



## **M(B)R Visiting #1: Merav Maroody**

The first installment of a new column on studio visits by Michal B. Ron, who lives in Berlin. As the coronavirus pandemic spreads, the column also develops and acquires new forms. At the center of each encounter is a discussion of works by different artists and their thoughts about the current conditions of art and life.

Column / Michal B. Ron February 16, 2021

### 0. Preface

The notion of writing a column about studio visits was born when I visited the artist Moran Sanderovich (b. 1980, lives and works in Berlin) in late 2019. Before the days of coronavirus – but I'm getting ahead of myself. Moran and I are talking about her work, among her works. Nearby, new sculptures are set on the floor. Their physical presence is shaggy and demanding. Objects made of familiar items, which appear to have grown new limbs in some crossbreeding of living and inanimate matter, hang on the wall. A table and some storage boxes by the window are full of raw materials: *faux* hair, glue, plastic toys. Moran sits facing me; behind her, a mirror is surrounded by images, famous paintings, and photographs, providing context and inspiration for her work. All of them contain hybrid, alien bodies. The mirror doubles the room and reveals an old sculpture behind me, stuffed into a crowded gallery niche.

Moran and I ponder and discuss how we might cooperate. She – an intuitive, intense artist – operates through action, not theoretical essays. However, in texts about her, she aspires to an exacting loyalty to her work in a way that threatens me. Moran – how to write about an artist if not through her own voice, the words already written about her, under her supervision, and freely? That was how the idea came about: to write not about the artist but a visit to her studio. This visit was recently published in issue #7 of the journal "Protocols."<sup>1</sup>

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[1]A mirror surrounded by images in Moran Sanderovich's studio, February 2020  
Photography: Michal B. Ron

[unnamed.jpg](#) [2]



[3]The high ceiling of an industrial space. The artist requires it as a necessary condition for thinking.

Photography: courtesy of the artist, Katrina Gun Oehlert, Düsseldorf, 2011

The studio is where I have been first exposed to art, long before visiting museums or exhibitions. It belongs to my aunt, who is an artist. Her name is Katharina Gun Oehlert (b. 1953). Her studio had always been a magical place for me when I visited family in Germany as a child. It had chairs laid with furs, and at its center was a large loom. There were feathers, and paints, and plaster figures, but mainly a large space and a small woman in blue work overalls, splattered with paint, her hair held back from her face with a band. Over the years, my aunt moved between several workspaces in and around Düsseldorf. Still, her studio always had that unique atmosphere, those furs and feathers, and the high ceilinged industrial spaces that the woman in the blue overalls needed as a condition for thinking, as she once explained to me with her serious artist's expression.

The next significant studio in my life belonged to Moshe Ron (1945-2016). An artist, a friend, who has become family. As a youth, I came to him seeking a solution for framing an overly large work – such as a teenager might produce – which I had made in Vered Pirhi-Linenberg's art class in Haifa. Once more, I've been exposed to a realm of wonders. Moishe's studio was an underground storage space, low-slung and windowless. Metallic "earrings for elephants" hung from the ceiling, the cement walls were covered with colorful paintings of faces, and faces were also carved in chunks of wood. There were paints and tools. I remember his big hands holding a heavy hammer and a fine brush just as steadily. Wherever you looked, whether at the door, the sink, the cabinet, the shelves, or a new work – it was art.





In those days, exhibitions for me were no more than a cluster of artworks hung on walls, and curating was the job of hanging them up. The proper place for experiencing, sensing, understanding art was the space where it had been created, near the person who had made it. That was the most exciting place. Before the world passes judgment, the scale in the autonomous artist's studio is between van Gough and the stars.

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[5]Moishe's studio, Haifa, 2016  
Photography: Tanya Kravtsov

It was inevitable that I would write about visits to the studios of the artists in my life. I'm excited about the random, eclectic aspect of the choice of artists who will gather under this umbrella: young artists who are just starting out, well-known, established artists, autonomous ones who work outside the system, local and foreign artists in Berlin, some who work here and some there... Painters, performance artists, political artists, academic artists, those who are themselves an institution. I'm thrilled when I think of those I will visit to talk with them and photograph their workspaces, down to their most remote corners.



"Do you have a studio?" one asks the artist. Only two days before, I spoke with the painter Eva Alter. She was at the studio. These days she travels by bicycle from her apartment to the studio. In fact, the crisis finds artists (almost) ready. They were among the most affected, having no financial security, when the cultural world went silent and all engagements and planned projects – in which artists participate or get paid indirectly – were canceled. But artists are also expert adapters. Financial security has never been theirs. Before introducing the result of the creative process to the world, art is by nature independent, autonomous, its own fulfillment and reasoning. From home or at the studio, the scale in the new situation is between the virus and the walls.

My future meetings will most likely take place through technological mediators. Again I will be able to talk to artists anywhere in the world. They will open for me a window to their workspace and show me what they wish to show. The camera's viewfinder will be in their hands. Will the digital subconscious still come through to the screen?

## 2. M(B)R Visits Merav Maroody

June 23, 2020

I follow Merav Maroody faithfully on [Facebook](#) [6]. I can see what she has seen – and photographed. I can read what she has felt, and shared. She makes me laugh. She astounds me. These are lines of love, beyond <3.

During the coronavirus lockdown in Berlin, we stayed at home. There was no kindergarten for my child, and the playgrounds were closed, as were the museums and the galleries. Not that we would have gone anywhere, certainly not on public transportation (who needs a car in Berlin? In the whirl of utopic thoughts brought about by the pandemic – among them regarding the value of the local versus uninhibited global tourism, which we had participated in and made a living from; or neighborhood solidarity versus wasteful consumerism at giant chain stores – how I had wished to be one of those capitalists and own a car... It has been, and still is, a time full of contradictions). Homebound, limited to window visits from more mobile friends who traveled the city on bicycles, Maroody's Facebook wall was an aperture to the outside world. Her followers were rewarded with an on-going glimpse of the photographer's real-time work as she documented history being made. "I think you must publish a book of pandemic photos when it's all over," I wrote to her in a private message with a sense of urgency.

Right.

You think?

After the coronavirus, it will be a bit boring to look at people on balconies.

Normally, it is the height of kitsch

Maroody answered, sharp and poignant (correspondence from April 15, 2020).

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[8]The perspective of the housebound, when it was forbidden to use the playgrounds.  
Photography: M(B)R, April 2020



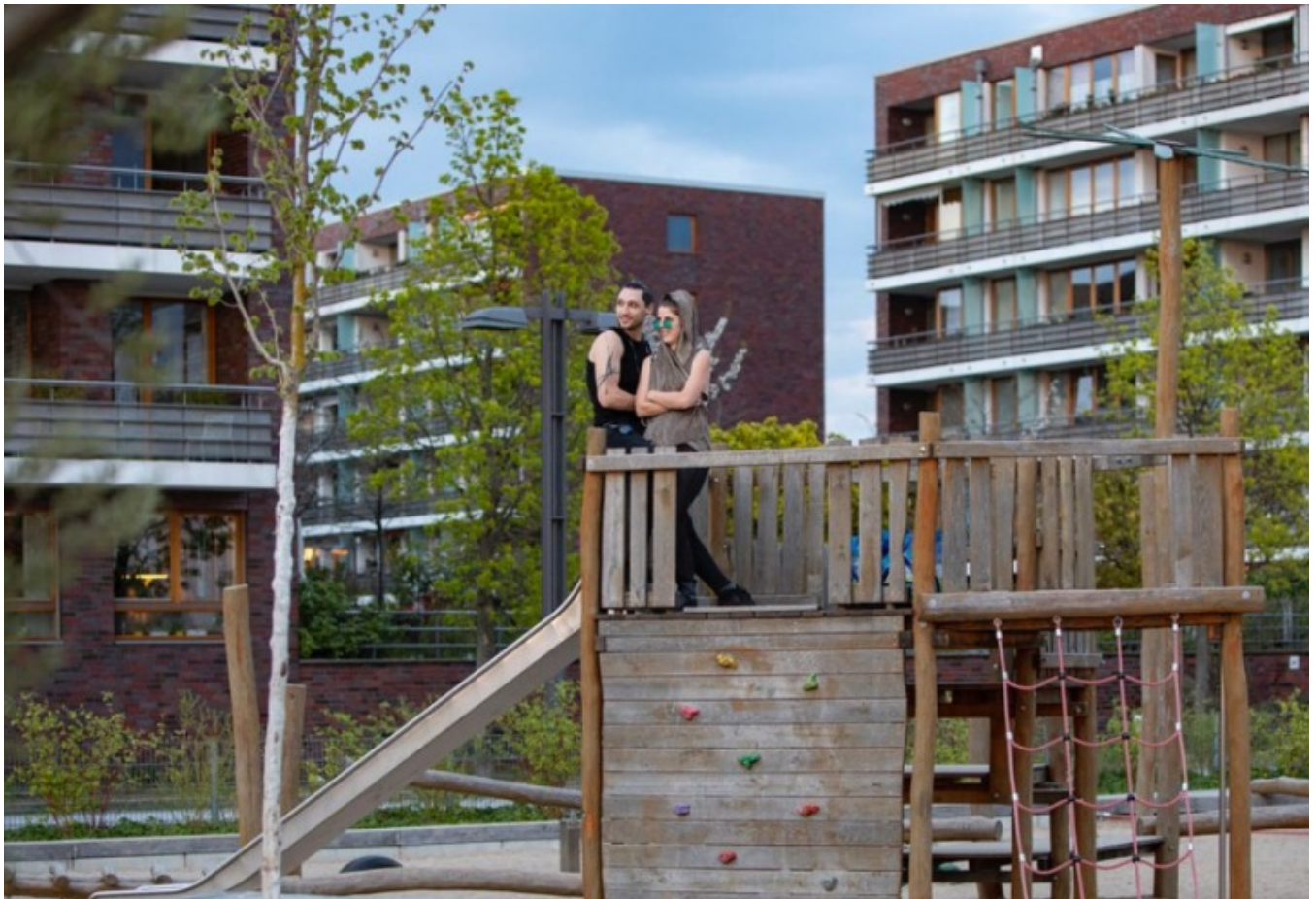


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[10]From the series "Balcony People"  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

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[12]

**"Clearly, if this were a science-fiction movie, we'd be following a group of young people who, despite the prohibition, have been meeting to touch, hug, have sex, because it is risky and prohibited, and the forbidden touch is a hundredfold more exciting and passionate," Maroody wrote on April 13, 2020. "Phew! I got annoyed with the couple in the playground. What's happening to me?" I responded.**

Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

"Capturing a moment in history that's happening now – and you're a part of it," Maroody replied when I'd asked her about her work during the pandemic. "at first I was sleepy," she recalled. Until an Israeli reporter approached her, asking, what does Berlin look like during the pandemic? She asked for photos, and Maroody went out to shoot. At first, it was the touristic areas, which were empty. "Then I realized that something serious was going on, when I was standing in the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz. We stayed there by ourselves for an hour and there was no one else."

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[14]Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

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[16]Berlin, deserted.

Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

Then Maroody returned to her neighborhood, and it was bursting with people! The neighborhoods were full of life.

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[18]Berlin FUNdemic  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

The contradiction of the deserted touristic areas and the lively residential ones demonstrates, in piercing images, the basis for the tensions that have developed between the needs of the local populations and the consumerism of the tourist industry, and the struggle between regulation and the free market, which had appropriated Airbnb apartments for temporary guests that use to flood the city. The tourists always disappeared at the end of their holiday, but others took their place. Certain areas of the city used to be populated by holograms, here now and gone the next moment, until the teletransporting stopped with the pandemic – the tourists disappeared as if they'd never been there.

The incongruity of the crowds of partying youngsters along the canal and the secluded older people above them, on their balconies and behind windows, is another one that Maroody has captured with her camera. That was the tension between at-risk populations and those confident of their immunity, who could unknowingly carry and spread the virus. Perhaps the photographs point out who in their physical, social, hormonal developmental stage has been able to remain indoors and who needed to physically go out. Sometimes that incongruity appears in a single frame: "perhaps the virus does not distinguish between people, but the lockdown amplifies the gaps," Maroody wrote (April 13, 2020).

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[20]"Perhaps the virus does not distinguish between people, but the lockdown enhances the gaps."  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

What triggered Maroody to start shooting balconies was a friend who has decided not to leave home. For three months, she saw her only through the window. Life continued on the balcony. Maroody's urge was the opposite: "just to get out of the house and walk." On certain days she took between 10,000 and 20,000 steps per day, as her smartphone reported. In this way, she had collected over 400 photographs of balconies. "I tried to make sure people knew I was photographing. There is no signature, but they waved to me" – and in most cases, that was as close as it got to consent from the subjects. In one situation, the people photographed sent the photographer their email, scribbled on a piece of paper folded into an airplane. In Germany, people cherish their privacy and safeguard their personal details through a series of stringent rules of data protection – *Datenschutz*. "Germany misses out on street photography because you cannot photograph people. This whole art is dead," Maroody says.

If you ask Germans on the street to take their photo, usually - in normal times - you will encounter resistance. But now, "people said hello." Most were friendly, which led Maroody to coin the term "FUNdemic." Some of her Facebook pearls:

Social distancing? Check!

New regulations? We are happy to scold!

Hygiene and cleanliness? Where do we pay?



Not seeing Grandma and Grandpa? What else is new? (April 23, 2020)

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[22]

**"After I photographed them enjoying the sunset, I asked if they knew each other, and they said no. And then they wrote their email address on a piece of paper, folded it into an airplane, and flew it at me, so I could send them the picture." (April 12, 2020)**

Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

Photographing balconies has become an obsession. There were no social interactions. No work. In the days of social distancing, it was possible only to walk around and take pictures. There were no distractions. The money was there – assistance grants the Berlin municipality had given to its citizens whose living was affected by the pandemic (the early and quickest to apply were the artists), enabling Maroody to make the best art. These were maximal conditions. Her productivity is proof of the failure in the economic assumption that people are lazy by nature and require incentives, or threats, to go and work. "With no money and no work – I was terrified," Maroody said. But because of the aid, "the graph at the bank looked like the graphs of the pandemic," she said. She wrote on Facebook: "with governments pulling billions out of their sleeves, why is there poverty in the world?" (March 27, 2020)

Maroody once wrote that "out of millions of pictures I've taken, the ones I hadn't are the most ingrained in my mind" (June 25, 2020). Did that happen during the pandemic? I asked. Of course. She told me she was once late for a meeting, and on the way she saw two women conversing from



two balconies in different buildings. That was a picture she couldn't take. "Most of the time, it is impossible to shoot," she says. "There's a tree, or it's too high up." Sometimes she waits a long time for the residents to come out to the balcony, and has even made up songs and sang them in the street to draw people out. "Why this obsession? Why another photo," she asked herself. Isn't one picture representative of them all? But even when I tried to ask whether the intimate photos of people in their homes contain some interior tension, a certain small-scale incident more mysterious and fascinating than the extroverted celebrants outside – the photographs themselves rejected being placed on a value scale.

Just then, as we talk, a pigeon lands on a neighbor's balcony, in the building facing the photographer's window. She must photograph it. I experience real-time photography on the other end of the phone line:

[IMG-20200623-WA0001.jpg](#) [23]







During the pandemic, the camera is always ready, Maroody says, the batteries always charged. During this period, her photographs won awards, including the iconic one of the bat eating humans, which had received the Bartur Photo Award in the Covid-19 Reflections competition.

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[26]Bat Eating Humans, a mural in Berlin.  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

This is a blend of several moments, Maroody explains the success of the photograph: the mural that has acquired new meaning in coronavirus times connects with the figure peeking out from its isolation through the building's window. "Something gets a new dimension, beyond the thing itself."



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[28]Merav Maroody, Photokabine, acquired for the collection of ICP – International Center of Photography in New York.  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 2020

I asked, did your work reverberate more during the pandemic? I thought of viewers like me, chained to the computer's screen, when there's no world to go out to. Yes, she said. After 20 years as a photographer, suddenly she enjoys recognition. When she thinks about the reason, she notes that first thing' apparently, is that she has gotten better. But also, "the world started to recognize female photographers." As an example, she recalls that only last year she presented her work for the first time at the Israel Photography Festival. The insult from a past festival still burns in her mind, when a wall was dedicated to still from movies, an area she has a rich resume in, but her works were absent from it. It should be noted that the festival in which she had finally participated was the first one with women curators.



Timing plays a major role in Maroody's photographs. The art of photography exemplified by the "decisive moment," that moment when the camera's click captures what's in front of it and locks it in a successful frame, even if that moment is a carefully directed set piece. Some photographs tell about the instant just before, or hint at the one that's coming. Maroody adds the moment of viewing to the complexity of the dimension of time in photography. On the one hand:

After the coronavirus It will be a bit boring to look at people on balconies.

In daily life it is the height of kitsch

As she has written to me in our exchange. But on the other hand, she has shown, in a photographic series, that "I'm just ahead of my time." Those are photos of people wearing masks, which she started to make two years ago as a way to deal with a big personal crisis, after a trauma that had paralyzed her life. In normal days, those photographs would have been framed as personal feminine expression, thus marginal and uninteresting, she said. Suddenly, with the pandemic, these images acquire a new meaning.

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VOGUE



Garbage Thoughts  
27/01/2020





Garbage Thoughts, 1/27/2020. With Melanie Schmidli  
Photography: Merav Maroody, January 2020

[pasted image 0 \(12\).jpg](#) **[31]**





[32]"Again to 'ahead of my time,' with Itai Keshet in the role of the person in quarantine Itai KT. Photographed in the Czech Republic, August 2019."  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 9, 2020

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[34]"I'm ahead of my time and this time wild animals are taking over the city."  
Photography: Merav Maroody, April 10, 2020

The same personal trauma brought Maroody, a gifted portrait photographer who had made it her living, to a state where she suffered from social phobia and could not deal with faces. That was when she started photographing friends in masks. "I've been doing it for two years, and suddenly the world stops and everyone becomes like you!" She then became the expert. It transformed from "the art of a woman focused on herself to something the whole world understands." Maroody arrived prepared to the crisis: not only an expert on isolation and social distancing, she was also equipped with masks. "the shops were closed – what you had in your house was it, and I had masks! Lots of them!" in this way the series with Angela Merkel's mask came about. Maroody, "the worst German speaker in the world," strolled in the streets wearing a Merkel mask, enjoined passers-by to stay home, and received all the love that Merkel's image evokes, which grew even more in light of her leadership in managing the crisis. "Someone tossed a joint because of me," she said. She has identified the comic aspect of the moment. Her aim was to make depressed people laugh, not photograph and document. It must be for a reason that Maroody and Merkel share an 'M' in their names. Like Mentors.

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[36]"Busy day for our amazing leader."

In the photograph: Merav Maroody with an Angela Merkel mask. March 23, 2020

"I've lost interest in making art, " Maroody says regarding my attempt to frame her Merkel outings as performance art or urban activism. When the art world went silent, I wondered whether I would miss exhibitions. And Maroody? Exposure in social media is sufficient for her. No need to print up the pictures, and the audience is much larger (10K followers on Instagram!). We go back to the beginning, to the way I have been following her production, while I'm at home and she's on the street.

I am lucky. I don't require exhibitions, while I'm surrounded by artists. In the meantime, I'll go on reporting from the studio, for those who depend on mediators to gain access to art.



Tip #1: When you befriend an artist, you get to know ten others, quickly.

Tip #2: while the art historian of yesterday rummages in archives, the art scholar of tomorrow burrows through social media. See:

Keneth Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet* (Harper Perennial, 2016)

- [1.](#) Michal B. Ron and Moran Sanderovich, "[In the future there will be no such creatures like me](#) [37]," *PROTOCOLS* #7: 6 + Genders (May 2020)

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