leader in Israeli Art* (Museum of Art, Ein Harod, 1991); or *The Song of the Beggars: The Archetype of the Beggar in Israeli Art* (Avi Hai House, 2008), Omer tended to create generalizations concerning "Israeli art." At the same time, his exhibitions formed a unique subgenre, based on his signature insistence concerning the double affinity of Israeli art both with Western modernism and with a philosophical-religious Jewish dimension. Additionally, Omer, in contrast to Ofrat, had little interest in the art world's margins, and did not even employ this term. Although his professional development took place parallel to the rise of alternative trends in curating and of a critique of the museum institution, he never curated exhibitions in alternative galleries or spaces outside of the contexts of the university, the museum, or of an international biennial.

In retrospect, one can point to an affinity between the lighthearted thematic exhibitions of 10+ art group and between Omer's thematic/sectional exhibitions, which may be interpreted as a more scholarly, serious and institutionalized development of these earlier shows. The fundamental difference was that Omer's exhibitions were quintessential curator's exhibitions: he identified a motif and brought together relevant works to form an exhibition, rather than inviting artists to create works pertaining to a certain theme. Even when he presented commissioned works, as in the exhibition concerned with columns, they clearly reflected Omer's interpretive viewpoint. The criticism awakened in the reviewers by these exhibitions stemmed from several reasons. Firstly, developments in the medium of the exhibition gave rise to a new set of expectations concerning the exhibition as a critical statement, and these expectations grew in relation to the new, high-quality, relatively large exhibition space at the university, a bastion of critical thinking. The second reason for the criticism was the fact that Omer mapped a group of "forefathers," or artists whom he identified as central and repeatedly marked as dominant. The third reason was related to his centralist position of power. Prior to his appointment as the director of the Tel Aviv Museum, Omer – in his capacity as the director of the university gallery – seldom enabled other curators to organize shows there, even though it was a public, educational space. This centralist stance also characterized the approach of Sara Breitberg-Semel, yet the essential difference between the two stemmed from their different degrees of responsibil-

University Art Gallery, Fortuna and Levi Eskenazi Sculpture Garden, *The Column in Contemporary Israeli Sculpture*, June 1990, pp. 6–9.

24 Mordechai Omer, "Foreword," in Tel Aviv, University Art Gallery, *The Presence of the Absent: The Empty Chair in Israeli Art*, May 1991, p. 157.

25 Mordechai Omer., "The Empty Chair in Twentieth century Art," *ibid.*, p. 151.

26 Äim Luski, "A Fair of Vanities at the University Gallery," *Yediot Ahronot*, May 24, 1991, weekend supplement, in Hebrew.

27 Ruth Direktor, "Elijah's Chair Steals the Show," *Ma'ariv*, May 17, 1991, weekend supplement, p. 63, in Hebrew.

ity. Breitberg-Semel was a curator of Israeli art, whereas Omer was a gallery director, and not only a curator. When he was appointed as the director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, his centralist position was significantly bolstered, and criticism of it grew even sharper.

The university gallery and the museology program operating within it enabled Omer to disseminate his idea that academic knowledge was the source of curatorial authority, and that the role of curating was to teach and educate: “I believe that museology is didactic, and this is a very, very important point. In the end, I see myself as a teacher, and museology is another channel for a didactic methodology aimed at teaching,” he said. Teaching at institutions of higher education (Tel Aviv University and Bezalel) and establishing a program in museology, alongside curating exhibitions both at and outside of the university gallery, marked one aspect of Omer’s great synthesis, which was completed with his appointment as the director and chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Another aspect of this overarching, centralizing, and long-lasting strategy was, as noted, interpretive. This aspect, which had already become evident in his early exhibitions, continued to deepen over time, as given expression in his inclination to bring together the written word (especially poetry) with objects or visual images.

The question of the relations between literary texts, especially poetry, and between visual art had already intrigued Omer in his doctoral dissertation, which was concerned with William Turner and William Blake, who were both painters as well as poets.<sup>28</sup> As noted, the first exhibition he curated alone was concerned with Turner (1975). He argued that the melding of a visual image and a textual image enabled Turner to exceed the mere observation of natural phenomena and to seek transcendental concepts, and later also to assume the qualities of an artist and a prophet.<sup>29</sup> The view of the artist as prophet was also given expression in Omer’s interpretation of two key local artists, Danziger and Zaritsky, whom he returned to repeatedly over the years.<sup>30</sup> Omer viewed Danziger as “an educator,

thinker, rabbi, father, prophet at the gate, and preacher.” Zaritsky, meanwhile, was described by him as “A priest, worshipping the forces of nature while activating his forces in order to enslave them.”<sup>31</sup>

The official seal of approval for presenting a written text – biblical, literary or poetic – alongside a visual text as a key interpretive act was given to Omer by the art historian Meyer Schapiro, who served as Omer’s advisor on his Master’s thesis at Columbia University, and assisted him in paving his professional path. Schapiro deeply impacted Omer’s approach to art and professional trajectory, as Omer himself recounted:

*Ever since my student days at Columbia University, I shared with him every advancement on my professional path. It was with his blessing that I was given a job as the assistant to René d’Harnoncourt, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. While I worked there (1967–1972), Schapiro closely followed my research, including the research I conducted for the exhibition of Picasso’s sculptures, where I served for the first time in my career as an assistant to the curator. It was with his encouragement that I left for London, where I wrote my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of John Gage on *The Iconography of the Deluge in English Romantic Art, With Special References to William Blake and J. M. W. Turner*. A significant number of the ideas presented in this study arose following my conversations with Schapiro. Many of the initial ideas I consolidated at a later stage of my research on both international and Israeli art owe the early stages of their germination to Meyer Schapiro. To his last day, I was privileged to enjoy his attentive listening and his in-depth, enriching involvement.*<sup>32</sup>

Schapiro was greatly concerned with iconography and with the question of the encounter between a verbal text and a

<sup>28</sup> Blake’s poetry is better known than that of Turner. According to Omer, Turner wrote poems that were not published during his lifetime. The manuscript of his poems, *Fallacies of Hope*, was first published in 1966 in an anthology titled *The Sunset Ship*; see Mordechai Omer, “Introduction,” in London, a traveling exhibition organized by the Greater London Council, *Turner and the Poets*, 1975.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>30</sup> On Danziger, see Mordechai Omer, *Itzhak Danziger: Makom* (based on materials edited by Itzhak Danziger and Rina Valero in 1973–1977), Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1982, in Hebrew; Mordechai Omer, *Itzhak Danziger*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1986, in Hebrew; Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *Itzhak Danziger: A Retrospective*, opening: September 19, 1996. See also the lecture given by Omer to mark his retirement from Tel Aviv University (December 26, 2010): Omer chose to focus on the motif of water in Danziger’s work. On Zaritsky, see Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *Yosef Zaritsky: A Retrospective*, November 13, 1984–March 20, 1985; Tel Aviv, University Art Gallery, *Zaritsky: Views of Tel Aviv from the Roof and the Window*, 1984; Mordechai Omer, *Zaritsky*, Givatayim: Massada, 1987, in Hebrew.

<sup>31</sup> That is how, according to Omer, Danziger described himself in an interview in *Ma’ariv* (February 29, 1977); see Mordechai Omer, “Introduction,” in Omer, *Itzhak Danziger: Makom*, 1982, in Hebrew; Omer, *Zaritsky*, 1987, in Hebrew.

<sup>32</sup> Mordechai Omer, “Introduction,” in Mordechai Omer, editor, *Meyer Schapiro: A Selection of Essays on Art History*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, 2003, p. viii, in Hebrew. In various references to his period of work in New York, Omer provided different dates for his period of apprenticeship at the Museum of Modern Art. To the best of my knowledge, the precise time period was 1968–1971.



visual image, exploring the image as a sign and its semiotic status in ancient and medieval art.<sup>33</sup> He also attempted to decipher and understand artworks by means of philosophical texts, or to relate them to different philosophical trends<sup>34</sup> and to the interpretations that thinkers such as Heidegger and Freud provided to masterpieces (by Van Gogh and Leonardo, respectively).<sup>35</sup> He even wrote about Chagall's Bible illustrations.<sup>36</sup> Omer, like Schapiro, often wrote about poetry and about literary and philosophical texts. Yet unlike Schapiro, Omer's interpretive bent veered toward religious layers of meaning and made use of figurative means, above all metaphors, to describe the relations of visual art with poetry and literature.

One of the most powerful metaphors in this context was borrowed by Omer from Samuel Beckett. In response to Omer's question concerning the possibility of an encounter between visual art and literature, Beckett answered that "Like fire and water they are separated by a zone of evaporation."<sup>37</sup> This quote was first presented in an article that Omer wrote for the exhibition catalogue of Arikha's portrait drawings of Beckett (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1976), and it was requoted in additional articles by Omer.<sup>38</sup> Omer's repetition of this quote endowed it with the status of a motto describing the relations between verbal text and visual image. These relations, as he saw it, existed in the encounter between two elements that could not be reduced to one another, while creating something new that exceeded them both, and was possessed by a different and intangible quality. Unlike Yona Fischer, who sought to distance himself from metaphorical interpretations, Omer consistently relied on the metaphor of the "evaporation zone," which enabled him to establish a didactic interpretive strategy that presented religiosity as a transcendent, abstract power embedded in art. The "zone of evaporation" marked, for him, a longing for the sublime and an expansion of the "Jewish experience" in relation to both Israeli and international art.

This approach was explicitly formulated in the mega exhibition *Jewish Experience in the Art of the 20th Century* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 1975). This exhibition was curated by Professor Avram Kampf, who had established

the Faculty of Art and the university gallery at the University of Haifa.<sup>39</sup> The exhibition featured 120 European, American and Israeli Jewish artists, and covered seven decades of artistic activity. It focused on its historical Jewish background, and especially on Jewish concerns and Jewish motifs. Kampf argued that an examination of the landscape of 20th-century art revealed dominant traits pertaining to a collective Jewish experience, which was related to the mass migration from East to West, to the existential struggle, and to adaptation to new environments. He defined experience as "a continuous process of the living organism interacting with aspects of the world in which it lives",<sup>40</sup> and wrote that experience meant "observing, encountering and undergoing; It is feeling, sensing, thinking and remembering; It means enduring situations and conditions." In short, experience was, in his eyes, tantamount to change. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Kampf argued further that:

*There has been a strong claim that modern art is largely built on the narrow aesthetic precedents of other works of art, and that its formal problems grew out of older formal problems. This emphasis on formal invention and innovation has diminished the power of content. Not only has there been a tendency to devalue or deny the literal, the pre-artistic, the experimental sources of life which continuously nourish art; we have thereby been induced to overlook the relations, loyalties and tensions between the artist, his background, his culture, sources and concerns.*<sup>41</sup>

It is plausible to assume that in the climate of the present moment, Kampf's arguments would have been more readily attended to than in the 1970s. Robert Pincus-Witten, one of the prominent theorists to follow the Minimalist trend in New York as well as in Israel, responded critically to this exhibition and to Kampf's underlying assumptions.<sup>42</sup> Pincus-Witten attacked the distinction between form and content and the presentation of experiences of deracination, immigration, adaptation and assimilation as unique to the Jewish people. He criticized Kampf's overlooking of contemporary Israeli art of the kind created by Moshe

33 See Meyer Schapiro, "Words and Pictures: On the Literary and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (4):506–507, 1976. See also Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs" (1969), in his *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society, Selected Papers*, New York: George Braziller, 1994, pp. 1–32.

34 Meyer Schapiro, "Philosophy and Worldview in Painting" (1958–68) and "Cézanne and the Philosophers" (1977), in his *Worldview in Painting, Art and Society: Selected Papers*, New York: George Braziller, 1999, pp. 11–73; 75–105.

35 See Omer, editor, *Meyer Schapiro: A Selection of Essays on Art History*, pp. 306–311, 92–131, in Hebrew.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 332–351.

37 Omer, *Essays on Israeli Art*, p. 134, in Hebrew.

38 See, for instance, Mordechai Omer, *Contemporary Israeli Art: Sources and Affinities*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006, pp. 141, 331, 353, in Hebrew.

39 New York, Jewish Museum, *Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century*, October 16, 1975–January 25, 1976.

40 *Ibid.*, p.7.

41 *Ibid.*, p.8.

42 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Six Propositions on Jewish Art," *ARTS* 50, No. 4 (December 1975): pp. 66–69.

Kupferman, Joshua Neustein and Pinchas Cohen Gan, as well as in the medium of photography, and negated the coupling of modernism and abstraction and their relation to the Jewish resistance to the creation of graven images. Moreover, Pincus-Witten rejected the belief that the power of art was embedded in iconography and in what he referred to as “imagism.” Pincus-Witten concludes his text with a short discussion of the inability of words to express visual meaning (on a pre-conscious, psychoanalytic register). The artist, he wrote, “is surely reluctant to approach such a range of signification – through words at least – as words inevitably falsify the meaning of the visual; after all, words and images are not the same.”<sup>43</sup>

One may well assume that Omer was closely familiar with the exhibition shown at the Jewish Museum, as well as with Kampf and Pincus-Witten’s texts, which were published in the Israeli periodical *Musag*, edited by Adam Baruch. From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, throughout the period of Omer’s sojourn in New York, the Jewish Museum held a number of key exhibitions, while actively participating, alongside the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum, in the important moment marking the rise of the New York School, of Minimalism, and of kinetic art.<sup>44</sup> In his own way, Omer sought to chart the complex set of relations between Jewish art, abstraction, modernism, content and form, and contemporary art. He did this in part by means of the metaphor of an “evaporation zone,” as well as by means of poetry. These resources assisted him in forging a bridge that connected Western modernism with Judaism and its philosophical dimension, while highlighting artists whom he considered to be “modernist forefathers,” as well as the forefathers of local Israeli art. In doing so, he laid the foundations for a re-reading of the 1970s, as I will now demonstrate.

In retrospect, it appears that the debate that developed between Kampf and Pincus-Witten was powerfully present over the years in the work of additional local curators. In light of this debate, one can more clearly grasp the conceptual emphasis of Yona Fischer and the different interpretive emphasis given by Sara Breitberg-Semel and Galia Bar Or to experiences of being Israeli and of deracination in art; at the same time, Gideon Ofrat’s definition of

being Israeli may be seen as fusing the stances of Kampf and Pincus-Witten. This debate was clearly replicated in the opposing stances of Mordechai Omer and Adam Baruch. Much like Omer, Baruch was a secular believer; yet in contrast to Omer, he was seen as representing a secular, subversive and provocative line of thought, as evident in his writing:

*Is somebody attempting to rewrite local secular history? Was modern Israeli art born not from an arid Israeli experience, not from the gaze toward the West, not from secularism, but rather from religiosity?! There is no case to be made for this idea. This is a pathetic attempt to hold onto something “greater than art” – an attempt to downplay the affinity with secularism as the dominant value in local modern art... Why have two authoritative representatives of the local art world, Yigal Zalmona and Mordechai Omer, each independently engaged in an acquisition spree (albeit a moderate and aesthetic one) centered on “religiosity” or at the very least “a sense of religiosity” in Israeli Minimalism and abstraction?<sup>45</sup>*

## THE MUSEUM AS PLACE

In 1992, Mordechai Omer’s name came up as a candidate for directing the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. From the first moment, the possibility of this appointment awakened resistance within a group of artists, curators and writers, whose leaders were Ariella Azoulay, Aïm Luski, Naomi Siman-Tov and later also Gilad Melzer. A meeting held at Bograshov Gallery in Tel Aviv (in December 1992) was intended to protest this possibility.<sup>46</sup> In a short interview conducted by Smadar Sheffi with Omer, he argued that “The central problem today in every museum is the huge gap between the public and the art, and it needs to be reduced... the museum should be concerned with providing values. The Israeli public must see and learn much in order to overcome gaps.”<sup>47</sup> Omer believed that the museum must first and foremost serve to collect, preserve and present historical exhibitions and show art in context, and that

43 Ibid, p. 69.

44 During this period, the Museum of Jewish Art featured, among other exhibitions, the first museum shows of works by Robert Rauschenberg (1963); Jasper Johns (1964); Kenneth Noland (1965); Larry Rivers and Ed Reinhardt (1966); Yves Klein (1967); and the exhibition *Primary Structures* (1966), curated by Kynaston McShine, and which served as a milestone in defining Minimalism. Among the museum’s directors during those years were Karl Katz (1968–1971), formerly the director of the Bezalel Museum and later the director of the Israel Museum’s Bezalel Wing – who, like Omer, had studied with Meyer Schapiro. See Matthew Israel, “A Magnet for the With-It Kids: The Jewish Museum, New York, of the 1960s,” *Art in America* (October 2007): 72–83.

45 Adam Baruch, “With all due respect, what exactly is Jewish about Moshe Kupferman?!” *Ha’Ir*, July 26, 2001, pp. 62–65, in Hebrew.

46 Smadar Sheffi “The museum will be the judge,” *Haaretz*, December 17, 1992, p. B7, in Hebrew; see also Naomi Siman-Tov, “Who will be the next curator?” *Tel Aviv*, November 20, 1992, and Omer’s response, “I protest,” *Tel Aviv*, November 27, 1992, p. 13, in Hebrew.

47 Sheffi, “The museum will be the judge,” *Haaretz*, December 17, 1992, in Hebrew.

the “spreading of new theses” was a goal of secondary importance.<sup>48</sup> He argued that the museum should not be presenting artists who have just completed their studies, but only artists whose development has been studied over time. He also believed that the Tel Aviv Museum of Art should be equally devoted to exhibitions of Israeli art, exhibitions of international art, and exhibitions combining the two. Unlike Sara Breitberg-Semel, who was opposed to historical exhibitions, promoted young art, and preserved the gap built into every museum between elitism and the inclination to market art for the people, Omer sought to reduce the gap and educate the visiting public.

Ultimately, Omer was only appointed to this position in September 1994. In accordance to the conditions he demanded, he was given the double position of general director and artistic director (chief curator). His entrance to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art was accompanied by a professional dispute and workers’ protest, since he sought to annul the collective contracts securing the workers’ positions, and replace them with personal contracts. He also fired one of the museum’s young and active photography curators, Rona Sela, and stemmed the early activity of the video department directed by Idit Porat. Having been appointed to act as both general and artistic director, he also continued to work as a professor of art history and as the director and chief curator of the university gallery, while also serving as a consultant to the city’s mayor at the time, Roni Milo. Given these numerous positions, the problem of centralized power became a major concern overshadowing the assessment of Omer’s curatorial work. As Orna Kazin wrote:

*The power he has accumulated is frightening. The positions he holds provide him with tremendous freedom of action and an ability to restrict the activity and influence of others. He is capable of distancing entire groups of artists and curators from the center of power. He can stem the advancement of art scholars at the university and prevent them from receiving academic degrees ... as a consultant to the mayor, he can distance resources from those he does not wish to support.<sup>49</sup>*

From Omer’s perspective, the numerous positions he held complemented one another. His educational-scholarly worldview complemented his approach as a museum director, creating a great synthesis. “The museum and the university are very similar in terms of the challenge they

offer,” he stated. “A museum collects, preserves and presents a people’s cultural treasures, as does the university. These are truly parallel roles.”<sup>50</sup> He argued that curating, which is only one aspect of the museum system, must be subject to the definition of the museum’s target audience and to the museum context, and that the museum, and not only an academic gallery, must be predicated on academic knowledge and its patterns of acquisition. “I think that an academic methodology is necessary to curating. It is not an option but a necessity. It is necessary since there is nothing else. But not everyone agrees with me,” he said. In a press interview at the time of his appointment as museum director, Omer noted that curators are “art’s Archimedean creative point.” They must conduct research, “and in doing so – without intervening in the artist’s considerations – they create. This is the only way to achieve an optimal presentation of the exhibition and to do justice to the artist and his art.”<sup>51</sup> Omer related research to an allegiance to the artist; and unlike the notion of the curator as creator upheld, for instance, by Gideon Ofrat, he ascribed importance to the “precision” of interpretations – “the optimal presentation” of the works, in his terms – even though in practice his modernist-religious interpretations did not always do justice to the artists or their works. Much like Elisheva Cohen, Omer underscored the didactic aspects of curating, without clearly characterizing the criteria defining a curator: “One mustn’t compromise on standards,” he noted, “the conditions must be created for the joining of good new curators. Who is a good curator? I would say, a combination of a Renaissance man and inspiration.”<sup>52</sup>

Following his assumption of his new role, in accordance with his position that a museum must first and foremost present historical exhibitions, Omer curated the exhibition *New Horizons: Sculpture* (1996). The exhibition featured six sculptors: Kosso Eloul, Itzhak Danziger, Dov Feigin, Ruth Zarfati-Sternschuss, Moshe Sternschuss and Yehiel Shemi. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Omer stated that the image of the New Horizons movement is of a movement whose activity centered on painting, while his exhibition sought to underscore the importance of the sculptors who were part of the group and to highlight their work. The exhibition was divided into five clusters: (1) Portraits; (2) Figures; (3) Motifs of animals, birds, and bird nests; (4) Danziger; (5) Abstract, geometric language.<sup>53</sup> The reviewers argued that Omer presented these sculptures for the first time in several decades without formulating a stance and without presenting a contemporary historiographic perspective, and saw this as a missed scholarly

48 See Smadar Sheffi, “The Silence of the Curators,” *Haaretz*, October 30, 1996, p. D2, in Hebrew; Mordechai Omer, “The curators are working” (response to Sheffi’s article), *Haaretz*, November 5, 1996, p. D1, in Hebrew.

49 Orna Kazin, “There is only one Motti Omer,” *Ha’Ir*, March 28, 1997, in Hebrew.

50 Aviv, “And now he has a museum,” *Yediot Ahronot*, December 9, 1988.

51 Bar-Kadma, “Omer, the new director: ‘I’m a conservative? Ha,’” *Yediot Ahronot*, February 3, 1995, in Hebrew.

52 Ibid.

53 Mordechai Omer, “New Horizons: Sculpture,” in Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *New Horizons: Sculpture*, March 28–June 29 1996, pp. 1–4, in Hebrew.





View of the exhibition, *The Boundaries of Language*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1998.  
Photo: Avraham Hay.

opportunity. They criticized the archaic organization of the display and the clearly felt absence of additional writers in the catalogue aside from Omer.<sup>54</sup> Omer saw his achievement in the act of salvaging the sculptures, many of which had been touched by rot, as well as in their process of documentation.<sup>55</sup> The exhibition and the reviews of it once again revealed the gap between the emphasis on preservation and documentation that guided Omer's approach to the museum and the expectations of the local art community that the museum represent theoretical innovation, a critical historiographical point of view, and cutting-edge art. Later that same year, Omer curated at the museum a large retrospective for Itzhak Danziger, who had already been awarded a central place in the New Horizons exhibition. That year also featured a joint exhibition of works by Arnon Ben David and his father, Shlomo Ben David, as well as an exhibition of works by Lucien Freud. Notwithstanding the appreciation for the achievement involved in exhibiting the work of an important contemporary artist, the Freud exhibition was criticized for being presented as a comprehensive exhibition when in fact it was not, and for being accompanied by a catalogue that only included an article by Omer.<sup>56</sup>

The most comprehensive historical activity that Omer initiated at the museum was a reexamination of the 1970s. From a personal perspective, this decade was a foundational professional moment, yet due to his sojourn in London, he did not experience the important art events that had occurred in Israel during the first half of this decade, or the impact of the Yom Kippur War on art-making during those years. Sara Breitberg-Semel observed, as noted, that the first half of the 1970s was a "revolutionary moment," and that this period obligated her – as a curator of Israeli art working at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in the subsequent post-revolutionary moment – to consolidate her course of curatorial action in relation to it. Working at the same museum yet operating from a different position than that represented by Breitberg-Semel – the double position of a director and curator – Omer chose to return to a concern with the 1970s and to cement their importance with a monumental project. *Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies* (1998) included, as noted, three exhibitions (two at the Tel Aviv Museum and one at the Tel Aviv University Art Gallery), three catalogues, and an index volume devoted to the decade's exhibitions and art

<sup>54</sup> See Smadar Sheffi, "The Horizons Are New, the Catalogue is Restricted and Old-fashioned," *Haaretz*, April 29, 1996, in Hebrew; Ruth Direktor, "New Horizons: Sculpture," *Studio art magazine* 73 (June 1996): 59–60, in Hebrew.

<sup>55</sup> Kazin, "There is only one Motti Omer," *Ha'ir*, March 28, 1997, in Hebrew.

<sup>56</sup> Galia Yahav, "The Counting of Omer," *Ha'ir*, March 27, 1998, pp. 74–77, in Hebrew.

events.<sup>57</sup> This project partook of the efforts of a number of museums to mark the State of Israel's 50th anniversary through a reexamination of local history. It was presented parallel to the exhibition *Hebrew Work* curated by Galia Bar Or (Museum of Art, Ein Harod), and the double exhibition *Social Realism in the 50's, Political Art in the 90's* curated by Gila Ballas and Ilana Tenenbaum (Haifa Museum of Art). The opening text in each of the three catalogues included in Omer's project notes that the timeframe on which the exhibitions focus extends from the Six-Day War (1967) to the Lebanon war (1982), and includes the Yom Kippur War (1973), which "cast its long shadow on the middle of this period."<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, the texts created the expectation that the reading of the art events unfolding during this period would be political. In practice, only the exhibition curated by Ellen Ginton, *The Eyes of the Nation: Visual Art in a Country without Boundaries*, explicitly presented a political perspective, and it too made this perspective felt more in the catalogue texts than in the installation itself.<sup>59</sup> Ginton argued that "Israeli art since the 1970s has evinced a changing and expanding political awareness. Part of what was then still not regarded as political is so today... Contrarily, what was conceived as outspokenly political then may seem less so by now."<sup>60</sup> *The Jerusalem River Project* (1970) is according to Ginton an example of the first type; Moshe Gershuni's *Who's a Zionist and Who isn't* (1978) is an example of the second type.

The two exhibitions held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art extended throughout its galleries. The exhibition curated by Ginton presented, among other things, Moshe Gershuni's work *Soft Hand* (1975). The first part of this work featured Gershuni singing the Hebrew poem by this name, a performance broadcast hourly from the museum rooftop in a manner reminiscent of the muezzin's call; its second part included an enlargement of newspaper excerpts concerned with the story of Jewish settlers from Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement near Hebron in the West Bank, who abused Ziad Yussof a Palestinian man). Other works in the exhibition included a work by Raffi Lavie featuring a Bank Hapoalim advertisement (a fragment of an official portrait of Golda Meir) glued onto a photograph of the al-Aqsa Mosque; a reconstructed installation by Joshua Neustein, *Dogma*, which had been shown at Yodfat Gallery in 1974 and, included rolls of tar paper on which the corpses of run-over dogs were laid; a sound work by Michael Druks,

which included a text from Herzl's *The Jewish State*; a wall work by Tamar Getter from the *Tel Hai Cycle* (1974–1978); and a large, central work by Avital Geva, based on an action he had performed at Yodfat Gallery in 1973. The original version included herring emitting a strong odor, bowler hats and ties in basins filled with preservative liquid. At the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Geva presented a larger and somewhat milder version in which live fish swam in an impressive pool among pink waterlilies and bowler hats.

Ginton's exhibition was presented in a single gallery, while the exhibition curated by Omer, *The Boundaries of Language*, extended throughout most of the museum. It was divided into two theoretical chapters: the first, "Anatomy of the Language of Visual Art," included four categories (drawing, color, surface/format and space). The second, "Trends in the Language of Visual Art" was concerned with prominent phenomena in the Western art of the 1970s, which Omer argued had been given special expression in Israeli art (Earth art, body art, performance and installation, photography, video, television and film art, sound art, grids and serial art, cartographic art, text art, mail art). The exhibition spaces were divided into sections and sub-sections in accordance with these different categories.

The reviews, especially those by critics who had experienced the art of the 1970s in real time, related to the gap between the mummified museum displays and the vivid and rebellious energy of 1970s art. Yossi Nachmias argued that the exhibitions lacked any self-reflexive dimension concerning the act of display as "an action that constructs meaning," and that they "neutralize the social-artistic activities of those years and discharge them of their potential threat to the ongoing stability of the current order of things."<sup>61</sup> Aïm Luski, one of Omer's regular critics, argued that the exhibition was curated from a distant and detached position ("in the feverish mind of God"), and that it fail to challenge the views of local art-world representatives and their different interpretations of this period.<sup>62</sup> Dana Gillerman referred to Yona Fischer's remark that the index volume was filled with mistakes and should be removed from the shelves.<sup>63</sup> Sara Breitberg-Semel reported in *Studio* that in the midst of this demanding, wide-ranging project, Omer even found time to curate another exhibition himself, *Contemporary Israeli Art: Three Generations* (Brunei Gallery, 1998), at the University of London's School of Oriental and Afri-

57 Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *The Eyes of the Nation: Visual Art in a Country without Boundaries*, April 7–May 30, 1998; Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *The Boundaries of Language*, April 7–July 4, 1998 (catalogue published in 2008); Tel Aviv, University Art Gallery, *Tikkun*, March 26–May 1, 1998.

58 Mordechai Omer, "Foreword," in Tel Aviv, *Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies*, 1998 (all three catalogues).

59 The catalogue included a text by Uri Ram, titled "A Decade of Turmoil: Israeli Society and Politics in the Seventies," in Tel Aviv, *The Eyes of the Nation*, 1998, pp. 346–326.

60 Ellen Ginton, *The Eyes of the Nation: Visual Art in a Country without Boundaries*, *ibid.*, p. 318.

61 Yossi Nachmias, "The Exhibitions that Were: Israeli Art in the Seventies," *Studio* 93 (May 1998): 66–68, in Hebrew.

62 Aïm Luski, "The Exhibitions that Were: The Boundaries of Language," *ibid.*, pp. 68–70, in Hebrew.

63 Dana Gillerman, "Yona Fischer: The Index of Art of the Seventies Is Filled with Mistakes," *Haaretz*, July 5, 1998, p. D1, in Hebrew.



can Studies.<sup>64</sup> The catalogue of the London exhibition was published by the *Tel Aviv Museum of Art*, whereas the catalogue *The Boundaries of Language*, the largest and most comprehensive of the three exhibitions in the Israeli project, remained unpublished due to budgetary constraints, and was only published a decade later, in the context of another comprehensive project.

The third exhibition in this project, *Tikkun* – which was presented at the University Art Gallery, transforming it into a de facto extension of the Tel Aviv Museum – was a streamlined, quintessential thesis exhibition. The Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun* refers to the primordial need to restore the order of things in the world, which was shattered as a consequence of the disaster known as “breaking the vessels.” In order to heal it and raise the Being to a higher level of wholeness and unity (*tikkun olam*), man must make himself an active participant. Omer tied the notion of *tikkun* to the Israeli art of the 1970s by means of two artistic figures: the international Joseph Beuys, and the local Itzhak Danziger. He sought to reread this period in light of the two most powerful channels of influence he identified in it: Beuys’ artist as shaman phenomenon, alongside the pioneering socialist way of being, which was infused during the 1970s with ecological ideas concerning the rehabilitation of nature under the influence of Danziger’s art.<sup>65</sup> According to Omer, these two channels of healing pursued two currents already present in the Israeli painting of the 1950s and 1960s, which viewed the artist as a healer of the world. The first current, according to Omer, relied on a Jewish mystical tradition, and its most important standard bearer was Mordechai Ardon; the second current was made evident through the work of Joseph Zaritsky, whom Omer described as opposing any possibility of an explicit Jewish narrative and preferring an abstract, international language as the point of departure for his art.<sup>66</sup> Omer argued that Ardon’s work gave expression to Kabbalistic structures and occult symbols and sought to reduce the gap between the heavenly realm and the terrestrial realm in and by means of his art.<sup>67</sup> According to Omer, in the 1950s and 1960s, secular Israeli art was not ripe enough to receive the mystical possibility that arose in Ardon’s works, and his direct concern with Jewish symbols. Zaritsky’s work, by contrast, offered an artistic spiritual power that represented, for Omer, the residue of a Romantic sensibility, and was thus closer in this respect

to the approach of the New York School, and especially to that of Jackson Pollock.<sup>68</sup> A special place in Omer’s discussion of Zaritsky was devoted to the series of paintings concerned with Kibbutz Yechiam, where Zaritsky stayed during the summers of 1949–1954 while teaching art there. According to Omer, in the Yechiam series Zaritsky is presented as “one who wants to be drawn into the infinitude of the place, but also to arise over nature in order to conquer it and to recreate it anew.”<sup>69</sup> Omer likened this series to the song of a Troubadour, who wanted to “sing of the universe which pulses on earth and found himself singing his own song.”<sup>70</sup> This remark once again underscored the importance of poetic texts in Omer’s eyes, his view of such texts as a conduit to the sublime. In the end, Omer argued that these two approaches, that of Ardon, which openly engaged with Jewish ideas, and that of Zaritsky, who reached this heightened state of consciousness through art as a private, secular act, offered *tikkun* by synthesizing faith, knowledge and doubt.

This exhibition featured eight male artists who were central in the 1970s, most of whom had already been attended to in breadth by Omer: Itzhak Danziger, Joshua Neustein, Pinchas Cohen Gan, Menashe Kadishman, Avraham Ofek, Michail Grobman, Gideon Gechtman and Motti Mizrahi. The first four were represented by works that Omer related to Earth art and to American artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer or Walter De Maria; the last four, he argued, had used their bodies in order to “take off” to the beyond and to pass beyond the boundaries of their bodies,<sup>71</sup> and could thus be compared to international artists such as Ana Mendieta and Terry Fox. The exhibition consisted mainly of photographed documentation of various actions alongside a reconstruction of the installation *Exposure*, which had been presented by Gechtman in 1975 at Yodfat Gallery, as well as clothes, objects and accessories that were used in the actions performed by Avraham Ofek, such as *Cloak for Self-Stoning* (1980) and a box of work tools and clothes for *Esau’s Deed* (1979–1980).

As noted, despite its relatively small size, *Tikkun* was Omer’s most comprehensive thesis exhibition. It represented the great synthesis towards which he strove by bringing together the museum and the university, as well as by forging a historical connection between the forefathers of local art in the 1950s and the artistic actions of the 1970s, charting a cross-generational process that was

64 Sara Breitberg-Semel, “A Work Arrangement between London and Tel Aviv,” *Studio 95* (July 1998): 15, in Hebrew; see also Dana Gillerman, “Israeli Art in London,” *Haaretz*, July 2, 1998, p. D2, in Hebrew.

65 Mordechai Omer, “Tikkun: Shamanism in Art – The Israeli Option,” in Tel Aviv, University Art Gallery, *Tikkun*, March 26–May 1, 1998 pp. 508–449.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 493.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 492.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 488–487.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 482. It is worth nothing that parts of Omer’s discussion of Zaritsky in this context were quoted in full from Omer’s book *Zaritsky*, p. 134, in Hebrew.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 487.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 465.





Views of the exhibition, *Tikkun*, The Genia Schreiber Tel Aviv University Art Gallery, 1998. Photo: Avraham Hay.

**Top:** Works by Avraham Ofek. **Bottom:** Works by Menashe Kadishman.

simultaneously rooted in Jewish thought and in late (New York) modernism. The axis of interpretation delineated by Omer moved between the two meanings of “place”: locus and topos – that is, a specific, concrete site and an abstract category or connotation of place in its cultural and religious sense. The trinity of art-divinity-nature circumscribed by the exhibition created an affinity between the concepts of place and *tikkun*, while pointing to the possibility of also seeing the gallery and the museum as sites in which this affinity existed, and in which truth could be approached. In this sense, Omer’s work translated the curatorial process into a participation in the process of investigating truth, and completed his assumption that an interpretive allegiance with artists and their work touched upon the truth:

*My work in the fields of art scholarship moved between the aspiration to expand and enrich artistic creation in its cultural and philosophical context, and between the need to bring the audience closer to the artist’s work by calling attention to its linguistic aspects and modes of display. The discussions of formal language served merely in order to access the message of the works, which sought, each in its own way, to uncover the explicit and implicit truth of life. Above all, I see art as a testimony to man’s eternal striving to decipher the mystery of his life.<sup>72</sup>*

In 2008, in conjunction with the sixtieth anniversary of the State of Israel, Omer returned to concern himself with the 1970s as part of an initiative involving a series of six exhibitions marking this occasion in the country’s different museums. Following upon the exhibitions dedicated to the state’s first decades (curators: Gideon Ofrat and Galia Bar Or) and its second decade (curators: Yona Fischer and Tamar Manor-Friedman), which were mentioned above, Omer curated the exhibition dedicated to the third decade, *My Own Body*, which was concerned with the art of the 1970s from the perspective of body art. Once again, the exhibition featured many of the works previously exhibited as part of the project *Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies*, albeit in a different thematic context.<sup>73</sup> On this occasion, Omer completed – a decade after the exhibition – the publication of the catalogue *The Boundaries of Language*.

The exhibition *My Own Body* was divided into two parts, shown in two disconnected parts of the museum. Its first part was concerned with the self-portraits of some 30 artists, and was located in the museum’s top wing, whereas the second part was located on the museum’s lowest level and was concerned with the artist’s body, expressions of activism and anti-institutional protest, and the documentation of various performances and installations that took place during those years. The subject of portraiture, which was not unique to this period, enabled Omer to include in

<sup>72</sup> Omer, *Essays on Israeli Art*, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *My Own Body: Sixty Years of Art in Israel – The Third Decade, 1968–1978*, July 31, 2008–January 3, 2009.



Installation view, *Tikkun*, The Genia Schreiber Tel Aviv University Art Gallery, 1998. Works by Gideon Gechtman. Photo: Avraham Hay.

this display artists who were active during this time period, even though their work did not include a new understanding of the body – including Ofer Lelouche, Liliane Klapisch and Jan Rauchwerger. The physical disconnection between the “head areas” devoted to portraiture, which were reminiscent of the sectional exhibitions that Omer curated at the Tel Aviv University Gallery, and the “lower body parts,” featuring numerous works concerned with pain, shame and abjection, amplified the lack of connection between the two parts of the exhibition, as well as its didactic effect. While participating in this national project, Omer also differentiated his exhibition from it, viewing the exhibition on the third decade of Israeli art as another link relating to *Perspectives on Israeli Art*, which was entirely identified with his own curatorial signature. Indeed, the foreword to the exhibition catalogue was the same one previously printed in the three catalogues of the 1998 project.<sup>74</sup> He thus expanded his hold as a curator on the interpretation of this period, as well as his affinity with the artists active during those years.

## CULTURAL RESPONSIBILITY

During his years as the museum director, Omer’s attitude concerning a number of the criticisms directed at him changed, and he responded to them on various occasions. “I admit that we should have held more group exhibitions of young artists – to identify a line, themes, approaches,” he said in an interview with Gilad Melzer in 1999.<sup>75</sup> In an interview I held with him in 2009, Omer admitted that the numerous positions he had filled simultaneously sometimes had an adverse impact on one another, yet argued that they also supported one another. “I didn’t receive these jobs, I constructed them,” he noted. With the opening of the museum’s new wing (1999), which added exhibition and storage spaces, Omer had various difficulties (including budgetary ones) in adhering to the program he had outlined when assuming his position – that of presenting, in equal parts, exhibitions of Israeli art, international art, and mixed exhibitions. At the Tel Aviv University Gallery, which had been expanded in the meanwhile (2001), his absolute hold as a curator was loosened somewhat, allowing for more activity on the part of guest curators, some of whom were graduates of the museology program.<sup>76</sup> At the same

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.

<sup>75</sup> Gilad Melzer “The Poverty of Omer,” *Yediot Ahronot*, November 12, 1999, 7 Days supplement, pp. 58–64, in Hebrew.

<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, *Hanoch Levin: Human, Object, Human*, January 18–April 10, 2003 (curators: Prof. Nurit Yaari and Prof. Shimon Levi); *The Meir Agassi Museum: A Mental, Metaphorical, Real Space*, November 13, 2003–January 11, 2004 (curator: Yaniv Shapira); “Now Here, Tomorrow Where?” *Dany Zakhem: Works 1980–1993*, April 29–June 24, 2004 (curator: Dana Tagar); *Women’s Presence in Israeli Architecture*, May 18–July 5, 2007 (curator: Shelly Cohen); *Digital Landscapes*, November 27, 2007–January 31, 2008 (curator: Irit Tal).



time, during the first decade of the 21st century, Omer curated at the museum, among other exhibitions, retrospectives of Arie Aroch (2003) and Dani Karavan (2007), which were accompanied by comprehensive catalogues, as well as large exhibitions of a significant number of artists, including Mordechai Ardon (2003), Sigalit Landau (2004), Michal Rovner (2006), and Michal Heiman (2008).<sup>77</sup> In addition, he co-curated, together with Christopher Rothko, a small retrospective of works by Mark Rothko, which included 38 paintings (2007).

At the same time, Omer began promoting the construction of a new, separate building to be devoted to Israeli art, which was planned to allow for the presentation of 100 years of Israeli art, from the early days of Bezalel to the present.<sup>78</sup> His insistent efforts to raise money for the new building deepened his connections with donors, while leading to a new series of protests concerning the management of the museum,<sup>79</sup> as the position of power from which he operated continued to be attacked even more vehemently. Ami Steinitz published a piercing article in which he attacked the lack of transparency concerning the museum's administration and Omer's collaboration with artistic censorship.<sup>80</sup> Steinitz's curatorial position concerning censorship had been clearly articulated in the exhibition *Banned*, which was shown at his gallery in 1998 and featured works that had been censored, boycotted, vandalized or made to disappear.

Steinitz's article summed up most of the criticisms focused on Omer's way of directing over the years. I will refer to it here mainly in terms of its concern with censorship, which was extensively discussed. In this context, there were two important cases. The first concerned an exhibition of works by Ahlam Shibli at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art following her receipt of the Gottesdiener Prize (2002). Shibli was awarded the prize for photographs capturing the life of residents in the unrecognized

Bedouin village Arab al-N'aim, located between Sakhnin and Carmiel, in the north of Israel.<sup>81</sup> In the exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum, Shibli expanded on her concern with unrecognized villages, also documenting the lives of the Bedouins in the Negev Desert. The German curator Ulrich Loock, who was a member of the prize jury, curated the exhibition at the museum and wrote a text that expressed a critical stance pertaining to the State of Israel's treatment of the Bedouin settlements in the Negev. The disagreement between Loock and the museum concerning part of the catalogue text he wrote led, according to Loock, to the censorship of part of his text, and to his subsequent resignation from the prize jury. Steinitz noted in his article that Omer disagreed with a number of Loock's formulations and asked him to change them, and that despite Loock's agreement to do so, that part of the text was censored.<sup>82</sup> It should be noted that Steinitz chose to portray this affair in an unbalanced manner. He based himself on the information presented in Dana Gillerman's article, yet presented a partial and fragmented version of the disagreement.<sup>83</sup> Gillerman had described a complex situation: she hinted at the possibility that what was at stake was not actual censorship but in fact editing, and that Loock had exploited his position as a curator in order to make arguments that he viewed as vital to an understanding of Shibli's works, yet which in fact expressed his political stance towards Israel. "Shibli documented everyday life, not the destruction of houses or children fleeing pesticide sprayed in the fields. These facts were supposed to appear in Loock's text, which was meant to provide the viewer with additional information to complete the picture," Gillerman wrote.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, Gillerman noted that Shibli had sharply criticized the censorship of Loock's text. She also noted that Shibli further argued that the museum's press release defined her identity as a "Palestinian Israeli," rather than "a Palestinian resident

77 In 2003, the Tel Aviv Museum and the Israel Museum simultaneously held two large exhibitions concerned with various aspects of Ardon's work, which together formed a retrospective including more than 100 works; Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *Mordecai Ardon: Time, Space, Metaphysics*, March 2003; Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, *Mordecai Ardon: Landscapes of Infinity*, March 2003; see Smadar Sheffi, "Blue Summer Storm," *Haaretz*, March 3, 2003, in Hebrew.

78 Smadar Sheffi, "No Formulation of a New Canon," *Haaretz*, November 14, 1999, p. D1, in Hebrew.

79 On the exhibition of the Hackmey Collection at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and on the Bank Leumi display at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (1998), see Smadar Sheffi, "Like a slow clock," *Haaretz*, November 24, 1998, in Hebrew. On the planned donation of Aviva and Sami Ofer to the museum's new building, which was predicated upon the renaming of the museum after the donor and was rejected due to public outcry (2006), see Dana Gillerman, "The Tel Aviv Museum will be named after Aviva and Sami Ofer," *Haaretz*, December 11, 2005, in Hebrew; Merav Yudilevitch, "Sami Ofer withdrew his donation to the Tel Aviv Museum," *Ynet*, January 31, 2006, in Hebrew.

80 Ami Steinitz, "Broken Vessel," *Maarav* 4, June 15, 2006, in Hebrew. Originally published in the periodical *Hakivun Mizrach* (December 2005).

81 Ahlam Shibli's photographs were shown at the gallery of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (2000) in an exhibition curated by Tal Ben Zvi, as well as in the exhibition *Liminal* (Ein Harod Museum of Art, 2001), curated by Galia Bar Or. See Smadar Sheffi, "Five Personal Stories," *Haaretz*, October 22, 2001, in Hebrew; Dana Gillerman, "Delineating the Border," *Haaretz*, December 11, 2001, p. D1. In Hebrew.

82 Steinitz, "Broken Vessel."

83 Dana Gillerman, "No Politics Now," *Haaretz*, April 30, 2003, Arts & Leisure section, in Hebrew.

84 Ibid.



of Israel,” as she defined herself.<sup>85</sup> This affair revealed a special sensitivity concerning the critical stance of a non-Israeli curator towards Israel (when Shibli’s works were presented at the Ein Harod Museum of Art, in 2009 and at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, in 2006, the exhibition curators and writers were all Israeli).<sup>86</sup> At the same time, it also revealed Omer’s difficulty to create a balance between maintaining the artistic freedom of artists and curators and the need to protect the financial support that the museum received from private bodies and Jewish donors.

The second important case concerning censorship (also mentioned in Steinitz’s article) had to do with the removal of paintings from David Wakstein’s exhibition *Explosion* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2003), curated by Varda Steinlauf. Wakstein’s works were based on anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic caricatures that had appeared in the Arab press in the 1990s, as well as in the Soviet press in the 1960s. In a number of the images, Wakstein merged a Star of David and a Swastika. Two-and-a-half months following the opening of the exhibition, Omer decided to remove four works (Wakstein argued that ten works were removed) and to close the exhibition three weeks early, arguing that throughout its period of display, the museum had received a growing number of appeals and complaints by Holocaust survivors who had been hurt and shocked by these difficult images.<sup>87</sup> A provocative representation of the Holocaust in contemporary artworks has surfaced more than once in the context of censorship, presenting museum directors with the need to make decisions on this matter.<sup>88</sup> Two pertinent examples are Roe Rosen’s exhibition *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (The Israel Museum, 1997), and the exhibition *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 2002). In both cases, the museums withstood the pressures exerted on them and did not censor the exhibitions, although the museum in New York had defined in advance an unusually short exhibition period (three months instead of four), due to the expectation that it would prove controversial.<sup>89</sup>

In his text, Steinitz chose to present himself and

Omer as representing two fundamentally opposing approaches. He viewed Omer as representing an approach “rooted in art history, which views art as an autonomous sphere free of political significance,” and himself as representing an approach rooted in cultural criticism, according to which art is not separate “from the system of control accompanying social processes.”<sup>90</sup> Steinitz then turned to survey the directorial policy of Alfred Barr, the founder and director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who battled censorship throughout his tenure at the museum. He also presented the opposing approach taken by Meyer Schapiro (who, as noted, had been Omer’s intellectual model). Steinitz pointed to the fact that in 1937, Schapiro critiqued Barr’s approach, which presented abstract art as free of historical and social conditions and as expressing a series of natural orders by means of a pure visual language devoid of content. Steinitz also noted that although Schapiro upheld the autonomy of art, he argued that artists could not detach themselves and be indifferent in their works to the events unfolding in the world around them.

In 1957, in light of the stormy political reality of the Cold War and the struggle waged by Alfred Barr against the attempt to censor part of the works in a traveling exhibition of American artists, Schapiro’s approach shifted. According to Steinitz, he retreated into a state of “personal withdrawal,” arguing that the artist must develop a private safe space in the violent and unstable reality of the time, and that painting created in a state of inner freedom helped to preserve the critical spirit and ideals of creativity, honesty and independence vital to cultural life.<sup>91</sup> Steinitz’s description of Schapiro’s “withdrawal” points to a difference between public responsibility and cultural responsibility. Schapiro, according to Steinitz was arguing that artists must distance themselves from public life in order to better serve American culture.

In light of the complex attitudes expressed by Barr and Schapiro on the question of censorship, Steinitz charted a change beginning in the 1960s, which had shaped the struggle against curtailing freedom of speech. He claimed that theorists and critics such as Douglas Crimp

<sup>85</sup> For details concerning the protest that broke out in Paris following Shibli’s exhibition *Phantom Home* (Jeu de Pomme, 2013), which presented Palestinian suicide bombers as “martyrs,” and concerning the museum’s conduct in relation to this affair, see Ellie Armon Azoulay, “Protest in France About Ahlam Shibli’s Exhibition,” *Haaretz*, June 18, 2013, Arts & Leisure section, in Hebrew.

<sup>86</sup> The series of works *Trackers* (2005), which was concerned with Palestinian (Bedouin) residents of Israel who serve in the IDF as trackers, was curated by Dalia Levine, and was exhibited at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the exhibition cluster *Uniforms & Customs* (2006).

<sup>87</sup> Tel Aviv, Museum of Art, *David Wakstein: Explosion*, June–September 2003. For details pertaining to this affair, see Aviva Lori, “There was an explosion,” *Haaretz*, September 10, 2003, in Israel.

<sup>88</sup> See David Sperber, “How did the concern with the Holocaust become provocative?” *Maarav*, April 21, 2009, in Hebrew.

<sup>89</sup> On Roe Rosen’s exhibition, see Ido Shahaar, “Live and Die as Eva Braun: Holocaust Discourse in Israel as Reflected by the Exhibition,” *Resling* 7 (Summer 2007): 38–50, in Hebrew. For a discussion of the exhibition in New York, see Jeanne Pearlman, “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study: The Jewish Museum, New York City,” *Animating Democracy* website, pp. 1–25.

<sup>90</sup> Steinitz, “Broken vessel.”

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

and Benjamin Buchloh contrasted the aesthetic approach to the political, with which both Barr and Schapiro had been identified, to new critical trends that underscored the role of cultural functionaries, the art market and the mechanisms of power that controlled it. Steinitz viewed Omer as an heir to the approach represented by Barr and Schapiro, while considering himself to be working in the spirit of Crimp and Buchloh. He argued that Omer's refusal to take a political stance in his curatorial work was itself a political choice, and that censorship at the Tel Aviv Museum involved crossing a red line even from a conservative viewpoint.<sup>92</sup> In the context of local Israeli culture, Steinitz's text located Omer on the right of the political map as a collaborator with the threat on freedom of expression, in the name of the museum's dependency on the alliance between political and economic forces. This distinction between a historical approach predicated on the idea of art's autonomy, and between critical studies, which nurtured political art, expressed a common thought pattern in the historiography and discourse of Israeli art beginning the late 1980s (as noted in the first part of this study). Ariella Azoulay, as I will demonstrate below, deepened this distinction, treating it as paradigmatic.

A museum director or exhibition curator's stance concerning censorship in Israeli art institutions – an issue that has already surfaced three times in this section of the book concerning the works of David Reeb, Gershuni and Zaritsky – has clear implications for the character of their public responsibility.<sup>93</sup> Omer's critics, including Steinitz, saw his position (as museum director and curator) as necessarily political. They demanded of him to demonstrate public responsibility by privileging the value of free expression, which also involves cultural and educational responsibility. Yet imposing censorship on an exhibition or parts of an exhibition after a museum has already approved, budgeted, produced and mounted it points above all to a problem in the museum's organizational culture, and not necessarily to a political matter. It reveals that there had been no advance anticipation of visitor responses, and points to a failure to prepare to effectively address such responses. In this sense Omer, a museum director who saw himself first and foremost as an educator, revealed a weakness in his performance of this role.

A retrospective point of view reveals that Omer held a conflicted position concerning his extended responsibilities that did not successfully consolidate into a great synthesis, apparently due to his multiple roles. His allegiance to the museum as a concrete place, whose administration must be based on transparency and public responsibility, was not always compatible with his cultural mission as a curator and educator in a secular site that charges artworks with cultural and spiritual meanings; nor was it always

compatible with the deep and honest allegiance he felt with artists. As noted, the thesis of Omer's exhibition *Tikkun* related the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun*, pertaining to the healing of the world, to the art of the 1970s in Israel, and emphasized the artist's personal responsibility. Omer's own interpretation of his cultural responsibility seems to have shaped his aspiration to apply this idea of *tikkun* to the museum as well.

Omer was not innovative in terms of his conception of the exhibition. Yet like Elisheva Cohen, his work was groundbreaking in laying an academic infrastructure for museological studies in Israel, as well as in his demand to institutionalize, renew and expand the exhibition spaces he was charged with directing. As noted, the Museum Law was passed in 1983, and the first program for museological studies, which also addressed curating to a certain degree, was inaugurated in 1985. Unlike Europe and the United States, the institutionalization process of museums in Israel and the attempt to offer a legal and administrative definition of museum work unfolded parallel to the process of curating's separation from museology and its growth as an independent discipline. Omer's activity and his curatorial approach are vital to understanding this double process. In a newspaper column published following Omer's death, Sara Breitberg-Semel and Tsibi Geva noted Omer's total devotion to his role, as well his great passion for art, a passion that was a major catalyst in the work of all the curators discussed thus far.<sup>94</sup> Breitberg-Semel even critiqued, in this column, the severe absence of resources facing Israeli museum curators, which gives rise to a severe dependence on donors, benefactors and market forces, and necessarily undermines the ability of the directors of public institutions to fulfill their role without compromising their cultural responsibility.

#### ARIELLA AZOULAY – THE EXHIBITION AS AN EMERGENCY STATEMENT AND ACT OF RESISTANCE

Ariella Azoulay (b. 1962) worked continuously as a curator for only five years, during which she served as the director and curator of Bograshov Gallery in Tel Aviv (1989–1994). Over time, she has worked as a scholar of visual culture, lecturer, filmmaker and translator, with curating as only part of her range of activities. Although the main emphasis in the current book is on her curatorial practice, this work must be understood in the wider context of her academic, cultural and political involvement.

Azoulay studied in Paris in 1982–1989. During these years, she completed an undergraduate degree in literature and film, and a graduate degree in semiotics at the University of Paris. She later (1986–1989) enrolled in a doctoral

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> For a discussion of censorship in Israeli art institutions, see Joshua Simon, "The State of Israel Versus: Israeli Art," *Globes*, April 28, 2004, in Hebrew.

<sup>94</sup> Ellie Armon-Azoulay and Daniel Rauchwerger, "The Tel Aviv Museum at a Crossroads," *Haaretz*, July 29, 2011, in Hebrew.



Installation view, *Bograshov, the Street: Export Surplus*, Tel Aviv, 1994. Photo: Noa Harnik.

Kochava Levi (in striped shirt) – an Israeli citizen who was taken hostage in the Savoy Hotel attack (Tel Aviv, 1975), and became a mediator between the Palestinian terrorists and the Israeli forces – stands next to a cut out figure of Michal Heiman, who photographed her in 1988 to a journalistic article.

program at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), which she did not complete. Following her return to Israel in 1989, she began working at Bograshov Gallery (60 Bograshov Street, Tel Aviv). During that time, Azoulay also served as a curatorial assistant to Adam Baruch, who curated the exhibition *Dorchin* (1990) in the Israeli Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. She also produced the exhibition featuring the Israeli proposal for Aperto (Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan, 1990).<sup>95</sup> She completed her doctoral studies at the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University (1997). Her thesis, which was concerned with a critique of the museum economy, was published as a book in 1999.<sup>96</sup>

Bograshov Gallery – established in November 1986 by the artist and filmmaker Udi Aloni, with the financial support of the political left party Ratz (today Meretz) – was initially directed by Aloni, and later by Azoulay. Throughout its period of activity, it was identified with a left-wing political orientation. At the gallery, Azoulay curated solo exhibitions of numerous artists, including Michal Heiman (1989; 1990), Arnon Ben-David (1990), Yocheved Weinfeld (1991), Orit Adar (1991), Roeë Rosen (1992), Hila Lulu Lin (1992), Gilad Lavi (1992), Tamar Getter (1992), Tsibi Geva (1992), Ariane Littman-Cohen (1992), Noa Ben-Nun (1992), Svetlana Dubrovsky and Alexander Rudakov (1992), Nir Nader and Erez Harodi (1993), Uri Zeig (1993), David Reeb (1993), Tiranit Barzilay (1993), Neta Ziv (1993), Jean-Jacques Rullier (1993), Nati Shamia-Opher (1994), Aya & Gal (1994), Uri Stettner (199), Dana and Boaz Zonshine (1994), Miki Kratsman (1994), Henry Shelesnyak (1994), and David Daniel (1994). She also curated thematic group exhibitions with a critical orientation, which reflected her social-political interests. The first exhibition was *Space/Presentation/Power* (1990); it was followed, among others, by *Left – Right*, inspired by Itamar Levy's book *Letters of the Sun, Letters of the Moon* (1992); *Olive Green* (1992); an exhibition of artists responding to the court verdict against the publication of artist Dudu Geva's duck book, based on the argument that the duck figure was copyrighted by the Disney Company (1992); *Strategies of Camouflage* (1993); and *Who Can Retell the Things That Befell Us* (1994).

In 1993, the gallery was redefined as Bograshov Alternative Space. According to Azoulay, this decision was undertaken in order to distinguish it from commercial galleries.<sup>97</sup> An additional space, Bograshov 2, was installed in the space occupied during the gallery's early years by a coffee shop. This second space was reserved for small, focused exhibitions mainly curated by guest curators (including Michal Heiman, Ilana Tenenbaum, Gideon Ofra and Aïm Luski), or for the presentation of

<sup>95</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, "Daniel Zak for Aperto," *Studio 8* (February 1990): 48, in Hebrew; "A Glimpse of Venice," *Studio 12* (June 1990): 449–451, in Hebrew.

<sup>96</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *TRaining for ART: Critique of Museal Economy*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad publishers, 1999, in Hebrew.

<sup>97</sup> Smadar Sheffi, "Bograshov Gallery to be renamed Bograshov 60 – Alternative Space," *Haaretz*, November 2, 1993, p. B5, in Hebrew.





Bograshov 3, *The Suitcase*, 1994. Photo: Michal Heiman.

a “decisive moment” in local art.<sup>98</sup> The first exhibition presented there was *Musag* (Concept), an exhibition of works featured in the periodical *Musag* in the 1970s. In 1994, Azoulay opened a third exhibition space, Bograshov 3, a tiny space resembling a store, which was designated for the exhibition of small works for sale. In this way she hoped to support the gallery, which suffered severe financial difficulties due to a lack of support, and to enable it to persist while protecting its two main spaces against commercial considerations.<sup>99</sup> It was in this space that she presented *The Suitcase* (1994), small works by different artists featured within the space of a suitcase, and offered for sale. At the end of that year, Azoulay left the gallery. Her parting exhibition was: *Bograshov, the Street: Export Surplus* (as part of the *Artfocus* events, October 1994). The exhibition challenged the status of the gallery space

as a unique space designated for the exhibition of art, and was held in different sites along Bograshov Street, from its eastern part all the way to the sea in the west.<sup>100</sup> Bograshov Gallery closed a short time after she left (March 1995).<sup>101</sup>

In November 1994, Azoulay was appointed as the director of the Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan, replacing Miriam Tuvia Boneh. She began consolidating a team and building a program – which was to combine exhibitions alongside lectures, symposiums, and various political activities – and to prepare the museum for renovation; eight months later, however, she was fired (in July 1995) without mounting a single exhibition.<sup>102</sup> Following her dismissal from this position, petitions signed by museum directors and academics demanded of the Minister of Education and Culture, Shulamit Aloni, to establish a public committee to examine this matter, yet the decision was not overturned.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup> See Itamar Levy, “AC/PC: Summary of the 1992–93 season at Bograshov Gallery, Tel Aviv,” *Studio* 46 (September 1993):56–59, in Hebrew; and “Miscellaneous,” *Studio* 40 (January 1993): 63, in Hebrew.

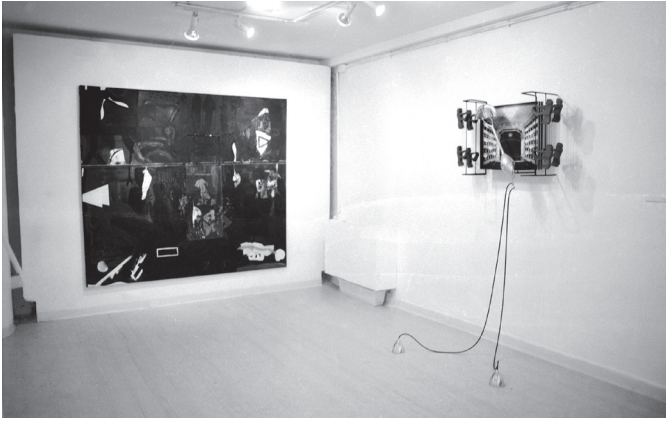
<sup>99</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “Press release: Bograshov 3 – The Suitcase,” January 3, 1994, Israeli Art Archive, Beit Areila Library, Tel Aviv, in Hebrew. See also Adam Baruch, “The Disposable ‘Suitcase’ of Bograshov Gallery,” *Yediot Ahronot*, December 31, 1993, Friday communications and culture supplement, p. 23, in Hebrew.

<sup>100</sup> The exhibition featured 32 artists. The opening was held on Bograshov Street near building number 44 on Friday, October 7, 1994.

<sup>101</sup> Adam Baruch, “Roni Milo: Don’t Close Bograshov,” *Yediot Ahronot*, December 2, 1994, p. 6, in Hebrew.

<sup>102</sup> Naomi Siman-Tov, “We will direct and you will hang the pictures,” *Ha’Ir*, July 28, 1995, pp. 78–79, in Hebrew.

<sup>103</sup> Concerning the petitions, see Sara Breitberg-Semel, “In Favor of the Ramat Gan Museum = In Favor of Ariella Azoulay,” *Studio* 64 (August 1995): 4–5, in Hebrew. See also the issue of *Studio* devoted entirely to the curatorial concept of the Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan; Ariella Azoulay, guest editor, *Studio* 74, The Museum that Was Not (August 1996).



Installation views, *Space/Presentation/Power*, Bograshov Gallery, 1990. Photo: Michal Heiman.

**Top:** *The Bride and the Echo* (1990) by Sigal Primor (right) and *Restoration* (1986) by Michal Heiman (left). **Bottom:** *The Green Bride* (1990) by Sigal Primor (center), works by Arnon Ben-David (back wall).

In 1995–2002, Azoulay served as the director of the theoretical studies program at the art school Camera Obscura. Among her other initiatives at the school, she founded “The New Seminar for Visual Culture, Criticism and Theory,” the first study program in Israel concerned with critical curating marked by social-political emphasis, and independent of the discipline of museum studies. In this context she also initiated and edited the seminar’s journal, *Plastica*. In 2000, Azoulay curated the group exhibition *The Angel of History* (Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, and later at the Ein Harod Museum of Art, 2001). She subsequently curated the exhibitions *Everything Could Be Seen* (The Art Gallery, Umm el-Fahm, 2004), *Act of State* (The Gallery of the Minshar school of Art, Tel Aviv, 2007; later shown in Ferrara, 2008; Johannesburg, 2009; Geneva, 2009; Barcelona, 2010; Amsterdam, 2011). *Architecture of Destruction* (Zochrot Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2008). *Constituent Violence 1947–1950* (Zochrot Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2009); and *Untaken Photographs*, which received the Igor Zabel Award from the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana (Moderna Gallery, Ljubljana, 2010, and later at the Zochrot Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2010).

Azoulay wrote a number of books, including *How Does It Look to You?* (2000, in Hebrew), *Bad Days* (with Adi Ophir, 2002, in Hebrew), *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2006), *Once Upon a Time: Photography Following Walter Benjamin* (2006, in Hebrew), *The One-State Condition* (with Adi Ophir, 2008) and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2010). She has also created films and video works, including *A Sign from Heaven* (1995), *The Food Chain* (2004), *At Nightfall* (2006) and *Civil Alliances: Palestine 47–48* (2012). She has also translated various writings into Hebrew, especially texts by French philosophers (Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard). Together with Adi Ophir, she also translated Hannah Arendt’s book *The Human Condition* (2013).

In 2011–2014, Azoulay created visual essays that were presented as a curatorial statement in exhibitions curated by others. The project *Museum of Regime-Made Disasters* was displayed as part of the exhibition *ReCoCo: Life under Representational Regimes*, curated by Joshua Simon with Siri Peyer and exhibited in Zurich and Vienna (2011) and in Bat Yam (2013).<sup>104</sup> Her work *Potential History, Photographic Documents from Mandatory Palestine* was presented as part of the exhibition *Where To?* curated by Udi Edelman, Eyal Danon, and Ran Kasmy-Ilan (Center for Digital Art, Holon, 2012). An additional work, *The Body Politic*, was featured as part of an exhibition curated by the Croatian curating collective WHW/What, How & for Whom (Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, 2014). In all of these exhibitions, Azoulay established an artist’s mode of action,

**104** The visual essay *When the Body Politics Cease to be an Idea* was presented as a folding brochure in the exhibition *ReCoCo: Life under Representational Regimes* (Bat Yam, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013). It was later republished in English in the format of a “printed exhibition” in *Manifesta Journal*. See Ariella Azoulay, *When the Body Politics Cease to be an Idea*, *Manifesta Journal* 16 (2012): 46–60.

reexamining both the concept of the exhibition and her own position as a curator. Her work emphasized representations of power, especially by means of photography and in relation to the Israeli occupation. In 2012, Azoulay was offered a position at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where she serves as Professor of Modern Culture and Media and teaches in the Department of Comparative Literature. The last exhibition she curated in Israel was the solo exhibition: *Aim Deüelle Luski: Horizontal Photography* (Bat Yam Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014), which was also published as a book (2016).

According to Azoulay, her curatorial trajectory can be divided into two periods.<sup>105</sup> The first period included her six years as the curator of Bograshov Gallery, and as the director of the Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan. She has described herself during those years as an active player in “the art world,” and thus participated in the paradigm dominating the art field, which also guided her curatorial work. The second period, which began following her dismissal from the Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan, and continues to this day, has been characterized, from her perspective, by a shift from the paradigm of art history to thinking within the disciplinary framework of visual culture. Azoulay has argued that from the perspective of art history, the art object is at the center, and art images are placed high up in the cultural hierarchy. By contrast, the field of visual culture allows for greater detachment from the centrality of the object, and views art products as documents and testimonies, which – like other cultural products – partake of arguments pertaining to a larger historical, social and political context.<sup>106</sup> This chapter examines Azoulay’s exhibitions in relation to her theoretical and political positioning, and inquires as to whether these exhibitions offer a visual manifestation of her theoretical discourse, or whether they also contain a proposal for a new curatorial stance.

## POWER, PHOTOGRAPHY, CITIZENSHIP

The question of power, the limits of its use and above all the individual’s ability to resist it is central to Azoulay’s work as a curator, and was already addressed in the first group exhibition she curated at Bograshov Gallery, titled *Space/Presentation/Power* (April 1990). Azoulay noted that the point of departure for this exhibition was the “institutional critique” as given expression in the work of European and American artists (Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger). According to her, when she began studying this subject in relation to the local art market, she discovered that no institutional critique was ever given explicit expression in Israel. She

thus shifted the subject of the exhibition from a direct critique of institutions to the attitude of artists to centers of power or to representations of power. These, she argued, “include not only ‘visible’ institutions, with physical existence, – university, museum, library or archive – but also ‘invisible’ institutions, i.e., cultural canons, norms and systems of representation... the treatment of the representations of power, and of the power of representations is a more covert treatment of the ‘political’ and the ‘social,’ a treatment of the mechanisms that enable the institutions of power to operate.”<sup>107</sup>

The exhibition featured four artists: Arnon Ben-David, Michal Heiman, Moshe Ninio and Sigal Primor. In her catalogue essay, Azoulay discussed the visual images they produced and the ways in which their works exposed different representations of power: those of the state and of the museum (Arnon Ben-David); of the concert hall and the church as institutions that directly impacted the experience and behavior of the viewer (Sigal Primor); and of the memorial, the book and the archive as participants in the construction of the cultural pantheon (Michal Heiman). The exhibition was also concerned with foundational images in the history of Israeli art – such as the works of Itzhak Danziger – and the manner in which their replacement by other images (in the works of Moshe Ninio) preserved their symbolic status, while revealing their mechanisms of symbolization. Additionally, her catalogue essay gave initial expression to three themes, which were later emphasized and comprehensively developed in her work: “the multivalence of photography,” which is at once a picture, a representation and a relic / evidence; the archive as a means of controlling, preserving and disseminating knowledge; and the feminist perspective, as well as the connection between the oppression of women and their one-dimensional representation in visual culture. This theme was given expression in the catalogue mainly in the discussion of Primor’s works.

The exhibition *Space/Presentation/Power* and its treatment of questions concerning space, representation and visibility designated Azoulay, beginning in 1990, as a quintessential representative of a critical trend in the Israeli art field. In this exhibition and in the subsequent exhibitions she curated at Bograshov Gallery, as well as in the articles she published in the first half of the 1990s, Azoulay emphasized the fact that museum visitors tend to trust the exhibits and their mode of display, and to see them as evidence. She pointed to the status of curators as the guards at the gate, who determine what will be exhibited and what will be excluded, and to their ability to shape meaning by means of the exhibition space and the exhibits.<sup>108</sup> This emphasis underscored, the status of the curator in an unprecedented

<sup>105</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, New York: Verso Books, 2015, pp. 45–47.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>107</sup> Ariella Azoulay-Armon, “Space/Presentation/Power,” in Tel Aviv, Bograshov Gallery, *Space/Presentation/Power*, 1990 (n.p.).

<sup>108</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, “The New Museum – Definitions and Functions,” *Kav 10* (199): 155–161, in Hebrew; “On Critical





Installation view, *Michal Heiman: Sorting*, Bograshov Gallery, 1990. Photo: Michal Heiman.

manner. In writing about this exhibition, Aïm Luski noted that “The curator, who is supposed to bring together all of the exhibition’s components into an overall synthesis, is at the center of the exhibition – so that editing, in postmodern art, gains crucial importance.” Luski argued that the curator’s taste was translated into a “marketing strategy,” noting that “the choice of these specific artists has good sociopolitical reasons, which transcend the law of artistic taste adhered to within modernity.”<sup>109</sup> David Ginton wrote that, “the paradoxical result is that art which is supposed to expose the control mechanisms of institutions gives itself over to a manipulation by the institution of interpretation and display, in order to acquire hitherto nonexistent power and appear as critical.”<sup>110</sup> He argued that such art made “massive and blind use of concepts,” imposing on the works meanings whose existence is subject to doubt. Oded Yedaya wrote: “Azoulay-Armon argues that display and preservation are in fact aspects of power. They may be similar in character, yet there is not necessarily a direct line leading from display/preservation to power. They do not share the same center of gravity. Moreover, display/preservation and power exist on both sides of the divide on the plane of good-evil.”<sup>111</sup>

Azoulay thus became the quintessential representative of the second turn in Israeli curating. She called attention to the question of power’s visibility and representations, explored ways of using the exhibition to expose mechanisms of classification and exclusion, and encouraged a hermeneutic discourse. Her use of the exhibition not only exposed power, but also demonstrated her own power. Moreover, already in her first thematic exhibition, she pointed to the central power of photography in actions aimed at shaping memory, as well as to the inclination of viewers to trust it, in a manner similar to the trust invested in museum exhibits.

The next thematic group exhibition curated by Azoulay, *Olive Green* (February 1992), was concerned with the concept of the boundary as reflecting and shaping power relations in the geographical and cultural spheres. The boundary determines “who is different, who is identical, who is included and who is left outside” she wrote.<sup>112</sup> Participants in the exhibition include Orit Adar, Arnon Ben-David, Tamar Getter, Neta Ziv, Erez Harodi and Nir Nader, Michal Na’aman and David Reeb. It offered clear political criticism concerning the State of Israel as a military state making use of destructive governmental power,

Art in Israel and Its Condition,” *Theory and Criticism 2* (Summer 1992): 89–118, in Hebrew; “Open Doors: History Museums in the Public Sphere in Israel,” *Theory and Criticism 4* (Fall 1993): 79–95, in Hebrew; “The Dynasty of Raffi Lavie and Michal Na’aman: Kinship Relations and the Household,” *Theory and Criticism 7* (Winter 1995): 177–219, in Hebrew.

<sup>109</sup> Aïm Luski, “An Exercise in Curating,” *Yediot Ahronot*, May 4, 1990, in Hebrew.

<sup>110</sup> David Ginton, “A Critique of a Critique,” *Yediot Ahronot*, May 4, 1990, in Hebrew.

<sup>111</sup> Oded Yedaya, “Space, Presentation, Power,” *Ha’Ir*, May 4, 1990 in Hebrew.

<sup>112</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “Olive Green,” In Tel Aviv, Bograshov Gallery, *Olive Green*, February 1992, p. 43.

a critique that became increasingly central and harsh in her subsequent works. In the catalogue essay, her discussion of Erez Harodi and Nir Nader's work created a clear equation, "State=gallery and viewer=man." She wrote that the Lebanon war (1982) and the Intifada (1987) led to a dissolution of the myths concerning "just war," "male fraternity," and private mourning as a national asset.<sup>113</sup> "Right now there is someone else who is conducting a just war," Azoulay argued, "And we, on the other side, can only be more and more critical towards ourselves, towards the myths that have motivate us, towards our defense mechanisms against the bear-hug of the establishment which have made us give up the right to take up a political position, or to push it into the back ground, in culture as in art, for fear that we will find ourselves serving the others, or profaning art with placards."<sup>114</sup>

Azoulay proposed a political reading of the works, used the term "politicization of the aesthetic," and noted that the exhibition called for rethinking the separation between content and form and between "here" (local) and "there" (universal), which was defined in Sara Breitberg-Semel's seminal exhibition *The Want of Matter: A Quality in Israeli Art* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1986). She argued that *Olive Green* "does grapple critically with the basic premises of that exhibition, the shaping role of which in Israeli art cannot be disputed."<sup>115</sup> Dalia Manor had already critically examined the thesis of *The Want of Matter* in the exhibition *Perspective* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1991). Gideon Ofrat, for his part, pointed to the shift in the artistic treatment of the military and of soldiers in his essay "Fading Khaki: The Figure of the Soldier in Israeli Art," which was published that same year.<sup>116</sup> Azoulay's *Olive Green* marked a new possibility – that of making political use of curating – much like the political use of art made by artists such as David Reeb and Arnon Ben-David. The exploration of the concept of the boundary and the question of who is included and who is not offered an initial definition of the concept of a citizen, who serves as a point of departure for resistance to the sovereign.

In an interview with Jeff Wall, which appeared at the end of her book *How Does It Look to You?* – an anthology of 25 conversations she held with figures in different professions in 1995–1996 – Azoulay focused on Wall's photograph *Citizen*.<sup>117</sup> The photograph features a man lying, perhaps asleep, on the lawn in a park. In her foreword to the conversation, Azoulay wrote:

*The passersby's moment of rest is meticulously staged: the angle of the face, the removed glasses, the tension of an occurrence on the horizon, lighting from several sources. Together, these elements form an incomplete story, which the viewer completes by means of the photograph's title: Citizen. This title enables us to extricate at once from the photograph the tension between privacy and the public sphere, between intimate withdrawal and exposure to all, positioning it immediately at the center of the image. Once I saw Jeff Wall's sleeping citizen, I could not refrain from seeing every person slumbering in a park as a citizen fulfilling the right to sleep in public.*<sup>118</sup>

Azoulay's choice of this specific photograph by Jeff Wall and her reading of it revealed her point of departure, according to which "the civil" is a key term related to photography. Azoulay saw this photograph, and later on every other photograph, from the most spontaneous to the carefully staged, as an open "document" demanding to be repeatedly stimulated and reinterpreted. She also underscored the perspective of the photograph's observers, the viewers, and their active role. For Azoulay, Wall's work presented a citizen who had realized his right, whose validity was given expression in the medium of photography.

The early expressions of Azoulay's curatorial approach to the civil condition, and its connection to photography, were felt in many of the exhibitions she curated at Bograshov Gallery. In most cases, this approach related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to the occupation. It was treated from the perspective of different artists, and was given expression, among other exhibitions, in *Olive Green* and in the works of two artistic duos: Erez Harodi and Nir Nader's *In the Photography Confessional* (1993); and Aya & Gal's *Middle East* (1994). Harodi (whose father was killed in the Six-Day War) and Nader's exhibition was concerned with the hypocrisy of Israeli mechanisms devoted to the sanctification of bereavement, and with the manner in which the commemoration project of bereavement legitimized the Israeli politics of the occupation. As part of the exhibition, they positioned in the gallery rows of chairs bearing the inscription "Reserved for the families of the heroes."<sup>119</sup> The artist's book *Treasures of the Lost Table*, which accompanied the exhibition, was concerned

113 Ibid., p. 24.

114 Ibid., pp. 23.

115 Ibid., p. 40.

116 See Manor, "New Aesthetic Concepts in the Art of the 1980s in Israel"; Tel Aviv, *Perspective*, March 26–June 8, 1991, pp. 7–24, in Hebrew; Gideon Ofrat, "Fading Khaki: The figure of the Soldier in Israeli Art," *Studio 27* (November 1991): 6–7.

117 Ariella Azoulay, *How Does It Look to You?* Tel Aviv: Babel, 2000 pp. 239–246, in Hebrew. Most of the conversations were originally published in the column "Eye to Eye" in the newspaper *Ha'ir*.

118 Ibid., p. 240.

119 In the early 1990s, Nader and Harodi performed a series of acts of protest not only against the Israeli culture of

among other things with the economic aspects of the mechanism for sanctifying bereavement.

The artists Aya Frenkel and Gal Wertman, who worked together in the 1990s, were featured in an exhibition that overtook the entire space of Bograshov Gallery. It included a sound work and latex suits based on plaster casts that had merged three bodies: a female model's body, a muscle-builder's body and Wertman's body. The suits dangled from the gallery ceiling, resembling molted snake-skins. The exhibition was concerned with a condition in which the body's boundaries are blurred, and its unity and actual existence are undermined.<sup>120</sup> Later on, in a project titled *Naturalization (Documenta 10, Kassel, 1997)*, Aya & Gal extended their concern with borders and the relations between exterior and interior to territories located between countries, "beyond the borders of the passport."<sup>121</sup> In these early exhibitions at Bograshov Gallery, Azoulay had already articulated the role of photography in challenging the limits of the gaze, of perception and of the body, as well as the representation of reality and the relations between the individual and the collective.

Bograshov Gallery also gave rise to Azoulay's long-term collaboration with the artists Michal Heiman, Miki Kratsman and Aïm Luski, who participated in many of the exhibitions she curated. Azoulay frequently referred to their work in her articles, books and lectures. As noted, Heiman was the first artist whose works were exhibited at Bograshov Gallery in an exhibition curated by Azoulay (1989). Although this exhibition featured paintings, a year later, when her exhibition *Michal Heiman: Sorting (1990)* opened at the gallery, Heiman was already concerned with questions of photographic representation, and began developing the signature traits of her long-term photographic exploration of the mechanisms of power operating on the way we see. The works of Miki Kratsman, who was also given a solo exhibition at Bograshov Gallery (1994), have documented the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the course of three decades, and were one of Azoulay's recurrent point of reference in her discussions of visual representa-

tions of the occupation. The artist and theorist Aïm Luski was concerned with deconstructing the camera's single point of view and its products by building cameras with multiple eyepieces, which challenged the perceptual and technological fixation of photography as dependent on a single point of view. Azoulay frequently collaborated with him as part of her research and curatorial work; as noted, she also curated a comprehensive solo exhibition of his works at the Bat Yam Museum of Contemporary Art (2014). Heiman, Kratsman and Luski's works served Azoulay in defining a number of her key arguments, both concerning photography and concerning its connection to the civil perspective, as I will now turn to show. Her long-term and consistent collaboration with these artists reflects a pattern of relations between curators and artists, which was explored in the previous chapters in the discussion of the relations between Elisheva Cohen and Anna Ticho, Yona Fischer and Moshe Kupferman, or Sara Breitberg-Semel and Moshe Gershuni.

The exhibition *The Angel of History* (Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000; Ein Harod Museum of Art, 2001) was the first exhibition curated by Azoulay after she left Bograshov Gallery, as well as her first museum exhibition. It was concerned with the relations between art and history in the museum space, and sought inspiration in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* by Walter Benjamin, about whom Azoulay was writing a book at the time.<sup>122</sup> The exhibition featured eight artists: Boaz Arad, Gideon Gechtman, Michal Heiman, Aïm Luski, Sigalit Landau, Doron Solomons, Justine Frank (a fictional figure created by Roe Rosen) and Miki Kratsman. The large exhibition hall at the Herzliya museum was divided into rooms, and each one of the artists was allotted an individual space. The works, most of which included a political statement, attended to the gap between reality and its representation, and underscored the function of the imagination in the construction of historical representations. Doron Solomons presented short videos in which he planted himself in scenes from Hitchcock's films. Sigalit Landau created an

bereavement, but also against the collusion between the business class and the political class. In this context, they created *Preparation for the Supreme Court (1994)*, which featured a fire inscription on the plaza outside the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in protest against cronyism at the museum. Nir Nader is a political activist. For more than a decade, he was second on the list of the party Da'am, which Azoulay was also identified with (she even appeared in the party's propaganda posters leading up to the 2013 election. Nader founded Maan, a non-profit organization for worker's rights, and produced the exhibitions *Bread and Roses*, in which profits from the sale of the artworks were used to support Palestinian women in earning a living through agriculture. See Galia Yahav, "Portrait of the Artist as a Social Text," *Haaretz*, December 22, 2012, in Hebrew.

<sup>120</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, "The Body Is Not the Border," in Tel Aviv, Bograshov Gallery, Aya & Gal, *Middle East*, March–May, 1994, in Hebrew; Vered Maimon, "Excitation without a Body," *Ha'ir*, April 13, 1994, in Hebrew; Aïm Luski, "Self-Image," *Yediot Ahronot*, April 29, 1994, in Hebrew.

<sup>121</sup> See Dana Gilerman, "Beyond the Borders of the Passport," *Haaretz*, September 7, 2007, in Hebrew; Eli Armon-Azoulay, "I've Got Me Under Your Skin," *Haaretz*, September 16, 2011.

<sup>122</sup> The title of the exhibition alluded to the name that Benjamin had given to the angel in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968. Ariella Azoulay, *Once Upon a Time: Photography Following Walter Benjamin*, Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University press, 2006, in Hebrew.



installation based on Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Match Girl*. One of the exhibits was a freezer containing ice cubes cast in the form of the frozen girl, so that their consumption warmed and resuscitated her by means of the breath, while also melting and killing her. Roe Rosen created works in the name of a fictional artist, Justine Frank, and participated in the exhibition as a guest curator of her works. Boaz Arad created two video works that attended to the figure of Hitler by means of editing manipulations. Michal Heiman created a sort of psychological treatment room in which she administered the *Michal Heiman Test No. 2 (M.H.T): My Mother-in-Law, Test For Women*. The women visiting the room were asked to lie on the couch, respond to a range of photographs, and provide them with a context. Aïm Luski created a series of multiple eyepiece cameras, Gideon Gechtman presented a photographic overview of his installation Yotam, which was concerned with his deceased son and had been exhibited at the Herzliya Museum a year earlier. Miki Kratsman presented photographs referring to the occupation. The exhibition was accompanied by a lexicon written by the participating artists and a film (70 min.) created by Azoulay, which served as a "speaking catalogue."<sup>123</sup> Adam Baruch published a positive response written in the form of an elegy, in which he remarked that "According to Ariella Azoulay, 'The young artist' is your private-public dream angel, if you are in exile in your own country, in your own home."<sup>124</sup>

*The Angel of History* marked the end of a period in Azoulay's curatorial work. It was the last exhibition in which the focus was still on contemporary art, as a means of processing political and historical aspects. In her following exhibitions, although she continued to explore questions of point of view, photography, imagination and representation, sometimes also by means of contemporary art, the focus shifted. The exhibition became a means of expressing a "state of emergency." In his eighth thesis on history, Walter Benjamin wrote that, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."<sup>125</sup> The political reality in Israel in the aftermath of the Rabin assassination (1995), the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000) and the suicide bombings that followed it (2002–2003) shifted the perspective from which Azoulay worked as a curator,

deepening the sense of "exile in your own home" (in the terms stated by Adam Baruch).<sup>126</sup> She subsequently began offering new definitions for a civil struggle that made the state of emergency visible.

## THE CIVIL PERSPECTIVE

In their book *Bad Days* (2002), Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir jointly defined "An Abridged Dictionary of Citizenship," which included definitions of several concepts, including man, nation, citizen, borders, civil religion, naturalization, right, civil society, soldier, sovereignty, equality and resident.<sup>127</sup> According to their definition, citizenship is a category by means of which one can think of all humans, without exceptions, as both partners and as subject to governance. The concept of citizenship emerging within modernity relied, according to them, on the "ideal of man" as a basis for equality, yet this concept of citizenship is also a "principle of distancing," since not every man is a citizen and not every man can be a citizen. Thus, the ideal of man and the principle of abstract, non-concrete equality derived from it, camouflage, according to Azoulay and Ophir, a situation in which citizens have no rights or only partial rights, and are, de facto, "flawed citizens." Azoulay and Ophir offered a conception of citizenship that is not based on the ideal of man, but rather assumes "a concrete multiplicity of individual human beings, a multiplicity that exceeds representation and eludes essence."<sup>128</sup>

Citizenship involves Azoulay and Ophir's fundamental resistance to the idea of the nation-state and to the distinction between a nation and a state. "A state is a simulation of a collective to which all the citizens belong. By contrast, a nation is a group that is not identical with the group of citizens."<sup>129</sup> The nation, according to them, precedes citizenship and conditions it, and is thus a principle that contains a built-in form of discrimination. A nation-state involves inequality between citizens who are members of the nation and other citizens, who can never belong to the nation and are thus flawed or second-class citizens. Azoulay and Ophir pointed to the existing order on which the concept of the citizen was predicated as an order that creates three forms of relations between a person and citizenship: citizen, noncitizen and second-class citizen. According to them, the very existence of second-class citizen inherently also undermines the status of the citizens, since at some point in time every person may be

<sup>123</sup> Ariella Azoulay, editor, *The Angel of History: A Lexicon*, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000. See also Moshe Elhanati "The Textual Ritual: Some Remarks on the Art Catalogue," *Studio 120* (December 2000–January 2001): 38–47, in Hebrew; Dana Gilerman, "Breaking the Silence," *Haaretz*, September 21, 2000, in Hebrew.

<sup>124</sup> Adam Baruch, "The Angel of History – Dear Viewer, You Too Are in Exile," *Resling* 8 (Fall 2001): 79, in Hebrew.

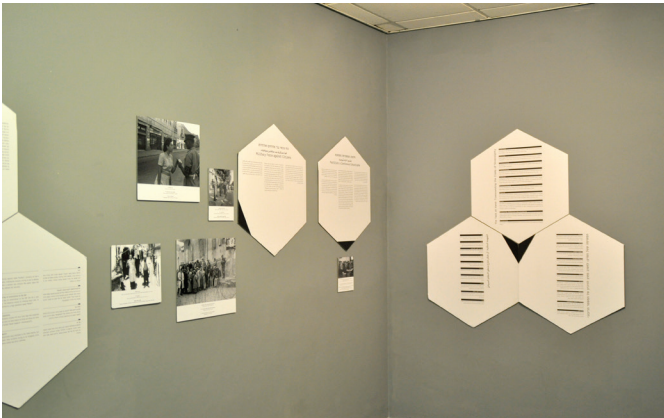
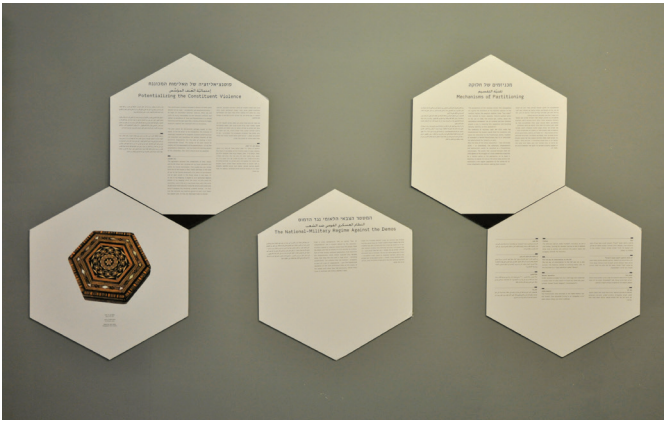
<sup>125</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 257.

<sup>126</sup> See Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *Bad Days*, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2002, pp. 8–19, in Hebrew.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–43.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*



Installation views of *Potential History*, Center for Digital Art, Holon, 2012. Photo: Osnat Zukerman Rechter.

stripped of their rights. Azoulay and Ophir sought to offer a conception according to which citizenship precedes and conditions any other definition.

The *Abridged Dictionary of Citizenship* described naturalization as an active stance that never reaches completion, and as a “constant effort to close the gap between being a subject and being a partner in governance.” Naturalization, they wrote, “is our key term. It enables us to develop a dynamic theory of citizenship, and not only to talk about citizenship as a status or static state, but rather as a ceaseless movement in the social sphere, which is constantly searching for new channels of attachment.”<sup>130</sup> Naturalization, according to Azoulay and Ophir, is given concrete expression in the ability of each person to take personal responsibility for a shared human sphere. This responsibility does not rely on a definition awarded by the state or a commitment to the sovereign, to market forces or to any form of governance, including democracy. The civil perspective offered by Azoulay and Ophir sought to recalibrate the lack of equality built into the world’s various systems of control and order, and to present them with an alternative, which was to a large extent utopian. The visual representations and expressions of the civil perspective were at the center of the exhibitions that Azoulay curated from 2000 on.

In 2004, Azoulay curated the exhibition *Everything Could Be Seen* at the Umm el-Fahe Art Gallery. The artists were asked to choose an image or a group of images representing the visibility (or invisibility) of the occupation, and the ways in which they view the occupation. In her catalogue essay, she wrote that the exhibition was concerned with the everyday price paid by non-citizens, the daily price exacted from the apparently only temporarily, although this transience has become the permanent reality of their lives.” The exhibition, she noted, “gathers together evidence, incontrovertible evidence of destruction, humiliation, injury, manslaughter, abuse, suffocation, suffering, misery and injustice. This doesn’t mean that everything can be seen; at most, what we can say conditionally is that the basis for seeing everything exists here.”<sup>131</sup> The catalogue’s back cover featured “An Abridged Dictionary of the Occupation”, which contained a list of terms and expressions (hostile organization, person of interest, targeted alert, pocket of resistance, human shield, found their death, terrorist nests, permanent residents and more). The dictionary was also presented in the exhibition itself. Additionally, alongside the works of the participating artists, Azoulay presented her film *The Food Chain* (2004), which was an attempt to answer the question of whether there is hunger in Palestine. The interviews she held with different agents in the “food chain” led Azoulay to the conclusion that the State of Israel, with the assistance of mechanisms of humanitarian aid, kept the Palestinian population in the occupied territories “on the verge of catastrophe” – that is, on the verge of

130 Ibid., p. 30.

131 Ariella Azoulay, “Everything Could Be Seen,” in Umm el-Fahm, Art Gallery, *Everything Could Be Seen*, June–September 2004, p. 14.

famine but not actually famished.

The exhibition in Umm el-Fahm made the participating artists into partners in Azoulay's attempt to train the gaze on what had eluded it for various reasons. In her terms, she demanded of them to become naturalized. The responsibility of the exhibition curator was no different, in this sense, then that of the artists or visitors to the exhibition. They all need to share a similar responsibility of protesting the fact that in the name of protecting them and their citizenship, "non-citizens" were being exposed to injuries. The visibility of the horror, Azoulay argued, was not an objective matter, but was rather part of the personal responsibility of the viewers-citizens. In *Everything Could Be Seen*, Azoulay defined for the first time a form of responsibility preceding the professional responsibility of the artist, the curator, and the visiting public – a responsibility shared by all three, since its source was civil.

In her book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2006), Azoulay systematically defined and exemplified the injustices of citizenship, especially with regard to non-citizens (the stateless Palestinians) and second-class citizens (women). She also analyzed photographic practices in terms of citizenship, and discussed the ways in which photography enables its spectators to be an active partner in what they are looking at, and thus to become naturalized. Her book put forth several fundamental arguments: first, that the contract organizing human relations in our shared world relies on the imagination, and that it enables the imagination of a state of existence in which a multitude of human beings govern, are governed, and are partners in the world equally and without exceptions. Her second argument was that the necessary precondition for both citizenship and photography was a multitude of participants and partners, and that neither could be owned.<sup>132</sup> Her third argument was that the civil contract of photography required solidarity and a mutual responsibility on the part of the citizens of "the citizenry of photography." The very definition of photography as an infrastructure for a civil contract revealed that seeing is a "performative utterance," and that things could be done with it, much like J.L. Austin's definition of speech.<sup>133</sup>

Azoulay underscored the shared aspects of photography and citizenship as a particular set of relations. "Free from the nationalist perspective, or any other essentialist

conception of the collective of governed individuals, citizenship comes to resemble the photographic relation."<sup>134</sup> She argued that photographs, and especially photographs in which one can identify an assault on others, make an ethical claim for a mode of observation that investigates and deciphers, and constitute a call for civil responsibility and for a constant renegotiation of the unfixed photograph's meaning. The idea of observing photographs as a means of struggle became the point of departure for Azoulay's curatorial work from 2004 onward. It enabled her to distill the use of curating as an act of resistance, of counter-power, while activating a form of counter-violence against the violence she identified and diagnosed. Based on Walter Benjamin's eighth thesis on the philosophy of history, which, as noted, was concerned with "the creation of a real state of emergency," Azoulay provided herself with a moral infrastructure for the activation of counter-violence, arguing that the activation of counter-power is the individual's only ethical power.<sup>135</sup>

### A CONSTITUENT MISTAKE

The exhibitions *Act of State: Photographic History of the Occupation 1996–2007* (Minshar Art Gallery, 2007; published as a book, 2008); *Architecture of Destruction* (Zochrot Gallery, 2008); and *Constituent Violence 1947–1950* (Zochrot Gallery, 2009; published as a book, 2009) were all concerned with "the regime of the occupation."<sup>136</sup> Each of them featured a large selection of photographs, and explored the idea of watching photographs as a civil skill and as an act of resistance and protest.

In *Act of State*, Azoulay examined the year 1967 as a critical moment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This exhibition featured more than 500 photographs taken from that moment onward by various photographers, mostly Israeli Jews, who documented the destruction, arrests and searches in the immediate aftermath of the war, as well as the facilities used by the army. The photographs were arranged along a temporal axis, pointing to patterns of assault on Palestinian civilians, beginning in the first year of the occupation. *Constituent Violence* featured 213 photographs, and goes further back to the year 1948 and to the events surrounding the separation and deportation of a civil

<sup>132</sup> By ownership, she is referring both to ownership of the photograph's reading and to ownership concerning copyrights. According to Azoulay the photograph fixes nothing and belongs to no one. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books, 2008. pp. 14-23. See also Azoulay's discussion of photojournalists in *ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>133</sup> See Austin, J.L., "How to Do Things With Words," *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962 For a discussion of the gaze, see also Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, pp. 118-122.

<sup>134</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 23.

<sup>135</sup> Azoulay, *Once Upon a Time: Photography Following Walter Benjamin*, pp. 142–143.

<sup>136</sup> The organization Zochrot was founded in 2002 by Norma Musih, who was a student of Azoulay's at Bar-Ilan University and a small group of Jewish-Israeli activists. The organization works "to broaden the recognition of the Nakba and the Palestinian refugees' right of return within Israeli society, and to inspire Israelis to take responsibility for the Nakba – the deliberate, violent uprooting and dispossession of the Palestinian people in 1948.;" see <http://zochrot.org>



population during the period of Israel's establishment.<sup>137</sup> Azoulay argued that the mechanisms of the new state were shaped while destroying Palestinian society through acts of killing, dividing, deporting and expropriating, and by preventing the return of the deportees. She also argued that the condition for the stabilization and preservation of these mechanisms was the presentation of the Palestinian catastrophe as “a catastrophe from their perspective” – that is, by structuring conscious attention to the distinction between “us” and “them.” The idea of “a catastrophe from their perspective” is highly reminiscent of the idea put forth by Susan Sontag in the opening of her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag shed light on the apparent unity of the taken-for-granted category “us.” She argued that this perspective arose when “we” are positioned as the recipients of war photographs or photographs of disasters suffered by others. She also noted that in many cases, the perspective of “us” vs. “them” also involves a geographic division between “here” and “there.”<sup>138</sup>

*Architecture of Destruction* presented photographs of the destruction of Palestinian homes. Azoulay argued that the regime of the occupation intervened massively in the Palestinian sphere in three ways – through construction, administration of movement, and destruction – and that it was acting to transform this sphere by means of systematic destruction. According to her, the three exhibitions involved a process of classifying and choosing photographs that would each reveal the ongoing assault on civilians while offering something singular, “which appeared in it alone.”<sup>139</sup> Each one of the photographs in the exhibition was accompanied by a text written by Azoulay.

These texts provided detailed information gathered from sources including interviews with the photographers, while locating each of the photographs in a wider context than the one visible in it. Azoulay believed, following Walter Benjamin, that each photograph was in need of a text to accompany it – not a text that transmits a message or fixed meaning. The text is always partial, inevitably overlooking certain details and contaminated by an error, a “constitutive mistake.”<sup>140</sup> Azoulay argued that for Benjamin, the text served to undermine of the author's authority and ownership, allowing for a destruction of “the original,” and of the readymade meaning accompanying the appearance and dissemination of the photograph. As Azoulay wrote, “The photograph is an object that exchanges hands, yet the image printed on it eludes ownership, and thus has

the power to repeatedly position new recipients who will transform it into part of their personal experience, and in doing so will cause the visible to speak again.”<sup>141</sup> According to Azoulay, causing the photograph to speak meant creating one reading among many, a singular reading taking place as part of multiple readings in the past, the present and the future. All these readings are seen as equally valid. Reading, in contrast to interpretation, does not assume the existence of a single origin that is interpreted anew, while the information accompanying the photographs, like a text accompanying archival artifacts, is always partial and thus contaminated by a constitutive mistake that enables it to be repeatedly retransmitted.

The practice of reading the photographs in light of Benjamin's ideas led Azoulay to distinguish between the photographed event (the situation captured in the frame) and the event of the photography (the interaction between the partners to the act of photography and the traces it leaves in the photographed frame).<sup>142</sup> This distinction referred to Roland Barthes' argument that the photograph is a medium of truth attesting to what “was there.” In contrast to Barthes, Azoulay assumed that the photograph was not a closed event presented to the viewer, and that what is in it is never all that was there.<sup>143</sup> Barthes assumed the consolidation of the photograph's phenomenal aspect as an image with a function that endows it with meaning, and thus presented the photograph as imbued with the power to correctly point to things in reality. Azoulay, by contrast, distinguished between the phenomenon and its function. She chose to attribute truth value not to what appears in the photograph, but only to the social relation between photographer and what is photographed, which was put into existence by means of the camera. This distinction enabled her to separate what “was there,” the event that had been captured in the frame and that had since ended, from what would always remain open to endless new readings. Unlike the photographed event, which leaves us in the position of an outside observer, the event of photograph creates an active, engaged position of viewership, and a flexible and open conceptualization of history. Each viewer, with every viewing, is called upon to read the photographed both before and after the photographic moment.

In the exhibition *Untaken Photographs* (Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 2010; Zochrot Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2010), the imagination served a central function, encouraging an active position of viewership. As noted, within

137 The term “constitutive violence,” and the distinction between it and “preservative violence” were borrowed from Walter Benjamin, and were discussed at length in her book on Benjamin. See Azoulay, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 130–159.

138 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2003.

139 Ariella Azoulay, *Act of State*, p. 14.

140 Azoulay, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 108.

141 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

142 Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, pp. 34–40, 248.

143 See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 125; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1981.

the framework of *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay ascribed a decisive position to the imagination. She argued that the contract relied on the imagination and enabled every person to imagine a state of existence as an individual among multitudes. The imagination enables us to traverse the limits of the visible and to awaken civil responsibility even vis-a-vis things that are not visible. In contrast to the exhibition *Everything Could Be Seen* (Art Gallery, Umm el-Fahm, 2004), in which Azoulay had attempted to point to visible testimonies, in this exhibition she sought to extend the civil gaze beyond the limits of the visible. The exhibition was concerned with several “regime-made disasters,” which involved assaults on citizens by the regime. It featured five artists, and made use of archival materials, including photographs provided by the human-rights organization B’Tselem. The works all required the viewer to imagine the violence and power that were not photographed, and were thus not present to the eye.

The artists Dor Guez, Miki Kratsman and Boaz Arad presented photographs of sites of deportation, destruction and murder. These photographs represented the silencing of past violence in the Israeli public sphere, which effaced it and rendered it invisible. Aïm Luski presented the products of one of the cameras he had built, while Efrat Shalem’s works focused on scenes in which women had been murdered. The discussion of the status of women as impaired citizens was, as noted, widely explored in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, while usually receiving secondary, indirect expression in Azoulay’s exhibitions.<sup>144</sup> By means of Shalem’s series of photographs, Azoulay underscored the argument that women as civilians did not enjoy equality, not only in terms of options for promotion and livelihood, but even on the most basic level of personal security. They are more exposed than men to violence and rape, and thus their citizenship was second grade.

In the exhibition *Untaken Photographs*, Azoulay also presented a group of pencil drawings accompanied by texts. She had created the drawings herself by laying transparency paper over photographs from the Red Cross Archive, which she was not permitted to reproduce or scan.<sup>145</sup> These were photographs taken in Al-Qubab in November 1948, some six months after Israel’s declaration of independence. They captured scenes of the local Arab

population being deported by the new sovereign state of Israel, whose independence had recently been declared. The act of copying, which enabled Azoulay to circumvent the mechanism of censorship imposed on the gaze and to liberate the photographs from the archive in which they were imprisoned, became, from her perspective, a form of testimony. The publication of these images was a direct continuation of her demand for an activation of the gaze. Drawing them presented itself as a default option, in contrast to clandestinely photographing or scanning them without permission – actions that would have endangered Azoulay by constituting a legal transgression. It is important to note that Azoulay’s activism always remained within the limits of the sovereign laws which she sought to protest. Although her work pointed to the subversion of sovereignty as a legitimate action, she herself was never subversive.<sup>146</sup> The choice of drawing, in this case, like the choice of contemporary art and of installing exhibitions in art spaces, attested to the fact that the arenas of artistic context prepared, for Azoulay, the conditions for constructing the civil gaze and creating visibility. Curating enabled her to preserve these arenas and to act by means of artistic contexts.

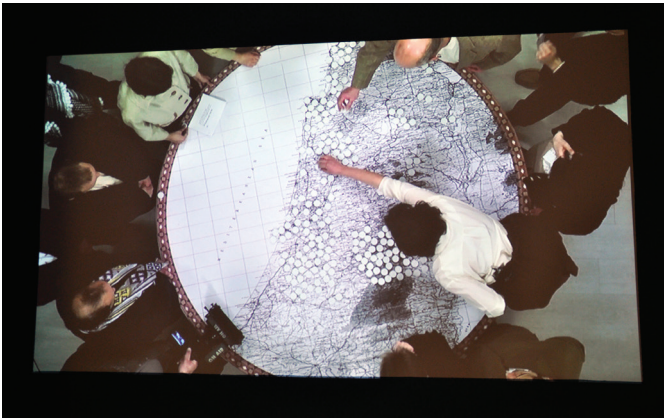
#### THE EXHIBITION AS A REVOLUTIONARY GESTURE

The medium of the exhibition is only one of several mediums (video, photography, writing) that Azoulay used as an educational tool instructive about active viewing, and as a means of calling for civil responsibility. The term “regime-made disaster” – a disaster caused directly by the regime even if it is not recognized as such by the regime – became central in her work, while also impacting her curatorial projects. The exhibition became an emergency statement and warning signal, assisting in the dissemination of the emergency message: “From her position, the spectator can occasionally foresee or predict the future. Thus she is able, through skilled observation, to identify and forewarn others of dangers that lie ahead... The spectator is called to take part, to move from the addressee position to the addresser’s position in order to take responsibility for the sense such photographs by addressing them even further, turning them into signals of

<sup>144</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, “Has anyone ever seen a photograph of a rape?” See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, pp. 203–266.

<sup>145</sup> The images were printed in a small booklet published two years later. See Ariella Azoulay, *Different Ways Not to Say Deportation*, Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2012.

<sup>146</sup> Her lecture on the concept of the archive, which was given at Tel Aviv University on November 17, 2011 (as part of the Seventh Lexical Conference for Critical Political Thought) opened with a dedication of the lecture to Anat Kamm. In October 2011, Kamm was accused of major espionage after it was discovered that, as part of military service as an assistant in the Central Command Bureau, she had copied 2,085 military documents, some of which had been classified as “secret” or “top secret.” In 2008, she gave 1,500 of these documents to the journalist Uri Blau. Kamm, in contrast to Azoulay, represented a clearcut position of subversion, which involved a legal transgression. For a distinction between subversion and revolutionism, see Avi Lubin, *From Political Action to Depoliticizing Politics*, dissertation submitted for the degree of Master of Law, Tel Aviv University, 2009.



Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Alliances, Palestine, 47-48*. Views of the installation, Center for Digital Art, Holon, 2012

an emergency, signals of danger or warning – transforming them into emergency claims.”<sup>147</sup> Accordingly, the message transmitted through different visual means – usually photographs accompanied by words or video – becomes the focal point. The exhibition’s preferred status as a means of disseminating messages was increasingly replaced in Azoulay’s work by the visual essay, which further underscored the status of the imagination as a visual power.

In September 2011, in the midst of the social protest that had broken out in Israel, Azoulay published an open letter to Daphne Leif, who launched the protest and was one of its leaders. Among other things, Azoulay wrote that the social protest rekindled in her a sense of hope and provided her with a sphere in which to dream, and that she was busy defining two new human rights: one, defined by means of negation, was “the right not to be a partner in crime”; the second, defined by means of affirmation, was “the right to imagine the future.”<sup>148</sup> Azoulay privileged the imagination as “the organ of the future,” and awarded it a constitutive and highly meaningful role.<sup>149</sup> Just as the act of founding the modern state in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) required a leap of imagination, the attempt to break the monopoly of the sovereign and of nation states over citizenship required, according to Azoulay, a significant effort. In both cases, it was necessary to imagine a principle of equality and partnership, which served as the basis for both power and counter-power. In her book *The Civil Imagination*, the category of civil imagination served to distinguish between these two types of power. Additionally, Azoulay defined the term “political imagination” (imagination exceeding the vision of the single individual, and exists between individuals), arguing that the civil imagination was needed in order to imagine non-citizens or second-class citizens as citizens.<sup>150</sup> According to her, civil imagination allowed for a diversion from the familiar perception of citizenship as conditional upon a sovereign regime and the institution of the state.

In the exhibition *Where To?* (Center for Digital Art, Holon, 2012), curated by Udi Edelman, Eyal Danon, and Ran Kasmy-Ilan, Azoulay acted as the curator of “an exhibition within an exhibition” titled *Potential History*. The display included two parts: a visual essay and a new video work by Azoulay, *Civil Alliances: Palestine 47-48*. This work was concerned with the period preceding the foundation of the State of Israel, and presented the alliances created between Arabs and Jews as an example of civil imagination and of the ability to think outside of the logic of the sovereign regime.

<sup>147</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, pp. 159-160.

<sup>148</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “An Open Letter to Daphne Leif,” *Erev Rav*, September 15, 2011, in Hebrew: <http://erev-rav.com/archives/14818>

<sup>149</sup> The term “organ of the future” was borrowed from Hannah Arendt. Arendt referred to the will as the “organ of the future.” Azoulay avoided a concern with will, and circumvented the philosophically problematic question concerning the relation between the future and between free will. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, Part two, p. 13.

<sup>150</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, pp. 15-19.



The events of the past decade – the mass protests erupting worldwide, the Arab Spring, the governmental instability and the economic crises from which numerous countries are suffering – have led Azoulay to tie the civil imagination to the concept of the revolution.<sup>151</sup> She has re-defined this term while deconstructing its familiar meaning as a violent and rapid change usually perceived as positive, and measured in relation to its achievements and results.<sup>152</sup> Azoulay argued that a revolution is a language, and is thus a continuous form of existence rather than a single event or measured continuum of events. She suggested seeing the familiar gestures of the revolution – such as raising a flag, making the V sign or burning tires – as “components of language” rather than as planned actions towards the achievement of a given goal. As Azoulay wrote, “Language is a form of common human existence; it develops according to the needs of its speakers, creating new dialects and skills, and is transmitted from one to another while it is being shaped. The language of revolution is thus composed of a lexicon of gestures and of a grammar, of rigid rules and possibilities for improvisation,”<sup>153</sup> and its visibility is made possible through photography.

This definition of the revolution enabled Azoulay to tie the regime disaster occurring in Israel to regime disasters occurring elsewhere in the present or past, and to anchor her resistance to it in a widespread resistance that creates a synchronous and diachronic continuum. The repetition of the same revolutionary gestures over a period of some 250 years, and under different regimes (monarchical, communist, democratic, fascist, dictatorial), reveals, according to Azoulay, “precisely the heritage that is shared by different political regimes around the globe, which create regime-based disasters with similar patterns of action, and inflict harm on certain governed populations.”<sup>154</sup>

Azoulay argued that the universal language of power exercised by political regimes and the universal language of citizenship, of which the revolution is an inextricable part, are two languages separated by a fundamental and unbridgeable gap. The ruling language of power creates regime-made disasters, while the universal language of citizenship emphasizes the dimension of responsibility placed on the shoulders of every human being due to the disasters. These arguments are compatible with theoretical developments in the discipline of visual culture. Like

Azoulay, Nicholas Mirzoeff, one of the major contributors to defining the discipline of visual culture, developed the idea of bifurcating power into power and counterpower. Mirzoeff argued that since the visual has become a form of ammunition in the service of authority, and cannot serve resistance to authority, one must distinguish between two types of visuality: that which serves to control and preserve the existing order, and that which has been figured as the barbaric, the uncivilized, or, in the modern period, as the “primitive.” These two types of visuality, like Azoulay’s two languages, are incompatible. It is only within the framework of the second type of visuality, “which is not part of authority ‘life process,’” Mirzoeff argued, that one could think of countervisuality, or the right to look and establish a counterhistory.<sup>155</sup>

The visual essay “When the Body Politic Ceases to Be an Idea,” which was presented and distributed as a folding brochure in the exhibition *ReCoCo: Life under Representational Regimes* (Museum of Contemporary Art Bat Yam, 2013), gave expression to gestures from the revolution unfolding in different places worldwide. The exhibition as a space-dependent medium was reduced, as the three-dimensional installation gave way to the two-dimensional format of the visual essay. The emphasis shifted to choosing, classifying, editing and giving words to the photographs. The images represented the universal language of power and its disasters alongside a range of familiar revolutionary gestures, without ascribing much importance to the differences between a (three-dimensional) installation and the (two-dimensional) format of the page. Azoulay’s curatorial action was adapted for the purpose of rapid distribution and maximum replication, as part of a “civil language.”<sup>156</sup> Azoulay the curator was transformed into a “producer” in the sense attributed to this word by Walter Benjamin, as the relations between the consumers (citizens) and themselves were defined as the object of her action.

In contrast to the previous curatorial projects examined thus far, the curatorial statements created by Azoulay from 2000 onward – with the exception of the exhibition of works by Aïm Luski (2014) – were not concerned with artists or artworks. Her curating was an action of civil socialization, which amounted to a demonstration of her political and social stance. The almost total reduction of the spatial aspect of her work in recent years seems to

151 For Azoulay’s discussion of the concept of revolution, see. See also Azoulay’s Internet site, <http://cargocollective.com/AriellaAzoulay>

152 Azoulay has written at length about Arendt’s model of revolution. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

153 Ariella Azoulay, “The Language of the Revolution: The Gospel of the East,” *Devarim* 5 (2012): 46–47, in Hebrew.

154 Ibid.

155 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 22–25.

156 Civil language gives precedence to the idea of justice over the laws of the sovereign (“social justice” was the slogan of the summer 2011 protest in Israel). Justice is given expression in the basic human right, defined by Azoulay by means of negation, as the right of every person not to have his life relinquished, and not to participate in relinquishing the lives of others. See Ariella Azoulay, “Open Letter to Daphne Leif,” as well as Ariella Azoulay, “Civil Awakening,” *Erev Rav*, August 25, 2011: <https://www.erev-rav.com/archives/14433>.

return to the conceptual strategies undertaken by curators in the 1970s – such as in the exhibition *Information* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970). In Azoulay's case, however, this process gave expression to her devotion to a didactic strategy, which seemed to involve relinquishing the theoretical and visual richness, as well as the challenges, brought forth by an installation in space, as the essence of a curatorial action endowed with power and singularity.



Mordechai Omer and Ariella Azoulay's highly divergent actions as curators – the first operating from an institutional position within a museum, and the second operating from an independent position identified with a sharply critical line of action – have exemplified two ways in which curating both endows the curator with power and is concerned with power. Notwithstanding the significant difference between these two curatorial positions, both shared a didactic approach to curating and a vision of redeeming the world and transforming the order of its regimes – as given expression, among other things, in their curatorial actions.