Artists as a Public: A Conversation with Abraham Kritzman

Under the extreme political controversy surrounding the Barbur Gallery in Jerusalem, and in the shadow of the political decision to evict the gallery from its current space, Lonnie Monka talks with Abraham Kritzman, an artist and the gallery's curator, about being an artist-led institution, curating and writing about art, and the concern that the political struggle will overshadow the attempt to make art.

Conversation / Lonnie Monka July 23, 2020

Tucked into the maze-like walkways of Jerusalem's Nachloat neighborhood, Barbur Gallery has been an active force of avant-garde art for fifteen years. The gallery was founded in 2005 by a group of young artists, who had recently graduated from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. Working with the Jerusalem Municipality, they received the space to create the gallery. Since then, Barbur has served as a non-profit, independent space for art and artists, holding monthly exhibitions and hosting ongoing cultural activities, such as screenings, lectures, and workshops. Over the last few years, the gallery has been embroiled in an ongoing legal battle connected to freedom of speech.

The legal situation erupted as public officials were outraged by talks held at the gallery. These provocative lectures featured speakers from Breaking the Silence, an organization of veteran soldiers who have taken it upon themselves to expose the Israeli public to the reality of everyday life in the Occupied Territories, as well as Ta'ayush (Arabic for "living together"), a grassroots volunteer organization of Arabs and Jews working to break down the walls of racism and segregation by constructing an Arab-Jewish partnership. In response to these talks, Miri Regev—the former Israeli Minister of Culture and Sport—called for the Jerusalem Municipality to close the gallery. Nir Barkat—the former mayor of Jerusalem—responded to Regev's plea by claiming that she should defund the gallery. Following this tit-for-tat between public officials, the Jerusalem Municipality decided to proceed with evicting the gallery.

At first, the reason for the closure was that the gallery had misused the space, breaking a rule that banned the use of municipality-owned spaces for political activities. Yet, it soon became clear that this restriction applied to official political parties using municipal spaces, and should not restrict people freely expressing political opinions in them. Accordingly, the municipality's story changed, shifting to argue that the gallery needed to be evicted for reasons unrelated to the events that had initiated the call for closure. A legal battle ensued, currently heading for the Supreme Court of Israel.

Abraham Kritzman.jpg



[1]Abraham Kritzman
Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

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[3]Barbur community protesting in the Jerusalem district court
Photographer: Noam Kuzar. Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Barbur team was called into court for the last hearing before going to the Supreme Court. Wearing masks, they stood before a judge and received an eviction notice requiring them to vacate the space. Today, the space in Nachlaot stands empty, and the now-unkempt outer garden is filling up with trash. The Barbur team is waiting to go to the Supreme Court, though their legal counsel had warned them that their chances of winning back the space in Nachlaot were slim. Despite the bleak situation, the gallery team is currently preparing to reopen in a new location in Jerusalem, but not under the auspices of the municipality.

The following conversation with Abraham (Avi) Kritzman—an artist, educator, and a member of the Barbur team, who had curated most of the shows for the past few years—was conducted months ago. At the time of the interview, the gallery's fate was in question, but the prospect of winning the battle against the municipality's efforts to evict them seemed promising. Given the amount of attention the gallery was receiving in connection with this controversy, I hoped to have a discussion about the art—that is, I feared that the legal situation was overshadowing the gallery's continued efforts to organize art exhibitions.

Tsibi_015 web.jpg **[4]**



[5]Har Tsyion Kibbutz Galuyot exhibition, featuring works by Tsibi Geva & Yitzhak (Itche) Golombek
Photographer: Elad Sarig. Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

Roger.jpg **[6]**



[7]Performance during Fugue In Three Voices exhibition, featuring works by Roger Ychai (playing guitar), Noga Farchy, & Mia Yankovich Shentser
Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

Along with the ongoing developments, the significance of this conversation has shifted. When there was still hope of the gallery remaining in Nachlaot, Avi's thoughts about curating reflected the amazing exhibitions that the gallery had been organizing despite the political pressure being exerted on them. When the eviction notice went into effect, this interview read like the documentation of the creative activities that Jerusalem and the Israeli art community were at risk of losing. The current situation, mixing a failed battle for freedom of expression with hopes of the project's continuation in a new space, casts a bitter-sweet aura on the following conversation. Rereading these words today, I am reminded that institutions and infrastructure are only as good as the people who operate within them.

Lonnie Monka: Avi, what would you say is the curatorial vision for Barbur Gallery?

Abraham Kritzman: There is definitely a curatorial vision—I would call it a legacy—that I inherited from Masha [Zusman]. The whole idea for Barbur is that it's an artist-led institution, or gallery. I call it an institution because we do more than art now. We organize lots of programming for the public—whether it's shows, music, or poetry readings. Overall, we think about the audience that we're talking to as fellow artists.

So, Barbur is meant to be a place where artists show their works to other artists, so that a kind of in-depth conversation can be held. I think that artists communicate through their artworks, so this should be a place where you can articulate something about your art practice, and show it, and then other artists will come and see it. And of course the general public is supposed to enjoy this dialogue, or multilogue. Inherently it's very experimental, and it's supposed to be a little bit like a generator or some kind of engine in the artist’s studio.

Gustavo.jpg **[8]**



[9]Happy to Fall exhibition, featuring works by Gustavo Sagorsky
Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

LM: You recently organized a show with two very established Israeli artists—Tsibi Geva and Yitzhak (Itche) Golombek. Can you share your thoughts about that experience?

AK: I think that with Tsibi and Itche it was a bit more about the relationship between them, or the idea of bringing to the gallery things that are from the edges of their practice—not having Itche’s big sculptural works, not having Tsibi cover the entire Barbur Gallery with tires. Things that are more from the edges of their practice, and seeing where that meets, because they have a very long dialogue between them, and they are very much acquainted artistically—and they're just friends.

The whole idea of Barbur is to try something different. For these known artists, there is this option to bring something that has never been shown before, and sometimes it's a place to show people that nobody knows, and then it becomes a chance for them to show what they do.

For instance, there is the show we are hanging now, with Roger [Bénichou-YchaÏ] and his assistant artists. Roger had a whole career as a musician, and in his retirement, which he has already been in for 30 years, he has been painting quite incredible works. It's a life project that he has been taking very seriously, but I think that he never even approached anyone to see it. So this is exactly the kind of place to show it. It feels like it's from here, even though he's French and didn't grow up here. He is working with two young artists. The way they work is so intense. They work every single day on these huge paintings. It's the kind of effort that makes you ask, "Well, who is this for? Where is this supposed to be shown?" And when I asked Roger about it he said that he has an imaginary space that he's making all of these works for. Maybe Barbur is the entrance to that space that he's imagining.

LM: So, Barbur is a kind of gateway to the imagination—sounds pretty magical. How does your work as a curator contribute?

AK: First, let me just say that I don't see myself as a curator. I think that curating is something different than what I do. A curator is someone who needs to build a context for the work. When you go into an artist's studio you meet the world that they make, that they dwell in. A curator—this is not what I do—is supposed to cut out a piece of that world, contextualize it, and make it comprehensible for the viewers. You see, the viewers can't meet an entire world. It always needs to be edited in some way.

I think that our role at Barbur is to have a conversation with artists.

When meeting with an artist I would try, through our conversations and our meetings, to understand: What would this exhibition be in relation to you and your work or art practice? How do you want to be perceived? Sometimes it's very surprising. When organizing a show with Gustavo [Sagorsky], for example, I thought that we would have an exhibition showing his photographs, but we ended up having a painting show. Because he was super excited about it. He was brave enough to show me something that is completely outside of his practice. I was thrilled!

LM: I remember going to the artist talk for that exhibition. He spoke about how very excited you were to see these hidden paintings made by a photographer.

AK: Yes, because I genuinely got excited by the paintings. I guess that if I didn't I would say "Look, they're really nice, but maybe we should [chuckles] try something else." But they were REALLY exciting.

The studio visit is one thing, but then there is also the exhibition. You have to very gently steer the exhibition towards being a good exhibition—that is, an exhibition that will fulfil the artist's vision. It sounds simple, but actually sometimes the artist's vision is a bit fuzzy.

I'll give an example: the show we did with Tamar Lewinsohn. She had a lot of works. There were works that looked very similar. We both thought that it would be really interesting to show the repetition, and to bring something intimate into the work. We talked about this word "intimacy"—something that can be felt, something between mundane and very very tactile, as if something is breathing on your neck. But it was very difficult to make that intimacy happen in the exhibition.

There's also this thing about writing the text [chuckles]. The text. I'm not very interested in a gallery text. The traditional way.

LM: You mean the wall text?

AK: Yes, I think that it's problematic.I think that all curators would agree that it's problematic, because you're looking at something that is very complex. It's layered. Always. It's not something that you can talk about in two paragraphs.

Most of the mistakes I've made with texts arose from trying to tell the viewers what they're looking at, or to suggest a reading. It's a mistake. Maybe the text was interesting. Maybe it was smart.

Maybe it was engaging. Maybe it was funny. Whatever. I don't know if it helped achieve the goal of making the show the best it can be.

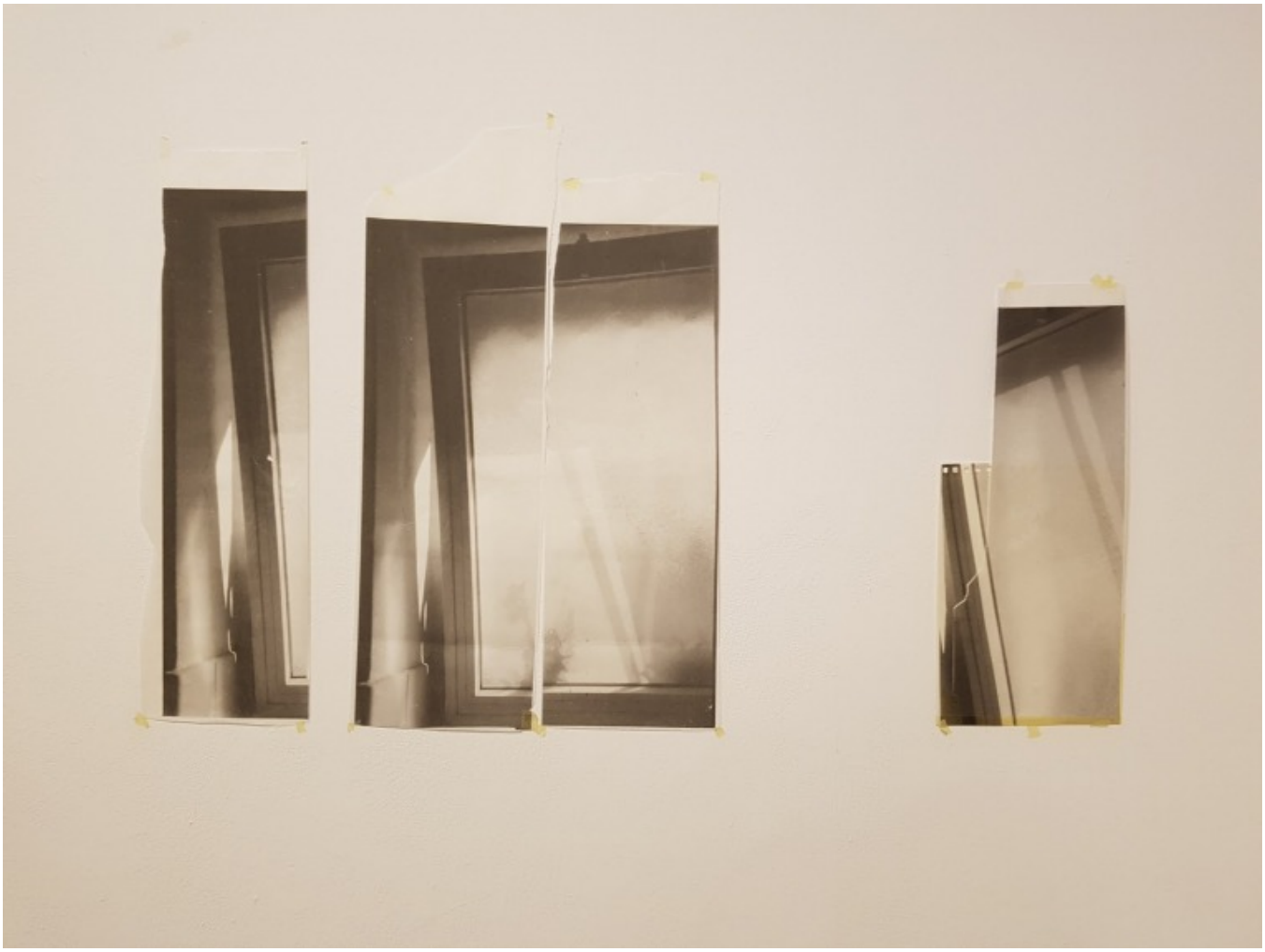
I'll give an example. When I wrote a text for Dorit Figovich Goddard, Noa Tavori, and Adi Weizmann, I suggested an interpretation in the text, and after a week I realized that it really, really forces my personal reading of the exhibition on the visitors, even though the exhibition itself was very open and almost abstract.

LM: What was the interpretation?

AK: I was talking about it as a still image—as time that froze. I was referring to The Langoliers—it's a sci-fi film based on a novella by Stephen King. The minute that you introduce these things, you're doing something very violent to the viewer. You're forcing them to think about the film or about Stephen King in relation to the exhibition. Eventually I regretted it.

With Tamar Lewinsohn, I did an exercise in writing, where I had this small philosophical reading of her work. A kind of phenomenological encounter. It was an amazing thing to write. I really, really enjoyed it. I actually think it's a beautiful text. But again, I don't know if it helps the work, or the exhibition.

20180322_201127.jpg **[10]**



[11]My Heart Isn’t Synchronized With Technology exhibition, featuring works by Tamar Lewinsohn Photographer: Tamar Lewinsohn. Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

LM: So what would be an example of a text that you would feel comfortable with? What kind of text can help an exhibition?

AK: You know, this is a debate. What is this text supposed to be? So, for instance we had an exhibition that didn't have a text. It had images instead of texts, and one curator told me—and I don't know if I agree with her or not—she told me: There's something disrespectful about not writing a text for an exhibition, because an audience sometimes needs a bridge into the work, and if we are claiming to be a community gallery then we should make ourselves a bit more approachable for the audience.

LM: Sure...

AK: No! I don't think it's true. I think it's silly. What happens with most of these texts is that people come into the show and they feel like they need someone to tell them something. It doesn't even matter what. I don't think that I agree with this position, with this practice, or—I don't know what to call it—this habit.

LM: It sounds like you're against fulfilling a desire which, for you, seems cheap.

AK: Yah, because I think that I would like the viewers to engage with the work fully. I would rather that they be a bit baffled than fall upon an explanation. I understand that the museum needs to keep

the audience pleased, to keep coming for tickets—whatever. But at Barbur there's always someone there to talk to. So there can be a conversation if there is no text.

On the other hand, sometimes, there are things that the artist wants people to know. Sometimes I write it, sometimes not. One time we had a whole show by Or Ariely that was based on a short story, so I thought that it was very appropriate to have this short story; Or wrote a very weird, interesting, wacky text. I thought that it was amazing. Also to see the people looking through the show, and then asking for a text, and receiving this short story and going [in a slow, confused tone] "OK", while also understanding that there is a deep relationship between the two. So it doesn't give them a shortcut. There is no blurb. You know. It's as if you've bought a book, and then you say maybe I'll just read the text on the back cover to see what it's about.

The Tate is very good at this educational writing. They're really good at writing stuff that doesn't crush the work, and doesn't interpret it, but still gives the audience the comfort that they're learning something [chuckles] or that they have something to fall upon.

LM: So, one last question. Do you think that the ongoing legal battle to keep the gallery open interferes with the activity of putting on these exhibitions?

AK: No. I mean, the gallery is for artists. Like I said, I really try to keep that in mind. I'm really not trying to sell anything to the city hall. You know, we don't show nudity. So that orthodox people would be engaged with the gallery, and would know that it's safe to come in.

Yom bahir .jpg **[12]**



[13]On a Clear Day exhibition, featuring works by Adi Weizmann, Noa Tavori, Dorit Figovich Goddard
Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

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[15]Death of a Guard: Dolphin exhibition, featuring works by Or Ariely
Photographer: Smadar Tsook. Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

LM: I didn't know that. So no paintings with nudity?

AK: Yah. It's a kind of self-censoring that we chose to do. It's a decision that was made a long time ago—mostly to respect the people that are our immediate neighbors, and the people who we are working with and we love. I think it's a small thing to give.

You know, I dislike politics as much as I dislike money. I feel we got mangled in this political mess, where we all really hate it. I mean the whole idea of inviting Breaking the Silence [Shovrim Shtikah] and Ta'ayush, and all of those people, was to make a space where people could ask them about what they do.

The Barbur Gallery Team on our last day in Shirizly 6.jpg **[16]**



[17]The Barbur team closing the Nachlaot space
Photographer: Noam Kuzar & Lidia Maletin. Courtesy of Barbur Gallery

Barbur is a meeting place. It's not us lecturing to the world about what we think. It's not about that. We just got into a mess because of Miri Regev, and it's a shame. I really hope that the city hall will retract from this situation, because I think that it would really be a huge loss for the artists, and for the community. You know, we really try to make exhibitions that are good and interesting and exciting. We do have the public in mind—especially thinking about artists as a public.

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