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Hadas Kedar

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**Keeping the Edges Open:  
Towards a Curatorial Horizon  
in the Negev Desert**

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... we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.<sup>1</sup>

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**1** ——— Donna Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene”, *Experimental Futures, Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices*, A series edited by Michael M. J. Fischer and Joseph Dumit, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, p.101

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**Keeping the Edges Open: Towards a Curatorial Horizon in the Negev Desert**

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## Note regarding photographic series that are included in the book

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The book comprises of photographic series created by artists who participated in the international residency program, Arad Art and Architecture, that I founded and curated in the city of Arad, in the Negev desert. Photographs by Bezalel Ben-Chaim, Sasha Flit, Dana Lev Levnat, Noritaka Minami and Sharon Ya'ari, are dispersed within the book and depict Arad's unique and diverse social fabric, from the point of view of those who had artistically studied the city. The photographic series express contemporary artistic perspectives on the 20th century modernist art and architecture of the 'new town' of Arad in the reality of the Negev desert of the 21st century.

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## Acknowledgements

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The work presented in this book is based on interactions and engagements with colleagues, friends, and relatives. It is the culmination of a decade-long retrospective investigation into my curatorial experiences in the Negev desert, specifically in the city of Arad, where I lived in my teenage years. Curating combines imagination, research, theorization, and communication, resulting in stimulating and precarious experiences rooted in creative collaborations. This dissertation and the work it reviews is the result of endless interactions with family members, friends, artists, curators, intellectuals, people of the municipality of Arad, and colleagues at Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev who have encouraged me to continue my curatorial journey in the Negev. I thank them for supporting me and providing me with moments of creativity and excitement. I had the great privilege to collaborate with artists who had participated in the residency program, the exhibitions, and public events I curated in Arad, of which many have contributed their work to this book. You have laid the foundations of unique artistic renditions of the city of Arad which one can sense through your profound and sensitive creations.

I extend special appreciation to my supervisor, Professor Dorothee Richter for your endless patience and support and for seeing me through such a complex, challenging and, at times, excruciating process. The theoretical component of the book is based on your foregoing intellectual work in feminist curating of which I am extremely appreciative. Stimulating my cerebral vigor, you encouraged me to develop a principle of art and curating of which I am very proud, in regions distant from cultural centers, and amongst societies who do not necessarily ascribe to a western definition of art and creativity. Gratefulness to my beautiful sons, Amos and Yoel, for teaching me how to cope with my inhibitions and to practice playful creativity. Your inventiveness and imagination are never-ending sources of inspiration for me that I will always treasure. To Yizhar, who accompanied me on this journey and engaged in my findings, excitement, and fears during the research. Yizhar, you have contributed to this project through your unparalleled insights and your boundless sensitivity.

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## Prologue

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On the morning of October 7, 2023, I was in Hungary for the first time, celebrating my birthday with my sons and friends. We drove from Budapest, my father's birthplace, to Dunaföldvár, the hometown of my grandmother, and soon found ourselves in the cemetery of the small town, searching for traces of my family roots that go back to Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), the Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist, playwright, and father of modern political Zionism. The events that unfolded on that dramatic day became a significant turning point for myself and my curatorial journey. The trip to Hungary was conceived as a conclusion to my research, which had surveyed the Negev desert in Israel through the eyes of the Zionist quest to populate the desert; a quest to which my father contributed with his research on ancient Nabataean culture. It continued with a critical reading of the Zionist mission, which in its rush to populate the land had overlooked unique and valuable forms of art and creativity that are specific to the societies of the land. Finally, the dissertation proposes to re-visit and consider regional creative forms in terms of a curatorial horizon for the Negev. In my proposal to consider regional creations, ideas, and knowledges that arise from the history of a region that has been occupied by colonial forces for centuries, I intend to broaden and diversify the current curatorial field of the Negev. Probing the graveyard in Dunaföldvár for traces of my ancestor's name, Herzl, my sons began receiving images and footage of friends declared missing from the Nova festival that took place in the Negev. In a short time, they came up with documentation of combat between Hamas and the inhabitants of the 'new towns' of the Negev that border with Gaza. One of the 'new towns' that was largely affected by the Hamas attack was Ofaqim, the hometown of my friend from Israel that accompanied me on the journey to my family's roots. Footage of an attack on civilians in his hometown emerged evidenced that the western Negev desert is under attack, but we did not yet realize the magnitude of the events. Like my hometown Arad, a 'new town' established the mid-1960s in the eastern Negev, Ofaqim was established along the Gaza border in 1955. Ofaqim, along with two other 'new towns' in the Negev called Netivot and Sderot, are populated mainly by Jewish immigrants from Arab-speaking, Muslim countries such as Tunis, Morocco, and Algeria.

The recent unrest in the region has brought about a great deal of agony for both Jewish and Arab Bedouin communities of the Negev desert. Particularly the western Negev (previously ‘the Gaza envelope’) in which the calamitous events have embedded a sense of hopelessness and despair. Although written before the disastrous events of October 2023, this book, based on my PhD dissertation, addresses the region’s continuous turbulence in the last decades. The unrest between the western Negev and Gaza has a decades-long history that is evermore so troublesome amongst the Arab Bedouin communities of the Negev, many of whose family members reside in Gaza. Consequently, they have lost family members in both the Hamas and Israeli attacks.

Torn between identification with the Israeli ruling ideology in terms of administration and authority and an affinity with Palestinian society in terms of language, tradition, and creative expressions, as well as between a traditional way of life, cultivating the land and farm animals and assimilating processes of modernization and urbanization, the dissertation urges to consider methods to collect, preserve, and exhibit regional creations and knowledges that are on the verge of disappearance. It is the motivation of working in the Negev and with its valuable knowledges that brought me to the Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev, where I am currently a faculty member. In the capacity of my work, and evermore so since the October 2023 war, I have been involved in a rehabilitative process of communities of the Negev, especially the Arab Bedouin ones, and in pursuing processes of policy making and governing that have been initiated before the war. Although both Jewish and Arab Bedouin communities have mutually experienced death and bereavement, past fruitful interactions between the two communities in the Negev have been largely disrupted, and they have each receded into a form of isolation from one another.

The Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev was established by the Mandel-Israel Foundation with the aim of improving the quality of life of the residents of the Negev through the development of social, educational, and cultural leadership. At the core of the center’s activity is the belief that committed and responsible local leadership is a significant factor in promoting Negev communities and in instigating collaborations between the diverse communities of the Negev.

As a faculty member promoting art and creativity amongst leadership programs, I have based my teaching at the Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev on the intellectual elaborations of this dissertation. This includes raising challenges and dilemmas for the consideration of those, from both the Arab Bedouin and Jewish communities, who are to become powerful agents in the region at a time in which these communities are immersed in hardship and pain.

My work at *Mandel* consists of developing methods based on creativity and artistic forms through which participants open a space for the expression of personal and communal narratives. Facilitating art and creative activities amongst Jewish and Arab Bedouin communities in the Negev gives rise to new formulations that are mostly liberated from the confines of the western perspective on art and creativity.

“Art Space”, a teaching unit at the Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev, is my latest development in the direction of a mutual, shared space of art and creativity. It expands the participants’ conceptual and creative perceptions, assisting future leaders of the Negev in developing innovative and pioneering forms of leadership. The teaching unit is integrated within the main teaching components of the leadership programs, which include sessions on the development of the participants’ individual worldview; matters dealing especially with the space and place of the Negev; lessons that address issues of government administration and local government in the Negev, and more.

Theoretical components of “Art Space” include aesthetics and art history studies. The analysis and discussion of historical and contemporary works of art develops comprehension of non-verbal forms of expression and aesthetic-ethical conceptualizations that help shape the future leaders’ worldview. The practical component of “Art Space” summons participants’ lived experiences and emotional elements through creative experimentation with artistic techniques. This includes creative undertakings in a wide range of techniques (painting, sketching, photography, collage, sculpture) that allow for resourceful personal inquiries in a safe and enabling environment. The unrestricted mindset that accompanies the trial-and-error approach of creative endeavours gradually admits access to emotive substances, both conscious and subconscious. Projection of sensitive constituents onto the artistic substance subsequently facilitates the participants’ ability to manage emotive substances, progressively transforming them into mental objects that are integrated in their leadership course. The notion of “genius loci”, which is based on the portrayal of the unique nature of a geographical region, is one of the central conceptions that exemplify the intertwining of art and leadership. The concept, which originated in ancient Rome, where religious beliefs assumed that there is a spirit that guards a certain area or place, has transformed over the years into a consideration of how a certain region or place has a unique character that is rooted in its artistic expressions and knowledges. One of the main themes of “Art Space” is an attempt to outline the “genius loci” of the Negev. In doing so, the participants from diverse backgrounds learn how to collectively define the context in which they operate. Often the description of the “genius loci” of a

certain region, especially in the periphery, is based on a generalization or a pretentious definition that stems from a stereotypical classification of regions concurring with a western exoticification of the other. To challenge the western definition of minorities living in the margins, I introduced the notion of “situated knowledges” as defined by Donna Haraway, which affords a participatory, subjective, collective identification of a region; I have introduced this notion based on its expansion in this dissertation. “Situated knowledges” offers participants of leadership programs—representatives of the different communities of the Negev—a means to collectively define the character of the geographic area of the Negev. The technique is based on a collective procedure that demonstrates the variety and diversity of creative expressions and knowledges that are rooted in the region from ancient times. The participatory characterization of the “genius loci” of the Negev is developed through participants’ field research that includes observing, listening, smelling, and delegation of ideas rooted in the contemporary existences and traditions of regional communities. The process of defining the “genius loci” of the Negev, is rooted in subjective and partial forms of knowledges that challenge academic, institutional knowledge.

As a research method, “situated knowledges” resists the engulfing forces of globalization and westernization that many times erase differences between communities. The origins of this concept can be found in the teachings of the 20th-century French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, who presented a concept of cultural relativism that challenges the western tendency to smooth out differences between ‘the west and the rest’ in favour of global concepts. According to Strauss, cultural relativism asserts that one culture should not judge for another culture what is considered art and what is not.<sup>2</sup> Basing the definition of the “genius loci” of the Negev on cultural relativism, “Art Space” is responsible for creating the conditions in which participants of leadership programs contrive a diverse, but also many times a conflictual character of the Negev. What “situated knowledges” offers for the characterization of a place is a true-to-life and at times antagonistic understanding of the spirit of a place. This is especially true in face of volatile issues such as land, land use, and land rights. By encouraging field research that directly communicates experiences and currents of different societies of the Negev, participants learn methods that avoid generalizations and instead piece together partial and personal perspectives to arrive at a collective definition of the spirit of the place

<sup>2</sup> ——— Levi-Strauss, Claude, *Race and History*, UNESCO Paris, 1952, p.12

that reflects its diversity. The discussion of the “genius loci” of the Negev raises questions such as how does the spirit of the place speak of the region’s communities? What are the main forces that shape the landscape and societies of the region and how are they delegated by representatives of the different communities? How do observations of local expressions reverberate the histories of the region?

Facing the disastrous results of the Gaza war of 2023, one of the main questions that concerns participants of current leadership programs from both Arab Bedouin and Jewish communities in the Negev is how artistic and creative processes may alleviate the pain of losing loved ones from both the Negev and Gaza. One answer to this question occurred during a drawing session, when a participant felt so emotionally overwhelmed after experiencing a personal disaster on October 7, that they felt they were unable to create. When I suggested that they link a creative expression to their feeling, they drew one single wave that crossed the page from one side to the other. Transforming their overpowering feelings that had led them to experience a creative block into one single wave, they developed an aesthetic reduction of their overpowering feelings. This was the first step in the direction of processing their trauma. When the cohort observed the participant’s creation, they too felt a sense of distinctness and clarity in face of the participant’s ability to create an aesthetic reduction of their overwhelming feelings. The single wave that the participant drew signified the process of sublimation that they were experiencing, a process that transforms unprocessed emotional substances into socially acceptable expressions, and in our case into artistic expressions. The transference of redundant emotional materials into a creative context relieved the participants’ feelings of loneliness and alleviated the burden of carrying untreated traumatic emotional substances. The diversion of redundant emotional materials into the realm of creativity contributes to participants’ personal awareness, furnishing them with a sense of clarification and elucidation that are fundamental for their leadership skills. The ability of leadership program participants to translate powerfumental materials into aesthetic expressions promotes responsive and determined leadership abilities. Processing material that has not yet been handled due to its overwhelming properties fulfils one of the main milestones in the personal identity clarification process of a future leader.<sup>3</sup> Another example of how a partici-

<sup>3</sup> ——— The 20th-century British-Austrian psychoanalyst Melanie Klein claimed that the act of projecting an intolerable mental experience onto the other is a representation of the patient’s inability to be in touch with that experience.

pant in a leadership program used creativity in their personal identity clarification process took place in one of the sculpture workshops. A participant that avoided contact with clay described the material in terms of bodily secretions and expressed feelings of aversion. It took several sessions until they allowed themselves to touch the clay. The notion of abjection<sup>4</sup> came up several times in the context of sculpture workshops. Artistically creating with the use of malleable substances is often accompanied by anxieties due to a sense of blurring of the boundaries concerning what defines oneself as a subject and what exists independently of oneself as the object. Clay and other soft materials give the impression that pieces that were once categorized as a part of oneself or one's identity and have since been rejected, continue to exist within the material. I noticed an interesting aspect: the bumpier the process of getting acquainted with clay, the more the final union with clay ultimately rewards the participants. The familiarization process, which draws one from the sense of abhorrence vis à vis parts of oneself that were rejected and that appear in the material towards a connection with the material is so powerful that the longer the revulsion period extends, the more the participant finally experiences feelings of relief in the creative process with the clay. It seems that conquering feelings of revulsion brings them closer to unwanted emotional materials. This, in turn, awakens the processing of those materials, which subsequently alleviates the participants' emotional burden. In this prologue, written amidst the horrors of the Gaza war and with a pessimistic perspective that peace in the region is not in reach, I have demonstrated how the PhD dissertation has positively impacted my challenges in working within the fractured Jewish and Arab Bedouin communities of the Negev, and that the integration of the field of art and curation into the leadership training curriculum contributes a means of clarifying the connection between the future leader and themselves, between the future leaders and their cohort, and between the participants and the region.

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4 ——— Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives, A Series of the Columbia University Press, New York, 1982

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## 0. Introduction

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Curators working in state institutions hold the power to shape and participate in the construction of the state's narrative. Like schools, religious centres, and government institutions, they can become powerful agents for the reproduction and reinforcement of dominant social and government agendas. The propagation of ideologies of the state in social institutions was articulated by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser in his theory of the ideological state apparatus (ISA)<sup>5</sup>. The theory explains how pedagogical, religious, and also cultural institutions create knowledge constructions that transmit the ruling ideology. Following the theory of ISA, curators working within state institutions are faced with the challenge of reproducing existing ideologies or opening them up to critique. The power of the curator is even greater when art institutions are in areas that are distant from larger cultural centres that have a plurality of art institutions. In places where art institutions are scarce, and thus come to represent a larger and more diverse section of a nation's population, the impact of a particular curatorial agenda becomes amplified. Under these conditions, the responsibility implied in the curatorial process increases significantly.

The question of the social responsibility of state institutions occupied me during the tenure as the curator in the city of Arad, Israel, (2014–2018). My curatorial practice during this period was tied to my directorship of two institutions, which I co-founded, namely the international residency program Arad Art and Architecture (founded 2014) **Figure 1** and the exhibition space Arad Contemporary Art Center (founded 2016). During this timeframe, I curated nine exhibitions and two public events and encountered artistic, political, and ethical challenges. Located in the eastern corner of the triangular-shaped Negev desert, which extends from Gaza on the Mediterranean, bordering with the southern basin of the Dead Sea, Arad is a Jewish new town designed in the late-modernist style. It was founded as part of a Zionist impulse that considered cities in the Israeli periphery as an answer to the Jewish population's quest for survival.<sup>6</sup> Arad was founded in the mid-1960s in a region that was distant from cultural centres.

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<sup>5</sup> ——— Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", Paris: La Pensee, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> ——— Zvi Efrat, "The Politics of New Towns in Israel, The Urburb", Catalogue of the Israeli Pavilion, Venice: 14th International Architecture Exhibition, 2015

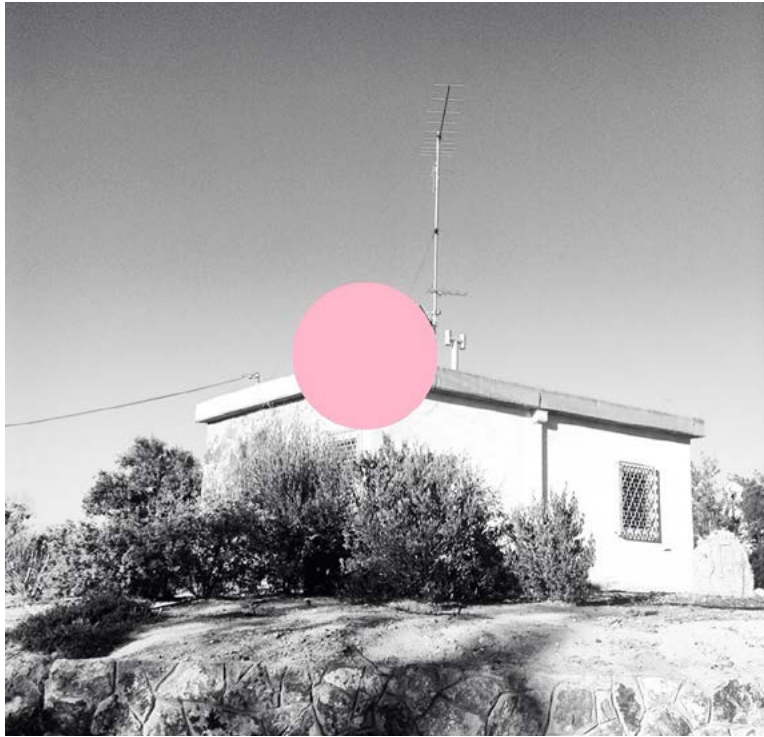


fig.1, Jennifer Abessira. *Arad* (Arad Art and Architecture), 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

After establishing myself as a curator in London, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Berlin etc., my interest in art and curating in regions that are distant from cultural centres brought me to return to the city of Arad in the Negev desert, where I was raised in my teenage years. I was drawn to explore the desert that my father had researched half a century earlier. But from the perspective of the early twenty-first century and with my background as a cultural practitioner, the Zionist impulse to link the region with a Jewish history had become challenging. Zionism, as it was articulated by Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), the Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist, playwright, and father of modern political Zionism of whom I am an ancestor, was envisioned in the face of the rising anti-Semitism in Europe and North Africa during the early twentieth century. Zionism called for mass Jewish immigration to the region. The rushed creation of agricultural settlements and cities encouraged the amalgamation of Jewish traditional artistic sentiment, as it had been practiced by Jews in the diaspora, with the unique modernist sentiment that accompanied the birth of Zionism. Immigrant artists and first-generation Israelis began to articulate the forms of a new Hebrew artistic imagination. In so doing, some of them also tapped into the historical creative expressions of the region to incorporate its valuable knowledges and creative developments in their artistic work. My father's research dealt with the Arabian, Nabataean civilization that inhabited the land along the incense and spice routes (4th century BC to c.106 AD). His research on the Negev was amongst the first Israeli doctorates in geography (1959) **Figure 2** and it reflected the cultural richness of the Negev desert in ancient times; a cultural richness that in the Zionist impulse to settle the region was many times overlooked. The motivation for the dissertation is rooted in my intention to re-articulate the cultural richness of the Negev desert and create links between the ancient civilizations of the desert and contemporary art and creativity of the Negev.

The dissertation considers broadening the scope of the curatorial activities of Negev institutions and including artistic interventions that introduce creative expressions and knowledges from the region. Democratizing the curatorial agendas of Negev art institutions means recognizing the significance of artistic interventions that represent the history of the region. But representing the Negev's contested history means allowing for tensions and hostilities into the art space. The source of these tensions is many times connected to the fact that the Negev desert is a volatile terrain with numerous conflicts between communities mainly due to disputes regarding land rights. The notion of land in the Negev is conflictual not necessarily because it regards

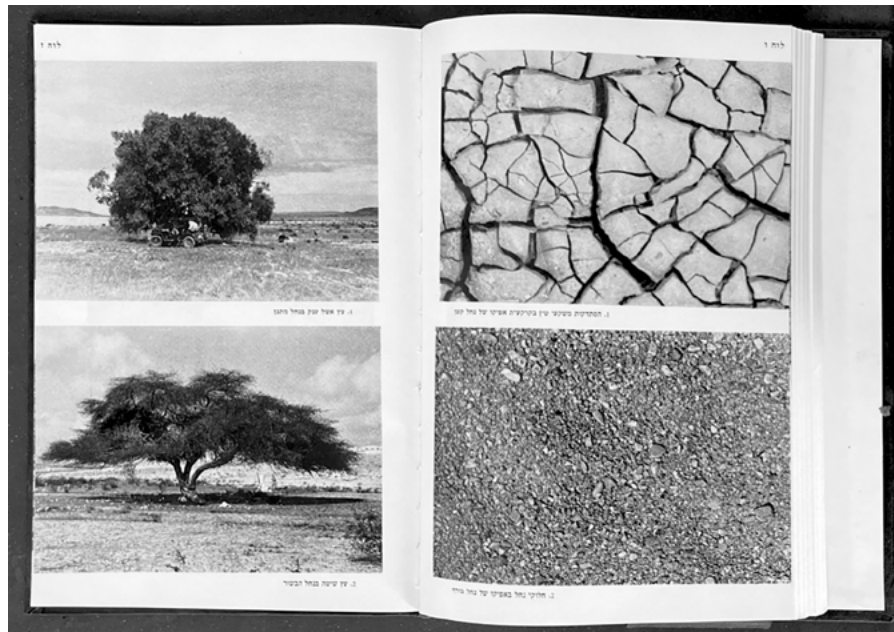


fig. 2, Yehuda Kedar. *The Ancient Agriculture of the Negev Highlands*, 1967. Image courtesy of the author.

the question of ownership of material property. Yes, it includes sand, stones, graves, ancient irrigation systems and farms; however, when one speaks of land, land use, and land rights in the Negev, one is actually speaking of the legal right to keep others off their land. Land is really owned once no one challenges your ownership. In other words, land in the Negev is not actually its material constituents, it is the legal understanding of the owner of the land and the implementation of this ownership by neighbors and by the authorities.

Art institutions in regions that are distant from cultural centres tend to lean on a western and globalist curatorial agenda. This assertion may sound abstract but is a simple description of the style of artistic and curatorial interventions in these regions, including my own. A western perspective is apparent in the sense of their slickness, characterized by the sort of uniform, globalized art that one may find in a wide array of white-cube, art spaces in cultural capitals around the globe. Many times, these forms of artistic interventions raise issues of a political nature, but not specifically regarding the region in which they are exhibited. The genre of a globalized and western politically engaged artistic intervention many times conveys a benevolent political agenda (for example, artistic interventions that address the exploitation of migrant workers or that promote the inclusivity of handicapped artists in cultural institutions). These artistic interventions may be committed to a universal political agenda but do not directly address volatile issues of the region.

Allowing a regionalpolitical struggle to enter the art space may expose curatorial practitioners to condemnation on behalf of audience members, their peers and their superiors in municipal and governmental institutions. Curatorial interventions that deal with issues that are controversial in the regional community necessitate the development of methods that can sustain the tensions and hostilities that may arise in the art space between divergent positionalities. In the case of an outdoor curatorial intervention, the precarious conditions of the public sphere—with its diversity of regional communities, many of them are not necessarily involved in the curatorial programming of institutions—pose an even greater challenge to curation and the sustaining of the tensions and hostilities that may arise from divergent positionalities. One example of an artistic intervention that addressed explosive issues in the public sphere of Arad was showcased in the public event *Salon Beton 2*, which took place in the main city square of Arad. *The Voice of the Next State*, by artists Omer Krieger and Roman Hillel, was in fact an outdoor, live radio program, one out of a series of

iterations of the artistic intervention that took place in city squares around the country and was broadcasted live on the web. The performative, public broadcast event hosted a series of speakers including Khalil Alamour, an Arab Bedouin lawyer who is a member of the local council of his unrecognized village and who created initiatives for the village youths, and Leah Shakdiel, a peace activist and feminist scholar from the Negev 'new town' of Yeruham, who works with Israeli human rights NGOs such as Machsom Watch, Mirkam Azori, Darom4Peace, and Rabbis for Human Rights and brings values of peace, equality, human rights, and social justice to the Negev. The audience consisted of art enthusiasts from central Israel and from Arad, along with passersby who happened to be in the square. The audience was invited to present questions regarding the future of Israel and to debate the issue with the speaker and other audience members. The conflictual perspectives between audience members raised tensions and hostilities between audience members. In one incident, a soldier that just arrived in the city from serving on the border with Gaza was so infuriated by the speakers' vision of the Negev, that he shouted that he could not withstand the pressure that the artistic intervention raised.

Another example of an artistic intervention that addressed issues of the public sphere of Arad was the exhibition *Gym in Arad* (2017) **Figure 3**. The exhibition summed up a residency period of Studio Gym in Arad. They operated as a mobile school researching the public space of the city. The exhibition was based on recreating fragments of the public space in the exhibition space. The exhibition allowed audience members to explore pressing issues in a contained environment. Bringing the logic of the democratic public sphere into the art space allows one to imagine a curatorial horizon of the Negev where people may convey their ideology without causing opponents to become enemies. By allowing tensions and hostilities to present themselves in the art space other histories and forms of knowledges that have not yet been dominated by a western logic may appear.

Correspondences with colleagues, artists, curators, and intellectuals, who operate in regions distant from cultural centres and who contributed to the compendium *Extreme*, the 50th edition of the OnCurating journal (2021)<sup>7</sup>, which I edited accompanied the dissertation. The contributions to *Extreme* articulated a unique impulse of artistic and curatorial methods existing outside dominant art circles. Some contributions addressed the unique expressions of original populations

7 ——— "Extreme", OnCurating no. 50 (2021), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-50.html>, last accessed 04/07/24



fig.3., Ori Carmely, Ruth Leonov, Tal Stadler, Lu Moria and Nir Nave. *Gym in Arad*, 2017. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Photograph by PR.

and indigenous communities that face the hazardous effects of the globalization processes, which obliterates valuable knowledges; others articulated challenges to the art and curatorial fields at the geographical extremes and how they reflect on western conventions of art and curating; while others discussed decolonization processes of colonial collections that exclude minorities. *General Nourishment: The Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Arts in Marawi*, a contribution by curatorial researcher Renan Laru-an, originally from the Philippines and currently artistic director of SAVVY contemporary in Berlin, examined the Philippines first Islamic arts institution. The Aga Khan Museum letters record the methodology of the museum, revealing the museum's institution-building efforts. The letters uncover the museum's survey of human and physical resources, which consolidate ante-normative and curatorial dynamics into sustainable services. Considering the museum, which is located on the shores of an ancient lake, as a tributary stream that flows into a larger river, Laru-an argues that the museum curatorial force, recently instituted, networked, and professionalized, in fact builds, discriminates, and fabricates connections and encounters. Like a tributary stream that is always partial, it is also always a wholeness that continuously flows, periodically emptying itself out to reclaim the rightful amount of freedom.

*Art as Expanded Rationality*, the contribution of Portuguese visual artist João Pedro Amorim and philosophy and aesthetics scholar Nuno Crespo, debated how the colonization of knowledge as a driving force has abandoned experimental and open-ended forms of knowledge. According to Amorim and Crespo, western capitalist logic has forsaken that which is unknown and unresolved for the concrete and rational. This assertion is evidenced in their exploration of the Karrabing Film Collective, an indigenous collective from the Belyuen community of Northern Australia. The collective, comprised of between thirty and seventy people with ages ranging between two and sixty years old, blurs boundaries between art, life, and political action. Based on their unique relationship with anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, who partakes in the group, Amorim and Crespo assert that the Karrabing Film Collective redefines the traditional role of anthropology in the context of western, academic research methodologies. Regarding their films, Amorim and Crespo assert that the collective expands the capitalist logic of rationality that is embedded in western intellectual thought through engagements with unreasonable forces, such as previous lives. The title of curator Johanne Løgstrup's contribution to *Extreme* is based on a chapter in the book *Museums as Contact Zones* (1993) by history of consciousness scholar James Clifford.

Based on her assertion that conflicts are inherent in the very idea of the museum, Løgstrup adds the word “conflict” to Clifford's title. *Museums as Contact or Conflict Zones* raises ethical questions regarding the museum and its curatorial practices, specifically asking who has been excluded from the history that has been told so far and how do we decolonize our museums and radically transform them from within? To address these questions, Løgstrup expands on the temporary opening of the Sámi Dáiddamusea (the Sami Art Museum) that was housed in what was, at the time, the defunct Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø, Norway. Løgstrup cites the museum's press release from the event: “Finally, Sápmi, Norway and the world has a museum dedicated to Sami art! After almost 40 years of activism, acquisition, negotiation, lobbyism, and stubbornness, the world of art enters a new era. A big day for Sápmi. A big day for Norway. A big day for the world.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Errant Curating*, Nadim Samman, the art historian and curator of the digital sphere at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, asks how is it that the site of the exhibition wandered so far from its historical locus—the home of the muses? Samman considers wandering as a curatorial method—exhibition-making in an errant mode, beyond galleries, beyond cities that traverse the globe, from domestic settings to geographical extremes. Samman speaks to errant curators that leave centres for geographical extremes, not to escape but to make the home more visible. The notion of errant curating is demonstrated by Samman through a series of exhibitions including *Treasure of Lima: A Buried Exhibition* (2014), which is an ensemble of commissioned works buried at a secret location on Isla del Coco and the *1st Antarctic Biennale* (2017) that took place on the Antarctic continent and was based on the consideration that the on-site audience included only biennale participants and the regions' wildlife. Departing from standard models of perennial exhibition-making, it included a landscape photography exhibition for penguins and an underwater installation for whales. Instead of the frontal mode of art exhibitions that arranges objects on the walls of a gallery or museum, errant curating questions the conventions of curating by considering the geographical extremes and how we may develop in the margins new modes of curating. From Sabreen in Jerusalem, the Holon Digital Art Center (DAL), and the Palestinian Association of Contemporary Art (PACA) in Ramallah to the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven and the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP) in Al-Bireh, curator Galit Eilat discusses her curatorial experiences in terms of soft power. In face of

8 ——— The temporary website for the Sami art museum: <https://www.sdmx.no/en/news/sami-art-museum-open>. Last accessed 27/05/24

the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict, Eilat considers soft power as an effective and sustainable method for developing negotiating methodologies. In contrast to hard power's attempt to change people's behaviour through schism, intimidation, and coercion, Eilat presents an example of soft power and how it was implemented in the art scene in the occupied territories of Palestine and in Israel. Specifically, she analyses the chain of events that eventually led the Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani to conceive the *Picasso in Palestine* project. *Picasso in Palestine* has been regarded as a triumph over the Israeli limitations on cultural activities in the occupied territories of Palestine. Eilat questions the possibility that Hourani's project, along with other soft-power art initiatives, can eventually lead artists and curators to lean towards a broader social imagination that dissolves the code of conduct enforced by Western perspectives on art and creativity, namely the glorification of the unique art object and the genius creator.

*The Penumbra Age* was the title given by the chief curator of the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Sebastian Cichoki, to an exhibition he curated. The exhibition is based on a book that tells of protagonists from the future that see in our era a spectre of anti-intellectualism that overshadowed the techno-scientific nations of the western world, preventing them from acting on the scientific knowledge that was available at the time. One of the key historical references in the exhibition *The Penumbra Age* is the Slovenian OHO group, which began operating in the mid-1960s. With a philosophical and artistic non-anthropocentric outlook, the group created interventions in nature using readily available materials. After a few decades of activities, members of the group collectively left the art world and began to operate through a marginal and esoteric approach. Revisiting OHO group's ecological activities in the 21st century and in the face of climate change, Cichoki demonstrates the significance of the group's subject matter in the current environmental crisis.

The artistic practice of the Rotterdam-based Spanish artist Lara Almarcegui is the focus point of *Lara Almarcegui and Extreme Unagitation* by cultural scientist and curator Helene Romakin. Romakin follows Almarcegui's art practice of working with natural materials such as gravel or volcanic lava sediment. Almarcegui introduces massive amounts of raw materials from pits or nearby quarries into museum spaces. Challenging the engineering aspects of the exhibiting institution, Almarcegui bases her art works on materials that in total add up to the maximum weight that the building's structure can carry. According to Romakin, Almarcegui's thought-provoking artistic interventions, which challenge the institution's infrastructure, reflect on

concepts of land reclamation and exploitation and the role of geological space and time in the context of climate change.

The contributions to *Extreme*, which discussed artistic and curatorial interventions in rural or peripheral regions that impact a wider section of society, provided evidence of the responsibility of the curatorial process in areas that are remote and distant from larger cultural centres. The compendium raised issues concerning the conditions that have cultivated unique modes of production and creation on the world's margins. *Extreme* envisioned possibilities to overcome the limitations of the western logic of art. It created, momentarily, a public or a community conjoined through questions of representation and democratization of art and curation. Democratization of representation is based on developing a curatorial agenda that, at times, addresses issues that are controversial in the regional community. These necessitate the development of curatorial methods that can sustain the tensions and hostilities between divergent positionalities.

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## 0.1 Problematics and Questions at Stake

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The main questions that arose during my curatorship in Arad were (1) how artistic and curatorial interventions can facilitate the broadening of the scope of regional artistic representation and (2) how to incorporate expressions that challenge the western artistic and creative perspective that has dominated the Israeli art scene. This, in order to develop curatorial approaches and theoretical positions that would enable a more diverse representation of the artistic and creative richness of the eastern Negev region. When I first started curating in Arad, I became aware of the fact that many art institutions in the Negev propagate a curatorial agenda that excludes, for the most part, the Arab-speaking communities, whether the Arab Bedouin communities that, due to contested historical circumstances, are many times forced to live in non-recognized villages, **Figures 4 and 5** or Jewish Israelis from North African (Sephardic) origin, many of them that populate the margins of Israel including the Negev. One may argue that it is precisely the Arab-speaking communities who have far deeper roots with the region and its history. Therefore, it seemed crucial to me to develop a curatorial method that considers non-western artistic expressions



fig. 4-5., Uriel Gur David, *Untitled*, 2018-2020. Images courtesy of the artist.

and their unique curatorial aspects. Encountering the exclusion of Arab-speaking communities from the collections and exhibitions of art institutions, the thesis asserts that a broader artistic representation is paramount for relaying the creative richness of the Negev. Only when subjugated communities are brought into an intercultural relation with the dominant, more privileged communities, can art institutions reflect the true heterogeneity of the region.

Whilst my curatorial practice focused on Arad and the Negev desert, my research uses the findings gained from my curatorial experience as a case in point to arrive at a broader understanding of the problematics and potentials of curatorial practice in areas that are distant from cultural centres and represent a large and diverse population.

The insurmountable boundary of my social status as a white, gendered, and classed subject, educated within the context of institutions steeped in western traditions of modernist art, awakened an awareness that the social norms and ethical values I thereby gained during my cultivation as a curator inadvertently influence my curatorial ethos. These included assumptions that art is created by (mainly male) geniuses and exhibited on the walls in a white-cube gallery space. The western values that I had acquired during my artistic upbringing resonated strongly with the environment I encountered in Arad. Arad's urban planning has been a topic for discussion throughout the history of Israeli architecture. The city has been considered by architects and urban designers an unprecedented project that attracted creative minds to create urban forms able to adapt to urban life in the desert.<sup>9</sup> Initiated in 1960 by the Israeli government, the city's overall urban planning approach was modelled on the approach used to build the new British towns in the aftermath of WWII.

The planning team of Arad designed the city on-site and created what may be considered an interpretation of British post-war, welfare-state architecture. Considering how open spaces surrounding social housing projects allowed for leisure time for the British working class, Arad is famous for its translation of European Brutalist Playgrounds. The high-modernist backdrop of this "new town" provided the conditions to question the fundamentals of modernism and how they are intertwined with Zionism. The initial 20th-century architectural ethos that sought to cultivate intercultural relations between immigrants from a wide range of backgrounds in the public sphere has been met with the pre-

<sup>9</sup> ——— Shadar, Hadas, *Arad: Experimental City*, Israel: Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2020, [my translation]

cariousness and messiness of Arad in the 21st century, which is faced with existential dilemmas regarding its future in terms of polluting, extractive industries and the decline of the neighbouring Dead Sea.

As my tenure in Arad progressed, I was motivated to create curatorial methods that challenge the modernist tradition of the white cube and to convey the diversity of the art and creativity of the Negev. The dissertation is neither the culmination of these curatorial developments nor its starting point; rather, it reflects the circular, wayward motion of treading the desert sand in search of bearings for artistic expressions that amount to the spirit of the Negev. The dissertation is an inquiry into an inter-generational chain of events that led to a series of creations: my great-great uncle, the father of Zionism, constructed the circumstances that let my father to immigrate to Palestine to struggle for the right of the Jewish people for a nation-state. With the founding of the first academic institution in Israel, my father researched the Negev desert which, in turn, created a unique, Hebrew form of imagination, leading to my interest in art and creativity, eventually motivating me to return to the desert my father explored in order to establish two regional art institutions.

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## 0.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

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In the following paragraphs, I will lay out the main theoretical underpinnings that define my research, which seeks to open and challenge existing power relations within curatorial practices in the Negev. Unfolding over six years (2017–2023), the research is situated in the geographical and anthropological theories of the last half of the 20th century and early 21st century, which have led to a critical reconsideration of peripheral and marginal regions in post-colonial and subaltern studies.

Areas that are considered “other worlds” by specialists of African studies Jean and John Comaroff, who describe the Global South through a wide set of variables, such as the ancient world, the Orient, the primitive world, the third world, the underdeveloped, developing world, and the undersides.<sup>10</sup> The Portuguese economist Boaventura de Sousa Santos considers these areas as a “...large set of creations and creatures that has been sacrificed to the infinite voracity of capitalism,

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<sup>10</sup> ——— Jean Comaroff and John L., *Theory From the South or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*, London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012

colonialism, patriarchy, and all their satellite-oppressions.”<sup>11</sup> Such analysis is also taken up in the arts, as notably portrayed in the extensive survey of centre-periphery relations in *Art in the Periphery of the Center* (2014), which asserts that: “The large number of countries that have virtually no infrastructure for the production, distribution, mediation, and reception of art make the notion of the global art world in the stricter sense, which spans not only all four corners of the world but also their sub-regions, appear utopian at present. The notion that the centre-periphery structure in the field of art is a thing of the past is true neither regarding the national art fields nor the global field.”

How certain areas have developed into “other worlds” or “undersides” that are exposed to the depredations of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, may be explained by the widely accepted world-system theory developed by the postcolonial sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein in the late 1970s. Wallerstein’s theory stemmed from the post-colonial tradition initiated by the work of the post-colonialist Edward Said, who researched the roots of the cultural domination of western urban capital over its colonies and linked economic power and centralization of knowledge. This theory led me to better understand the under-representation of communities in Negev regional art institutions as the result of ongoing colonialism, leading less powerful communities to face poor socio-economic conditions. Globalization is considered by many post-colonial and post-imperialist academics as an oppressive, occupying force that erases cultural distinctions between populations. For example, the contemporary Taiwanese theorist Chen Kuan-Hsing describes globalization as an economic force that has tormented uncultivated zones along its conquering route. According to Kuan-Hsing, globalization is a capital-driven force that penetrates and colonizes all spaces on the earth with unchecked freedom, creating unequal power relations<sup>12</sup>. Kuan-Hsing belongs to the tradition of subaltern studies developed in South Asia, as well as in francophone Africa in the mid-20th century, that includes theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Eduard Glissant, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Aime Cesaire. In the early 21st century, postcolonial theorists proposed other systems of understanding of the development of the global world model that were not based on simply inverting the globe to place the south on the top and the north below, while leaving intact the dualism that fixated the Euro-centric global model, but rather to

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<sup>11</sup> ——— Boaventura De Sousa Santos, “Manifesto for Good Living” in *Epistemologies of the South*, London: Routledge, 2014

<sup>12</sup> ——— Chen, Kuan Hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 4

construct multi-scalar cartographies. In this context, I note the historians Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra, who propose to look sideways at global networks in order to transcend the unified binary world-system model. Bose's and Manjapra's notion of lateral forms of distribution of knowledge links to the concept of queer cartography as introduced by Gyatri Gopinath, who specializes in gender and sexuality studies. Gopinath suggests a mode of queer cartography to consider global connectivities that critique the binary world system model. By looking sideways at global networks and considering queer cartography, one apprehends the micro-cultural knowledges that are based on an interconnectedness and cross-fertilization of micro-histories that have not been articulated by the overarching world system model. It is crucial to emphasize that whilst post-colonial theories provide analytical tools to deconstruct and redistribute western forces, they also have their limits in face of the dominance of western perspective on art and its privileges. Due to the perspective that I embody, as a white, gendered, and classed subject, the main theoretical aspect of the research is rooted in the intellectual work of post-Marxist, post-structuralist, and feminist researchers from the early and mid-20th century. I was especially drawn to this intellectual perspective due to the question of privilege in the context of subjugated artistic expressions, namely how the privileged dealt with their position and how social advantages were applied in the research of artistic and creative expressions of underdeveloped communities, while refraining from appropriating the vantage point of the subjugated.

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## 0.3 Methodological Lenses

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The first methodological lens that shaped my research concerns the concept of social space as articulated by Henri Lefebvre, the French philosopher, sociologist and humanist Marxist. Lefebvre asks how the social character of space dominates the space and how the visibility of the social character of a space, including a museum space, does not imply the decipherability of the inherent social relations that are at the basis of its social character. Following Lefebvre, the exploration of the social character of Negev art institutions reveals how they align with the dominant western agenda and how they create social distinctions that inadvertently exclude certain populations from their space.<sup>13</sup>

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13 ——— Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1974

The dissertation considers art and creativity in the broadest sense, including forms of regional expressions and knowledges such as folk tales, legends, oral history, traditional cultural rites, rituals, and knowledges of the land. The practice-based research is rooted in the notion that the western perspective on art and culture is redundant in the exploration of artistic expression in regions with indigenous and native populations and where diverse communities base their art on inter-generational traditions. The second theoretical pillar of the first methodological lens deployed in my research considers non-western forms of culture in regards to the potential of the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” as expounded by Michel Foucault.<sup>14</sup> Foucault noted that the prospect of regional knowledges is their autonomous, non-centralised nature, that they are not dependent on the approval of established regimes of thought.<sup>15</sup> Applying Foucault's proposition to the context of the Negev reveals how a western perspective on knowledge is not necessarily suitable for dealing with non-centralised forms of expression. The second methodological lens leads us to consider a feminist approach towards curating in the Negev. American philosopher of science and cultural theorist Donna Haraway introduced the notion of “situated knowledges” as a mode of feminist objectivity based on currents of feminism that build on vantage points of subjugated and embodied knowledges. Challenging the politics of closure and finality derived from a male-dominated perspective that many times dominates western science, Haraway proposed a feminist mode of objectivity rooted in partial perspectives and creating narratives that keep their edges open for surprising connections.<sup>16</sup>

In 2018, after having hosted 150 artists in the international residency program Art and Architecture and after curating nine exhibitions in the Arad Contemporary Art Center, I was motivated to deepen my exploration of how contemporary artistic and curatorial interventions may re-introduce artistic and creative forms and knowledges of the region, especially those that represent the Arab-speaking communities. Moreover, I was keen on developing curatorial methods that deal with forms of creativity that were not determined as such in western contexts. Specifically, I sought curatorial methods to collect, preserve,

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14 ——— Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1977. p.81

15 ——— Ibid.

16 ——— Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): pp.575-597

and exhibit forms of knowledges and non-object-based artifacts in cultural institutions of the Negev and in wider contexts around the globe. I single out The Museum of Bedouin Culture **Figures 6 and 7**, located in Kibbutz Lahav in the Negev to demonstrate the first methodological pillar of this dissertation. The largest museum in the world dedicated to Bedouin art and creativity is a strong case that demonstrates Lefebvre's notion of the social character of space. Untangling the social relations at the basis of the museum's social character raises questions regarding its curatorial programming and its missed opportunity to engage with the regional Arab Bedouin community. Like a multitude of western collections that exhibit artifacts gathered by Europeans as part of colonial expeditions, The Museum of Bedouin Culture exhibits collections amassed from the Sinai Peninsula in the framework of Israel's occupation of this piece of land. Nevertheless, in contrast to 18th- and 19th-century European museums that contain collections that were acquired under colonial conditions, The Museum of Bedouin Culture was established in the late 20th century (1980) at a time when the perils of the dominance of colonial forces over past colonies was widely discussed in the global curatorial discourse and at a time when repatriation procedures of artifacts from European institutions to the former colonies had already been initiated.

To understand the challenges of The Museum of Bedouin Culture let us take a look at the circumstance in which the museum's collection came to exist. Comprising around 500 objects, including traditional attire, Bedouin tents, tea sets, housing utensils, jewellery, furniture, foods, and medicinal herbs, the main collection of The Museum of Bedouin Culture is on permanent loan from archaeologist Orna Goren, who had amassed the collection while she and her husband, a governmental official and Israeli archaeologist, lived in the Sinai Peninsula after it was occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War. The collection of the museum mainly represents traditions of Sinai Arab Bedouin and not necessarily of the Negev Arab Bedouin. Another incongruity of the display is that the latest date of an artifact in the collection is 1978, the same year that Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty in the Camp David Accords. The peace treaty, which led to the subsequent withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai Peninsula and concluded the amassing of artifacts from Sinai by Israeli collectors. Following Lefebvre, one asks how the social character of The Museum of Bedouin Culture is present in the space and how the museum may create awareness amongst the audience regarding the museum's conditions and operations. The case of The Museum of Bedouin Culture reveals how the curatorial programming of the museum aligns with a western per-



fig. 6-7, Liat Yehuda, *Museum of Bedouin Culture*, Joe Allon Center, 2023.

Images courtesy of Liat Yehuda, Museum Curator.

spective that is at the root of colonial collections, and how its collections exclude the Arab Bedouin communities of the Negev, firstly due to the origins of the collection in Sinai and secondly due to the main collection's ossification in the late 1970s, missing an opportunity to collect and exhibit Arab Bedouin contemporary art.<sup>17</sup>

## 0.4 Breakdown of Chapters

The dissertation considers questions raised by the analysis of the curatorial agenda of such regional art institutions as The Museum of Bedouin Culture. Responding to their agendas and their problems, Chapter One introduces the concept of social space as articulated by Lefebvre and applies it to the exploration of the social character of The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Culture, which is housed in a former mosque, and how the museum's declared intention to create intercultural relations conceals the actual social character of its museal space. Chapter Two considers what happens when curatorial interventions address pertinent issues such as land use and land rights in the Negev and how the disparities between audience members creates the necessary conditions for a debate. This idea is demonstrated through artistic interventions from Arad that flesh out the notion of "critique as engagement with" as articulated by Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe, as a form of radical politics that disarticulated existing discourses and practices with the aim of constructing a different discourse. "Critique as engagement with" is discussed through a artistic interventions by contemporary Arab Bedouin artists living within and over the Green Line (the line of demarcation that served as the de facto borders of the State of Israel from 1949 until the Six Day War in 1967) that reveal a perspective on land use and land rights from each side of the border. It is also discussed in regards to *Under the Sea there is a Hole* an artistic intervention by UK artist/architect duo, Cooking Sections. These artistic intervention raised the question of the future of extractive industries in the region, which are a crucial source of income to residents of the region, thus putting on the table the conflicting values of audience members. Mouffe's concept of "critique as engagement with" theorises discursive situations within the art space and how they create a setting that allows for diverging audience members' perspectives to be articulated. Taking artistic interventions that discuss the social realities of Arad's residents in the art space as its starting point, Chapter Three explores what happens when artis-

17 ——— The museum runs a small space for contemporary art.

tic and curatorial interventions that raise differential opinions and positionalities exit the controlled conditions of the exhibition space and land in the public sphere of the Negev where the 'messiness' of different opinions is accelerated. The outdoor event I curated, *Salon Beton 1* in Arad, focused on a series of regional Brutalist Playgrounds designed as a social space for play and leisure of the diverse communities that were planned to inhabit the city by the first landscape architect of Arad, Zvi Dekel. The event dealt with the initial design of the playgrounds in the late 1960s and how they meet the reality of the 21st century and asked how the politics of play, leisure, and recreation are influenced by municipal and governmental policies, which shy away from tension and hostilities between opposing opinions, and how institutional policies aspire to reach consensus regarding the meaning and use of public spaces. Focusing on the extreme environment of the Dead Sea located in the eastern edge of the Negev, Chapter Four demonstrates how the microenvironment of the lake, its communities and individuals, have created unique cultural iterations that divert from the widespread world system model that regards knowledge through binary divisions such as east/west, orient/occult and north/south. Considering the concept of taking sideways glances at binary constructions and the notion of queer cartography, the chapter focuses on artistic interventions such as Sigalit Landau's *Salt Bridge Summit*, which creates knowledge distribution through arrangements that are relational and contingent, bypassing such binaries as the Israeli/Jordan border. Aware of the dangers of romanticizing and appropriating the vantage point of the less powerful, as articulated by Haraway<sup>18</sup>, Chapter Four explores forms of artistic interventions that subvert curating in regard to the dominant western perspective, towards the development of a curatorial ethos that is rooted in micro-histories and queer cartographies that, following Haraway, keeps its edges open for surprising new and old connections.<sup>19</sup> Chapter Five and the dissertation's conclusion, proposes to consider a 'new' historical trade route that explains how civilizations that have survived the extreme environment of the region cultivated new ways of existence and have impacted societies of the region and of the western world.

18 ——— Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): p.583

19 ——— Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin", *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 6, Issue. 1, (1 May 2015): pp.159-165

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## Chapter 1

### Art and Curating in the Negev: The Case of a Museum in a Mosque

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The first chapter sketches out an outline of art and curating in the Negev, focusing on the case of a museum housed in a former mosque, as a case in point that demonstrates the conditions that predispose the curatorial context of the Negev and the two institutions that I co-founded and curated there, in Arad (2014-2018). The analysis of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures' formation and operations is established with Lefebvre's social character of space and the reverberation of the historical conditions of the Negev that dictate the regional curatorial field in mind. By regarding the museum as a model or a case study for revitalizing and critiquing the curatorial field in the Negev, the chapter refers to the historical circumstances that had brought to the founding of the museum and how they are present amongst regional curatorial interventions.

The urgency and importance of this analysis proliferates an understanding of the dimensions that continue to dictate curatorial interventions in the Negev. And in theorizing the case in point of the museum, one creates encounters to listen to and learn from the people and things that underlie this desert's past and present. Following Lefebvre's shift from philosophy to the science of space - from the abstractness of ideas to the analysis of precise and concrete issues of the space,<sup>20</sup> the chapter regards current distinctions that inadvertently exclude certain populations from the museum's curatorial programming in terms of specific and actual matters of the mosque-turned-into-museum. It is important to stress that my positionality brings with it inherited assumptions that need to be acknowledged and challenged. Studying Fine Art in Jerusalem (Bezalel), New York (Cooper Union) and London (Middlesex University), I am the inheritor of a western academic vantage point – replete with its own traditions and orthodoxies for the making and curating of contemporary art. When in 2014 I was awarded the post of Artist of the Community of Arad (where I spent my teenage years), my positionality was dictated by an inherited western academic position on art and curating. The chapter maps out the coordinates that encompass the artistic and creative panorama of the Negev. Assisting my reader in becoming familiar with the challenges that art professionals encounter in remote regions such as the Negev desert, the main argument is rooted in the significance of the analysis of regional art institutions and their curatorial ethos and programming – it is the first step in the development of curatorial methods that address the unique social fabric and environmental conditions of the Negev.

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**20** ——— Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1974, p.2

## 1.1 Environmental and Social Landscape of the Negev Desert

Covering approximately 13,000 square kilometers, the Negev desert extends east from Gaza on the Mediterranean coast to the southern basin of the Dead Sea. The key environmental factor that determines the Negev land as a desert is the lack of precipitation in the region. The annual precipitation in the Negev is 100-300 mm, and the mean annual evapotranspiration<sup>21</sup> may range between 1700 to 1800 mm.<sup>22</sup> Human occupation in this region can be traced back to the Pleistocene and the first wave of migrations out of Africa. Due to the region's rich history and its location at a strategic point between Europe, Asia, and Africa, it was frequently an area of vast disputes and colonial occupations. During the second century BCE (Late Bronze Age) the area was named Canaan and was under the rule of the Egyptians. With the fall of the Kingdom of Yehuda (ca. 600 BCE), the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and the Jewish people in turn abandoned Jerusalem, leaving it deserted and destroyed. After the decline of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, exiled Judeans were permitted to return to Judah. According to the biblical Book of Ezra, construction of the second temple in Jerusalem began around this period. The Nabataeans (4th century BCE to c.106 CE), who were active in the Negev area, were present in a wide zone including what's presently defined as southern Syria, Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and North Africa. Nabataean roots are uncertain: The term "Nabatu",- an ethnic denomination rather than a geographical one - refers to a people who were active in a wide zone including the south and the east of Palestine, southern Syria, Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and North Africa.<sup>23</sup> Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, linked the Nabataeans to Ishmael's eldest son (Genesis 25:13) sketching out a territory, which he refers to as "Nabatene", stretching from the Euphrates to the Red Sea.<sup>24</sup> Historians assert they had their roots in pastoral

21 ——— Sinan Sahin, "An aridity index defined by precipitation and specific humidity", *Journal of Hydrology V. 8, no. 5* (11 June 2012): pp.199-208

22 ——— Blaustein Institute for Desert Research, "First National Report on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification", Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2022

23 ——— Francisco Del Rio Sanchez, *Nabatu: The Nabataeans Through Their Inscriptions*, Barcelona: Magoproductio, 2015. p.20

24 ——— Dan Gibson, *The Nabataeans: Builders of Petra*, Canada: CanBooks, 2000. p.18

desert communities that have left meager traces.<sup>25</sup> Historians agree that the Nabataean civilization's emergence in the region was exceptionally rapid and their decline even more swift. The Nabataeans were annexed into the Roman Empire in 106 CE. By the 3rd century CE, the Nabataeans integrated Greek culture, and by the 5th century CE they converted to Christianity. The Byzantine Empire's occupation of the region was followed by the Arabic Empire, which was then followed by the Crusaders and the Mamluks. The Ottoman Empire conquered the region in the 13th and was in power until the early 20th century. During the early centuries of Turkish rule (what is coined by some historians as the 'golden age' of the Ottoman Empire), the Jewish people had equal rights and were significant in maintaining the power of the Ottoman Empire.

The question of a historical tie between Nabatean civilization and the Arab Bedouin population of the Negev (the regional indigenous population) raises much tension amongst the population of the region until this very day. The fluctuations in Arab Bedouin presence in the Negev over centuries has been discussed extensively in historical literature. Historians and politicians mostly were in relative agreement on the statistics of Arab Bedouin presence in the Negev since the rule of the Negev by the Ottoman Empire through the present day. It is generally agreed that during the last years of Ottoman rule (until 1914), the Arab Bedouin tribes in the Negev included around 55,000 people; in 1922, during the British Mandate in Palestine the Arab Bedouin population was estimated at around 71,115 individuals; and by 1946 there were between 65,000 and 90,000. During the 1948 War only 13,000 Arab Bedouin remained in the Negev. Those tribes who were able to cling onto their territories set by the Ottomans did so.<sup>26</sup> The minority of Arab Bedouin that stayed in the Negev became refugees; a military government was imposed on the Arab Bedouin tribes of the Negev, covering hundreds of square kilometers.<sup>27</sup>

25 ——— David Mattingly, Paul Newson, John Tomber Grattan, Barker Roberta, Gilbertson Graeme, Chris Hunt, "The making of early states: the Iron Age and Nabataean periods" in *Archaeology and Desertification: The Wadi Faynan Landscape Survey*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008

26 ——— The two largest tribal confederations, Tarabīn and the Tiāha, acquired the most fertile territory in the northern regions of the Negev, while the Azāzmah were located in the arid mountains of the central area, and the tribes of the Gubarāt and Hanāgrah confederations were pushed to the coast.

27 ——— Local Bedouin leadership is based on tribal chiefs. Each tribe selected its own sheikh and during the first decades of the establishment of the State of Israel, if a trial was needed, they conducted tribal courts. The

Since the establishment of the Israeli state, the Arab Bedouin community has undergone a complex process of urbanization and centralization in designated cities in the Negev.<sup>28</sup> Linking the Arab Bedouin population to the history of the region has a pronounced political and economic impact on Israel's policies. To that extent, one may recognize that historical accounts written by scholars from a Jewish nationalist viewpoint will most likely confirm continuous Jewish presence in the region while scholars that challenge the nationalist perspective will most likely confirm the constant presence of the Arab Bedouin population in the Negev. The current social landscape of the Negev is comprised of a mixture of Israeli born (Sabras) from European (Ashkenazi) and North African (Sephardic) origins (75% of the Negev population); Bedouin Arab population<sup>29</sup> (25%); and African Israelites from the United States.; immigrants from the former Soviet Union and personnel and families of workers extractive industries of the Dead Sea region and minority members of the IDF.

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establishment of tribal courts reveals the power structure and the policies implemented towards Bedouin citizens by the newly established State of Israel. Bedouin leaders have held official positions and, occasionally, political positions within general Israeli politics. Examples are Talab al-Sana from Lakiya, an Israeli Bedouin politician and lawyer and the longest serving Arab member of the Knesset; and Dr. Muhammad Al-Nabari, a Bedouin who served as the mayor of Hura, a Bedouin village in the south of Israel, when he was only 34 years old. This leadership has tried to promote the Bedouins' interests but has also led the population into some dramatic compromises with the government in certain cases.

28 ——— The question of identity of Arab Bedouins in terms of recruitment to the military is discussed extensively in Chapter Two of this research.

29 ——— The Negev Arab Bedouin living in the state of Israel are a population differentiated from Arab Bedouins and Palestinians living in the North of Israel and from Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

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## 1.2 Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva: The Result of a Court Ruling

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Be'er Sheva was the only city in the region that was constructed by the Ottoman Empire and lies at the meeting point of three main Arab Bedouin tribes' locations. Ottoman efforts at town planning and development began around 1900. In 1917, during WWI, the city of Be'er Sheva was captured by the British-led Australian forces. At the time, the city was a small trade center mainly used by the Arab Bedouin tribes of the Negev. In contrast to other regions in Ottoman Palestine, Be'er Sheva was mainly populated by Arabs with only a small Jewish minority. According to the 1931 census the population of 2,959 residents comprised of 2,751 Muslims, 152 Christians, 11 Jews and 5 Baha'is. As the mayor of the municipality, the British appointed Sheikh Farih Abu Medin of the Hanjara tribe, one of the most influential people in the area's population, who served as a guide to the British forces during the First World War. In the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine (1947) that fell through, the city was planned to be part of the Arab state. Following the declaration of Israel's independence in May 1948, the Egyptian army occupied Be'er Sheva and used it as its logistical center. In October 1948, Be'er Sheva was captured by the newly established Israel Defense Forces. Since 1948, Be'er Sheva has been mainly populated by Jewish communities. Most of the population has descended from North Africa and are Sephardic Jews, as well as a minority of Cochin Jews from India. The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures is housed in what is known as the Great Mosque of the Negev region **Figures 8 and 9**.<sup>30</sup> The mosque was built in 1906 at a time when Be'er Sheva was considered the capital of southern Palestine, in the middle of the road between Gaza and Hebron – cities of Arab majorities.<sup>31</sup> During the British Mandate in Palestine, the mosque was partially converted to a prison and later to the High Court of Justice. In 1952, two years after the city of Be'er Sheva was founded, the municipality temporarily opened an exhibition in the mosque that

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30 ——— The Great Mosque of Be'er Sheva was built with donations collected from the Bedouin residents in the Negev.

31 ——— In 1906, during the Ottoman era, Be'er Sheva was the only planned and established city and served as an administrative center by the Ottoman administration for the benefit of the Arab Bedouin community.

was dedicated to documentation of Jewish settlements in the Negev. Visitors to the building were allowed to climb up the minaret of the mosque and to survey the area. That was the last time the minaret was open to the public. In 1992 the mosque closed its doors due to the building's dangerous condition. In 2002, when the building had stood empty for a decade, several NGO's dealing with promoting the rights of the Muslim population in Israel<sup>32</sup> filed a petition to the High Court requesting that the Muslim population be allowed to pray in the mosque. In 2009, the Supreme High Court rejected the petition of the Muslim population. Instead, it accepted the compromise proposal of the Be'er Sheva municipality, to expand the nearby Negev Museum of Art and to open an additional museum within the mosque. The Supreme High Court ruled for the municipality's transformation of the former mosque into a museum on the grounds that the museum will be committed uniquely "to the culture of Islam and the peoples of the Near East."<sup>33</sup> These were the legal conditions of the origin of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures. One might assume that in the eyes of the government and municipal authorities, the transformation of the mosque into a museum is considered an act of liberation of the space from its conflicted past. But with the transformation of the building into a museum, antagonistic aspects of the building's history seem to appear in its curatorial programming, at times presenting itself inadvertently.

32 ——— The Association for Assistance and Protection of Bedouin Rights and the Muslim committee of the Negev.

33 ——— Prior to the High Court's ruling an exhibition dealing with the history of Be'er Sheva was mounted and ran for two years until the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures opened its doors.



fig. 8-9., *Be'er Sheva mosque*, 1948.  
Images courtesy of Palmach Archive.

## 1.3 Irreducible to Form: Social Character of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva

The Supreme Court ruling of the conversion of the Be'er Sheva mosque into the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures is considered an expression of the widely accepted notion that museums are essentially open to all members of the public, accessible and inclusive to all communities, including minorities and accessibility-challenged communities.<sup>34</sup> The title of the museum - Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures - hints to the fact that its curatorial programming is orientated towards the region<sup>35</sup>. The reference to Islamic culture seems natural in the Negev desert where 300,000 out of 1.4 million residents are of Arab Muslim origins. It also seems natural that the regional museum is orientated toward Islam cultures considering that the region is populated by mostly Jewish residents with Arab roots. The following analysis of the museum's curatorial programming and infrastructure is undertaken through one of the two main methodological lenses that are the theoretical pillars of the thesis. The concept of 'social character of space', as articulated by French philosopher, sociologist and Marxist humanist, Henri Lefebvre, distinguished social character of space from the physical space. Lefebvre asserted that the social character of space is not constituted "neither by a collection of things or an aggregate of (sensory) data, nor by a void packed like a parcel with various contents, [...] it is irreducible to a 'form' imposed upon phenomena, upon things, upon physical materiality."<sup>36</sup> Lefebvre develops the idea of social character of space as a method to conceptualize how a physical space is c with a representational layer that:

34 ——— The notion that museums are open to all members of the public, accessible and inclusive has recently been articulated by ICOM in its amended definition of a museum (August 2022): <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> last accessed 25/09/22

35 ——— One may wonder how the geographical term 'near east' which is mainly a historical term referencing the historical Ottoman Empire – sometimes also comprising Egypt – found its place in the museum's title.

36 ——— Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1974. p.27

"overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects".<sup>37</sup> The social character that is overlaid on the physical entity of the space holds interpretations of objects and lived experiences of those who have inhabited the space. The museum's website's About Us section asserts that its main focal point is: "...the Ottoman mosque itself is the primary and most important exhibit of the whole museum."<sup>38</sup> One may discern in this sweeping curatorial statement that situates the building as the museum's main showpiece a concretization of the social character of the museum referring to its history and past lived experiences. The curatorial statement that the building is the museum's focus led me to explore how it is integrated into its curatorial agenda. In 2014, when the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures opened its doors, it published a statement describing its curatorial ethos: "The main hall accommodates temporary exhibitions where the emphasis is on inter-cultural encounters between traditional Islamic culture, external traditions, and contemporary arts – encounters that can generate reciprocal dialogue."<sup>39</sup> The ethos of reciprocal dialogue between Islamic culture and contemporary arts as a principal premise is the main thread in the following analysis of the museum's curatorial programming between the years 2014-2022. The exhibitions are analyzed via the concept of social space and how the representational and the symbolic layers appear in the physical space of the museum.

The first exhibition held in the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures was *Knots*<sup>40</sup> (2014–2015). It focused on Muslim rugs and mats originating from the 18th–20th centuries. Rugs from Iran, Turkey, and the Caucasus - a region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea mainly comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and parts of Southern Russia - were divided into three groups: prayer rugs, garden carpets and medallion carpets. Although the curatorial text asserts that the exhibition's focus on prayer rugs was intended to "[...]tie together East and West, as well as past and present[...]"<sup>41</sup>, most of the historical artifacts originated from far and near Eastern regions. Pointing out

37 ——— Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1974., p.39

38 ——— Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, December 31, 2023, see: <http://ine-museum.org.il/en/about-us/the-museum>

39 ——— "About the Museum", the website of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, November 25, 2022, see: <http://ine-museum.org.il/en/about-us/the-museum/>

40 ——— The museum's website does not mention the names of participants of the exhibition.

41 ——— "Knots", Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, November 25, 2022, see: <http://ine-museum.org.il/en/exhibition/knots/>

the regional cultural tradition of weaving and embroidery, although the text referenced the nomadic tradition of carpeting tents with rugs, it did not have a counterpart in the exhibition display. By mentioning “nomadic culture” without directly referencing Arab Bedouin traditions, head curator of the museum and curator of the exhibition, Sharon Laor-Sirak, created a crack in which the social character of the ex-mosque seeped into the exhibition. While refraining from explicitly mentioning the Arab Bedouin tradition and displaying carpets from the region, she allowed the traditional Arab Bedouin tent and the carpets that inhabit them enter the exhibition. The second exhibition held in the museum was titled *From Iznik to Jerusalem* (2015–2016) dealt with a period in which two distinct ceramic traditions (Turkish and Armenian) had been profoundly influenced by Chinese ceramic styles of the 15th and 16th centuries. Curator Laor-Sirak explains in the curatorial text that the exhibition focuses on a new tradition that combined Turkish Muslim art with the style of Chinese ceramic art of the late 15th century. Artistic contributions were from artists from Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and China. The third exhibition *Maktub: Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy between East and West* (2016–2017) dealt with the origins of paper and pulp and focused on how they provide a substance for calligraphy in Islamic tradition. The curatorial text explains that although paper was invented in China, it was introduced throughout the Islamic world.<sup>42</sup> The curatorial statement that the contemporary artworks on display “[...]offer new interpretations of traditional and stylized writing[...]<sup>43</sup>” is raised in the photograph *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, (1994) by Iranian artist Shirin Neshat.<sup>44</sup> Neshat’s photograph comes to terms with the tradition of calligraphy in terms of the female’s role in a traditional Muslim society. Positioned at the height a pair of a pair of female barefoot feet, the artist’s camera captures the feet inscribed with a contemporary poem in Farsi, with a gun set between them. By exposing the camera to a body part of a female that is not publicly visible, Neshat touches on the Muslim tradition of covering female parts in public and how it provides evidence of oppression of the female subject in Muslim societies. By positioning the camera close to the feet, with the barrel of the gun pointing to the camera, *Allegiance with Wakefulness* links the remem-

42 ——— *Maktub: Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy between East and West*, Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, November 25, 2022, see: <http://ine-museum.org.il/en/exhibition/knots/>

43 ——— Ibid

44 ——— Shirin Neshat left Iran to study in the United States in the early 1970s and did not return until 1990, 11 years after the Islamic Revolution.

brance of martyrs of revolutionary struggles to the social character of the museum. The gendered presence of the bare of feet, ornamented with calligraphy introduces its past as a former mosque, reacting to the tradition of aniconism that prohibits the presence of images of sentient beings in Islamic religious sites.<sup>45</sup> Much more than offering new interpretations of traditional and stylized writing, *Allegiance with Wakefulness* raises pertinent questions regarding the social character of the exhibition space: How is the transformation of the mosque into a museum reflected in the photograph? How is the representation of the revolutionary impulse that many times uses force to reach its political horizon embedded in the lived experiences of those who have used the mosque? The fifth exhibition held at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures was *The Utmost West: Arts and Crafts of the Maghreb: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia* (2018-2019), displayed arts and crafts from North Africa. The exhibition focused on the ties of North African nations with Europe. The curatorial text explains that the translation of the phrase: “The Utmost West” is Al Maghreb al-Aqsa. The Arabic word Maghreb means “place where the sun sets”, i.e. the west. The exhibition, mainly based on the Dr. David Rouach family collection (Rouach was of a Jewish Moroccan-Tunisian family that immigrated to France), included jewelry, amulets, weapons, ceramics and crafts from North African nations (from 19th and 20th centuries).<sup>46</sup> In addition to the Rouach family collection, the exhibition included paintings and photographs by 19th century European artists and photographers that had documented the life in the ex-colonies, alongside artistic interventions by contemporary Jewish Arab or Sephardic Jewish artists whose families immigrated to Israel from North Africa. Displaying artifacts whose origins are from North African cultures alongside works created by 19th century European artists that centered on life in lands that were conquered by imperial forces - the exhibition sketched out a set of coordinates through which one may contemplate how artistic expressions of artists from western backgrounds and those from the ex-colonies are influenced by their backgrounds. Spanning over a wide time frame and geographical region, the exhibi-

45 ——— Islamic aniconism stems in part from the prohibition of idolatry and in part from the belief that the creation of living forms is God’s privilege. Although the Quran does not explicitly prohibit visual representation of any living being, it uses the word *musawwir* (maker of forms, artist) as a nickname of God therefore human beings are prohibited to make living forms as that is the role of God.

46 ——— The exhibition consisted of artifacts that Dr. Rouach’s grandfather, a jewelry maker, created while he served at the end of the 1970s as an army doctor in Essaouira, Morocco.

tion linked the western colonial effort of expanding cultural traditions within the ex-colonies, with the quest to preserve traditional artistic expressions of regional communities that are gradually disappearing. The sixth exhibition held at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures was *Roots and Growth: Traditional and Contemporary Art from Turkey* (2019–2020). The exhibition was curated by the Museum's Laor-Sirak together with Turkish curator, Tuçe Erel, and focused on the intersection of Muslim and Greco-Christian culture in the junction between Europe and Asia. The curatorial text linked Turkish art with the overall curatorial focus of the museum by arguing that: “*The exhibition is on display in 'The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures,' housed in an Ottoman Mosque that exemplifies Turkish architecture*”. As such, it links the museum to its historic roots.” As explicitly stated in the curatorial text, *Roots and Growth* was the only exhibition in the museum's curatorial programming explored (2014–2022) where the historical roots of the museum were prominent in the curatorial text. Interesting to note is the timing of *Roots and Growth*. The exhibition in Be'er Sheva coincided with the Turkish juridical decision to convert the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul into a mosque.<sup>47</sup> The correlation between the decision to exhibit Turkish contemporary art in the former Ottoman mosque, and the transformation of Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque, ignited a crucial discussion on how conservative trends in traditional societies such as Turkey and Israel affect the curatorial ethos of institutions such as the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures. The seventh exhibition, *East: Local Design in a Global Context* (2020–2021) traveled from Design Week in Jerusalem (2021) to the Be'er Sheva museum displaying collaborative work between Israeli and Palestinian designers. The project *Matchmaker*, co-curated by Israeli Daniel Nahmias and Palestinian Tariq Nassar, linked the older generation of artisans with young contemporary designers through issues of cultural heritage. The display of work of eight Arab Palestinian designers and artisans was the only instance in the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures's curatorial programming that involved artists and artisans from Arab Palestinian backgrounds. One of the projects on display, *Satin Sheen*, involved an Arab Palestinian glass and embroidery artists creating chandeliers out of stiffened Arab embroidered fabrics.<sup>48</sup> One may consider how *East:*

47 ——— In the summer of 2020, after operating as a museum since 1935, the 1,500-year-old UNESCO World Heritage site of Hagia Sophia was transformed into a mosque.

48 ——— From the perspective of a few years after *East: Local Design in a Global Context* was held in the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures,

*Local Design in a Global Context* broadens the curatorial scope of the museum including Palestinian artists and artisans in its programming. Nevertheless, by holding the exhibition *East: Local Design in a Global Context* in a region with a large Arab Bedouin community and in an ex-mosque, the exhibition raises the schism between the regional Arab Bedouin community and the Palestinian communities of northern Israel with which they share religious and ethnic affinities but may be divided on concerning political and social issues.

Based on the above brief survey of the seven exhibitions (the fourth and eighth exhibitions will be discussed shortly) held at The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures one begins to distinguish the physical space of the museum from its social character. Considering Lefebvre's statement that the social character of a space is a representational layer that covers the physical space, the above examination demonstrated how the social character of The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures manifested itself, sometimes inadvertently. For example: by mentioning in a curatorial text the use of prayer rugs in nomadic tribes' tents; or by including artistic interventions by Palestinian artists and artisans with which the Arab Bedouin community of the region may or may not identify or by explicitly discussing in the curatorial text the building's past as a prayer site.

it seems difficult to fathom Palestinian - Jewish collaborations such as those initiated by Jerusalem Design Week that was exhibited in the exhibition. The political environment since the 7 October 2024 attacks on Israel and the Gaza war, has eradicated Jewish-Arab collaborations. Arab Palestinian artists regard participation in activities held in Jewish Israeli institutions as acts of normalization of Jewish Arab relations.

## 1.4 From Foucault to Haraway: Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledges to Situated Knowledges

The second methodological lens of the thesis focuses on curatorial methods that deal with artistic expressions that are not necessarily objects or tangible artifacts and include folk tales, legends, oral histories, cultural rites, and knowledges of the land. Artistic expressions that many times derive from limited locations and from cultures that do not necessarily identify with western artistic mediums and methods.

Exploring artistic expressions and forms of knowledge that stem from cultures that do not necessarily abide to the dominant western understanding of art and creativity, French philosopher Michel Foucault creatively crafted a linguistic play between two sets of binaries: global/local and power/knowledge - to address the need to groom cultural forms and artistic expressions that have been overpowered by western structures and intellectual and academic institutions. Foucault explored the notion of “local/knowledge” as “[...] an autonomous, non-centralised kind of theoretical production[...].”<sup>49</sup> He argued that the re-contextualization of local knowledge, or what he refers to as the act of “...insurrection of subjugated knowledges”<sup>50</sup> is not dependent on approval by the established regimes of thought, although he is aware that in the eyes of a western discourse, local knowledge is considered “[...] naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”<sup>51</sup> The problem that Foucault addresses regarding the validity of local knowledge in the eyes of the dominant culture was later contemplated by American professor of history of consciousness and feminist studies, Donna Haraway.

Haraway proposed to consider a form of feminist objectivity that shifts from the male, western scientific objectivity towards knowledges that are rooted in partial perspectives from limited locations. By considering a feminist objectivity, Haraway deems a shift from the masculine perception of science to allow other perceptions to take place, those that create “[...] a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in

<sup>49</sup> ——— Foucault, Michel, “Two Lectures” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1977. p.81

<sup>50</sup> ——— Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> ——— Ibid., p.82

order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions.”<sup>52</sup> The form of feminist objectivity considered by Haraway allows one to deconstruct truth claims of scientific objectivity and to create an earth wide network based on contingent relations of embodied knowledges or “situated knowledges”. Applying the concept of “situated knowledges” in the context of the curatorial realm of the Negev, one may begin to consider a more adequate and richer account of its regional communities’ artistic expressions. As the root of a curatorial ethos of the Negev, one may regard the curatorial in terms of a web of relations between embodied perspectives of those who inhabit the land and objects.

The problematics and complexities that are involved in considering “situated knowledges” in curatorial terms are well evidenced in the eighth exhibition held at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, *Gold Road Encounters* (2021–2022). The exhibition narrated the story of the gold trade route throughout West Africa and was based on a selection of artifacts from the Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art. The Weiss collection focuses on artifacts from the historical Ghana Empire and present-day Guinea. Architect and art collector Michael Weiss, co-director of the Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art, was the designer of the exhibition *Gold Road Encounters*.<sup>53</sup> The exhibition included a display of artifacts that are rooted in animist cultures that base their belief systems on the notion that humans, non-human beings, objects, places, and creatures possess spiritual essences. Displayed in vitrines, on pedestals and shelf systems, were a series of historical artifacts from the Ghana Empire along with contemporary artifacts from Guinea. Exhibiting animist artifacts poses a challenge to curatorial practitioners. Professor of contemporary continental philosophy and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti draws attention to the ongoing discourse in western intellectual theory surrounding the question of agency of non-living objects:

[...] the treatment of objects as self-organizing entities is not in itself new [...]. Similarly, the emphasis on matter, and the conti-

<sup>52</sup> ——— Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): p.579

<sup>53</sup> ——— The Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art is a collection owned by the Israeli architect couple that began with Dina’s grandfather, the Russian born architect Benjamin Idelson. who planned and built together with architect Arye Sharon in Ghana during the early sixties.

nunity between matter and mind, and between human bodies and the world in which they live, is not new either.<sup>54</sup>

Curating and designing an exhibition with artifacts from animist origins requires a critical, reflexive inquiry addressing potential entanglements between living and non-living entities. The reflection on various entanglements of living and non-living entities is ever more so volatile in terms of collections that have been amassed as the result of processes of colonization of the African continent. The political entanglement of West African cultures with dominant forces was the main topic of the exhibition's accompanying lecture series *Intercultural Encounters on the Golden Road*. The lecture series focused on Islamic influences on West African cultures, and included the lecture, *The World of the Baga Baga from Guinea*<sup>55</sup> presented by Weiss. The lecture focused on what Weiss asserted was the Jihadist campaign that took place during the 1950s against the Baga people. According to Weiss, Islam was forced on the Western African ethnic group that also looted them of original artifacts.<sup>56</sup> Like other indigenous groups, the Baga people are many times portrayed as communities which believe that non-human entities including animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and weather systems possess spiritual meanings. The exhibition and the lecture series raise pertinent question pertaining curatorial methods for the collection, preservation and exhibition of animist artifacts. These questions are met by curators working within African historical collections around the world. One such example is the Tishman Collection<sup>57</sup>, one of the biggest and most important private collections of African art. In the exhibition catalogue of the exhibition *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Tishman Collection* (1981) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, based on the Tishman Collection, museum's curator of African art, Susan Vogel argues that: "In societies without writing, art objects can acquire extraordinary importance as

54 ——— Timotheus Vermeulen, Rosi Braidotti, "Borrowed Energy: Timotheus Vermeulen talks to philosopher Rosi Braidotti about the pitfalls of speculative realism", November 25, 2022, see: <https://www.frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy>

55 ——— "The World of the Baga Baga from Guinea", The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, November 25, 2022: [http://ine-museum.org.il/event/\(Hebrew\)](http://ine-museum.org.il/event/(Hebrew))

56 ——— According to Weiss, fearing the Muslim rioters, a collection of Baga statues were hidden by the elders of the community for over 60 years.

57 ——— The collection was sold to the Walt Disney Company in 1984. In 2005, the Walt Disney Company gave all 525 objects in the Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection to the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

visual records."<sup>58</sup> Vogel stresses the point that the curatorial cannot simply avoid the exhibition of animist artifacts due to the fact that they carry spiritual meanings. But, at the same time Vogel also reminds us that African art is not only the art of the past: "A modern art has sprung up in the cities, schools, and universities, but it exists alongside the traditional art."<sup>59</sup> Vogel points to the complexity of curatorial methods concerning communities that are in transition. Some community member practice traditional artistic methods while others develop contemporary artistic expressions.

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## 1.5 Fleeting Art: Female Artist Exhibits in a Former Mosque

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The curatorial issues raised by the exhibition *Gold Road* and the lecture series *Intercultural Encounters on the Golden Road* are perplexing since the museum itself was once a sacred space -- its social character carries the lived experiences and the symbolic meaning of the architectural attributes of the space itself. *Black Gold* (2017), the fourth exhibition held at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, was a solo exhibition by artist Anisa Ashkar, a Palestinian from the north of Israel. The exhibition subtly raised questions regarding how art exhibited in the mosque-turned-into-museum continued to resonate with the social character of the space and to give presence to the lived experiences of those who used the building as a sacred site.

Curated by Dr Dalia Manor and Dr Laor-Sirak, *Black Gold* was titled after one of the most significant regional resources of the region: oil (petroleum products). The title of the exhibition touches on the centrality that natural resources of the region play and how they are tied to its geo-political shifts. Natural resources of the region such as oil and salt were the motives of a succession of regional occupations including: the Arab occupation of 600 BCE, the Roman of 600 CE, the Ottoman of the 16th century CE, The British Mandate in Palestine<sup>60</sup> of

58 ——— Susan Vogel, *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collections*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. p.6

59 ——— Ibid., p.10

60 ——— The British army ruled Palestine until a civil administration was established on 1 July 1920. Britain was granted a Mandate for Palestine on 25 April 1920 at the San Remo Conference, and, on 24 July 1922, this mandate was approved by the League of Nations.

the early 20th century and up until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The centerpiece of the exhibition echoed oil lamps typically found in Ottoman mosques. The round hanging sculpture that dangled from the ex-mosque's domed roof was coated with gold and dates - one of the significant natural products of the region. By substituting the oil of the lamp with dates, Ashkar echoes the endless occupations of the region that were aimed at attaining access to its rich resources. On the wall in the front area of the ex-mosque and at the height of a kneeling person hung two self-portrait photographs of the artist mounted on aluminum. The portraits depict the artist with her face decorated with calligraphic writing: For about twenty years, Ashkar has inscribed a phrase in Arabic on her face daily. The self-portraits raise issues that are related to those discussed earlier in regard to "Allegiance with Wakefulness" by Shirin Neshat that was exhibited in *Maktub: Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy between East and West*. First and foremost, Ashkar's self-portraits raise the issue of aniconism or the prohibition of the presence of images of sentient beings in Islamic religious sites.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, they speak to the gendered presence of the artist in the space that raises to the surface the lived experiences of the space that was populated mainly by men. By linking the issue of the prohibition of human portraits and the prevention of females to enter prayer sites (together with men) in traditional societies, the self-portraits challenged the repression of self-expression that females experience in traditional societies. In a series of paintings titled *Heaven*, ceramic plates with traditional European scenes from the beginning of the twentieth century (for example, a male courting a female) were juxtaposed upon non-figurative, color field paintings by the artist. Two of the paintings from this series hung on both sides of the Mihrab that points to the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca and indicates the direction which Muslims should face when praying. By linking the architectural feature of the Mihrab, believed by Muslim devotees as the door or the passageway to the next world with the painting series *Heaven*, Ashkar, draws into the exhibition the symbolic layer of the space of the mosque and links it with the revered virtue that signifies modernist abstraction. In an additional series of works Ashkar directly refers to the title of the exhibition. A series of paper works based on family portraits of Ashkar were mounted by the artist on gold

<sup>61</sup> Islamic aniconism stems in part from the prohibition of idolatry and in part from the belief that the creation of living forms is God's privilege. Although the Quran does not explicitly prohibit visual representation of any living being, it uses the word *musawwir* (maker of forms, artist) as a nickname of God, and therefore human beings are prohibited to make living forms as that is the role of God.

and black painted paper. Consigning family photographs black with gold backgrounds, Ashkar entwined her own personal biography with the driving forces of colonial occupations of the region in terms of attaining natural resources. Juxtaposing her family photos on the background of black and gold, Ashkar created the conditions in which one may contemplate how colonial occupations based on richness of natural resources of the region had influenced her own biography. Ashkar's *Black Gold* was the only exhibition out of the period of the curatorial programming explored above (2014-2022), that clearly dealt with the fact that the museum was once a sacred Muslim prayer site. Linking the religious past of the building with the broader history of the region, Ashkar's solo exhibition demonstrated the notion that the personal *is* the political<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> Apropos the link between the personal and the political in Ashkar's exhibiton: although the origin of the phrase "the personal is political" is uncertain, it became popular following the publication in 1970 of an essay of the same name by American feminist Carol Hanisch, who argued that many personal experiences (particularly those of women) can be traced to one's location within a system of power relationships.

## 1.6 Museum Courtyard: Dormant Sculptures Come to Life

The curatorial statement that appears on the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures’s website substantiates that the building of the ex-mosque is the museum’s main artifact. This curatorial statement is interesting in terms of the location of its permanent collection of the museum in the open-air courtyard.<sup>63</sup> While the indoors of the mosque, has been renovated in such a manner that it accommodates temporary exhibitions, the outdoor courtyard carries the gravity of its historical context. According to the museum’s website: “In the museum courtyard archaeological findings from the Muslim periods in the Holy Land are displayed. Among them are typical examples of architectural ornamentation in Islamic art: vegetal motifs, geometric motifs, and calligraphy.”<sup>64</sup> The museum’s decision to house its permanent collection raises to mind the protocol of exhibition conditions in outdoor archeological museums articulated in 2008 by the international cultural heritage network EXAR:

An archaeological open-air museum is a non-profit permanent institution with outdoor true to scale architectural reconstructions primarily based on archaeological sources. It holds collections of intangible heritage resources and provides an interpretation of how people lived and acted in the past; this is accomplished according to sound scientific methods for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of its visitors.<sup>65</sup>

The permanent collection of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures is situated outdoors, amidst a water fountain and fruit trees—**Figures 10, 11 and 12**. The outdoor exhibition space is the perfect setting to curatorially address the complexity of displaying “situated knowledges” of those who populate the Negev. It is the only space of

<sup>63</sup> ——— In 2011, Bedouin and Muslim leaders from the Negev joined forces to protest the Salut Wine and Beer Festival’s use of courtyard of the city’s great mosque. the controversy erupted after Arab Bedouin residents of the Negev complained that festival would be held on the grounds of a mosque-turned-museum. The public outcry regarded the prohibition of alcohol in Islam.

<sup>64</sup> ——— “The Museum,” Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, see: <http://ine-museum.org.il/en/about-us/the-museum/>

<sup>65</sup> ——— “Museum Practice in Archeological Open-Air Museums”, EXARC.NET, July 2008, see: <https://exarc.net/archaeological-open-air-museum>



fig. 10-12, *Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures*, 2013-2014. Photographs courtesy of Amit Giron.

the museum that combines living and non-living artifacts and allows lived experiences of communities of the region to resonate. Curatorial issues regarding outdoor displays are raised in a report issued by the Risk and Disaster Management at the Ministry of Antiquities in Egypt. The report discusses the effects of climate change on archeological artifacts in the region, arguing that an increase in temperature may cause damage to inorganic antiquities such as temples and stone monuments. However, the report focuses on yet another danger towards outdoor archeological collections that necessitates an urgent response. In the report, Egyptologist Monica Hanna argues:

Our antiquities — most of which are made of stone — have been bearing high temperatures over thousands of years. Yes, the temperature is increasing, but the state can take measures such as restoration from time to time. But the pollution's effect on antiquities is more dangerous as it has effects on the chemicals of the stone of these antiquities. So there should be an environmental policy to resolve this issue...The state should take measures to eliminate the pollution rates around archaeological sites — whether it is in water, air or the soil itself.<sup>66</sup>

Since the permanent collection in the courtyard of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures cannot be fully considered a 'true to scale architectural reconstruction' and thus does not fully comply with the EXARC protocol of archeological open-air museums, the environmental conditions of the artifacts in the courtyard are not officially reviewed by a institutional entity. On the one hand, the open-air installation of artifacts from the Islamic periods of the region (from the Muslim conquest of the Levant in the 6th century up until the Ottoman period) in an open space amongst the fruit trees and running water, sketches out a curatorial horizon in which living and non-living entities may reside together in a museum display. On the other hand, the dangers of climate change due to global warming and pollution raise concerns regarding the collection's sustainability.<sup>67</sup> The curatorial setting of the permanent collection of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures may be considered as a laboratory for curatorial investigations dealing with the development of methods to broaden the scope of the curatorial agenda of the museum so that it reflects the

66 ——— Samir, Salwa, "Extreme heat takes toll on Egypt's archaeological heritage", *Al-Monitor*, September 2021, see: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/extreme-heat-takes-toll-egypts-archaeological-heritage>

67 ——— The Negev's climate is characterized by hot and dry desert weather and large temperature differences between day and night as well as between summer and winter.

diversity of the communities of the region. One difference between indoor and the outdoor curatorial conditions is the question of audience engagement with the artifacts. The 'no touch' policy that disciplines audience member's engagement with the displayed artifacts that is practiced in the traditional curatorial setting of the indoor section of the Museum doesn't necessarily abide outdoors. One may sit on and next to the historical artifacts, drink the water from the fountain and even pick a lemon from the fruit tree. Haptic engagements with the outdoor exhibition are quite different from the silence and restraint practiced by audience members and controlled by the Museum staff in its indoor section. The artistic intervention of Palestinian artist Jumana Emil Abboud deals with embodied engagements with a museum display. In *I Feel Nothing* (2012)<sup>68</sup> Emil Abboud engages her years-long interrogation of the Palestinian oral tradition of anecdotes and legends.<sup>69</sup> One of these legends, *The Handless Maiden*, a grim tale of a girl whose hands are forcefully cut off, initiated a creative process in which hands – and the lack of them – became central in Emil Abboud's work in terms of keeping in touch with her homeland.

A significant scene in the video poem takes place in the indoor display of archeological artifacts from Greece and Rome exhibited at the Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology. In this momentous scene the artists hands appear stroking the collection of antique marbles. They emerge from behind the sculpture of a man, fondling and caressing the marble body's soft surface. Emil Abboud's erotic performance reverberates her desire, as a female, Palestinian artist, to penetrate the restrictions of a western display with her female, embodied presence. As Abboud's hands appear upon the sculptures, echoing the legend of the Palestinian folk tale, she also enacts a type of presence that is not customary in western historical museums. Abboud's hands break the silence of the dormant collection of marbles and provoke its customary "do not touch" policy, which leaves the spectator's body outside the museum. By introducing a female embodied presence amidst the lifeless collection of naked male marbles, Abboud acts upon what Haraway asserts as "[...]the view from a body[...] a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body[...]".<sup>70</sup> The haptic engagement with

68 ——— Hadas Kedar, "South as a State of Mind: Curatorial and Artistic Acts in the Face of Cultural Colonialism" [my translation], *Theory & Criticism No. 54* (Van Leer Institute, 2021).

69 ——— Palestinians comprise approximately 18 percent of Israeli citizens. Palestinian identity is divided into Christian, Muslim, Druze and Bedouin.

70 ——— Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): p.589

the collection in Cambridge and the bodily presence of the artist present a mode of the view from a body that is structured by curatorial codes. By creating a haptic engagement with museum artifacts, Abboud demonstrates how a structured body, disciplined to obey a certain code of conduct, disobeys its configuring and breaks its tactual regulations. *I Feel Nothing* presents the curatorial prospect of creating curatorial settings that invite the human body to engage with artifacts in a museum collection. While climate change and pollution may hasten the museum's outdoor collections' deterioration that include archeological artifacts from the Islamic colonial rulings of the region, audience engagement may be one method to keep its permanent collection alive.

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## 1.7 Conclusion of Chapter One

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The analysis of the curatorial programming of The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva unpacks to what extent the court ruling that led to the transformation of the Be'er Sheva mosque into a museum has impacted the physical space and its social character. Although its declared focus is Islamic and Near Eastern art, the backgrounds of artists who have participated in the curatorial program are quite widespread and include Chinese, Turkish, Japanese, Iranian and Jewish-German. Not one artistic contribution came from the regional Arab Bedouin community. The exclusion of the regional Arab Bedouin communities from the curatorial programming, impacts their absence from its audience and outreach programs. In contrast to the museum's indoor exhibition space, the outdoor courtyard that contains the museum's permanent collection poses an opportunity to consider the development of curatorial methods that consider lived experiences of regional communities and how forms of knowledge that are gradually disappearing due to processes of modernization and urbanization are to be dealt with in curatorial terms.

In Chapter One I analyzed the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva as one of the most complex regional cultural institutions in the Negev. I explored how its social character and curatorial programming had, at times, inadvertently reproduced the power structures that had created the institutional conditions that transformed the mosque into a museum. I contemplated how, based on Haraway, we might develop curatorial methods based on a feminist form of objectivity wherein embodied experiences draw into the space

what Lefebvre considered as the social character of the space. Curatorial methods that consider artistic expressions that do not necessarily ascribe to western curatorial methods are fundamentally different from the western globalized conception of art.

## Sharon Ya'ari

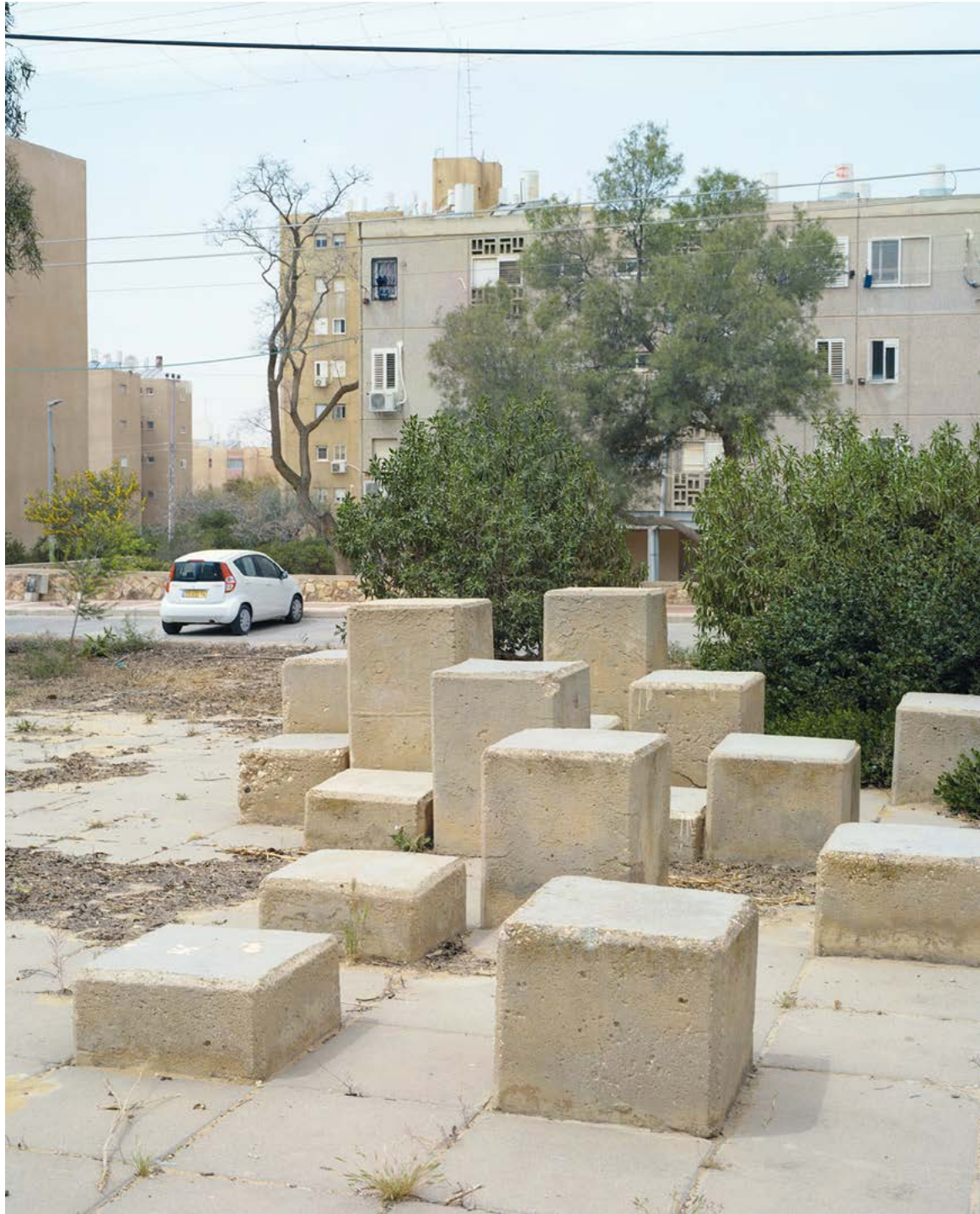
The photographs attest to the possibility of another fate for the modernist experiment, in another place and under different circumstances. Their focus is on “small” histories, almost marginal: they seek the intersections between the traces of the modernist idea and the everyday in Israel. An appreciative but questioning gaze searches for the DNA of Western modernism, which has molded the spaces created in Palestine/Israel since the 1930s. Within the photographs’ frame accumulate the by-products of the impossible effort of Israel to root itself in the environment, but also to fulfill the illusory utopia of a western region in the Middle East.



Sharon Ya'ari. *Color Index*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Sharon Ya'ari. (Work in progress. Photographing private homes from the 1960's and 1970's in Arad) 2024. Courtesy of the artist.



Sharon Ya'ari. *Avishur Neighborhood*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Sharon Ya'ari. (Work in progress. Photographing private homes from the 1960's and 1970's in Arad) 2024. Courtesy of the artist.



Sharon Ya'ari. (Work in progress. Photographing private homes from the 1960's and 1970's in Arad) 2024. Courtesy of the artist.



Sharon Ya'ari. *Arad, Avishur Neighborhood*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Sharon Ya'ari. *Arad*, 2005. (for the sake of the photograph a red carpet has been placed between a pot for plants made of concrete, in a spot near a concrete building). Courtesy of the artist.

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## Chapter 2

### Land, Land-Use and Land Rights in the Negev: Sustaining Contra- dictory Positions in the Art Space

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## 2.1 Muddled Desert: Negev Land Related Issues in Art

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During the period of 2014–2018 I curated and commissioned exhibitions and public interventions in the city of Arad in the Negev desert. For this section, I will focus on curatorial interventions that raise issues regarding land, land use and land rights in the Negev. Discussing artistic interventions that center on the pertinent issue of land in the context of the Negev, raises questions regarding curatorial interventions that sustain the differences on these issues amongst audience members - without aspiring to reach a consensus between differential positions. The significance of land in the Negev (comprising 66% of the area of Israel; 8% of its population) is rooted in a century-long struggle about the original owners of the land in the Negev. Due to a succession of occupations of the land, especially the Ottoman and the British, the question of land ownership continues to occupy Negev residents and the authorities. According to the Israeli geographer Amiram Oren, with the establishment of Israel, a large amount of land was expropriated by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). A specialist in a discipline termed in Israel ‘knowledge of the land,’ Oren states that in present day Israel, the security sector holds or influences more than half of the sovereign territory of Israel (not including the West Bank). Oren’s claim on the military expropriation of land by the IDF is based on a survey of statistics of the Planning and Deployment Branch of the IDF (2005). The survey displays that closed-off military areas in the Negev span 6,650 square kilometers and include about a thousand camps and facilities including IDF headquarters, training bases, logistics array facilities, airbases, communication, and intelligence facilities and more. They also include border substructures, system fences, border roads, checkpoints, lookouts, and outposts.<sup>71</sup> 30% of the Negev’s area is used as training areas; 4% are occupied by IDF camps and installations; 1% Ministry of Defense installations, and 11% comprise of off-limit areas, including areas where low-flying air force planes and helicopters are permitted.<sup>72</sup> Unlike other parts of the country, military structures of the IDF in the sparsely populated Negev desert have not

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71 ——— IEEES, “The infrastructure and deployment of the IDF in the Negev - environmental effects,” ISEES Magazine, November 2012, see: <https://magazine.isees.org.il/?p=15562>

72 ——— Amiram Oren, “Shadow Lands: The Use of Land Resources for Security Needs in Israel”, Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak (eds), *Militarism and Israeli Society*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010

been constructed upon the infrastructure left by the British Mandate in Palestine (1920-1948). Most of the camps and facilities were built after the establishment of the Israeli state, some in the first years and others later. Tolerance conveyed by citizens toward the expropriation of land in the Negev by the military is based on the widespread notion that the military uses of land in the Negev is significant for the security of Israel. This notion was mainly prevalent in a period when the IDF engaged in its rehabilitation and expansion after the Yom Kippur War (1973), and within the framework of its redeployment as part of the implementation of the peace agreement with Egypt in the beginning of the 1980s. Not only the IDF has an unremitting presence in the Negev lands.

Extraction companies, especially those that initially received concessions during the British Mandate continue to operate in wide stretches of the Negev's lands. For example, Palestine Potash Limited (today's International Chemicals Ltd.) continues to pursue a British concession document (1929) including a provision that "any lands required for the purposes of the Company will be expropriated by the government[...]"<sup>73</sup> ICL is one out of several regional extractive industries that operate extensively in the land, at times exposing the regional population to dangerous materials.<sup>74</sup> Due to the centrality of issues concerning land and adherence to it in the Israeli public discourse - land, land use, and land rights has been central to Israeli artists. From the artistic projections of early Zionist utopians on the ostensibly empty holy land that had originated in the diaspora; through orientalist depictions of the region and its indigenous populations that characterized the first Aliya (1881-1903), continuing with the documentation of the conflicted landscape by contemporary Israeli-born artists (Sabras).

The symbolism of land is present in artistic expressions of artists from diverse backgrounds including Israeli-Sabra; Jewish Israeli with European and North African origins; African Israelites<sup>75</sup>; Arab Bedouin

73 ——— Preliminary agreement and heads of concession for Palestine Potash Ltd. (1929), CZA, F43\14.

74 ——— Initially established as P.P.L., ICL extracts minerals from the Dead Sea and is the source of some 35 percent of the world's bromine as well as much of its potash and phosphoric acid.

75 ——— The African Hebrew Israelites are a community of African Americans who believe they are descendants of the ancient Israelites. In 1967, only 5 years after the city of Arad was founded, the first group of Israelites immigrated from United States to Arad. They lead a spiritual lifestyle that combines veganism with Judaism.

indigenous communities<sup>76</sup>; and immigrants from the former Soviet Union, as well as personnel and families of personnel of IDF military bases and extractive industries based in the Negev. Curated by myself, *Arad: From Vision to Delusion- Chapter I*<sup>77</sup> (2017) held at Arad Contemporary Art Center, was composed of artworks created by artists currently living or that have lived in the past in the city of Arad and its vicinity.<sup>78</sup> The exhibition engaged with regional artists and artisans examining reflections of the city and its surroundings in their artistic expressions.

The exhibition, that was organized in three sections: Vision, Living Forms and Delusion, sketched out different stages in the establishment of the city of Arad and its influence on artistic interventions. A monthly program of events engaged a wide audience to regional artistic methodologies including a temporary wood studio and a makeshift print-making workshop etc. The photograph *Untitled* (2016) **Figure 13** by Arab Bedouin artist, Sarah Schadah hung in a small frame on the wall of the art space depicted an ordinary, mass-produced female shoe, sunken into the desert sand. The sunken black shoe, filled with sand, created a *mise-en-scène* of a frenzied escape of an Arab Bedouin family from the region. A familiar moment for the inhabitants of villages unrecognized by Israel that are under the danger of destruction of their homes by Israeli authorities. *Untitled* (2016) raises questions regarding the alteration of habitats of the Arab Bedouin from scattered villages to designated Arab Bedouin cities in the Negev. While some manage to continue to lead a semi-nomadic life in the villages, others are forced to relocate to urban centers. The despairing lost shoe, sunken in the desert sand resonates the gravity of the situation in which Arab Bedouin communities, sometimes instantaneously, are forced to relocate due to forced migration. Hanging next to *Untitled* (2016), the framed photograph *Prayers Near the Beach* (2016) **Figure 14** captures a sense of excitement that accompanies a rare visit of an Arab Bedouin community to the Tel Aviv-Jaffa shoreline. Schadah cap-

76 ——— Nomadic Arab tribes have historically inhabited the desert regions in the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, the Levant, and Mesopotamia. Historians do not necessarily agree on the conditions in which the Arab Bedouin population are currently dispersed between Israel, Jordan and Egypt.

77 ——— Kedar, Hadas, *Arad: From Vision to Delusion – Chapter 1*, Arad Contemporary Art Center, 2017, see: <https://www.hadaskedar.com/from-vision-to-delusion>

78 ——— Lawson, Graham, "Art and Politics in Arad," 2017, see: <https://www.erev-rav.com/archives/english/arad-residency-project-contemporary-art-center>



fig. 13, Sarah Schadah. *Prayers Near the Beach* 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.



fig. 14, Sarah Schadah. *Untitled*, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.

tures a scene on the shore of the Mediterranean, far away from her home in the Arab Bedouin Negev city Kseyfa. She subjects two men to her female gaze – a gesture that is not generally accepted in Arab Bedouin traditional society. Two very different sentiments towards the land appear in the same photograph. On the one hand, a man seen kneeling and praying reminds one of the persistent endurance in the Negev land that is characteristic of the older generation and that in face of forced immigration is not negotiable. On the other hand, the man that captures the vista of the shore on his cellphone camera portrays the sentiment of the younger generation of the Arab Bedouin community which is in the midst of undergoing urbanization, and who are willing to bargain persistence for the land for ‘living at the moment’. Schadah’s photographs center on the conflicted existence of a female artist of the younger generation of the Arab Bedouin community who is caught between the patriarchal order of her elders (that believe that females of the community have a designated role in marriage and motherhood) and her passion to pursue the career of an artist. Schadah depicts a role-defying position towards traditional roles of woman in Arab Bedouin society.<sup>79</sup>

Tension between convention and self-realization of female subjects in traditional societies is addressed by Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty. Spivak asserts that: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development”.<sup>80</sup> Spivak’s argument contributes to an understanding on how female subjects endure patriarchal forces in communities that have tolerated and continue to experience societal and cultural domination. The contrast between tradition and modernization that arises from Schada’s photographs speaks to the anxiety experienced by the female in Arab Bedouin society. Two donkeys appear in the small, framed photograph of another Arab Bedouin photographer, Ibrahim Nawaja. *Untitled* (2015) was shot by Nawaja in his home village, across the Green Line (the demarcation that serves as

<sup>79</sup> ——— On the night before the opening of the exhibition Schada arrived to the gallery and attempted to take down her photographs due to the fact that she became aware of the price she may pay in her community by exhibiting her work.

<sup>80</sup> ——— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, NYC: Columbia University Press, 2010. p.102

the *de facto* borders of the State of Israel from 1949 until the Six Day War in 1967).<sup>81</sup> Two donkeys stand amongst remnants of ancient agricultural cultivation including stone terraces and canals that can be traced back to the Nabataean kingdom (4th century BCE to c.106 CE). The scene reminds us of systems that cultivated the desert in antiquity that have been almost completely forgotten in our day and age.<sup>82</sup> Similarities may be drawn between Schadah's and Nawaja's photographs depicting the tensions between tradition and modernization experienced by the younger generation of Arab Bedouin. While Schadah's photographs center on scenes inside the 1967 borders, Nawaja's photograph introduces the rocky region of the south-eastern tip of the West Bank - a region that Israeli citizens, except military and police forces, normally do not enter.<sup>83</sup> Centering on Arad and its surroundings, *Arad: From Vision to Delusion – Chapter 1* **Figure 15**, evidenced life in the city of Arad and its vicinity, including beyond the Green Line. Arad Contemporary Art Center which was co-founded by Arad municipality and myself, resides in a community cultural center in the mainly Jewish populated city of Arad. Within the context of the exhibition that dealt with specific qualities in the artistic expressions of artists from Arad and the region, the significance of artistic expressions from both sides of the military and social barrier of the Green Line was essential.

The history of the representation of land in Israeli art is quite extensive. The birth of Zionism drew tens of thousands of immigrants from the Jewish diaspora to the British Mandate of Palestine due to rising antisemitism in Europe and North African countries. Artists from the first (1882–1903) and second (1904–1914) Aliyahs<sup>84</sup> to Israel brought with them an impulse to revive Jewish diasporic culture. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 – the ultimate outcome of the Zionist project – brought many more immigrants to Israel and necessitated

<sup>81</sup> ——— After the Six Day War, and up until today, the territories occupied by Israel beyond the Green Line are considered Israeli-Occupied Territories.

<sup>82</sup> ——— I am drawn to sites of the remains of Nabatean agricultural settlements in the Negev, since they were the subject of my father's doctoral thesis and book "The Ancient Agriculture in the Negev Highlands" (1954).

<sup>83</sup> ——— The west bank is a region between the Mediterranean coast of Israel and Jordan and forms the main bulk of the Palestinian territories. bordered by Jordan and the Dead Sea to the east and the Green Line to the south, west, and north.

<sup>84</sup> ——— The Hebrew word Aliyah literally means ascent or rise, but for generations it has been used to mean immigration to Israel.



fig. 15, *Arad: From Vision to Delusion*, 2017.

Curator: Hadas Kedar. Foreground:  
Tamar Roded Shabtay. *Untitled*, 2012.  
Photograph by PR.

the articulation of new form of Israeli art that was based on its historical roots and its horizon. The arid desert in the south of Palestine wasn't necessarily the land that immigrants from the diaspora had dreamt of. In contrast to the Zionist dream of a pastoral utopia, the desert land posed an existential challenge. The ceramic-tiled work titled *Prayer for the Road* (1925)<sup>85</sup> by Russian-born, immigrant artist Meir Gur Arye (1891-1951) points to the disparities between the agrarian dream of Zionist immigration and the reality of the arid land that they faced. The human-donkey silhouette in *Prayer for the Road* rests under a tree praying before its upcoming journey into the unknown.<sup>86</sup> Gur Arye, who was born in the Russian Empire and was one of the first Jewish artists to immigrate to the region, was part of the first Aliyah of Russian and Romanian Jews that came from the Jewish ghettos and were passionate to cultivate the land. Gur Arye took part in the effort to articulate a typology of the art of the 'new Jew' of the early 20th century. Developing a signature style based on the combination of the ornamental styles of Art Nouveau and Jugendstil, the bright light that characterized Palestine was the main element in the new typology. It was a typology that was epitomized by a stylized silhouette, encapsulated in the bright environment. In Gur Arye's contrasted compositions, the Jewish quest to create an agrarian Zionist utopia in Palestine met the strong light and harshness of the desert environment.

Eighty years after Gury Arye's *Prayer for the Road*, the photo diptych *White A* and *B* (2004) **Figures 16 and 17** by Arad raised photographer Ohad Matalon brings with it the complexity of life in the Negev desert in the 21st century. In the first half of the photographic diptych, two youngsters seem as if they hover in thin air amidst a brightened background. On second glance the youngster appear on a donkey that blends in with the background. The disappearing donkey in *White A* resonates the danger that humans and animals experience due to the toxicity of industries of the desert that include disposal sites; bleaching factories, electric and a nuclear power plant.

Matalon's photograph reminds one of the white donkey that the messiah

85 ——— The featureless rider and donkey may be linked to the Jewish warning that appears in the bible that the Jewish people are not to create images or any representations.

86 ——— The donkey appears in the Bible as the animal that carries the burden of bitterness. Abraham used a donkey to carry wood for the sacrifice of Isaac. As king David prepared to die, he ordered that his son Solomon should mount the king's own mule — the offspring of a horse and donkey — to be taken to the king of Israel (1 Kgs 1:32-34)..



fig. 16, Ohad Matalon. *White B*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

fig. 17, Ohad Matalon. *White A*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

(savior) was anticipated to arrive on to Jerusalem to save the world from its annihilation in the popular Jewish myth;<sup>87</sup> the Muslim myth that donkeys provided a mount for Muhammad, and the myth of Jesus Christ who in the New Testament entered Jerusalem on a donkey.<sup>88</sup> In place of the Jewish messiah, Jesus Christ, or Muhammad, the pair of young boys are strung on the donkey's back in the bleached-out background stare at the camera as if the photographer was their redeemer.

The tainted background of *White A* continues in *White B*. In this half of the diptych, the whitened sky comprises most of the format. Beneath a sky that has lost its color, a figure is seen standing upon the six-meter-high separation wall between Israeli and Palestinian territories. The figure thrusts his hands in the air as if declaring victory. Stemming out of its white sleeves, its hands, that cut into the vast, empty, bright sky echo the upright ears of the donkey in *White A*. While the donkey in *White A*, turns his head around looking elsewhere, the figure with his hands thrust up in the air in *White B* seems aware of the camera that catches him on top of the wall. The photography diptych *White A* and *B* deals with the separation between societies living inside and beyond the Green Line and how whether on this side or the other side of the border, the communities close to the line are many times exposed to the region's harsh climate and difficult terrain. From the Zionist vision of a rural life for the Jewish people in the Holy Land, as it appears in Gur Arye's *Prayer for the Road*; to Schadah's perspective as a female subject in the patriarchal Arab Bedouin society within the Green Line; continuing with Nawaja's photographs that document the Arab Bedouin villages across the Green Line and concluding with Matalon's *White A* and *B* echoing utopianism of Zionism and its intersection with a traditional, agrarian existence of the original communities of the desert, the artistic interventions discussed in this section raise pertinent issues regarding the significance of land in the Negev and the volatile nature of land related issues.

87 ——— The donkey appears in the Bible as the animal that carries the burden of bitterness Abraham used a donkey to carry wood for the sacrifice of Isaac. As king David prepared to die, he ordered that his son Solomon should mount the king's own mule – the offspring of a horse and donkey - to be taken to be the king of Israel (1 Kgs 1:32-34). According to Christianity, donkeys carried Christ into Jerusalem which gained them a cross-like structure appearing on their fur. In Islam donkeys provided a mount for Muhammad, who supposedly used it to summon his companions.

88 ——— According to Christianity the donkeys received a cross-like structure on their fur after carrying Christ into Jerusalem.

## 2.2 Radical Political Critique as Practice: Under the Sea There Are Holes

The Dead Sea shores, the lowest terrestrial zone in the world, are located on the eastern edge of the Negev desert. The lake's shores are the grounds on which a unique phenomenon appeared in the last decade. Hundreds of underground cavities have emerged because of the collapse of the shores land masses by ongoing process of dissolving underground salty layers. By 2017, over 5000 sinkholes were documented on the shores of the Dead Sea. The sinkhole phenomenon together with the depletion of the Dead Sea results in rapid sea level drops of more than a meter a year for the past 50 years. Scientists attribute the sinkhole phenomenon first and foremost to the ongoing diversion of water from the Jordan River by Jordanian and Israeli industrial initiatives. Alongside that, the proliferation of the phenomenon has been tied to the excessive extraction of minerals from the Dead Sea area. Extractive industries that operate on both shores of the Dead Sea have gradually depleted the main water source of the lake.

The exhibition *Sinkholes*<sup>89</sup> (2017) **Figures 18 and 19** was held at ACAC and considered the phenomenon through a wide time frame. As part of a chain of topographic changes that started millions of years ago when tectonic plates began to shift leading to the formation of the Syrian African rift, which ran from Turkey to Tanzania and passes through the Dead Sea.<sup>90</sup> The exhibition pointed to the fundamental human hubris towards the Dead Sea environment that is displayed in the exploitation of its natural resources. Artistic expressions of the primal human fear of being suddenly engulfed in subterranean depths included *3,000 holes 180x50x50 each* (2002), a video by the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. Exhibited on a monitor installed on a counter of medium height, the video focused on a series of cavities in the sandy land on the shores of Morocco. Documenting the creation of holes that were dug by a group of immigrants of Maghribian and Sub-Saharan origins,

89 ——— Hadas Kedar, "Sinkholes", *Arad Contemporary Art Center*, 2017, see: <https://www.hadaskedar.com/sinkholes>

90 ——— The exhibition was held 90 years after a 6.25 Richter scale earthquake occurred in the Dead Sea area which resulted in 500 deaths and about 700 injuries.



fig. 18, Sinkholes, 2017. Curator: Hadas Kedar Foreground: Ronny Hardliz. *The Wanting of the Young*, Video Installation. 2016. Photograph by PR.



fig.19, Julia Wirsching & Gabriel Hensche. *The Fourth Pole*, 2019. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

one may compare *3,000 holes 180x50x50 each* (2002) with the tradition of land art in the south of the U.S., typified by artists such as Nancy Holt, Richard Long, Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson. The main difference between *3,000 holes 180x50x50 each* and U.S. land art is the significance of the location chosen for Sierra's artistic intervention. By situating his artwork on a hill from where one can see the African continent, Sierra's artistic intervention speaks of the dangerous conditions that African immigrants experience crossing the border and the exploitation of their precariousness once they have done so. In contrast with U.S. minimalist artistic interventions that took place in the desert of the U.S., outside of urban centers as an expression of their critique of the art market and its influence on artists, "*3,000 holes 180x50x50 each*" raised issues regarding African immigrants crossing the Gibraltar Strait to reach Europe and the exploitive labour conditions that they meet. The workers were employed and insured by Sierra for three weeks, based on the same conditions that included long hours of work for which they received minimum wage, implemented by contractors that operate in the area. By employing African immigrants with the same exploitive conditions that they were accustomed to, Sierra positioned the conditions that the work critiqued at its forefront.

The decision made by Sierra to re-iterate the oppressive conditions of the African immigrant community points to the concept of radical politics as articulated by Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe's conception of radical politics is based on 'critique as engagement with' as opposed to 'critique as withdrawal from'. According to Mouffe, 'critique as engagement with' involves creating relations with institutions to deliberate oppressive conditions that sub-contractors are many times subordinated to by creating alternative routes that are less precarious. In Mouffe's words, 'critique as engagement with': "...cannot consist any more in a withdrawal from the existing institutions but in an engagement with them to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced, with the aim of constructing a different one".<sup>91</sup> Mouffe's concept of 'critique as engagement with' transpires in the artistic decision of Sierra to base his artistic intervention on the exploitive conditions of African immigrants. Sierra refrained from using his privileged position to pay his collaborators a higher wage and possibly essentializing their positionality. Instead, as a method to critique their exploitation, Sierra

91 ——— Mouffe, Chantal, "Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention", 2008, December 3, 2022, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0808/mouffe/en> 2

decided to re-create the same exact conditions of the African immigrants' employment in his artistic intervention. Mouffe's concept of 'critique as engagement with' may serve as the basis to grasp another artistic intervention exhibited in *Sinkholes. Under the Sea there Is a Hole* (2015) **Figures 20 and 21** by Cooking Sections (Daniel Fernández Pascual and Alon Schwabe), part of the long-term project, *Climavore*, explores climate and human-induced transformations of the global food system. The installation consisted of hanging a horizontal plank, punctured with holes of different sizes that displayed a map of the Dead Sea shoreline, suspended in the art space. From time to time, the planks were used as dining surfaces in a performative open-invitation dinner, featuring a series of dishes that responded to the climatic and environmental challenges of the Dead Sea region. Envisioning seasons of food production and consumption that react to man-induced climatic events and landscape alterations, the menu, developed especially for the exhibition, consisted of plates such as: "Counter-Lessepsian Flows" for the "Invasive Season"; "Dead Sea Destruction Aperitivo" and "Nitrogen Fixation Mulch" for the "Forever Fertile Season"; "Water Stress Balls" for the "Drought Season"; "Floating Purifiers" for the "Ocean Cleaning Season".<sup>92</sup>

By placing the burning issue of the decline of the Dead Sea, one of the unique natural phenomena of the region, at its foreground, the performance invited participants to express their opinions on mining in the Dead Sea and its various implications. Disagreements arose between numerous participants affiliated with ICL, the Negev-based multi-national extraction industry that develops, produces, and markets fertilizers, metals, and other chemical products, and residents who participate in protests that publicly reflect the health and environmental hazards that related to extraction of minerals from the Dead Sea. The performative artistic intervention sparked a significant debate that considered, on the one hand, residents' reliance on the prosperity of extractive industries as a main source of income for the region, and, on the other side, residents' concern in terms of projected dangers to the environment and its inhabitants in regard to future mining initiatives in the city's vicinity. The disparity between the two perspectives is based on an actual dispute. "Smooth Mountain", a potential mining site that stands a few kilometers away from Arad and is estimated to hold 65 million tons of phosphate. It was deemed critical to the economic sustainability of the region on behalf of ICL. In contrast, the new extractive effort led to a series of petitions issued to the Supreme Court

92 ——— Cooking Sections, *Under the Sea There is a Hole, Levitate*, Frieiraum Q21, Museums Quartier, Vienna, 2015.

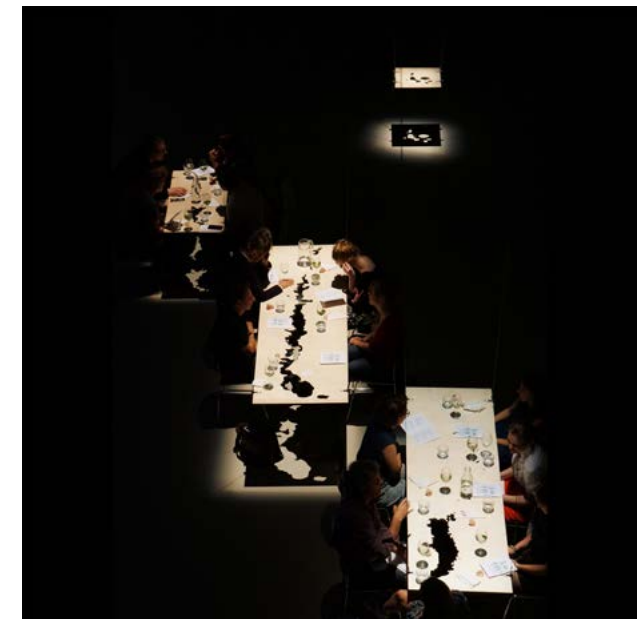


fig. 20-21, Cooking Sections. *Under the Sea There Is a Hole*, 2015. Images courtesy of the artists.

on behalf of environmental activists stipulating the health hazards that the enterprise would provoke towards the region's inhabitants. "Smooth Mountain" was the instigator of a major protest that took place in 2014 in the city of Arad. On one side of the street in the entrance to the city, stood ICL employees that protested the retraction of the permits issued by the "National Planning and Building Council" that allowed ICL's prospecting in the area. On the other side of the matter environmental activists that had pressured the council to evaluate the impact of the mining on the health of residents chanted slogans based on the Ministry of Health's report that predicted an escalation of cancer and breathing diseases among the regional population. *Under the Sea there Is a Hole* was a discursive platform that allowed audience members to perform a democratic political struggle while sustaining the differential points of view on mineral extraction in the Dead Sea and the region. In contrast to the democratic protests that took place on the streets, the artistic intervention is based on what Mouffe describes as a democratic situation in which those who oppose my ideas are perceived as antagonists to debate with not as my enemies that I must reach an agreement with:

The illusion of consensus and unanimity, as well as the calls for 'anti-polities', should be recognized as being fatal for democracy and therefore abandoned...When there is a lack of democratic political struggles with which to identify, their place is taken by other forms of identification, of ethnic, nationalist or religious nature, and the opponent is defined in those terms too. In such conditions, the opponent cannot be perceived as an adversary to contend with, but only as an enemy to be destroyed.<sup>93</sup>

*Under the Sea there Is a Hole* allowed for a layered and multifaceted debate regarding the future of the Dead Sea to take place. Stakeholders of varied positionality regarding the extraction of minerals in the Dead Sea region debated with their opponents around the table. The performance allowed adversaries to regard one another as legitimate participants to discuss pertinent issues, without the need to reach a consensus between them.

93 ——— Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso, 1993. p.25

## 2.3 Artistic Land Interventions in the Negev: Next Generation

*Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad* (2018) **Figure 22** was held in Arad Contemporary Art Center on the fifty-year celebration of the environmental sculpture in Arad, *Mizpor* (1967) that was created by German-born Israeli artist Igeal Tumarkin. The exhibition was based on artistic expressions of a younger generation of Israeli artists (born after 1980) that addressed the environmental sculpture of *Mizpor*. Several artists of the younger generation challenged the massive presence of the environmental sculpture with artistic interventions that minimized its massiveness using simple, DIY sculptural methods. Some participating artists deconstructed *Mizpor's* occupying presence by creating artistic expressions that consisted of soft and disposable materials, whereas others used ephemeral techniques that included digital media. The curatorial argument of the exhibition maintained that whether by applying soft disposable materials or by using ephemeral techniques, the younger generation of Israeli artists tend to deal with the dominating presence of environmental sculpture by creating artistic interventions that deconstruct its enormity. Although produced on separate occasions and in quite different conditions, two video works exhibited in *Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad* created a humorous and playful commentary on *Mizpor*. *Kiss a Statue* (2015) **Figure 23** by New York based artist Alona Weiss reflected the artist's relationship to the ideology at the root of *Mizpor* that was commissioned on behalf of the Israeli Office of Housing in the early 1960s.<sup>94</sup> The video follows two acroyoga performers balancing each other on the sharp, geometrical shapes of *Mizpor*. The balancing act serves as a metaphor to the tricky equilibrium that the younger generation of artists cultivate with their artistic forefather: on the one hand they react to the extraordinary presence of *Mizpor* in the desert landscape. On the other hand, they deconstruct its enormity through a playful performance. The video *Moav* (2018) **Figure 24** by Arad-born sisters Yarden and Omer Halperin also reacts to the occupying presence of *Mizpor* with a comic approach. The video documents an aerobic performance of the sister-creators on top and beside the environmental sculpture. Treating the sculpture as a stage in the desert landscape, they perform upon the

94 ——— Hadas Kedar, "Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad", *Arad Contemporary Art Center*, 2017, see: <https://www.hadaskedar.com/jubilee-year-for-mizpor-in-arad>



fig. 22, *Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad*, 2017. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Foreground: Guy Nissenhaus. *Deception*, 2016. Photograph by Eldad Menuhin.



fig. 23, Alona Weiss. *Kiss a Statue*, 2015. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artist.



fig. 24, Yarden and Omer Halperin. *Moav*, 2018. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

slippery surfaces of the *Mizpor* different dance compositions. By using the environmental sculpture as their backdrop for their exercises, the sister duo creates a humorous commentary on the masculine presence of the artistic interventions in the landscape of first-generation Israeli artists and how they are re-used in a feminine context. A series of sculptures by Israeli artist Roy Menachem Markovich, *Miniments* (2011–2017) **Figures 25, 28 and 29** seem at first glance as if they were accidentally fused together from the daily clutter of home and office drawers in any typical household. On second glance, the items that comprise the sculptures reveal their meticulously selected components that were weeded out from the panoply of second-hand shops, old perfumeries and gallantries, flea markets and dollar stores of Israel as well as nick-knacks plucked off its streets.

Although the sculpture series *Miniments* is composed of items that are quite unremarkable and indistinguishable from other sculptural constituents, they seem to encapsulate the essence of Israeli culture. Israeli historian and philosopher of social sciences, Moshe Zuckerman, ruminates on the question “what is Israeli culture?” Basing this question on the fact that Jewish immigrants had originated from very different areas, Zuckerman asks: “What could establish ‘authentic’ art in a society so fundamentally heterogeneous since its inception, typified by such a marked gap between the national-ideological pretensions of its institutions, and the actual cultural practices of the diverse groups within it?”<sup>95</sup> Zuckerman responds to his question by asserting that: “A society established in such ‘inauthentic’ circumstances...is not

95 ——— Zuckerman Moshe, “Authenticity, Ideology, and Israeli Society, *Hebrew Work: Israeli Art 1920s-1990s*,” ed. Galia Bar-Or, Israel: Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod; Israel Culture and Arts Forum, 1998 [my translation].

meant to create an ‘authentic culture’ at best, it has the means to create an authentic expression of its inherent inauthenticity.”<sup>96</sup> Following Zuckerman’s notion of ‘authentic inauthenticity’ the sculpture series “Minimants” challenges the materiality of Tumarkin’s *Mizpor* by basing its materiality on knick knacks and leftovers. Reducing their volume and bulkiness, *Minimants* is also a humorous reaction to the magnitude and weightiness of first- and second-generation sculptures such as *Mizpor*. Another route to understand the significance of *Mizpor* for the residents of Arad is to address its social functioning.<sup>97</sup> The role that the sculpture plays for Arad’s community was the basis of the film *Breaking Shapes* (2018) **Figures 26 and 27**, a collaboration between Ariel Tamir, an Arad-based filmmaker and myself. The film focused on a series of interviews with residents of Arad in which residents of the city narrated the sculpture’s presence from a subjective point of view. The film sketched out how residents’ imaginaries were projected upon the sculpture *Mizpor*. The film follows a series of interviews that unfold different narratives of the sculpture. In the eyes of one resident, the sculpture symbolizes an IDF airplane that had crashed into the Negev mountain range during the release of captives in the siege of Sodom during the 1948 War; for another, the sculpture depicts a huge bird holding its prey; and for yet another resident, the sculpture portrays the destruction of the city of Arad by dark powers. The notion that communities characterize public spaces based on their social functions is articulated by Italian researcher of place-making and geoaesthetics Giusy Checola. Checola explains that the development of symbols or special signs, “[...] settle into our sphere of existence and in cultural heritage. So, the landscape is no longer taken as a territory, it no longer exists in and of itself but our consciousness. It exists because human communities have characterized places with symbols and values.”<sup>98</sup> Following Checola, *Breaking Shapes* (2018) presents yet another route to deal with the presence of the environmental sculpture in the Negev landscape. It displays the relational aspect of outdoor art that evolves with the city and its residents. It becomes a catalyst for residents to consider the sculpture as a concourse of symbols and signs that have settled into the city’s social landscape.

<sup>96</sup> ——— Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> ——— Rumor has it that teenagers from Arad and the vicinity considered the sculpture as a kind of dwelling space for different desires, as love nests.

<sup>98</sup> ——— Giusy Checola, “The Imaginary Institution of Place”, in *The Understanding Territoriality Project: Understanding Territoriality: Identity, Place and Possession*, Brighton: Fabrica, 2017. p.4



fig. 25, *Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad*, 2017. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Foreground: Roy Menachem Markovich. *Minimants*, 2011 - 2017. Courtesy of the artist. Background: Alona Weiss. *Kiss a Sculpture*, 2015. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Eldad Menuhin.



fig. 26 - 27, Hadas Kedar, Ariel Tamir. *Breaking Shapes*, 2017. Screenshots. Courtesy of the artists



fig. 28 - 29., Roy Menachem Markovich, *Miniments* (detail), 2011–2017. Images courtesy of the artist.



fig. 30., *Jubilee Year for Mizpor* in Arad. 2017. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Left: Laura Kirshenbaum. *Untitled*. 2017.

Right: Roy Menachem Markovich. *Miniments*, 2011–2017. Photograph by Eldad Menuhin.

## 2.4 Environmental Sculpture in the Negev: Militaristic Overtones

In contrast to monuments that commemorate soldiers and citizens killed in terrorist attacks that dominate the Israeli landscape, environmental sculpture is an artistic niche that is not necessarily linked to a nationalist sentiment. Nonetheless, the enormity and massiveness of many environmental sculptures have an unavoidable presence in the landscape that dominate their surroundings. *Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad* **Figure 30** demonstrated how Israeli artistic land interventions are many times intertwined with nationalist sentiment of the land. This is especially true in the case of the Negev, which was initially considered by Jewish immigrants as a ‘no-man’s-land’ that needed to be inhabited and cultivated. A color photograph taken upon *Mizpor*’s completion that was displayed in the exhibition *Jubilee Year for Mizpor in Arad*, displays how the sculpture’s stark, primary colors and its geometric silhouette stand out amongst the rounded lines and soft hues of the desert. Two packs of military equipment, a small portion from the mass of defunct military equipment donated to the artist by the IDF, appear on one side of the sculpture **Figure 31**. The defunct military equipment that was added to the sculpture’s volume (since the sculpture’s creation, the military equipment has disappeared) raises questions regarding the link between artistic interventions and a nationalist quest for inhabiting the Negev desert.

A series of environmental sculptures located in the desert raises similar questions. Israeli artist Ezra Orion (1934–2015) was born and raised in a kibbutz and moved later in his life to an educational center in the Negev desert. Orion developed an expanded mode of sculpture that not only regarded the landscape as his studio but regarded the whole universe as his artistic environment. One of Orion’s most celebrated artistic interventions is *Intergalactic Sculpture* (1986–2001) **Figure 32** was executed with the support of the Israel Museum and the Israel Space Agency. The work involved laser beams launched from Jerusalem, Egypt, Russia, and Europe towards the Milky Way. They created what Orion considered a ‘super cathedral’ that extended into space. In yet another environmental intervention in the Negev, *A Pile of Dust* **Figure 33** and *Tire Valley* (1984) **Figure 34** Orion displayed his artistic relationship with the IDF. While serving in the army reserve as a tractor operator at a Negev-based military airport (one of the two airbases



fig. 31, Igael Tumarkin. *Arad Panorama*, 1962 - 1968. Photograph courtesy of Israel Zafirir.



fig. 32, Ezra Orion. *Intergalactic Sculpture*, 1992. Photograph courtesy of Avraham Hay.

established by the US Army following the evacuation of the IDF from Sinai in accordance with the Camp David agreements), Orion recognized an artistic opportunity in a huge pile of dirt that were prepared in the case that the runways were bombed, and the resulting cavities would need to be filled. Orion recruited a fellow bulldozer operator and created a cut in the heaps of dirt. Near the airport base, Orion found huge, discarded tires from the heavy vehicles that built the airport. He hired a local tractor and positioned the tires to look like they were rolling down the heap. *Dust Hill* may remind one of *Sun Tunnels* (1977) by the U.S. artist Nancy Holt that aligned a series of sculptural tunnels with the rising and setting of the sun on the days of the solstice. While Holt collaborated with an astrophysicist to calculate the exact angle of the sun on the days of the solstice, Orion's collaborations provided him with access to technology that was not in his reach. He collaborated with military superstructures such as the Israel Space Agency; NASA; "Wagner", a German manufacturer of laser beams and the IDF. These institutions not only provided Orion with technological knowledge but also with the infrastructure needed to create his art both in the desert and in space.

On his website, one of Orion's army buddies tells of his approach to art:

Ezra did not shy away from risks at all. He had an unusual urge to do, to participate in combat, to see what was happening, to be on the front line. Without any fear. He was a very daring person. Very brave in his conduct and this instilled confidence in his people. The Six Day War bent him inwards, but Ezra remained Ezra. He spoke little, wrote poems of three lines. A very authoritative type with great presence. In an awe-inspiring presence, in the manner of speaking, in the style, in the solid worldview. A very strong and quietly influential personality. Decisiveness in determining things. There are similarities to Julius Caesar. The D-9 bulldozer suited his personality[...].<sup>99</sup>

According to his military associate, Orion used his charisma to influence potential collaborators to pursue his ambitious artistic expressions. This is apparent in the art-engineering experiment, "Sculpture in the Solar System" (1978–1997)<sup>100</sup>, a stone line executed along four thousand kilometers and intended to be constructed on Mars in the Valles Marineris canyon. The artistic intervention was to be a collaboration with Israeli and international scientists; Jet Propulsion Labora-

<sup>99</sup> ——— Ezra Orion, "Military Biography", Ezarorion.org, December 3, 2022, [my translation], see: <https://ezraorion.org/היפרגויב/אבצ/>

<sup>100</sup> ——— Edelman and Messer, "Orion", Maarav online magazine [my translation], 2016, see: <http://maarav.org.il/category/קיסומ/19/> (2016)



fig. 33, Ezra Orion. *Dust Hill*, 1984.  
Photograph courtesy of Avraham Hay.



fig. 34, Ezra Orion. *Zmiguy (Tire Valley)*, 1984. Photograph courtesy of Avraham Hay.

tory; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NASA. The artistic intervention was to be carried out by the Mars Rover, which was en route to Mars at the time. The plan was to aim the vehicle towards the edge of the rock face and instruct it to create the stone line upon completion of its operational mission. A more suitable comparison to Orion's collaborations would probably be E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) that formed collaborations between artists and scientists. E.A.T. based its collaborations on technological advancements during the 1960s in the U.S.<sup>101</sup> They were met with a lukewarm audience acceptance due to the context of the Vietnam war (1955-1975)<sup>102</sup>. In contrast to the adverse audience response due to the militaristic connotations of E.A.T.'s artistic interventions, both Tumarkin's *Mizpor* that included defunct military equipment and Orion's collaborative projects with military superpowers, were largely accepted by the Israeli audience. Although these artistic interventions of the Negev display autocratic and authoritarian use of military technological advancements, they are considered significant contributions to the Israeli artistic narrative and have not been widely discussed in terms of their militaristic overtones.

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- 101 — Anne Collins Goodyear, "Gyorgy Kepes, Billy Kluver, and American Art of the 1960s: Defining Attitudes Toward Science and Technology," *Science in Context*, 17(4), (2014): pp.611-635, UK: Cambridge University Press
- 102 — John R. Blakinger, "The Aesthetics of Collaboration: Complicity and Conversion at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies", *Tate Papers no.25*, see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/25/aesthetics-of-collaboration>

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## 2.5 Conclusion of Second Chapter

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Chapter One discussed the curatorial challenges of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva unpacking its curatorial programming and how the social character of the mosque-turned-museum show up from time to time in its temporary exhibitions and permanent collection. Based on the notion of 'critique as engagement with' as articulated by Mouffe, Chapter Two emphasized that a democratic curatorial method entails allowing artistic interventions of differential positionalities to exist in the art space, providing discursive platforms for debate and without aiming to reach a consensus. Issues of land, land use and land rights in the desert are demonstrated through artistic interventions rooted in a wide temporal and geographic lens: from the artistic expressions of the Zionist vision of an agricultural utopia in the Holy Land of first and second immigrants to Arab Bedouin artists that address the issue of land, land use and land rights through the tension between tradition and modernization; from the artistic visions of first- and second-generation Israeli artists that manifested in the desert landscape their fanciful artistic visions, to the young generation of Jewish Israeli artists that challenge the territorialization of the land of first and second generation Israeli artist through ephemeral materiality and playful artistic expressions.

## Bezalel Ben-Chaim

During my stay in Arad I ventured out on moonless nights to the outskirts of town and into the desolate and dark desert. I used very long exposures (30-60 minutes each) to photograph its primeval landscapes and structures, illuminated only by the light coming from Arad.



Bezalel Ben-Chaim. *Route 31*, 2021. Long-exposure photograph. Courtesy of the artist.



Bezalel Ben-Chaim. *Nahal Malhata*, 2021. Long-exposure photograph.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Bezalel Ben-Chaim. *Tumarkin, 11:18 AM*, 2022. Long-exposure photograph.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Bezalel Ben-Chaim. *Tumarkin, 1:20 AM*, 2022. Long-exposure photograph.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Bezalel Ben-Chaim. *Tumarkin, 04:40 AM*, 2022. Long-exposure photograph.  
Courtesy of the artist.

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## Chapter 3

# My Curatorial Experimentation in the Negev

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Chapter One has evidenced how the curatorial agendas of cultural institutions in the Negev are entrenched in a western cultural perspective that systematically excludes communities of the Negev that do not necessarily ascribe to a western perspective on art and creativity. Regarding “situated” and embodied knowledges, the first chapter considers curatorial methods that broaden the scope of the curatorial programming of Negev cultural institutions. Discussing the fact that audiences will not necessarily share the same vantage point when engaging with a particular artistic or curatorial intervention, Chapter Two focuses on issues of land, land use and land rights in the Negev and how the tensions and hostilities that arise from the debate on these issues in the art space are sustained through curatorial methods. Responding to these ideas, Chapter Three explores how a shift in the curatorial context of a given exhibition or event affects its audience reception. Pursuing Mouffe’s assertion that a democratic public sphere creates the conditions in which struggles between adversaries may take place without aiming to resolve differences between perspectives, Chapter Three reflects on the public event *Salon Beton 1* (2015) **Figure 35** that I curated in the public sphere of the city of Arad in the Negev desert.<sup>103</sup> The public event focused on a series of ‘climatic gardens’ or Brutalist Playgrounds of one of the first neighborhoods constructed in the city of Arad. Exploring the shift from the protected environment of the art space to the public sphere leads to a discussion on how the politics of leisure, play and recreation in Israel are reflected in artistic and curatorial interventions transpired in the public event *Salon Beton 1*. While the first half of the chapter explores the curatorial shift from the art space to the outdoors, the second half of the chapter interrogates another curatorial shift: from the periphery to central Israel. This shift is probed through an extensive exhibition I curated in a central Israeli museum of the oeuvre of the late Arad-based artist Ruth Dorrit Yacoby (1952-2015). It deals with how the shift in the context of her exhibition from the peripheral region of the Negev to Herzlia, in an affluent region in central Israel had impacted the audience reception of the oeuvre of Yacoby. And how the shift in curatorial conditions from the display of her oeuvre in the city where she operated to the center of Israel, had coincided with an international tendency in the art world to re-consider artists, mainly female artists from the periphery in western mega-exhibitions.

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**103** ——— *Salon Beton 1* was the first of a series of public events that I curated in Arad and dealt with the city as a space of creative action.

### 3.1 First Curatorial Shift: Artistic Interventions Enter the Public Sphere

As discussed in Chapter Two, audiences will not necessarily share the same vantage point when engaging with a particular artistic intervention, especially in the case of controversial issues such as land, land use and land rights. Within the protected space of the gallery or museum these differences can be addressed and contained by the curatorial. The first section of Chapter Three asks what happens when curatorial and artistic interventions that raise differential positionalities leave the art space and meet the precarious and unstable conditions of urban public sphere and raise questions regarding politics of play, recreation and leisure in Israel. The focal point of the interrogation of the curatorial shift from the controlled conditions of the art space to the unstable conditions of public space is *Salon Beton 1* (2015), an event that I curated and was comprised of a series of artistic interventions. *Salon Beton 1* took place in Avishur, one of the first quarters of Arad. Avishur quarter was planned by Eyal-Best, the initial planning team of Arad.<sup>104</sup> and included a guided tour that included seven out of the ten “climatic gardens” or Brutalist Playgrounds,<sup>105</sup> an outdoor exhibition,<sup>106</sup> an indoor exhibition,<sup>107</sup> a symposium on art, architecture, and urban interventions, and a series of performances.<sup>108</sup>

- <sup>104</sup> ——— Architect David Best who was born in Liverpool and studied architecture in Manchester brought with him the British architectural post-war practice to Arad.
- <sup>105</sup> ——— The guided tour was led by Dekel and Israel Drori, the main researcher on Dekel’s work.
- <sup>106</sup> ——— The event included an open-air exhibition on an elementary school fence that showed artistic interventions of artists that participated in the residency program and that addressed *Avishur* quarter in their work. Presenting the works of artists’ views of the quarter in the context of the school had an educational impact on school children.
- <sup>107</sup> ——— *Salon Beton 1* included an ad-hoc exhibition space that was created in a garbage room designed by Dekel that had, for one day, been transformed into an exhibition space. In this space a sculpture and video were presented, the result of a collaboration between the artist Merav Kamel, who participated in the artist’s residency program, and a local girls’ after school group.
- <sup>108</sup> ——— The event was accompanied by a catalogue that included a text by architect-researcher Michael Jacobson; an interview with Zvi Dekel; a personal text by architect-journalist Guy Nardi about his childhood



fig. 35, *Salon Beton 1*, 2015. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Photograph courtesy of Baruch Hanegbi.

Arad's urban planning has been a topic for research throughout the history of Israeli architecture. The city is considered by architects and urban designers as an unprecedented project attracting and challenging creative minds to create urban forms adapted to urban life in the desert.<sup>109</sup> Initiated in 1960 by the Israeli government, the city's overall urban planning team was led by its founder, Arie Eliav. He described the group of planners as:

[...]a strange and very diverse mixture of excellent professionals...people who were driven to the desert by the spirit of adventure, among them volunteers, driven to Arad by the pioneering motive.<sup>110</sup>

The urban planning approach of Arad was modeled on British new towns in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>111</sup> Alex Sher, the chief architect of the city of Arad and a former soldier in the British army, flew to Britain to get an impression of the new British towns.<sup>112</sup> Upon his return he wrote:

The desert nature of the region, the bright and dry climate, scarcity of rain, strong radiation and refreshing western wind all day long, all these pointed at the way the planners should have chosen and thus the fundamental principles for the planning of the city were established... a well-structured and groomed centre will constitute a focal point of attraction to the new and diverse population...here they will learn to know each other and here will grow and accumulate the common ground of the immigrants from various countries.<sup>113</sup>

The planning team of Arad created what may be considered an interpretation of British post war welfare-state architecture. The open spaces of social housing projects in Britain such as Churchill Gardens estate in Pimlico, London, (1978) were designed in relation to the post-war tradition of employing raw concrete as the main material in housing projects. Constructed as part of the overall design of the building's sur-

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and adulthood in Arad; a text by Israel Drori that deals with the work of Zvi Dekel; original artwork by the artists Keren Benbenisty (Israel) and Godron Widlock (Germany).

**109** ——— Shadar, Hadas, "Arad: Experimental City", Mifal Hapais, Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2020 [my translation]

**110** ——— Shadar, Hadas, "The Linear City: Linearity Without a City", *The Journal of Architecture* 16, no. 5, (2011): p.738.

**111** ——— Ibid., p.733.

**112** ——— Ibid., p.738.

**113** ——— A. Sher, 'Elementary ideas for the planning of the city of Arad', Archives of the Ministry of Construction and Housing, Office of Director General Tanne, Arad district (April 1st, 1962): file 6 A-19, Container C-4943 (in Hebrew).

roundings, these spaces included play areas, pathways, ramps, and seating areas. These play areas were coined Brutalist Playgrounds and consisted of geometric abstract structures made from the same brushed concrete as the housing projects used mainly by children in play. Although they carried a formal and textural similarity to the rare concrete façades of the brutalist housing projects, Brutalist Playgrounds emanated from a different design ethos than that of the social housing projects. The playgrounds created experiential learning spaces, stemming from an educational ethos that children's encounters with the city and its structures should be based on investigation and creativity. Before the era of liability and risk that had brought about safe and soft materials into playgrounds, Brutalist Playgrounds were expressions of wild artistic and architectural gestures that considered children as agents of the transformation of urban spaces. The landscape architect, Zvi Dekel, who was part of the planning team of Arad, was responsible for the landscape architecture of the public spaces of one of the city's first social housing projects. Dekel was eager to create public spaces that would allow future residents of the city, from a wide range of backgrounds to meet and interact on common grounds. Concerned with how open spaces that surround social housing projects support play, recreation and leisure in the city of Arad, the planning team of Arad was inspired by public spaces of post-war social housing projects in post-war Britain and European cities such as Aldo van Eyck's Zaanhof Playground in Amsterdam (1950). Dekel based his designs on a free-form translation of European urban spaces, adapting them to the unique desert climate conditions. His designs were aligned with the planning team's overall modernist ethos based on an all-pedestrian back-bone that linked shopping centers, religious sites, schools with spaces for play, recreation and leisure.

Established in the second wave of new city constructions, the planning of Arad was based on lessons learned by designers of first wave immigrant cities in Israel. In opposition to first wave immigration cities' planning, typically planned from afar, Arad's urban planning took place on site. The planning team took into consideration the city's social fabric along with the desert environment and its extreme weather conditions. Residing on-site, the planning team developed an architectural program based on actual encounters with the city's surrounding population, terrestrial and environmental conditions. *Salon Beton 1* focused on the series of ten Brutalist Playgrounds (initially coined Climatic Gardens) in the Avishur quarter of Arad in the Negev desert.<sup>114</sup> Designed by Dekel, they have, since their construction, grad-

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**114** ——— I will use the term Brutalist Playgrounds to contextualize what Dekel called Climatic Gardens in a historical and international context.

ually lost their functionality. The quarter was initially inhabited by Sabras (native Israelis). With the vast wave of immigration from the former USSR to the city in the 1990s, the population of the city doubled and many of the new immigrants settled in the Avishur quarter. In the mid 2000's the neighborhood's social fabric changed once again, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Gur Hasidim community of Arad moved into the quarter. With the danger of crudely identifying communities according to ethnic backgrounds and use of public space, in 2015, the year that *Salon Beton 1* took place, 40% of the Avishur quarter was comprised mainly of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, which uses public space functionally— except on Shabbat, the Jewish holy day of rest; the immigrant community from the former Soviet Union - which is largely secular - also comprised 40% of the quarter's community and is likely to use public space for recreation, play and leisure especially on Shabbat; the African Hebrew Israelite community that comprises of about 10% of the quarter and rarely uses public space for recreation, play and leisure and especially not on Shabbat, which they observe.<sup>115</sup> *Salon Beton 1* addressed how different uses of the public space may divide communities. The event raised questions regarding the possibility to activate public space of the Avishur quarter in such a way that it unites a wide range of positionalities without an aim of reaching a consensus regarding the use of the public sphere.

The curatorial method of the event was based on creating the conditions in which an examination on the current uses of the quarter's public spaces would take place. With the politics of play, recreation and leisure in Arad in mind, to allow for divergent positionalities to intersect and to create (momentarily) a democratic public space. At the heart of the curatorial ethos of the event stood Mouffe's proposal to "[...] accept the necessity of the political and the impossibility of a world without antagonism[...]" and to visualize "[...]how it is possible *under those conditions* to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order[...]"<sup>116</sup> By introducing the perspective of the initial designer of the Brutalist Playgrounds, the event created a platform that provoked a discussion regarding the disparities between their original design and how it they meet the current reality of the quarter.

<sup>115</sup> ——— The African Hebrews are African Americans who believe they are descendants of the ancient Israelites. In 1967, only 5 years after the city of Arad was founded, the first group of African Hebrews immigrated from United States to Arad. Based on a spiritual lifestyle that combines veganism with Judaism, African Hebrews are considered conservative Jews.

<sup>116</sup> ——— Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso, 1993, p.4

## 3.2 Salon Beton 1: The Tour

The guided tour of Avishur quarter that ran through six of ten Brutalist Playgrounds was led by Zvi Dekel, the designer of the landscape architecture of Arad. It was attended by 40 audience members, half from Arad and the other half arrived via transportation provided by the event from the center of Israel. Basing the tour on a series of previous interviews conducted between Dekel and architecture researcher Michael Jacobson, it began with one of the first descriptions of Dekel on how the original Climatic Gardens were initially used:

When the gardens were first open, they were a great success, for instance in Sukkot holiday, the children together with their parents built Sukkot [a simple hut that is constructed by each family used for meals throughout the one-week holiday, H.K.] in the gardens and held their activities there. There were also [play, H.K.] facilities that not one of them survived, I of course planned all the gardens, aside from the concrete fences, also with facilities, there was only one garden with a concrete labyrinth that did not need facilities.<sup>117</sup>

Attracting a mixed audience, partly from Arad and partly with others who arrived to the city especially to attend the event, *Salon Beton 1* raised issues on the politics of play, recreation and leisure in Arad as a microcosm for Israel as a whole. The event was covered by a journalist from the national newspaper Ha'aretz under the title: "Will art be able to wake up Arad?". In an article published shortly after the event, the journalist pointed to the gradual deterioration of the open spaces of the quarter over the years, asserting that the reason for this was that the public spaces of Avishur quarter were disconnected from surrounding quarters, leaving them secluded from visitors of other areas in the city.

<sup>117</sup> ——— Michael Jacobson, "A Tour in the Climatic Gardens in the Avishur Quarter in Arad and a section of an interview with landscape architect, Zvi Dekel" in *Salon Beton 1* event catalogue, ed. Hadas Kedar, Israel: self-published, 2015 [my translation], see: [https://www.hadaske-dar.com/\\_files/ugd/69e114\\_2b36a14b6b1b46b799854bcb141ec6a0.pdf](https://www.hadaske-dar.com/_files/ugd/69e114_2b36a14b6b1b46b799854bcb141ec6a0.pdf)



fig., 36 - 37, Malka Haas. *Junkyard Playgrounds*, 1970's -1980's. Photographs courtesy of Malka Haas estate.

Riba claimed that the residents with a higher socio-economic status have left the quarter for newer neighborhoods in Arad or for other cities.<sup>118</sup> The tour continued with a discussion on how the design ethos of the Brutalist Playgrounds coincided with the overall vision of the urban planning team of Arad. According to Dekel: “I felt we had a conversation and the planning was in full collaboration, and that we worked in the same mode.”<sup>119</sup> The tour continued based on Dekel’s ability to reflect on how the initial design ethos of the Brutalist Playgrounds is relevant to our day and age: “What I did 50 years ago was right for the time. It is [the public sphere of Avishur quarter, H.K.] derelict since families with children did not live in the quarter. Now, I hear, families have returned to the quarter”.<sup>120</sup> The tour that Dekel led raised questions regarding the personal motivation that drove Dekel to design the series of ten Brutalist Playgrounds in Arad. One may consider his involvement in the founding of kibbutz Harel (1948) and his specialization in designing kibbutz outdoor spaces as one of the main routes to consider his design of the open spaces of Arad. Dekel addressed the open spaces of the kibbutz by integrating art, education, and horticulture. Combining education and gardening in open spaces was quite common amongst the generation of the founders of the kibbutz.

One of the most interesting kibbutz innovators that linked outdoor spaces with experimental education was Malka Haas, who was amongst the founders of kibbutz Sde Eliezer. In the early 1940s Haas instigated a unique model of educational playgrounds that she called junkyard playgrounds **Figures 36 and 37**. Haas’s playgrounds focused on cultivating children’s curiosity through the combination of art, education, and the kibbutz ideology. A German Jew that escaped the Nazis, Haas grew up without parents and had to formulate her own method of educating her children. Coming from a socialist background, Haas recognized children as equal parts of the kibbutz community, having agency to design their own play environment. She believed they should, like their parents, be allowed to experience and invent their

118 ——— Naama Riba, “Can Art Wake Up”, Arad, Ha’aretz Newspaper, December 2011 [my translation], see: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/architecture/2015-11-25/ty-article/0000017f-e33d-d9aa-aff-fb7dd2330000> Last accessed 10/05/24

119 ——— Michael Jacobson, “A Tour in the Climatic Gardens in the Avishur Quarter in Arad and a section of an interview with landscape architect, Zvi Dekel” in Salon Beton I event catalogue, ed. Hadas Kedar, Israel: self-published, 2015 [my translation], see: [https://www.hadaske-dar.com/\\_files/ugd/69e114\\_2b36a14b6b1b46b799854bcb141ec6a0.pdf](https://www.hadaske-dar.com/_files/ugd/69e114_2b36a14b6b1b46b799854bcb141ec6a0.pdf)

120 ——— Ibid.

own environment. She asserted that pieces of junk “do not represent the broken, rusty, dirty remnants of human activity, but rather all the multifaceted richness that life has to offer.”<sup>121</sup> She encouraged kibbutz children to play with discarded objects as they felt like and to use them as instruments of innovative and playful experiences. One may associate Dekel’s inventiveness and experimentation, with Haas’s junkyard playgrounds and their educational ethos. It was in the kibbutz, throughout his experimentation with horticulture, play, and education that the seeds of Dekel’s future career were planted.<sup>122</sup> After leaving the kibbutz, Dekel travelled to Brazil to study landscape architecture with Roberto Burle Marx. Accustomed to the inventiveness of kibbutzim, Dekel encountered the severity of Brazilian modernist architecture and design that had crystallized in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>123</sup> Burle Marx was considered one of the pioneers of the Brazilian modernist national renewal movement and approached architecture through the nationalist sentiment of Brazilian culture and history. Burle Marx closely collaborated with the government on several projects to create designs that were aligned with the principles of the national Brazilian renewal movement.<sup>124</sup> Rendering a unique form of graphic design, tapestry, and folk art into his landscapes, Burle Marx had formulated a unique Brazilian modernist approach to landscape architecture. After concluding his apprenticeship with Burle Marx, Dekel returned to Israel and was recruited as the landscape architect of the planning team of Arad<sup>125</sup> **Figures 38 and 39** Dekel combined the nationalist sentiment of the revival of regional culture and history that

121 ——— Malka Haas, “Children in the Junkyard”, *Childhood Education*, Vol. 72, *Isu.6* (1996), p.345

122 ——— The experimental atmosphere of kibbutz Harel was also apparent in the Israeli artist Dani Karavan, who became famous for his public art and who was also a kibbutz member. Dani Karavan’s father was the main gardener of the city of Tel Aviv with whom Dekel worked with as an apprentice.

123 ——— The thirty-acre triangular “Crystal Plaza” designed by Burle Marx was envisioned as a vast military parade ground, commissioned by the Brazilian military regime for the Ministry of the Army in 1970.

124 ——— A retrospective of Burle Marx at the Jewish Museum in New York (2017) illustrated the full range of his artistic production, including landscape architecture, sculpture, set design, and environmental activism; collaborating with professionals from different disciplines.

125 ——— A more direct influence on the series of playgrounds in Arad may be found in Burle Marx’s series of gardens planned in conjunction with Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer’s new complex of social and cultural buildings in Brazil, and another planned but not realized series of 14 gardens complementing Niemeyer’s exhibition buildings, but even more in the garden plan of the Ministry of the Army in Brasilia.



fig. 38 - 39, *Avishur quarter*, Arad, 1970's.  
Photographs by Ran Erda.

he gained in Brasil with the conceptions of play and experimentation in the common space that he gained in the kibbutz. According to Dekel: "... when we came to occupy the land we wanted to occupy it all – the land and its people, that is Zionism." One may find the combination of a nationalist sentiment of Zionism as a widespread force that occupies the land in the built environment of the Brutalist Playgrounds in the open spaces of the new city of Arad. Efrat argues that the logic of new towns of the Negev desert, such as Arad, were based on the Zionist belief that they were the answer to the Jewish populations' quest for endurance in Israel: "New Towns policy is a mystified strategy taken for granted as both a redemptive act and a survivalist impulse."<sup>126</sup> The survivalist impulse of the new towns combined with Dekel's professional upbringings in the kibbutz were profoundly expressed in Arad. The kibbutz's experimental ethos that regarded children as agents of inventiveness and spatial understandings entwined with the survivalist impulse of the revival of culture that he had refined during when he trained under Burle Marx in Brazil. Traces of both biographic moments in Dekel's professional upbringing may be found in the 'climatic gardens in Avishur quarter in Arad that are coined today, Brutalist Playgrounds. Initially combining horticulture from the region with geometric constructions set in raw concrete, Dekel fused raw materiality, crude, geometric shapes with the inventiveness of the planning team of Arad.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the kibbutz founders who, as youngsters, had fled Europe, many of them leaving their parents behind, and had experimented in the 'junkyard playgrounds' with education through the prism of social reform, Arad's urban planning team was challenged by a heterogeneous community from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Alex Sher, the chief architect of Arad, argued that the public spaces of Arad "...constitute a focal point of attraction to the new and diverse population...here they will learn to know each other and here will grow and accumulate the common ground of the immigrants from various countries[...]"<sup>127</sup> By projecting a socialist reformist ethos on to a new town such as Arad, one creates inherent disparities in its initial design. Doing so, the planning team laid down the foundations for a future of discontent in Arad's public sphere. In the interview with

<sup>126</sup> ——— Zvi Efrat, *The Israeli Project, Building and Architecture 1948–1973*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2005 [my translation]

<sup>127</sup> ——— Alex Sher, "Elementary ideas for the planning of the city of Arad", *Archives of the Ministry of Construction and Housing*, Office of Director General Tanne, Arad district (April 1st, 1962): file 6 A-19, Container C-4943 [my translation]

Jacobson published in the *Salon Beton 1* catalogue, Dekel considered the defunct functioning of the playgrounds: "Then no one understood me, and there were people who criticized the idea saying the gardens were not airy enough, and the truth is that I myself also felt the same and that's why in my next projects I let a bit more air to enter. I relied very much on the growth of trees, but it takes 8-9 years for a tree to grow and therefore today when one wants the garden to function immediately then the pergolas increase [...]"<sup>128</sup>. The tour led by Dekel that visited the series of Brutalist Playgrounds created a moment of ideological collapse between the utopian vision of early and mid-20th century and the city's current reality - challenged by pressing economic, social, and demographic issues. During the tour, Dekel's frustration and discontent regarding the derelict state of the playgrounds was expressed more than once. In these comments he insinuated that would they had been cultivated as he intended them to be, the Brutalist Playgrounds of Arad would be in a better state than they were at the time of the event. The tour emphasized Dekel and his team's attempt to implement the anarchic spaces of experimentation for children in the urban space based on the high-modernist aesthetics of the European concourses of the 1950's and 1960's **Figures 40 and 41**. Based on the method of *Béton brut* - where concrete is left unfinished after being cast - displaying the cracks and seams of the formwork, the tour led by Dekel presented a radical design solution for public spaces in Arad, that had missed the opportunity to create welcoming spaces for encounters between the diverse communities of the city.

### 3.3 Salon Beton 1: The Symposium

The divergence in positionalities between Dekel and the residents of Avishur was ultimately revealed in a symposium that took place as part of *Salon Beton 1*. Speaking in the symposium alongside Dekel were Israel Drori, the main researcher on Dekel's work, Arad-based geographer Dr. Batya Roded; and Arad-born, Tel Aviv-based architect Robert

<sup>128</sup> ——— Michael Jacobson, "A Tour in the Climatic Gardens in the Avishur Quarter in Arad and a section of an interview with landscape architect, Zvi Dekel" in *Salon Beton 1* event catalogue, ed. Hadas Kedar, Israel: self-published, 2015 [my translation], see: [https://www.hadaske-dar.com/\\_files/ugd/69e114\\_2b36a14b6b1b46b799854bcb141ec6a0.pdf](https://www.hadaske-dar.com/_files/ugd/69e114_2b36a14b6b1b46b799854bcb141ec6a0.pdf)



fig. 40 - 41, *Avishur quarter, Arad*, 1970's. Photographs by Ran Erda.

Unger, part of Oniya (Ship) collective that leads place making projects with municipal and regional institutions in Israel. During the symposium residents' of Avishur raised questions regarding creative endeavors that they had undertaken in which they painted the raw concrete structures of the Brutalist Playgrounds in vibrant colors and why they were met by dissatisfaction on behalf of Dekel. Spontaneous decorative acts of Avishur residents that challenged Dekel's initial design ethos based on the method of *Béton brut* that attaches high aesthetic value, especially in the last decades, to architectural structures built in raw concrete.<sup>129</sup> Dekel spoke of their high modernist design approach that were rooted in the overall urban planning of Arad. Residents linked the purist approach of Dekel with a leftist ideological perspective. Pointing out that the ideological values that were the basis of the socialist left in Israel had lost their foothold in Israeli society. Audience members linked the derelict state of the Brutalist Playgrounds in Arad to the failure of the leftist ideology in Israel to develop a tangible political outlook on the diverse communities of new towns such as Arad. Residents that attended the symposium posed questions concerning the derisory state of the playgrounds asking if their current state is not the inevitable result of an ideological purist virtue that was at the root of their design. Numerous residents spoke of the Brutalist Playgrounds as cemeteries of idealistic imaginations that were at the basis of the founding of the state of Israel. In the face of audience members' demand to address the public spaces of Avishur quarter in Arad which were initially intended to accommodate children's playtime and engage family members and had eventually become precarious and vulnerable public spaces, leads us to the notion of a democratic public sphere as articulated by Mouffe:

The illusion of consensus and unanimity, as well as the calls for 'anti-polities', should be recognized as being fatal for democracy and therefore abandoned...When there is a lack of democratic political struggles with which to identify, their place is taken by other forms of identification, of ethnic, nationalist or religious nature, and the opponent is defined in those terms too. In such conditions, the opponent cannot be perceived as an adversary to contend with, but only as an enemy to be destroyed.<sup>130</sup>

Mouffe emphasizes that need for a democratic political struggle in a democratic public sphere. If the call for 'anti-polities' dominates the public sphere, it may give rise to other forms of identification of reli-

<sup>129</sup> ——— For example, see: Barnabas Calder, "Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism", London: Cornerstone, 2022

<sup>130</sup> ——— Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso, 1993, p.25

gious, nationalist and ethnic nature. By exploring the politics of play, recreation and leisure in Arad, focusing on the Avishur quarter, the symposium created a democratic discursive platform in which residents of the quarter shared their opinions on the public spaces between their houses. The symposium was a public arena where divergent positionalities meet and consider each other's opinions, without an aim to reach consensus or unanimity. Canceling and discouraging residents' spontaneous creative acts towards the raw concrete and its gloominess in their eyes that may be considered performances of a democratic struggle, the symposium demonstrated how eradicating free creative acts in the public sphere may lead to the strengthening of forms of identification of residents based on ethnic, nationalist or religious attributes that may be a major reason that had led to the decline of the public sphere of Arad. In summary, institutional reinforcement of non-violent, creative forms of expressions in the public sphere, may have, in fact, discourage other forms of identifications that create estrangement between communities.

### 3.4 Placemaking: Structural Inequalities Meet Art in the Public Sphere

During the symposium Arad-born architect Robert Unger spoke of the strength embedded in collaborations between cultural practitioners and regional and municipal institutions, emphasizing that in his eyes successful urban renewal projects are based on tailor-made cultural programs that involve the residents of the urban space. According to Unger, the first and major step in the process of placemaking projects that encourage urban renewal is their re-assessment in terms of a variety of uses of the spaces. Doing so involves collecting information from residents regarding their sentiments toward the public spaces and how they foresee their engagement with these spaces.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, following Unger, one should apply the evaluations to become the heart of a cultural program with a wide range of positionalities with which one may identify. Although they are supposedly not subordinated to the curatorial ethos of cultural institutions, it appears that many times placemaking projects duplicate the limitations and restrictions that institutions pose on specific communities, particularly those who do not align with a western perspective on art and creativity.

It seems that the logic of placemaking is frequently based on the creation of public spaces that smooth out differences. They create an environment of 'anti-polities' that revokes a democratic political struggle in the public sphere. Following Mouffe, revoking spontaneous acts of creative expressions as portrayed by residents of Avishur quarter may give rise to other forms of identification that lead to recognizing an opponent as an enemy to be destroyed rather than an adversary that may be challenged. As a direct result of *Salon Beton I*, Arad municipality received a grant from The Office of the Defense of the Environment and The Jewish National Fund to renovate the series of Brutalist Playgrounds in Avishur quarter of Arad. A municipal social worker was appointed to oversee the social aspects of the renewal of the playgrounds<sup>132</sup>. The appointment of a municipal employee to interact with the neighborhood's residents spoke to the sentiment that Unger con-

<sup>131</sup> ——— Information that is crucial also for playgrounds long-term maintenance.

<sup>132</sup> ——— In fact the social worker trengthened structural inequalities between Dekel's positionality and that of the residents of the quarter.

tributed to the symposium. Nevertheless, the result of the urban renewal of the playgrounds centered on their aesthetics: removal of paint from the raw concrete, cleaning the spaces and installing a soft colorful floor. The urban renewal project did not include a tailor-made cultural program based on socially engaged activities, as suggested by Unger. Remodeling the Brutalist Playgrounds may have created pleasing public spaces, but they did not address the engagement of certain communities who do not align with western, modernist aesthetics with the public spaces. By peeling off the painted endeavors of the quarter's residents, it seems that the municipality opted for an urban renewal project that steers away from a democratic public struggle. The urban renewal of the series of Brutalist Playgrounds that smoothed out the differences between the positionality of the residents and those of the initial designer, eventually contributed to the weakening of their sense of identification with the spaces, and instead strengthened the connection with their ethnic, nationalist or religious groups. The focal point of *Salon Beton 1*, the Brutalist Playgrounds of Avishur quarter, one of the most innovative and inventive architectural projects in Israel, brought to the surface contradictions in positionalities that exist in the public sphere of Arad touching on questions such as: Who feels comfortable in the public sphere of Arad? Who doesn't and due to what reasons? What may be done in order to create the conditions in which divergent positionalities may exist in the public sphere without, on the one hand, becoming enemies, and on the other, aiming for consensus? The performative event raised concerns on how the survivalist impulse and nationalist sentiment of new towns of the Negev that were cast in raw concrete encountered the current reality of the city with its nuanced social fabric.

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## 3.5 Conclusion of First Section of Chapter Three

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Through the perspective of the Israeli politics of play, leisure, and recreation, the first section of Chapter Three analyzed the curatorial and artistic interventions of the public event *Salon Beton 1*. The event demonstrated how a series of Brutalist Playgrounds in Arad that were the focal point of the event reflected inherent structural differences between the initial design ethos and its current reality: between a socialist reformist ethos and the survivalist impulse of new towns of the Negev that were employed into the high-modernist aesthetics *Béton brut* and the present-day actuality of Arad with its diverse communities and precarious living conditions. Mentioning experiments of social reformers of the first half of the 20th century who had considered child play as part of a larger picture of revolutionary educational ideas, the first half of chapter Three argues that place making methods that are applied in urban renewal projects many times create slick space that smooth out differences, excluding those who do not necessarily align with a western perspective on art and creativity. Responding to the initial motivation of the planning team of Arad to create public spaces in which encounters of diverse communities of Arad take place, *Salon Beton 1* re-inscribed meaning into the Brutalist Playgrounds through playful and adventurous artistic interventions. The curatorial ethos of *Salon Beton 1* was to re-introduce the variation and diversity of points of view on the politics of play, leisure and recreation into the defunct public spaces. Creative and playful artistic interventions introduced the perspective of children and youngsters into the Brutalist Playgrounds that have gradually disappeared since their inception. By regarding the quarter's residents, especially children, as agents of change, *Salon Beton 1* resonated the social inventiveness of social reformers of the 20th century such as Dekel and Haas, while taking in account the structural differences between the homogenous community of the kibbutz and diverse backgrounds of the residents of the new town of Arad.

## 3.6 Second Curatorial Shift: The Oeuvre of an Artist from the Negev in Central Museum

In this section I will interrogate another curatorial shift and its influence on the audience and its reception. There was a shift in the curatorial context of the exhibition of the oeuvre of the artist Ruth Dorrit Yacoby (1952–2015), who lived and worked in Arad. The shift that is the focal point of this section is from the exhibition of her work in the context of the city where she operated to a central museum of Israel. This analysis of the shift in the curatorial context of Yacoby's artwork sketches out the coordinates of the Israeli art discourse and how it is influenced by its institutional circumstances. Born as Ruth Yacoby to a Canadian-born mother and a father of Iraqi descent, Yacoby turned to art later in her life, after giving birth to four children and practicing psychology.<sup>133</sup> Yacoby's was born in a cooperative farming community in the north of Israel near the Sea of Galilee and after marrying moved to Arad, where her husband worked as an engineer for the mineral refining industries. In Arad she qualified as a psychologist and began working in the city. Subsequent to raising her four children she began her art studies in Be'er Sheva and later enrolled in one of Israel's main art schools in central Israel. While raising her four children, she practiced art in her studio in the industrial zone of Arad. Focusing on ideas of womanhood, motherhood, and care, Yacoby's work was many times sidelined by mainstream Israeli artists and curators. Nevertheless, although she lived in the geographical periphery and focused on themes that were largely at odds with the male-centered discourse of Israeli art, Yacoby exhibited extensively in Israel and internationally.

I became acquainted with Yacoby during my post as artist of the community of Arad<sup>134</sup> and visited her in her studio a few times. I was inspired by her vast oeuvre that dealt with themes that were quite at odds with the Israeli art discourse. The first step that I took in the

<sup>133</sup> ——— The fact that Yacoby prioritized her gendered roles before practicing art seemed to have contributed to her misrecognition in the Israeli art canon.

<sup>134</sup> ——— Artist of the community is a project initiated by the Ministry of Culture and Sport in which artists operate in the periphery of Israeli, mainly in educating children and youth in art and culture.

direction of the curatorial exploration of her work was in the group exhibition *Arad: from Vision to Delusion – Chapter 1* (2017)<sup>135</sup> that I curated. The exhibition dealt with the creative mindset of Arad and the region and how the socio-political conditions of the desert are reflected in the work of artists that were either born or raised in the region.

In the context of the group exhibition, Yacoby's artworks sounded the voice of a female artist who dealt with themes that were largely unaccepted in the Israeli art discourse. Although widely exhibited in Israel and internationally, considered herself as an artist operating in the social and geographic periphery of Israel. After her sudden death, I began to further pursue a curatorial inquiry of her work.<sup>136</sup> I was motivated to re-contextualize her oeuvre to a wider audience. *Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* **Figure 42** was staged at one of Israel's central museums, Herzliya Museum of Art (2021-22) provided me with the conditions for re-examination of Yacoby's oeuvre.<sup>137</sup>

*Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* highlighted the feminist perspective of Yacoby that challenged the constraints and limitations of the Israeli art canon. A feminist perspective that was also prominent in her positioning on environmental issues. Due to her feminist perspective on notions of motherhood, womanhood, and care, Yacoby was considered by numerous Israeli and international artists and curators as an outsider artist.<sup>138</sup> An example for this may be found in the German curator Dr. Gabriele Uelsberg's consideration of Yacoby's appropriation of various materials and found objects in her artistic interventions, regarding them as: "blend of reality and imagination."<sup>139</sup> Another route into the analysis of Yacoby's appropriation of found objects could be the artistic method of *objet trouvé*, practiced mainly by the Surrealists and that challenged traditional ideas about art by asserting that any object could be a work of art if a person recog-

<sup>135</sup> ——— The exhibition *Arad: from Vision to Delusion – Chapter 1* was discussed extensively in Chapter Two.

<sup>136</sup> ——— See Yacoby's website: [www.ruthdy.com](http://www.ruthdy.com)

<sup>137</sup> ——— Around the time that the exhibition *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* was held at the Herzliya Museum, a new survey of the history Israeli art was organized in Tel Aviv Museum and included a work of Yacoby that was in its collection but never exhibited in the context of its survey of Israeli art.

<sup>138</sup> ——— Although Yacoby exhibited widely in Israel and abroad, she was not included in the most comprehensive survey of Israeli art: Yigal Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2013). Originally published in Hebrew by The Israel Museum in 2010.

<sup>139</sup> ——— Gabriele Uelsberg, *Living Space: On the Art of Dorrit Yacoby*, Herzliya: Herzliya Museum, 1993



fig. 42, Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: *The Door to the Secret Garden*, 2021 -2022. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Photograph by Dor Even Chen

nized its aesthetic virtue. However, by considering the appropriation of found objects in her oeuvre as an expression of her blurred distinction between what is real and what is fiction, Uelsberg's analysis essentialized Yacoby's femininity that many times considers the female imagination as a means to transgress reality. Instead, I would argue that being that she struggled to be accepted by the Israeli mainstream art discourse, Yacoby's integration of found objects such as discarded furniture, windows, doors, and broken glass into her artistic interventions was in fact a quite realistic manifestation of her profound identification with negligible, lost, objects.<sup>140</sup>

### 3.7 The Door to the Secret Garden: Five Themes, Six Rooms

In April 2014, one year before her death, Yacoby submitted a proposal to the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport to represent Israel in the Venice Biennale. The 100- page document<sup>141</sup> that she compiled serves as a testament of Yacoby's motivation to become officially recognized by the Israeli institutional art system. Her proposal was based on three

<sup>140</sup> ——— Here I link the “found object” with Yacoby's consideration of herself a marginal artist that sought to be rescued from “disposal” and re-introduced into the Israeli art discourse in a new context.

<sup>141</sup> ——— The documents that are included in the PDF include: a three-page submission form; 18 pages of her CV; two-page page literal description of the Biennale Project titled: “Ruth Dorrit Yacoby, The Biennale Project in Venice, The Happy Mother of the Sons, The Journey to the Land of the Living”; the overall layout of the exhibition that is described by her as a journey that takes place between three territories within the three spaces of the pavilion. A five-page visualization of the exhibition inscribed upon the architectural layouts of the Israeli pavilion; detailed descriptions of each level incorporating her own poems and writings (thirty-two page description of the Land of the Dead, nineteen-page description of the Journey of Living Heart, twenty-four-page description of the Land of the Living); eleven scanned pages of newspaper articles on her art in English, Italian and Japanese; eight frames taken from a film that her son, Amram Yaakoby created, “The Woman of the Thousand Voices” and a one-page synopsis of the film; twenty-five scanned pages from the exhibition catalogue of her solo show at the Vatican and fifty scanned pages from her solo exhibition in the Tel Aviv University Gallery,

themes: The Land of the Dead,<sup>142</sup> The Beating Heart<sup>143</sup> and The Land of the Living.<sup>144</sup> The exhibition description read:

The creative work of the great mother's journey is rooted in the depths of a private psychic being, which understands suffering as an existential state of continuing antiquity...An existential experience similar to a mystical religious occurrence and as the world of the ancient myth, therefore it is interpreted as a journey: a transformative, conscious and spiritual journey of mythical heroes to the deep abyss and back to the world of life, or the journey of the soul to redemption and eternity, this journey takes place between the poles of birth, death and rebirth, in a circular motion that proclaims life from death.<sup>145</sup>

The curatorial methodology of *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* was based on resonating the poetic and enigmatic language of her Biennale proposal. Five main themes of her oeuvre, based on themes that were raised in the above Biennale description, correlated with the five rooms in the exhibition space, with an additional room dedicated to her object-based artworks. Alongside the exhibition space, a reading room included documentation of Yacoby's various expositions in Israel and abroad as well as an archival materials section featuring film and video; and an additional screening room continuously screened the film *The Woman of a Thousand Voices* (2008,

142 ——— Yacoby situated the Land of the Dead on the first floor of the Israeli pavilion and described it as the area of the exhibition that comprises of songs, paintings, her son's film and an audio work in which her parents read her poems, alongside handwritten poems in color on white canvases, stained curtains and sheets that seemed to her as if they were ancient manuscripts of monks. (Yacoby, Dorrit, proposal to represent Israel in the Venice biennale, 2014).

143 ——— The Living Heart was intended to be exhibited on the middle floor of the Israeli pavilion. Yacoby describes it as such: Within the cracks between the worlds and in the transition between them, the heart is born; margins of the living and the dead; gripping the soul, the breath has movement from the ends of the world to the beating heart - a place of resuscitation. (Yacoby, Dorrit, proposal to represent Israel in the Venice biennale, 2014).

144 ——— Yacoby considered The Land of Life that was intended for the second floor of the pavilion as the end point of the journey. It is the center from which everything springs, it is the beginning of existence, the starting point for life and its end. At the heart of the axis lies the great mother, the tree as a source of life, nourishment, protection and protection, the matrix that unites the whole of existence (Yacoby, Dorrit, proposal to represent Israel in the Venice biennale, 2014).

145 ——— Yacoby, Dorrit, proposal to represent Israel in the Venice Biennale, 2014

60 mins) on a large screen. The film was directed by her son Amram Yacoby; I will get back to the film shortly.

The five themes of the exhibition emphasized the feminist aspects of Yacoby's oeuvre. Through the eyes of a woman and a mother, the exhibition considered Yacoby's perspective on pertinent issues of Israeli society such as spirituality, belief systems, and the human impact on nature. Nevertheless, the curatorial perspective on these issues refrained from essentializing femininity or considering Yacoby a feminist artist, as she did not consider herself as such - although she did exhibit in this context.<sup>146</sup>

In contrast to her vast studio-showroom in her home city of Arad, where her artworks filled the studio from the floor to ceiling, the layout of the exhibition *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* was based on intimate engagements between the audience and each artwork. The exhibition design allowed one to encounter Yacoby's works and experience their layered textures and intricate compositions them from up close. The curatorial ethos of the exhibition was to gradually introduce the five themes, beginning with those that were easier to digest, and as the exhibition progressed, to introduce such themes as suffering, pain, anguish, disintegration and bereavement.

The following is a list of the five themes that were at the root of the curatorial investigation of Yacoby's oeuvre. They are followed by an extensive analysis of each theme. The first theme, *A Feminist Perspective on Belief Systems* **Figure 43** centered on religious and spiritual iconography that was a salient aspect of Yacoby's oeuvre. The second theme, *The Feminine Grid: Rhythmic Dynamism of a Female Fragmented Presence in a Male-Dominated Society* addressed the recurring image in her work, of a flat female silhouette that may be linked to notions of the female body and spirituality. The third theme, *Reclaiming Her Birth Name Ruth and A Feminist Perspective on Belief Systems* dealt with the fact that at a mature age Yacoby renamed herself "Ruth" and painted her newly acquired name into a vast number of artworks. The fourth theme, *Infliction of Harsh Conditions on Art and Artist* addressed images of suffering, anguish, and disintegration of the body. The fifth theme, *Loosening Language Links: Painting Language from a Feminist Perspective*, dealt with how Yacoby often inscribed her own poems into her artwork and repeatedly painted broken sentences, words, phrases,

146 ——— For example, in the group exhibition *Feminine Presence: Israeli Women Artists in the Seventies and the Eighties*, curated by Ellen Ginton at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1990, Yacoby exhibited alongside Tamar Getter, Deganit Berest and Michal Na'aman, who have been largely associated with Israeli Dalut HaHomer (Arte Povera).



fig. 43, *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden*, 2021 - 2022.

Curator: Hadas Kedar. Photograph by Dor Even Chen

and syllables. The sixth theme was dedicated to her object-based artworks and was located in the heart of the exhibition where a large podium was installed. The podium was covered with salt which was a direct reference her studio floor where she scattered salt. Salt is also one of the main protagonists of the film *The Woman of a Thousand Voices* (2008, 60 minutes) created by Yacoby's son, Amram. Salt is represented through its duality: as a substance that impedes life and growth and references pain and suffering, and as a substance involved in the processes of healing and preservation.

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### 3.8 Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: Womanhood, Motherhood, Care

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One of the most enigmatic themes of Yacoby's oeuvre was addressed in the third curatorial theme of the exhibition. Nine artworks organized around a watershed moment in the artist's adult life. The theme presented a biographical moment in which Yacoby reappropriated her birth name "Ruth" and inscribed it into many of her artworks. Considering the act of reversing that biographical instant when her mother changed her birth name from Ruth to Dorrit, the theme centered on the notion of how the artist worked with her own identity as creative material. By adding her birth name "Ruth" to her adult name "Dorrit", Yacoby resonated a biblical Ruth. According to the biblical narrative, after losing her husband, Ruth forms a female alliance with her husband's mother, a female alliance that encounters pertinent questions of womanhood and motherhood in a patriarchal society. The artworks organized around the theme of Ruth highlighted the fact that the social constructs of womanhood and motherhood in the patriarchal Jewish society were a major concern for Yacoby. Her addition of the name "Ruth" to her mature female identity speaks of her reliance on female alliances as a source of strength. Professor Haviva Pedaya, an Israeli poet, author, cultural researcher, and professor of Jewish history and a noted Mizrahi<sup>147</sup> feminist intellectual who was Yacoby's teacher and friend, explored manifestations of religion in Israeli society and gendered expressions of religious sentiments. Pedaya's critical outlook

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147 ——— In modern Israeli usage, Mizrahi Jews refers to all Jews from Central and West Asian countries, many of them Arabic-speaking Muslim-majority countries.

on Israeli society's ongoing oppression of women, especially Mizrahi (Jews who have immigrated from North Africa) women living at the periphery, was central to Yacoby's development of a feminist prospect. Through her encounters with Pedaya, Yacoby became interested in linking notions of womanhood and motherhood with religious belief systems. Yacoby invited Pedaya to write the main exhibition text to her solo exhibition, *Gate of Tears, Rain of Roses* (2001) that was held at the Vatican<sup>148</sup>

The observer of Yacoby's works feels that her art is carved out of the abysses of the soul, and that one is looking at a story whose existential power draws on the effort and striving for spiritual and creative development, along with the urge for self-realization as a woman and mother.<sup>149</sup>

Pedaya's association between Yacoby's spiritual and creative development and her urge for self-realization as a woman and mother as it appears in her words is made explicit in the painting *On the Night of All the Moons Ruth was Born* (2009-11). The painting links the biblical scene in which Ruth follows Naomi's advice to meet Boaz at night (Ruth 3:3-4) with the moment of Yacoby's "re-birth" - as her namesake "Ruth". A female figure appears in the painting, against a red background. She is wreathed in plants, cradling a bird in her arms. The painting seems to express Yacoby's exploration of Judaism and Kabbalah through the perspective of care and empathy. By centering a series of works on "Ruth", Yacoby touched on the significance for Jewish women of females in the Bible.<sup>150</sup> A similar sentiment appears in *Mary's Mercy Cabinet is Empty* (2000-3) referring to the Virgin Mary who is believed to have conceived Jesus after being impregnated by the Holy Spirit and without having sexual relations. While the series of paintings that allude to biblical "Ruth" link her Yacoby's own biographical moment in which her identity was twisted and contrived by herself, the painting *Mary's Mercy Cabinet is Empty* speaks of acts of puritanism and sacredness of the female body that were projected upon

<sup>148</sup> ——— The exhibition was on view at the Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses.

<sup>149</sup> ——— Haviva Pedaya, *Between the Sky and the Land*, in *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: Gate of Tears, Rain of Roses*, Rome: The Vatican, 2001

<sup>150</sup> ——— It was unaccepted that secular artists would address religious issues. Yacoby may have been influenced by a contemporary Michal Na'aman (b. 1951) who based her installation *Kid in Its Mother's Milk* (1974) on the biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not cook a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19) combining it with the notion of the regimentation of female subjects at childbirth and the separation of the mother from her child.

the Virgin Mary as a subject of patriarchal orderings. *Garment of Life* (2008-2010) is set inside a shallow box, depicting a female figure intermingling with her background. The painting displays the female body in its final state of disintegration. Fragments of the female silhouette are graced by desert debris such as stones, twigs, and sand. The painting demonstrates Yacoby's unconventional exploration of death, burial, and bereavement from the viewpoint of a female body. Yacoby dealt with issues of death, burial, and bereavement from the perspective of the women in Israeli society involved in a perpetual political conflict. Unlike male artists of her generation that typically dealt with war and bereavement from the viewpoint of the soldier, Yacoby portrayed the pain and suffering those wars inflicted on Israeli society from the perspective of women and mothers who lost their husbands and children in the wars.

### 3.9 Poetic Constructions: Destabilizing Language Structures

The fourth theme of the exhibition, *Loosening Language Links: Painting Language from a Feminist Perspective* **Figure 44** consisted of the repeated painted poems and broken sentences, words, phrases and syllables.<sup>151</sup> By incorporating syllables, words and sentences into her artwork, Yacoby inflicted a constant destabilization of a widely accepted, consensual vocabulary. The text-based works included syllables, words and sentences loosely painted or smeared on canvas, textile, or wood or linen. Recognizing that the syntax of language is a key means of exerting control in a patriarchal society, Yacoby's text-based works provoked to challenge the institutionalization of language by patriarchal educational institutions.<sup>152</sup> Yacoby's destabilization of widely accepted language constructions based on poetic decoding call to mind international female poets who reclaimed language from a femi-

<sup>151</sup> ——— A practice that may be linked with Freud's notion of repetition compulsion (Wiederholungszwang).

<sup>152</sup> ——— In her text-based work in particular, Yacoby forged an affinity with a previous generation of Israeli artists who criticized the use of Hebrew in political contexts. For example, her teacher Moshe Gershuni who painted letters and words as part of an exploration of spirituality in the context of commemorating the Holocaust. Unlike Yacoby, as a male artist Gershuni maintained his status in the mainstream canon of Israeli art despite his critique of the patriarchal control on language.



fig. 44, Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: *The Door to the Secret Garden*, 2021 - 2022.

Curator: Hadas Kedar. Photograph by Dor Even Chen

nist perspective. One such example is Yacoby's contemporary - the American poet, essayist, and feminist Adrienne Rich (1929-2012). Rich wrote in her essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, wrote: "Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."<sup>153</sup> Following Rich, Yacoby's undermining of accepted linguistic structures was an act of survival. Nevertheless, it was a form of existence that was not necessarily based on a pure feminist approach. In contrast to Israeli artist Aviva Uri (1922-1989) who asserted that "If one wishes to create, one must firstly be an artist, and only then a woman",<sup>154</sup> Yacoby's survivalist instinct did not compromise motherhood for pursuing a career in art. Rather, Yacoby assumed a liberal feminist approach that combined the female, gendered role that she assumed with an artistic career. This approach is dealt with in a series of text-based works in which Yacoby inscribed the names of female figures who incorporated their gendered roles with their artistic careers. For example: the ancient Greek scientist Pythias who wrote, together with her husband Aristotle, an encyclopedia of specimens of living things, and the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, who had an artistic relationship with her artist husband, Diego Rivera. Inscribing the names of Pythias and Kahlo in her paintings, Yacoby gave presence to a liberal feminist approach, strengthening her own existence as wife, mother and artist. Israeli feminist art historian Tal Dekel explains that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Zionist idea of gender equality was based on a biological-essentialist approach.<sup>155</sup>

In contrast to first-wave Zionist feminism, one of the strengths of later feminist thought is the opportunity to reevaluate, or even recast events and accepted historical narratives by asking in the name of what, and for whose interests, do certain events become part of the collective experience? It is within the context of these inquiries that one may consider the liberal feminist approach of Yacoby. As an artist she established a feminist perspective that was critical of a generally patriarchal Israeli art discourse. As a mother of four living in the periphery, she pursued her gendered role in Israeli society.

<sup>153</sup> ——— Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", *College English: Women, Writing and Teaching*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1972), p.18

<sup>154</sup> ——— Uri as quoted in Dekel, p. 154.

<sup>155</sup> ——— Tal Dekel, "From First-Wave to Third-Wave Feminist Art in Israel: A Quantum Leap," *Israel Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 2011): pp. 149-178

## 3.10 The Female Grid: A Fragmented Presence

A female silhouette suspended in the air, arms outstretched, cross-like, at times with a halo around her head, is a recurring image in Yacoby's oeuvre. The second theme of the exhibition centered on paintings of the female silhouette in a wide array of compositional and color variations **Figure 45**. In the preface to the catalogue of her solo exhibition curated by Mordechai Omer, the late curator of Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Tel Aviv University Gallery, Omer stated that the recurring theme as Yacoby's expression of the "...spiritual experience of the Great Mother of all life and death, lamenting over the dead but also giving life and curing the hurt."<sup>156</sup> Expanding on Omer's notion of the female as the expression of motherhood, care and bereaving, one may consider Omer's reference to the gendered role of the female in a patriarchal society as a backbone of existence - an existence that provides both life and death. The gendered role of the mother split between the gift of life and the tormenting of a lost soul is considered in the second theme of the exhibition. The split or fragmentation of the female existence is considered in the formal composition of these paintings. In formalist terms, the female figure - spine of existence - serves as the artwork's means of division of the canvas into sub-sections. The American art theorist Rosalind Krauss asserted that the grid in the paintings of European artists Mondrian and Malevich: "[...]is a staircase to the Universal, and they are not interested in what happens below in the Concrete."<sup>157</sup> According to Krauss, the modernist grid is an expression of the sublime, while at the same time disregarding reality. The spine of existence in Yacoby's compositions is a concrete expression of the split gendered role of the female in Israeli society.

While the male modernist's grid introduces a rigid rhythm into the paintings' compositions that serves as the staircase to the Universal, the female-silhouette-grid of Yacoby is a flexible and dynamic means to create sub-compositions in the painting. A malleable grid that expresses the dynamic fragmentation inherent in the gendered role of

<sup>156</sup> ——— Mordechai Omer, "Preface" in *The Woman of the Thousand Voices*, Tel Aviv: The Genia Schreiber University Gallery, 2011 [my translation]

<sup>157</sup> ——— Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, London: The MIT Press, 1986, p.10



fig. 45, Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: *The Door to the Secret Garden*, 2021 -2022. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Photograph by Dor Even Chen

the female in a patriarchal society. A means in which Yacoby expresses quite different modes of a female existence that includes marriage, motherhood and artist.<sup>158</sup>

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### 3.11 Conclusion of Second Section of Third Chapter

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The second half of the chapter has demonstrated how a shift in the curatorial context of the display of artworks of Ruth Dorrit Yacoby - from the context of Arad to the exhibition of her work in the context of a central museum in Israel - led to a renewed consideration of her acceptance into the Israeli art canon.<sup>159</sup> At a point in time in contemporary art where it is popular to survey unfamiliar female artists, there is no doubt that the positive reaction to the exhibition of Yacoby's oeuvre was also due to its timing. Focusing on five central themes that emphasize feminist aspects of her oeuvre, the exhibition *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* pointed to the restrictions and constraints of the Israeli art discourse that had not accepted Yacoby at the time due to her marginality – geographical and artistic. Addressing issues such as giving birth, female pain and suffering, burial and disintegration of the female body, and linking them with womanhood, motherhood, and care, Yacoby's oeuvre was many times overruled by a male-dominated Israeli art discourse that did not consider such issues as relevant to a contemporary art discourse. Chapter One considered how the broadening of curatorial agenda of cultural institutions in the Negev is rooted in the integration of a wide range of artistic interventions from both western and non-western cultural logics, diversifying the curatorial agendas and collections of Negev cultural institutions. Responding to the fact that audiences will not share the same vantage point when engaging with a particular artistic intervention, Chapter Two focused on artistic interventions that dealt with the burning issues of land, land use and land rights in the Negev and discussed how differential vantage points regarding burning issues are sustained by the physical and theoretical space of the cultural institution. By

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**158** ——— The difference between the male and female grid may be linked to Deleuze and Guattari's notions of smooth and striated space.

**159** ——— One of the major successes of *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* was the insertion of a previously unexhibited painting into the permanent collection of the Tel Aviv Museum.

exploring two curatorial shifts – the first from the controlled environment of the art space to the public sphere, and the second, from the exhibition context of a peripheral art center to a museum in central Israel– Chapter Three investigated how a shift from a conventional curatorial setting opens possibilities to challenge the conventions of Israeli public space and the Israeli art discourse. Chapter Four of the thesis examines the Dead Sea region asking what are the conditions that had cultivated a series of subversive existences on its shores. The chapter delves into the unique conditions of the lowest place on the surface of Earth to investigate their imprint in the development of dissident forms of art and creative expressions. The Dead Sea that lies at the depth of the Great Rift Valley in the eastern corner of the Negev has seen alternative religious, social, material, and political realities take presence on its shores. Surveying significant events and historical turns in the political and economic past of the Dead Sea region, the chapter establishes how a struggle to control the region by imperial forces had disastrous effects on the environment and had eventually led to the Dead Sea's demise.

## Dana Lev Levnat

When I returned to her after 20 years, at first glance she seemed as if she had not changed; The same small houses and yards where we slept in sleeping bags, the same cinema and the same buildings. As I first wandered around the city, I walked in the streets and paths that I recognized from the days spent at the Arad Festival, but the longer my stay, the longer I wandered.



Dana Lev Levnat. *Untitled (Arad)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



Dana Lev Levnat. *Untitled (Arad)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



Dana Lev Levnat. *Untitled (Arad)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



Dana Lev Levnat. *Untitled (Arad)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



Dana Lev Levnat. *Untitled (Arad)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

## Sasha Flit

Metonymy forms the lens in Sasha Flit's portraits of Arad, an Israeli city located in a geographic and poly-experiential interzone between his country's metropolitan centers and tourism magnet, the Dead Sea. Its people, habitations and landscape present a multicultural reality, where participants attempt a depth of field, shutter speed and viewing angle on their own terms. Agency is sacrosanct, but Flit acknowledges that *"When our coordinates lose their meaning we are left horrified in the face of uncertainty."*



Sasha Flit. *Untitled*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.



Sasha Flit. *Untitled*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.



Sasha Flit. *Untitled*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.



Sasha Flit. *Untitled*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.



Sasha Flit. *Untitled*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

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## Chapter 4

# Artistic and Curatorial Interventions in the Dead Sea Region

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The Dead Sea region is considered by many a peripheral region. While it is outside the scope of this chapter to thoroughly account for how widely accepted world models have dictated the way we perceive global regions, the chapter does aim to challenge the Dead Sea region's peripherality by unpacking its significant history. The most widely accepted world systems approach was developed by American sociologist and economic historian Immanuel Wallerstein and was based on relative positioning of geographic entities within the capitalist world system<sup>160</sup>. Beginning his career as an expert on post-colonial Africa and India,<sup>161</sup> Wallerstein based his world system model on the division of the world's production and how it has led certain areas to become central to the growth of the ruling classes while subjugating other regions to commodification of human labor and expenditure of global natural resources.<sup>162</sup> Wallerstein's system schematically dividing the world into core, semi-periphery, and peripheral countries is a sincere attempt to explain unequal global power relations – not to provoke them.<sup>163</sup> During the 1990's several post-colonial theoreticians and historians criticized the modern world system model of Wallerstein based on a capitalist, economic logic, proposing other systems that conceptualize the development of central and peripheral regions.<sup>164</sup> Instead of simply inverting the map of the earth to place the south on the top and the north below, leaving intact the dualism that fixated the binary worlds system model of Wallerstein, post-colonial theoreti-

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**160** ——— Wallerstein's based his world systems model on one developed by Argentinean economist Raul Prebisch in the 1950's.

**161** ——— Wallerstein was the president of the African Studies Association (1972–1973) see his CV: <https://iwallerstein.com/wp-content/uploads/docs/iwallerstein-cv-eng-09.pdf>

**162** ——— Fundamentally based on an economic logic, Wallerstein's world system model is based on the analysis of three main aspects of the growth of nation-states: the historical development of an economic world structure; economic world structure's foundation in the capitalist world-economy and the economic world structure's shaping of structures of knowledge.

**163** ——— The core: areas most benefited from the capitalist world economy, mainly northwestern Europe; The semi-periphery: areas that were once core regions but are in decline, or peripheries attempting to improve their relative position in the world economic system; the periphery: areas lacking strong central governments or controlled by other states; and external Areas: maintaining their own economic systems while managing to remain outside the modern world economy.

**164** ——— One of the most interesting attempts took place in the early 1960's on behalf of the "Non-Aligned Countries", a collective by a cluster of countries that were considered marginal or remote in the Cold War era, and that had organized themselves under an umbrella organization.

cians and historians created types of orientations of the world system model that were not widespread.<sup>165</sup> For example, the Sino-centric world system<sup>166</sup> (1993), advanced by the German American economic historian and sociologist Andre Gunder Frank, steered the axis of the world towards China. Frank's theory is rooted in a 5000-year-old history that contests the modern world system that situates Europe as the center of economic development. Italian-American feminist Marxist, Silvia Federici (1995) critiqued the concept of "the West" as a fictionalized formation that "...pretends to be constructed by reference to conventional geographical coordinates and yet maps the world in ways that defy "common sense".<sup>167</sup> European post-colonial thinkers such as Frank and Federici question the logic that is at the root of Eurocentric centrality. Following this line of thought, Chapter Four advances the intellectual discussion on European post-colonial thinkers that had regarded the west as the culprit of the center/periphery divergence, by considering both the "non-west" as an equal counterpart in challenging a Euro-centric world system model. The post-colonial Indian theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty proposes that the project of decoding Eurocentric centrality of the world system model involves both "western" and "non-western" partners:

[...]the understanding that this equating of a certain version of Europe with "modernity" is not the work of Europeans alone;

**165** ——— At about the same time that Wallerstein's theory saw light, the Norwegian political scientist and sociologist Stein Rokkan (1921-1979) provided one of the few historical-comparative macro-sociological surveys for the development of nation-states and periphery. Rokkan, a political scientist who specialized in comparative politics, demonstrated the structure and evolution of territorial political systems in a multi-dimensional nature, with a relatively high degree of autonomy of dimensions and variability. Relative terminology such as 'configuration' and 'constellation' appear throughout his work. In a series of conceptual maps Rokkan visually demonstrates a spatial succession of events that have led to the modern world model by incorporating economic, territorial, cultural, political and demographic data, which were all in play in the development of nation states in Europe. The relational graphic technique of the catalogue *Magiciens de la Terre*, 'centralizing' every artist participating in the exhibition, and the idea that the world system is based on a multitude of data and relative, multi-dimensional, evolution of territorial political systems may be linked to Rokkan's mapping technique of the world system.

**166** ——— Andre Gunder Frank, Andre and Gills, Barry K., eds., *The World system 5000 Years or 500?*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993

**167** ——— Silvia Federici, *Origins and Crises of Western Civilization: The Construction of the Concept of Western Civilization and Its "Others"*, Connecticut and London: Praeger Westport, 1995. p.65

third-world nationalism, as modernizing ideologies *par excellence*, have been equal partners in the process. I do not mean to overlook the anti-imperial moments in the careers of these nationalisms; I only underscore the point that the project of provincializing "Europe" cannot be a nationalist, nativist, or atavistic project. In unravelling the necessary entanglement of history – a disciplined and institutionally regulated form of collective memory – with the grand narratives of "rights," "citizenship," the nation state, "public" and "private" spheres, one cannot but problematize "India" at the same time as one dismantles "Europe."<sup>168</sup>

According to Chakrabarty the decoding of the west requires a disentanglement of the institutionally regulated collective narrative. Considering the interdependency between core and periphery one problematizes "non-west" forces at the same time as one dismantles "the west."

**168** ——— Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?", *Representations*, No. 37, *Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*, Winter, 1992. p.21

## 4.1 De Zone: Negev Social, Material, and Political Realities

The exhibition *De Zone* (2018)<sup>169</sup> **Figure 46** that I curated at Arad Contemporary Art Center focused on the ancient communities of the region, investigating alternative belief systems, countercultures, and unique forms of ancient existences. The exhibition presented contemporary artistic interventions that echo significant ancient regional historical pivot points such as those that appear in the thousand-year-old scriptures such as The Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>170</sup> Focusing on artistic interventions based on chronicles of individuals and communities that had deviated from dominant form of belief of their era, *De Zone* created a lexicon of historical non-conformist existences that had sprouted in the region, and that were many times considered eccentric individual undertakings or activities of extreme sects or cults. The image series *Blue Board/Tablet*, *Red Board/Tablet*, *Green Board/Tablet* (2018) by contemporary Israeli artist Barak Rubin echoes ancient tablets that were found in the region during the pottery-phase of the Neolithic period. Using photographic techniques, Rubin imitates ancient techniques inscriptions (14th century – mid 8th century BCE) made with a stylus on the inner surfaces of tablets that were covered with wax. On the right side of the diptych *Red Board/Tablet*, an image of an ancient goddesses, like those of the Canaanite pantheon that had inhabited the region (early Bronze Age - 1st century CE) appears.<sup>171</sup> Rubin based the representation of the goddess on figurines excavated from the ancient Canaanite city of Tel Megiddo.<sup>172</sup> Ancient Semitic

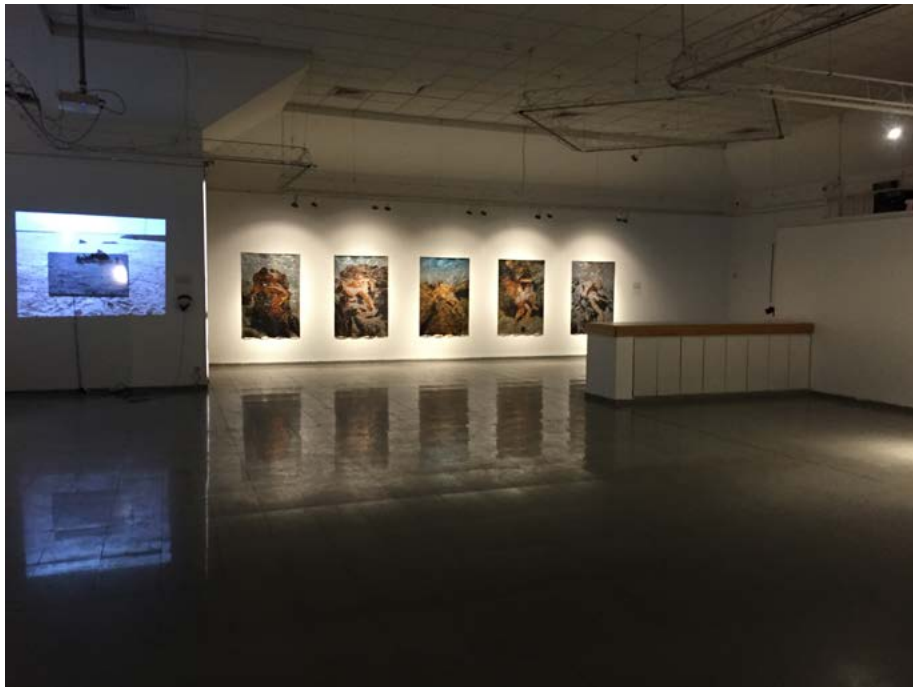


fig. 46, *De Zone*, 2018. Curator: Hadas Kedar. Alexis Couzino, Mirages, 2106 - 2017. Photograph by PR.

<sup>169</sup> ——— Hadas Kedar, *De Zone*, Arad Contemporary Art Center, 2017, see: <https://www.hadaskedar.com/de-zone>

<sup>170</sup> ——— Manuscripts that were discovered between 1947 and 1956 in eleven caves near Khirbet Qumran, on the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea. They are approximately two thousand years old, dating from the third century BCE to the first century CE. The scrolls ownership, held in a vault in the Israel Museum, is under dispute due to the fact that they were found in the northern shore of the Dead Sea, at the end of the British Mandate for Palestine (1947), in an area occupied by Jordan in the 1948 War.

<sup>171</sup> ——— Goddesses of the Canaanite pantheon included Astarte, Asherah and Anath.

<sup>172</sup> ——— Situated in northern Israel near Kibbutz Megiddo, about 30 km south-east of Haifa.

religious practices were rooted in a wide range of forms of belief including the belief in female goddesses, polytheism (the belief in many Gods) and monolatry (the worship of one god without denial of the existence of other gods). On the left side of *Red Board/Tablet* the image of a bull-God appears, strengthening the notion of masculine systems of power that symbolize fertility amongst ancient regional communities. The image of the bull-God is reminiscent of ancient artifacts of cultures such as those that existed in the city of Ugarit<sup>173</sup> where the head of gods was both named El (God) and bull (Tor). The equality between the female and male gods revives historical belief systems of the region that were based on a gender equality, communality, and social responsibility. *Red Board/Tablet* reminds us that in ancient civilizations a variety of belief systems were based on a wide set of beings and genders, and that the development of the single, male god in monotheistic religions is relatively new to the region. Gender non-preference was one of the characteristics of the ancient Essene community (2nd century BCE – 1st century CE)<sup>174</sup> that resided on the shores of the Dead Sea.<sup>175</sup> The Essenes, who did not believe in human or material assets, carried out a communal life with the intention of constructing social equality between all community members. The Essenes did not accumulate money, property, attain slaves, nor marry (and thus had few children) but rather dedicated their time to prayer and voluntary practices. The Essenes were a separatist sect that abandoned Jerusalem in protest of the Roman rule of the Temple. Considering themselves to be the chosen people, the Essene community secluded itself from the broader Jewish community in the Dead Sea – its secluded conditions provided the Essene community with the possibility to combine communal life with theology and belief. The most famous Essene communities which settled at the foot of the Qumran caves above the Dead Sea are associated with The Dead Sea Scrolls. The scrolls are considered by historians as the Essenes' library.

173 ——— Ugarit is an ancient city in northern Syria. Its ruins are often called Ras Shamra.

174 ——— Roman naturalist and philosopher, Pliny the Elder, mentions in *Natural History* 5.73, that the Essenes lived on the northern shores of the Dead Sea, in isolation with neither property nor women.

175 ——— Although they disrupted religious discourses, the Essenes reinforced the patriarchal community, excluding women from the sect and from all facets of public life.

## 4.2 The Dead Sea: Secluded Conditions Cultivate Subversive Expressions

Hidden away briefly before the Roman occupation of the region (68 CE), the scrolls contained the oldest written record of the Old Testament (300 BCE), along with sectarian manuscripts, including biblical commentaries, legal documents, and apocalyptic accounts.<sup>176</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls were mainly written in Hebrew, but also in Aramaic or Greek. One of the manuscripts titled *The Manual of Discipline* discusses the terms in which new members may be accepted into the community, while *The War Scroll* contains a battle plan for the war that will occur at the end of what the Essenes considered 'the present evil age'. *Green Board/Tablet*, a large triptych framed image by Rubin hung on a central wall of the exhibition space looks as if it was taken from one of the manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls. At the center of the triptych a map of the world appears. The center of the map is situated on Jerusalem, the epicenter of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. With its axis pointing to Jerusalem, the map is one out of a series of maps that regarded Jerusalem as the center of the globe. The cloverleaf Bunting's Map<sup>177</sup> from the end of the 16th century, created by the Roman theologian and pastor Heinrich Bunting, situated Jerusalem at its center, surrounded by the three central continents. The central panel of *Green Board/Tablet* is a digital representation of the Earth based on screen capture of a frame from a geobrowser that accesses satellite and aerial imagery and other geographic data from the internet. The map links the timeless and eternal concepts of religion and faith as they appear in Bunting's Map with the technological indifference of a momentarily screen capture of one out of endless satellite and aerial images of the earth. The technological accomplishment of Google Earth is at the forefront of *Green Board/Tablet*. The effect of the finiteness of the project of the mapping of the world on mankind was addressed by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud:

176 ——— Israel Museum, "Shrine of the Book", December 27, 2022, <https://www.imj.org.il/en/wings/shrine-book/dead-sea-scrolls>.

177 ——— Bunting's map is stored in the collection of maps in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem and a mosaic facsimile of the map appears on the fence of Jerusalem's city hall.

[...]for the first time in the history of mankind, we are all, in this room, living in a world which is *finite*. It's mapped entirely, since 2001. Which is very important historical date that nobody really cared about. But it's the year when the last blanks on the world map were filled by the satellites. Since then we have a representation of every millimeter of this planet – and this is a historical fact of great magnitude. And it changes, in a way – because we unconsciously know it, obviously – we are living in a world where there is nothing to discover anymore! There's no *terra incognita*. Over. How could it not produce effects in our psyche and in the arts? Obviously, it does!<sup>178</sup>

Bourriaud's expression of the dramatic consequences of digital mapping systems and the implications of the culmination of an era of discoveries is significant for conceptualization of art in the era of the finiteness of global mapping. Raising questions on how human imagination has been impacted by the shift from a wide range of spiritual of belief systems in ancient times, as demonstrated in *Red Board/Tablet*, to the predominant ascendancy of the three monotheistic religions as it appears in *Green Board/Tablet*. On both edges of *Green Board/Tablet* a human-headed winged bull appears. Partly ox, lion, eagle and human, their antecedent seems to be the exotic beast known as lamassu in Assyria that served as mythic gatekeepers for gods and kings. In Judaism a similar creature is known as the Cherubim, the pair of winged creatures that were mounted on The Ark of the Covenant at the Holy Temple that contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.<sup>179</sup> The two panels of the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, articulate the fundamental set of principles and code of ethics and worship that were accepted both in Judaism and Christianity.<sup>180</sup> By situating the two panels depicting the winged bull on both sides of the digital map of the globe, Rubin links the disdain regarding the completion of the mapping of the world – in a world where there is no *terra incognita* – impacts or comprehension of world history. With the completion of its mapping through digital technology a re-consideration of the notion of discovery arises.

<sup>178</sup> ——— Nicolas Bourriaud, "History and Historiography, The Problematic of Time in Contemporary Art", in *Maarav*, transcribed by Ami Asher, 2012, see: <http://maarav.org.il/english/2013/10/03/the-problematic-of-time-in-contemporary-art-nicolas-bourriaud/> last accessed 23/6/24

<sup>179</sup> ——— The bird-like figures of the Cherubim are discussed in Torah commentaries such as Rashbam (1085-1158).

<sup>180</sup> ——— According to the bible, the ten commandments were revealed to Moses in the desert and were inscribed by the finger of God on two tables of stone.

eration of the notion of discovery arises. Bourriaud proposes to consider a shift in the notion of discovery from unearthed territories to our own histories:

"Strangely, if you look at what's left, what are the possibilities now, the last continent to be discovered is actually history. The past is the only place where we can make discoveries. It's not about the new anymore; it's about discovering, which is very different."<sup>181</sup>

By considering history as the next continent to be discovered Bourriaud urges us to investigate historical pivot points that continue to impact our communities. Nevertheless, the colonial quests of the west to conquer uncharted territories resonates in Bourriaud's proposal to consider history as the next territory to be conquered.. Director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University, Gayatri Gopinath, raises the issue of a binary world model system that reinforces binaries such as center/periphery, east/west etc. She proposes to challenge binaries with the term "region" as an alternative to the term "local". According to Gopinath, the term "local" is used to describe knowledges and creative expressions of a certain place, inadvertently strengthening the binary: "local/global."<sup>182</sup> By exchanging the term "local" with the term "regional" we acknowledge that the world model is a dynamic, contingent system of regions that may transcend imaginary boundaries between east and west, north and south. Furthermore, Gopinath proposes to substitute antagonistic binaries with dualities of the same category: "[...]South-South, region-to-region, and diaspora-to-region connectivities that critique, subordinate, and at times by-pass the nation-state[...]"<sup>183</sup> By applying dualities of the same category, Gopinath raises the notion of multiscalar cartographies or mapmaking that allows for global relationships and correspondences to appear. Gopinath asserts: "[...]a queer regional imaginary in its supranational sense instantiates alternative cartographies and spatial logics that allow for other histories of global affiliation and affinity to emerge."<sup>184</sup>

<sup>181</sup> ——— Nicolas Bourriaud, "History and Historiography, The Problematic of Time in Contemporary Art", in *Maarav*, transcribed by Ami Asher, 2012, see: <http://maarav.org.il/english/2013/10/03/the-problematic-of-time-in-contemporary-art-nicolas-bourriaud/> last accessed 23/6/24

<sup>182</sup> ——— Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Vision: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. p.29

<sup>183</sup> ——— Ibid, p.18

<sup>184</sup> ——— Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Vision: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. p.6

### 4.3 Multiscalar Cartographies: Challenging Antagonistic Binaries

A queer regional imaginary explores alternative cartographies and spatial logics that allow other histories and affinities that do not align with the dominant narrative to materialize. In the face of Gopinath's proposal to consider multiscalar cartographies and a queer regional imaginary that transcends antagonistic binaries, Professor of History at Harvard University, Sugata Bose and assistant Professor of History at Tufts University, Kris Manjapra, proposes the notion of looking sideways:

As theorists of interregional and transnational studies have pointed out, the practice of taking sideways glances towards 'lateral networks' that transgressed the colonial duality is the best way to disrupt the hemispheric myth that the globe was congenitally divided into and East and West, and that ideas were exchanged across that fault line alone.<sup>185</sup>

Bose and Manjapra propose the concept of taking sideways glances at lateral networks to transgress antagonistic binaries and to develop forms of knowledge production and distribution that navigate knowledges through a contingent and relational logic.<sup>186</sup> Gopinath, Bose and Manjapra propose to disrupt binaries that have reinforced the widespread world system model in which certain areas, through a capitalist system, have gained power while others are subordinated to central supremacies, with notions of multiscalar cartographies and lateral networks that transgress historical myths that assert that the globe is divided to halves and hemispheres. The practice of taking sideways glances, locating lateral networks, transgressing binaries and developing forms of knowledge production and distribution that consider a relational logic between regions, is the guiding force of the exhibition *De Zone*. The exhibition presented artistic interventions that unpacked artistic expressions and belief systems that stemmed in the region and had disrupted dominant power structures. Considering the history of the Dead Sea region through queer cartographies, the exhibition drafted a regional imaginary that is based on a nexus of contingent systems of knowledge exchanges, that materialized other histories of the region. The historical prominence of the Dead Sea in terms of the cultivation

<sup>185</sup> ——— Sugata Bose, Kris Manjapra, *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*, New York: The Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series, 2010. p.2

<sup>186</sup> ——— Ibid.

of alternative forms of existence is central to the oeuvre of Israeli artist Sigalit Landau. The three main pillars in the installations that comprised of *One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings* (2011), the exhibition of Landau that represented Israel in the 54th Biennale (curators: Jean De Loisy, Ilan Wizgan), were water, salt, and earth. On the ground level, an installation consisted of a typical Israeli water pipe system in which seawater, pumped from the nearby Venetian canal, gushed in a closed-circuit system. On the upper floor, a screening of *Salted Lake* (2011, 11:05 mins.) followed the sinking of a pair of shoes that were previously immersed in the Dead Sea into the icy lake of the Polish city of Gdansk. On the middle floor of the Israeli pavilion, *Salt Bridge Summit* (2010) **Figure 47** an artistic research platform was exhibited. *Salt Bridge Summit* is based on participatory and collaborative decision-making processes. Through its political summit format, it engaged Jordanian and Israeli representatives on issues pertinent to the future of the Dead Sea. Its installation component was comprised of twelve laptops placed on the circumference of a conference table. The images on the screens create a 360-degree display of the underworld of the table. On the computer screens, *Laces*, (2011) **Figure 48** a twelve-channel video is projected in which a youngster is seen conjoining the shoelaces of the participants of a conference. While the video follows the youngster linking representatives' shoes together, they are seen removing their shoes and gradually abandoning the discussion.<sup>187</sup> The youngster that appears moving in a circular motion tying the delegates' shoelaces may be considered an expression of Landau's artistic-political initiatives and how they meet the convolutions of policy making in the context of the ongoing Jewish-Arab conflict. Like Landau herself, the youngster is determined to conjoin the stakeholders of the lake to reach a mutual agreement regarding its future. But the futility of fastening shoelaces of empty shoes, reflects how many Israelis of Landau's and the younger generation experience both the hope and the despair in face of the results of a long list of peace talks that intended to bring Jewish and Arabs into a political relationship (Madrid, Oslo, Camp David etc.).

<sup>187</sup> ——— A bronze sculpture of a circle of empty shoes by Landau was exhibited in the backyard of the Israeli pavilion echoing the empty shoes seen in *Laces*.

## 4.4 Salt Bridge Summit: Performing a Future for the Dead Sea

In *Salt Bridge Summit* the main protagonist is the Dead Sea. The body of water - a lake - <sup>188</sup> that is experiencing a steep fall in its shoreline due to the sinkholes phenomena.<sup>189</sup> The reasons for this phenomena include the diversion of the Jordan river - its former primary source of water; climate change and excessive evaporation; excessive mining of minerals of the lake executed by creating evaporation pools. The summit component of *Salt Bridge Summit* initiated a meeting between regional stakeholders that shared their mutual concern regarding the future of the lake. In this component of the work, the artist brought together Israeli and Jordanian representatives to discuss the future of the lake. As a historical reference to *Salt Bridge Summit* one may consider The Alliance of Palestinian Workers.

In the 1920s, Arab and Jewish laborers of Palestine Potash Limited or P.P.L. formed the labor union to promote cooperation between representatives of the Jewish and Arab communities that lived and worked on the shores of the Dead Sea. The potential impact of cooperation between Jewish and Arabs living and working in the region led David Ben-Gurion,<sup>190</sup> (who would become Israel's first prime minister in 1948) to articulate its significance as a means for the endurance of both communities: "Establishing friendships between Jewish workers and the many Arab laborers, on the basis of economic, political and cultural mutual acts - is a necessary condition for our redemption as a free worker."<sup>191</sup> P.P.L. started its operations in 1932 and existed until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, after which the company was nationalized and changed its name to Israel Chemicals Ltd. Until the year 2030, concessions granted during the British Mandate of Palestine continue to award exclusive rights to P.P.L. to extract minerals



fig. 47, Sigalit Landau. *Salt Bridge Summit*, 2019. Photograph by Yotam Frum.

- <sup>188</sup> — The lake is a closed-circuit system with no external drainage, and the water's only outlet is evaporation.
- <sup>189</sup> — According to Eli Raz in, "The Life Story of the Dead Sea, Sigalit Landau: Salt Years", Hatje Cantz, (2020): pp.149-159, the lake has plummeted from 400 to 700 million cubic meters in less than a century.
- <sup>190</sup> — Ben Gurion was Israel's Prime Minister between 1948 -1954 and 1955-1963.
- <sup>191</sup> — David Ben Gurion, *Us and Our Neighbors*, Tel Aviv: August 1931 [my translation]

from the Dead Sea. The outbreak of World War I may be considered the initial moment in which the decline of the Dead Sea began. During the war, the lake became an important Ottoman military station and the final destination on a new thoroughfare from Jerusalem.<sup>192</sup> Transportation initiatives facilitated mainly by regional Arab businessmen hauling food and other goods upon ships across the lake, were drafted by Ottoman officials to become military outposts.<sup>193</sup> As the Ottoman army defended the region from the Allied troops that had entered the region from Egypt, these independent enterprises became vital for the Ottoman kingdom.<sup>194</sup> One of the drafted initiatives was owned by Arab businessman Ibrahim Hazboun from Bethlehem. Hazboun, whose initiative was drafted by the Ottomans, was denied the rights to develop an extractive industry on a piece of land he owned on the north side of the lake where the transportation initiative that linked the east and the west sides of the lake operated. Instead, he was offered a managerial position in Ottoman-run transportation operations.<sup>195</sup> In face of his failure to gain the rights to establish an extractive initiative, in 1922 he agreed to sell the piece of land to Moshe Novomeysky, a Zionist Russian Jew.<sup>196</sup> The transaction between Hazboun and Novomeysky serves as first step in the direction of the establishment of Palestine Potash Limited. Born in the late 19th century in Siberia, Novomeysky came from a family of miners. Developing methods of extraction of minerals from Lake Baikal in Siberia, in 1900, Novomeysky founded a factory supplying refined salts on the shores of Lake Baikal. With his

**192** ——— Ottoman infrastructure in the Dead Sea also included a bridge over the Jordan river just north of the Dead Sea and two new roads linking Salt (modern-day Jordan) to Jerusalem. For further information on the Ottoman empire's stronghold in the Dead Sea see: Norris Jacob, "Toxic Waters: Ibahim Hazboun and the Struggle for a Dead Sea Concession, 1913 – 1948," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 45, (2011): pp.25 -42

**193** ——— One of the significant transportation businesses crossing the Dead Sea run by a Jerusalem-based, Arab businessman, Hussein al-Husseini.

**194** ——— From 1915 onwards, the Ottoman army began to effect major change on the Dead Sea shores, building a harbor on the western bank of the lake and then expanding the Dead Sea fleet by transporting several ships from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, mobilizing hundreds of Arab sailors and workers in the process.

**195** ——— After his death, Hazboun's family claimed that he sold the property to the Ottomans on the basis that he thought that the managerial position in the Ottoman transportation operation would lead to the possibility of gaining Dead Sea concessions after the war.

**196** ——— For this transaction, Novomeysky loaned from the Baron James De Rothschild 5000 lira sterling. For further information Novomeysky's first steps in creating PPC, see Languzki Yossi, "The Story of Israeli Potash Company", ICL archive (Hebrew).



fig. 48, Sigalit Landau. *Laces*, 2011.  
Photograph by Yotam Frum.

success in extracting minerals in Siberia, and in connection with initial stages of the Zionist movement, Novomeysky began to show interest in the Dead Sea. In 1906, the German geologist Otto Warburg, presented Novomeysky a report providing information on the Dead Sea that sparked Novomeysky's interests. Novomeysky travelled to the region for the first time in 1911 and discerned similarities between Lake Baikal and the Dead Sea and began to plan his efforts in the Dead Sea region. Coming from a line of political activists, Novomeysky's grandfather was exiled from Poland to Siberia on the charge of contributing to a Polish uprising. Novomeysky's involvement in the 1903 Zionist Congress in Basel resulted in his imprisonment in Siberia. After his release from jail, Novomeysky became a prominent figure in the Jewish community, chairing the National Council of Jews in Siberia and heading the Siberian Zionist Center (1914-1920). In 1917, a year before the British occupation of the region and the founding of the British Mandate of Palestine (1918-1948), the British government issued a public statement supporting the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

The Balfour Declaration was transcribed in a letter sent from the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. The declaration included one single paragraph:

His Majesty's government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.<sup>197</sup>

The Balfour Declaration came after Russian-born president of the English Zionist Federation, Chaim Weizmann, persuaded the British Prime Minister at the time, David Lloyd George, and other cabinet members to support the Zionist vision. The founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, refers to the Dead Sea in his vision of the return of the Jewish people to Zion:

<sup>197</sup> ——— The National Library of Israel, The Balfour Declaration, December 22, 2022, <https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/history/zionism/zionism-history/balfour-declaration> last accessed, 29/04/22

It reminds me of the old legends about sunken treasures. Children imagine such treasures only in the form of golden bracelets, chains, and coins. But the Dead Sea salts are also golden. They are richer in bromine than any other natural lyle. And you know how expensive bromine is.<sup>198</sup>

The Balfour Declaration demonstrated British officials' recognition of the substantial advantages of the creation of a pro-British Jewish Palestine, but also, as articulated by Herzl, its economic benefits including Dead Sea natural resources. Just two years before publishing The Balfour Declaration, the British government guaranteed the Arab community of Palestine that if they accepted British rule of the region, they would liberate the Palestinian people from the oppressive Ottoman rule and reconstitute an Arab nation on the land of Palestine. The McMahon Pledge of 1915<sup>199</sup> was named after the former foreign secretary of the UK government in India who had become the British High Commissioner to Egypt. Henry McMahon was also known as being strongly against an Arab governed kingdom or empire in the region.<sup>200</sup>

In order to gain the support of the Arabs against the Turks we, in common with our Allies, made, during the War, another series of promises to the Arabs of the reconstitution of the Arab nation and as far as possible of the restoration of Arab influence and authority in the conquered provinces. And the same spirit of benevolent guardianship was embodied, even after the Balfour Declaration, in the Allies' declaration of November 7, 1918, in the Proclamation posted in every village throughout Palestine and Syria. The War is to assure the complete and final liberation of the people so long oppressed by the Turks, and the establishment of Government and administration deriving their authority from the initiative and free desire of the native population. They are far from wishing to impose any form of Government against their will.<sup>201</sup>

The McMahon Pledge of 1915 was issued to Sherif Hussein of Mecca offering him an independent Arab state if he would help the British fight against the Ottoman Turks<sup>202</sup>. But the pledge clearly avoided

<sup>198</sup> ——— Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland: The Old-New Land*, 1902, p.1946

<sup>199</sup> ——— The McMahon-Hussein Agreement of October 1915 was later endorsed by the British Prime Minister in 1919.

<sup>200</sup> ——— Jonathan Schneer, "The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict", London: Bloomsbury, 2010, p.54

<sup>201</sup> ——— "The McMahon Correspondence of 1915-16." *Bulletin of International News*, no. 5, 1939, pp: 6-13

<sup>202</sup> ——— There has been much disagreement as to whether this promise included Palestine. The area promised to the Arabs in The McMahon pledge

articulating the borders of a proposed Arab state.<sup>203</sup> Answering a letter from a former colleague that criticized his proposal, McMahon wrote: “What we have to arrive at now is to tempt the Arab people into the right path, detach them from the enemy and bring them on to our side. This on our part is at present largely a matter of words, and to succeed we must use persuasive terms and abstain from academic haggling over conditions.”<sup>204</sup> The McMahon Pledge that offered an independent Arab state in exchange for solidarity with the British, created a sense of trust amongst the Arab population towards British officials. But this solidarity was not expressed in terms of extraction rights on the shores of the Dead Sea. Arab businessmen who besought extraction rights of the Dead Sea resources were turned down many times by the British authorities who were keen on gaining the rights for the British. One example is the Arab Jerusalemite, Shukri Deeb, who was repeatedly refused rights for operating an extraction industry on the shores of the Dead Sea, although he was the owner of a successful enterprise, Shukri Deeb & Son, Ltd., that had supplied potash products via a water route that connected both sides of the lake.<sup>205</sup> Another example was the case of Bethlehem-based Ohanes Kaladjian, a businessman belonging to the Armenian ethnic minority that had fled Armenia during World War I due to its occupation by the Ottomans. The British refusal to grant Kaladjian the rights to obtain salt from Shukri Deeb’s Dead Sea Salt Works and to grind it in his own mill located in Jerusalem is another example of how the British aimed to gain complete control on extraction and distribution of minerals of the Dead Sea. A letter written in 1937 by the Director of Palestine Department of Customs Excise & Trade to the Chief Secretary of the British Mandate in Palestine dealing with Kadjian’s request reads: “It is very obvious that this milling of refined salt, even if duty paid, is starting a practice, which in my opinion is most dangerous to our salt revenue.”<sup>206</sup> The letter sheds light

of 1915 excluded only the territory to the west of a line from Damascus north to Aleppo. Palestine, far to the south, was, by implication, included. The British later denied that Palestine was included in the promise and refused to publish the correspondence until 1939.

<sup>203</sup> — Jonathan Schneer, “The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict”, London: Bloomsbury, 2010. p.67

<sup>204</sup> — Ibid, page 69

<sup>205</sup> — Although Hazboun and other Arab residents of the region’s initiatives were not granted official permission to operate individual initiatives, there is evidence that small-scale salt farming facilities and transportation of goods in the Dead Sea have continuously operated by Arab residents of the region, from the mid-1700’s well into the era of the Ottoman empire.

<sup>206</sup> — Israeli State Archives, Issue of a license to Mr. Ohanes Kaladjian to manufacture salt under the Salt Ordinance, 1937, December 22, 2022,

on how Arab initiatives of the Dead Sea posed a threat to the British empire’s control of its resources.

Although The McMahon Pledge mentions the Balfour Declaration, there exists a contradictory element between the two declarations. Many consider this inconsistency as the root for a heated relationship between Jewish and Arab communities during the British Mandate and up until this day and age. After gaining rule over Palestine, a set of economic declarations pushed further the occupation of economic assets in the British Mandate in Palestine. In 1929, British parliament published the Dead Sea Concessions documents, a series of petitions whose main aim was to gain monopolies for the operation of key economic assets of the lake. The documents not only serve as a testament to the significance of resources in the Dead Sea region, but also serve as important evidence of the methods that British government used to attain control of these assets:

As your Lordships are aware, the Dead Sea is today the centre of a drama destined to rivet the attention of nations. Situated in the world’s most historic land, it has been for many years a magnet for chemists, whose labors have now revealed great potential powers, which, allied with the enterprise of science and civilization, will transform a place of desolation into beneficent activity; and Palestine, which once lay at the cross roads of ancient civilization, becomes anew the highway between east and west... Great subsidiary fertilizer and chemical industries will arise. Soap and glass industries will flourish, railways will be built, and potash can be brought to London at £4 10s. a ton, to bring a renaissance to revive our British agriculture, which, due to the German monopoly and government neglect, has been the Cinderella of English industrial life.<sup>207</sup>

The Dead Sea Concessions documents, presented to the British Mandate, depict the lake as the source of: “great potential powers”, located in “the world’s most historic land” and describing Palestine as a “place of desolation”. The documents’ rhetoric insinuates that the British concessions are to transform the region that: “once lay at the cross roads of ancient civilization” into a: “highway between east and west.” The documents’ oratory gives the impression that the Dead Sea Concessions were an attempt on behalf of British officials to finalize the

<https://www.archives.gov.il/archives/Archive/0b07170680031eca/File/0b07170680bea272>

<sup>207</sup> — UK Parliament Lord Sitting, “Dead Sea Salts Concession”, *Hansard 1803-2005*, vol 73, 731 (1929), see: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1929/mar/20/dead-sea-salts-concession>

appropriation of all rights for extraction of Dead Sea resources, including potash, potassium nitrate, and bromine - especially those that were previously granted to representatives of Jewish and Arab communities by Ottoman officials. The concessions' documents evidence special interest towards substances used in munitions, such as potassium nitrate, which is crucial for explosives.<sup>208</sup> In 1923, Novomeysky appointed the Scottish engineer, ex-army general, and expert on explosives, Thomas Gregorie Tulloch to become his business partner in P.P.L. Tulloch, a former gunnery instructor in Malta who worked on ballistic research, a secretary of Lord Rayleigh's Explosives Committee was the director of various explosive companies and the author of *The Rise and Progress of the British Explosives Industry*. Tulloch recognized the significance of potassium nitrate as a potential source of Britain's notoriety in the manufacture of munition.<sup>209</sup> The partnership between Novomeysky and Tulloch was most likely the instigator of the British government's approval to grant P.P.L. a preliminary tender for extraction of minerals from the Dead Sea in 1927.<sup>210</sup> Although P.P.L. had instigated an advantage for Britain in terms of munition, harsh words were expressed against Novomeysky in British Parliament. The main opposition to Novomeysky was from Lord Islington, a former general for the colonies during WWI, and an opponent to British support for Zionism. Islington claimed that the rights for extraction from the Dead Sea should be in British hands and not in those of a Russian Jew. In his eyes, Novomeysky was a danger to the British monopoly on potash. What loomed in the eyes of Islington was that Novomeysky may establish a Zionist monopoly on Dead Sea resources, and eventually endanger Britain's military advantage. Remarks expressed by Islington and others in the British Parliament pressured Novomeysky to publicly declare in 1927 that P.P.L. would add British citizens to its board members. In 1929, with the formal issue of the British concessions to Palestine Potash Ltd. there was 11 board members: six British citizens, four U.S. citizens and Novomeysky, a citizen of the British Mandate in Pal-

<sup>208</sup> ——— Until 1914, the main potassium nitrate reservoirs were controlled by Chile, who produced almost 80% of the world's nitrogen. During WWI, Germany began to develop a synthetic form of potassium nitrate that gained monopoly on the world's nitrogen supply shifting from its use in agriculture to towards wide-ranging manufacture of gun powder and explosives. <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/nitrate>.

<sup>209</sup> ——— Like Novomeysky, Tulloch also had sought permission to mine in the Dead Sea with beginning of the British rule in 1918.

<sup>210</sup> ——— Thomas Gregorie Tulloch, "The Rise and Progress of the British Explosives Industry," New York: International Congress of Applied Chemistry, Explosives Section, London: Whittaker and Co., 1909, p.51.

estine. But the addition of British board members to P.P.L did not seem to restrain the disquiet from the side of British parliament members. Another attempt from the side of a British parliament member to question the Jewish directorship of P.P.L that was granted the Dead Sea concessions took place in 1929 when Viscount Templeton submitted a motion to parliament that was based on what he considered undisclosed foreign funding of the industry<sup>211</sup>:

The Rutenberg Concession, which gave a Russian Jew a stranglehold on the economic life of Palestine and Transjordan, for 70 years, in spite of determined protests in both Houses of Parliament, indicates the undue influence of Zionists and international financiers. In the question of the Dead Sea, which, owing to its vast wealth and power, is the key of the Middle East, the same undue influences are at work, and in spite of the fact that first-rate British plans have been available since 1918, it has been announced that Mr. Novomeysky has been chosen as the favored applicant.<sup>212</sup>

The conflicting promises of the Balfour Declaration and the McMahon Pledge was the main force for the British rule-and-divide method of domination of Jewish and Arab communities of the region. The Jewish Arab cooperation that was at the heart of The Alliance of Palestinian Workers, promoting communities' interests in advancing economic, political and cultural future horizons of the Dead Sea region, came to a halt in the 1948 War that had separated Palestine Potash Limited between Israeli and Jordanian owners.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>211</sup> ——— Apropos British anti-Zionist sentiment, see the 1903 proposal on behalf of industrialist and statesman Joseph Chamberlain to deport the Jewish population from the British Mandate of Palestine to East Africa.

<sup>212</sup> ——— UK Parliament, Hansard, Lords: 20 March 1929, Lords Chamber, Dead Sea Salts Concession documents, see: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1929-03-20/debates/5a8acb93-3dc1-4468-892a-b69e3f8eb60f/DeadSeaSaltsConcession> last accessed 23/06/24

<sup>213</sup> ——— Towards the end of the P.P.L.'s existence, concurring with the end of the British Mandate and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Novomeysky was caught between the different interests of Ben Gurion, the leader of the Israeli state; P.P.L.'s Arab and Jewish joint union and Jordanian president Abdallah, on whose territory parts of the company's grounds were located. After the war, P.P.L.'s lands were divided between Jordan and Israel while Novomeysky was relegated from P.P.L.

The recognition that the historical rule-and-divide method of domination of Jewish and Arab communities of the region and the British Dead Sea concessions are, until this very day, a major force impacting the lake's conditions is significant to understand the current condition of the Dead Sea and the motivation of *Salt Bridge Summit*.

Amendments to the initial concession's terms that were granted by the British to P.P.L. in 1930, were issued on behalf of The Ministry of Environmental Protection of Israel in 2019 read as such:

The existing Dead Sea Works concession was written at a time when environmental considerations were less prevalent. The concession area unnecessarily included unique natural and heritage values, such as Mount Sodom, settlements, palm groves, and more. The concession allowed the factories to quarry material from surrounding streams, in order to build batteries for their evaporation ponds, to pump groundwater without restriction, and without setting incentives to reduce the pumping from the northern basin of the Dead Sea. The present recommendations correct these historical errors, and their implementation will protect the environmental space around the Dead Sea.<sup>214</sup>

Among the recommendations to the amendment document one may find: the reduction of the concession area by about half of the 160 sq km; setting an economic incentive for streamlining and reducing pumping; regulating the factories' use of groundwater; protecting Mount Sodom, a site within the concession area with a unique heritage and unique environmental and geological characteristics; establishing an inter-ministerial team to realize environmental obligations under the current concession agreement and the inclusion of the *Ministry of Environmental Protection* in the formulation of a future concession agreements. Nevertheless, the list of recommendations does not impact the current activities of I.C.L that continue to contribute to the demise of the Dead Sea and the region.

214 — Ministry of Environmental Protection, "As Dead Sea Concession Period Comes to End, Ministry Continues to Take Actions to Protect Sea and Surrounding Area", See: [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/dead\\_sea\\_concession\\_final\\_report](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/dead_sea_concession_final_report),

## 4.5 Forcefully United: Sigalit Landau's Laces

*Salt Bridge Summit* is an artistic research platform that is based on participatory and collaborative decision-making processes. Through its political summit format, and by engaging Jordanian and Israeli representatives on issues pertinent to the future of the Dead Sea, *Salt Bridge Summit* uses the artistic format to arouse a debate between stakeholders on the lake's future. As an artistic research platform, *Salt Bridge Summit* also included over the years artistic endeavors of Landau that began with an initiative to create a bridge crossing the Dead Sea, linking Israel and Jordan. While the creation of the bridge has met a deadlock, Landau began to pursue another creative initiative that involves the construction of an artificial island in the lake, at the intersection between Israel, Jordan, and the Occupied West Bank. By following the laborious but pointless act of the youngster conjoining the empty shoes of representatives in *Laces*, representing divergent perspectives on the future of the lake, the youngster in Landau's video installation projects the overall hopelessness in face of numerous unfruitful summits and peace talks amongst Jewish and Arabs in Israel and abroad. The political deadlock that inflicts despair amongst the younger generations also impacts the environment and its natural resources. While Landau's "grown up" efforts for improving the future of the Dead Sea appear above the table in *Salt Bridge Summit*, her "childish" fantasies continue to present themselves underneath the table in *Laces*. The youngster's mischievous and playful performance expresses a fantasy world in which convening stakeholders in the interest of a better future will lead to its improvement.

The artistic intervention demonstrates the convolutions involved in attempts to reach an agreement between stakeholders concerning the lake's future. *Salt Bridge Summit* resonates the connection between political despair and environmental hazards. As an intervention in the real world, the project aims to create the conditions for stakeholders to meet and exchange perspectives on how they may contribute to advancing the lake's future. With the historical reference of Arab-Jewish alliance on the shores of the Dead Sea as they appeared in The Alliance of Palestinian Workers in mind, *Salt Bridge Summit* reminds us of the positive impact that collaboration between stakeholders may bring to the environment and its inhabitants.

## 4.6 NMC: Exploring Contemporary Landscapes

The Fourth chapter of the dissertation demonstrates how the exceptional conditions of the Dead Sea region has cultivated artistic interventions that speak of the uniqueness of the region and how historical events have led to the region's allure and its subsequent demise.

The chapter had explored the artistic intervention that reflect the unique history of the region, beginning with Rubin's *Blue Board/Tablet, Red Board/Tablet, Green Board/Tablet* (2018) account of ancient civilizations of the Dead Sea region that have settled in its extreme environment and cultivated nonconformist and dissident forms of living continuing with Landau's *Salt Bridge Summit*, rooted in Jewish-Arab collaboration dealing with the future of the Dead Sea based on the historical conditions that have contributed to the lake's gradual decline.

The New Mineral Collective (NMC) **Figure 49** explores contemporary landscape politics to better understand the nature and extent of human interaction with the earth's surface. Founded in 2012 by Tanya Busse and Emilija Škarnulytė, the collective sketches out the widespread transformation of the northern pole landscape, where they had been based, recording on video how human intervention and climate change have transformed their surroundings. The title of their video *Hollow Earth* (2013)- filmed at the geographic meeting point of Norway, Sweden and Russia - refers to the phenomenon caused by massive mining operations and climate change that brings the icy land to collapse into its terrestrial belly. Collapse of land is just one out of a series of hazardous phenomenon that exemplifies the changing landscape. The collective delicately outlines the mechanics of landscape transformation by recording the everyday reality of a region of which its landscape and its living creatures are under the threat of extinction. The video summons a comparison with widespread representations of catastrophic results of climate change in film and on television. In contrast to film and television productions that fly in film crews to document the changes in the landscape of remote regions, *Hollow Earth's* slow pace and concentration on details offers a point of view from eye level;- from amongst the ongoing adversity this allows one to experience the change from up close. The collective addressed the accelerated human intervention and climate change in the Dead Sea region



fig. 49, NMC, *Your Body Is a Mine*, 2016.  
Image courtesy of the artists.

that resulted in the altered landscape during their residency period at Arad Art and Architecture. Filmed at the lowest dry point on earth, *Your Body Is a Mine* (2016) explores the nexus surrounding the Dead Sea and how it affected by the mineral extraction industry and commercial spa tourism through the collective's point of view. New Mineral Collective accounts for the instabilities of life at the most extreme parts of the globe. Focusing on the power of human agency, they create performative interventions amid a mostly man-made environment. Their audio-visual meditations of the calamities of human interference in the landscape and its forlorn effects are eye-opening artistic interventions that link the extreme, altering landscapes in the four corners of the world.

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## 4.7 The Women of Sodom: Jacqueline Pearl's Eshetlot

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The unique conditions of the Dead Sea have impacted the imagination of the contemporary Israeli artist Jacqueline Pearl, who was intrigued by the historical female alliances of the region. Her imagination was sparked by an historical cinema that was constructed in a cave in the Dead Sea area in the late 1930's **Figure 50** during the first phase of the extractive activities of the southern base of P.P.L. The cave-cinema in Mount Sodom was constructed to provide a temporary relief for the workers of and their families of employees of P.P.L who experience the harsh living conditions of living and working on the shores of the Dead Sea. Fascinated by the cave-cinema in a secluded region, cut off from a natural course of life, Pearl developed an artistic intervention with both installation and performative components. *EshetLot (Lot's Wife): A Cinematic Historical Reconstruction of the Sodom Labor Camp* (2017-2018) addresses the extreme conditions that the women of Sodom experienced. The project, based on diary entries, many of them by wives and mothers of employees of P.P.L., sheds light on how they endured the harsh living conditions of Sodom. Pearl accompanied *EshetLot (Lot's Wife)* with entries of her own personal diary:

And here we are, before an incredible vision, let's imagine, for a moment, This Fata Morgana flickering from a projector at the heart of the desert. There are the factory workers, tired and dusty from a hard-day's work, sitting in the cinema cave, and a desert-

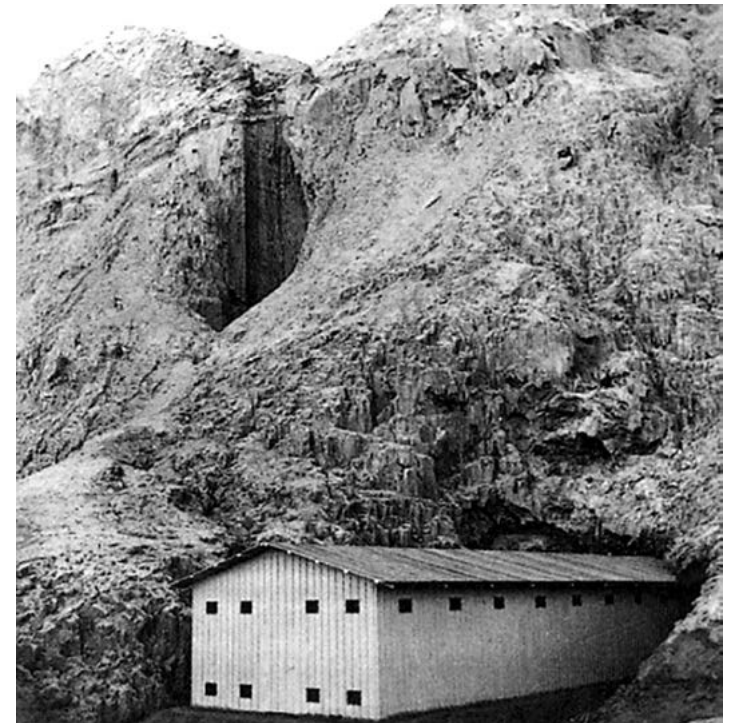


fig. 50, *Sodom Cinema*, 1930's.  
Image courtesy of Zionist Archive.

like space of mirages is spread before them. What are they watching? This strange and spectacular vision of the displaced cinema led me to deal with the queer, inevitable aspects of Sodom.”<sup>215</sup>

The enigmatic cave-cinema symbolized, in Pearl’s eyes, a desert Fata Morgana that screened visions from the region upon mineral particles in the desert air. This notion of the cave-cinema as a Fata Morgana or mirage led Pearl to explore ‘queer inevitable aspects of Sodom’. Doing so, Pearl resonates Gopinath’s notion of a queer regional imaginary that ‘allows for other histories to emerge’.<sup>216</sup> By basing her artistic interventions on the diary entries of the women of Sodom, Pearl created a space that allowed for other histories (her-stories), those of the women of Sodom to emerge. Keeping a diary that recorded her insights during the development of *EshetLot (Lot’s Wife): A Cinematic Historical Reconstruction of the Sodom Labor Camp*, Pearl contemplates on how she can translate aspects of the project to a site-specific performance and installation: “The project is based on a research survey into the historical account of the potash factory that operated in Sodom in the 1930s and 1940s, now seeks to return from the “neutrality” of the gallery or theater stage to the site itself.”<sup>217</sup> *EshetLot (Lot’s Wife): A Cinematic Historical Reconstruction of the Sodom Labor Camp*, unpacks the strenuous experiences of Sodom women who were affected by the extreme climate, and the foul minerals in the high-salinity lake, and the emotional burden of some mothers amongst them who carried their children to the working quarters in Sodom. Others needed to separate from their children in order to allow themselves to dedicate themselves to the work at Sodom. Pearl’s performance *Labor Mixer* (2016) **Figure 51** blends two separate narratives that took place in Sodom. The Biblical narrative of Lot’s Wife, a nameless woman who struggled with patriarchal orderings, and diary entries of the women of Sodom. Pearl bases her performance on the biblical story of Lot’s Wife, a refugee fleeing from her city in distress. In the biblical narrative, Lot flees the besieged city, while her daughters remain there in danger. Lot’s gaze back towards the destroyed city, violates the instruction she was given that forbids her from looking back at the city’s calamities. For disobeying this commandment, according to the narrative, she is punished and turned into a pillar of salt. Pearl bases her performance on the biblical story of Lot’s wife, while interweaving

<sup>215</sup> ——— Jackie Pearl, “Sodom: Isra-Drama & International Exposure of Israeli Theatre”, November 26-30, 2019, (unpaginated).

<sup>216</sup> ——— Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Vision: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. p.6

<sup>217</sup> ——— Jacqueline Pearl, “EshetLot (Lot’s Wife): A cinematic historical reconstruction of the Sodom labor camp”, 2017-2018



fig. 51, Jackie Pearl. *Sodom*, 2018.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

within it excerpts from diaries of the women from Sodom. The diary excerpts unpack traumatic instances that women of Sodom experienced in their daily routine as wives and mothers of Sodom personnel. The women of Sodom were mainly refugees from WWII who had already experienced separations from family members including from their children due to the war. The Sodom diary entries evidence traumatic separations that the women experienced from their children that coincide with similar, previous traumatic moments. In a diary entry of her own, Pearl reacts to the painful experiences of the mothers of P.P.L.:

As part of my research, I have found journal pieces and letters buried in archives, dusting up in libraries. Heartbreaking texts in which the working mothers deal with the agonizing detachment from their children. Much like migrant workers, women were separated from their children in order to provide for their families.<sup>218</sup>

In one section of the performance, Pearl stages a diary entry of a woman named Ruth, a refugee from the Holocaust who was a laborer in the Sodom camp of P.P.L.: “I’m taking leave of you, Sodom. I have come to speak to you for the last time. Parting is a common experience for our generation. We have left the lands in which we were born, parted from brothers and friends, parents and relatives, from everything we ever held dear... And coming to this land, we were drawn to the earth with the very last bits of our drive for survival... Indeed, it is not easy to make a living out of this land.”<sup>219</sup> At the same time that Pearl performs the diary entries, she operates a cement mixer. Situated at the height of her abdomen. Pearl’s performance touches on the hardships of womanhood and motherhood of the early 20th century Zionist-Jewish community in British Mandate of Palestine. The essentialization of the female subject in the Jewish-Zionist narrative many times regards women as machines for the procreation for the endurance of the Jewish people in the region.<sup>220</sup> Pearl’s diary entries shed light on her own contemplations on how she may blend various components of her artistic intervention, including the Cave Cinema in Sodom and the testimonies of the female laborers of the P.P.L. camp in Sodom:

Remains of a labor camp in Sodom and the remains of the Cave of Cinema, a cinema set up inside a cave in the camp area. How will

<sup>218</sup> ——— Jacqueline Pearl, “EshetLot (Lot’s Wife): A cinematic historical reconstruction of the Sodom labor camp”, 2017-2018

<sup>219</sup> ——— Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> ——— The Jewish duty of procreation is based on one of the earliest obligations of the Torah, ‘pru urvu’, to be ‘fruitful and multiply.

testimonies of the female subjects resonate in the abandoned and crumbling space of the remains of P.P.L.? Will it be possible to screen a film in the cave-cinema that still has the window in which the historic projector was placed? How will artistic images inspired by the story be installed in the desolate space of the former residence of P.P.L.? To what extent will the surrealist-documentary qualities of the space erupt from the tension between the historical and the metaphorical?<sup>221</sup>

Pearl’s contemplations came to fruition in the video installation *Eshet-Lot (Lot’s Wife)* exhibited in the group exhibition *De Zone* (2018) that I curated at Arad Contemporary Art Center. *EshetLot (Lot’s Wife)* was projected upon a television screen that was covered with a half-transparent cloth. The layered video screening instilled the quality of a Fata Morgana as referenced by Pearl in her diary entry regarding the cave-cinema in Sodom. The video installation *EshetLot (Lot’s Wife)* juxtaposed two videos, one on top of the other and on top of the cloth. The layered video combined *The Labor Mixer* with *Loti* (2018) **Figure 52** a video documenting the drag performance by Palestinian-Israeli artist Raafat Khatab. Amongst the remains of the P.P.L. resident camp in Sodom, Khatab performs the classic drag song *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. Pearl explains how the rebuke of homosexuality in the Bible and the Quran is linked to Sodom:

The term Sodom is associated with deviant sexuality; more specifically, with homosexuality. Around the Middle Ages, Christianity invents the terms ‘Sodom’ and ‘Sodomite’. It uses the biblical story to prohibit, persecute and punish homosexuality. Islam also uses Sodom for the same prohibition. The term “Luti” means homosexual/Sodomite in Arabic and appears in the Quran about 7 time derives from Lot’s name.<sup>222</sup>

Khatab’s video performance references two forms of deviations that appear in the Bible: Firstly, Lot’s wife, a mother, caring for her offspring, is punished due to her so-called disobedience once she turns around. Secondly, the term “Lot” connotes sexual deviation of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah regarding homosexual relations.<sup>223</sup> Focusing

<sup>221</sup> ——— Jacqueline Pearl, “EshetLot (Lot’s Wife): A cinematic historical reconstruction of the Sodom labor camp”, 2017-2018

<sup>222</sup> ——— The passage of the Quran that narrates the story of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah that demand sexual access to the messengers sent by God to the prophet Lot (or Lut), alludes to the prohibition of the act of sodomy (anal intercourse) between men.

<sup>223</sup> ——— In the Arabic language the terms for the act of anal sex between men is derived from Lot’s name and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.



fig. 52, Jackie Pearl. *Loti*, 2018. Screenshot.  
Courtesy of the artist.

on the narrative and chronicles of women who had strayed from patriarchal directives, the project *EshetLot (Lot's Wife)* provides a queer regional imaginary. By re-iterating the words of those who did not abide to the principles of religious and patriarchal orderings, Pearl presents alternative perspectives on religious and social patriarchal orderings. Linking the biblical portrayal of deviant Biblical Lot's Wife with true-life experiences of the dissident women of Sodom, *EshetLot (Lot's Wife)* reverberates Gopinath's notion of a queer regional imaginary that 'allows for other histories to emerge' and creates a space for the histories of the women of Sodom to emerge.

## 4.8 Conclusion of Chapter Four

Chapter four focused on the unique interactions and creative interventions that have sparked in the harsh environment of the Dead Sea and resonate Gopinath's proposal to create a queer regional imaginary that 'allows for other histories to emerge'. In an environment that is so harsh that almost nothing can survive,<sup>224</sup> evidencing artistic interventions based on forms of art and creation that had stemmed from the Dead Sea region is significant for the creation of a queer history of the region. The chapter discerns how Rubin's *Blue Board/Tablet, Red Board/Tablet, Green Board/Tablet*, Landau's *Dead Sea Summit*, NMC's *Your Body is a Mine* and Pearl's *EshetLot (Lot's Wife): A Cinematic Historical Reconstruction of the Sodom Labor Camp* resonate historical instances of alternative forms of belief and existences that had deviated from and subverted dominant constituencies, of religious or of governing nature, that have reigned in the region. The chapter follows Bose and Manjapra's proposal to disrupt binaries that reinforce the widespread world system model in which certain areas, through a capitalist system, have gained power while others are subordinated to main supremacies. The artistic interventions of Rubin, Landau, NMC and Pearl raise notions of multiscalar cartographies and lateral networks that transgress historical myths that assert that the globe is divided into halves and hemispheres. By demonstrating the destabilizing forces of individuals and communities that had deviated from mainstream reigning orders they defuse the bomb of religious and patriarchal dominations and create a queer regional imaginary of the Dead Sea region.

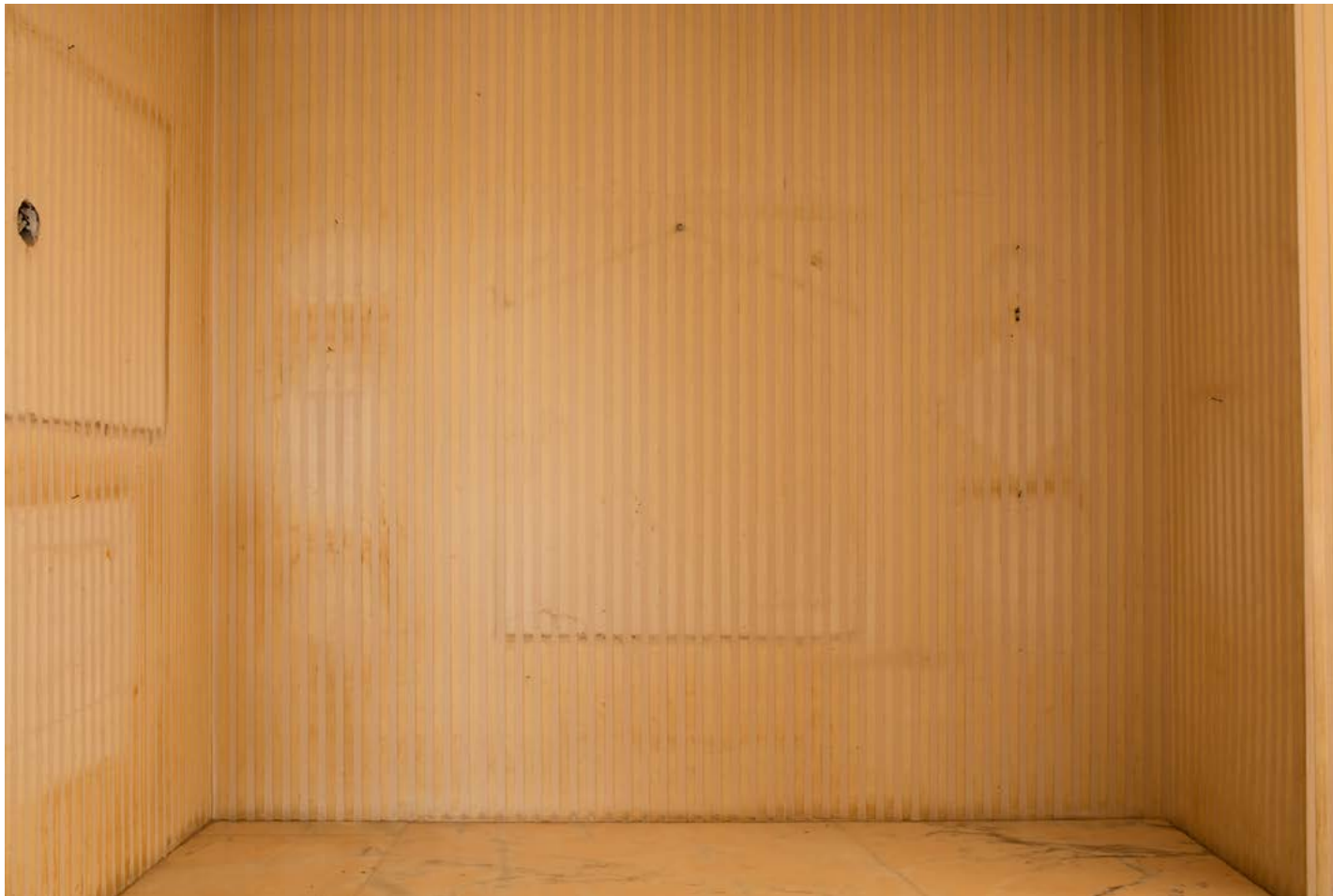
<sup>224</sup> ——— Aside for some microorganisms and algae, the Dead Sea is completely devoid of life.

## Noritaka Minami

I was looking for dated interiors (the designs and materials) that would provide insight to values that existed at a specific moment in time (mid-20th Century) in Arad. I was specifically drawn to the clear traces of what once existed in those spaces at that time.



Noritaki Minami. *Interiors*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



Noritaki Minami. *Interiors*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



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## Chapter 5 Conclusion

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The dissertation has provided evidence that the curatorial agendas of art institutions of the Negev are entrenched in a western curatorial perspective, and that this curatorial perspective could be diversified and enriched through methods that consider artistic instances of the communities of the Negev that are most related to its historical culture. The dissertation has demonstrated how the exclusion of Arab-speaking communities from the curatorial programming of cultural institutions in the Negev is exceptionally distressing in regards to institutions that declare that their focus on Islamic and Arab cultures. It is important to stress that the curatorial methods suggested in the dissertation and that broaden the scope of the curatorial of the Negev are rooted in a re-consideration of what is considered art in the context of the curatorial. At the root of forms of not-yet-art are expressions, concepts and ideas that are rooted in “situated knowledges” of the region. Due to their fragmented and partial nature these forms of expression that are not-yet-art may prompt differential vantage points of audience members in the art space and outside of it. The fact that audiences will not necessarily share the same vantage point when engaging with a particular artistic or curatorial intervention is discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Following Mouffe’s assertion that tensions and hostilities between adversaries are essential for a democratic public sphere, the chapters focus on artistic interventions that raise pertinent issues in the Negev and that deal with land, land use and land rights. Differential vantage points on issues of land are many times rooted in schisms between Jewish and Arab communities and between Jewish Ashkenazi and Jewish Sephardi Negev communities. Based on the analysis of artistic interventions, the chapters demonstrate how withstanding longstanding oppositions between opinions of residents of the Negev are at the basis of the curatorial.

Imagining a future horizon of the curatorial in the Negev is based on the decoding of the academically institutionalized historical narrative of the Negev. By closely investigating lacunae in the widely accepted regional narrative, one may evidence other histories that have gradually disappeared due to the domination of the academically institutionalized historical narrative of the Negev. Alternative histories that deviate from the widely accepted western perspective on the region express divergent and sometimes conflicting sentiments to the land. Sentiments that may be antagonistic to the dominant historical perspective and may give rise to tensions and hostilities in the art space. Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges” as a form of feminist objectivity that is rooted in partial perspective and that promises objective vision is the essence of a feminist curatorial horizon of the Negev. that.

A feminist form of curating allows for other histories to emerge. It is big enough to gather up complexities but also keeps its edges open, creating awareness to the possibility of surprising new and old connections.<sup>225</sup>

## 5.1 Decoding the Economic History of the Negev

The development of a feminist form of research that keeps its edges open ready for surprising connections assists one to address the history of commerce and trade in the Negev. The conclusion demonstrates how the dominant historical narrative that had connoted the Negev as a trade corridor from the Arabian subcontinent and India to the west has side-lined the Negev as an economic corridor. Concerned with how exotic substances originating from Arabia and India had arrived to the shores of western regions, the dominant historical narrative has led to extensive research on historical trade routes that consider the Negev a trade corridor. Opening the edges of the academically congealed economic historical narrative of the Negev reveals a richness of its micro histories that have gradually disappeared. If one researches minor historical documents and literature, one may learn how the Negev was a source of rich natural resources and cultural developments. These include historical trade routes that have dispersed verdant natural resources amongst Negev communities and abroad. Other histories that challenge the dominant historical narrative. The Negev desert has been recognized in academic literature as a major throughway of the ‘incense trade route (7th century BCE - 2nd century CE), encompassing over two thousand kilometers of land and sea routes, linking the Arabian Peninsula and Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea during the Nabataean and Roman periods. The ‘incense route’ was the chief trajectory for the conveyance of spices and aromatics from southern Arabia to the Mediterranean coast and from there to the western world (3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE). The ‘silk roads’ joined China to Western Asia. The focal point of research

<sup>225</sup> — Donna Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene”, *Experimental Futures, Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices*, A series edited by Michael M. J. Fischer and Joseph Dumit, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, p.101

administered on these routes have many times been accomplished via the study of the trajectories of exotic substances such as certain incenses, spices, and other luxury goods that had originated in southern Arabia and India.<sup>226</sup> In historical literature, the Nabataean civilization (4th century BCE to c.106 CE) is typically considered a society that had controlled the incense trade route. This assertion is commonly evidenced by referencing Nabatean settlements that had been constructed along the ‘incense route’ including Haluza, Mamshit, Avdat and Shivta.<sup>227</sup> The link between the incense route and the Nabataean civilization has been discussed in a variety of contexts and has been the subject of many books, including articles<sup>228</sup>, websites<sup>229</sup> and even music.<sup>230</sup> In contrast to the widespread research of the incense and spice trade routes, other, minor trade routes that had originated in the Negev desert and that have circulated substances in the desert region, have the potential to shed light on the Negev. The conclusion and final chapter of the research follows Haraway’s proposal to open the edges of theories and stories to reveal surprising new and old connections. Contemporary historical research may challenge traditional historical narratives by bringing into light knowledges that are under threat of diminishing.

In a curatorial context, the conclusion demonstrates how the act of revealing such hidden knowledges may eventually lead the way to a diversification and enrichment of the curatorial programming and collections of Negev cultural institutions. By re-considering minor and micro histories that were significant for the region and have lost their foothold

<sup>226</sup> — For example the UNESCO World Heritage Project: Land of Frankincense (Oman): <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sustainabletourismtoolkit/guide9/frankincense/> last accessed 18/05/24. Another example may be found in “Empire shops” that were first developed in London in the 1920s and intended to teach Londoners how to consume foodstuffs from the colonies.

<sup>227</sup> — UNESCO, *Incense Route: Desert Cities in the Negev*, 2005, see: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1107>

<sup>228</sup> — For example: Zohar Amar and Lev Efraim, “Trends in the Use of Perfumes and Incense in the Near East after the Muslim Conquests”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (2006): pp. 11-30

<sup>229</sup> — For example: “Trade History of the Silk Road, Spice & Incense Routes”, [Silkroutes.net](http://www.silkroutes.net/), see: <http://www.silkroutes.net/SilkSpiceIncenseRoutes.htm>

<sup>230</sup> — For example, Kaveh Kans, “Arabia’s Frankincense Trail,” album, see: [https://www.amazon.com/music/player/albums/B08X1KGL2X?ref=sr\\_1\\_2&s=movies-tv&keywords=The+Frankincense+Trail%2C&crd=3ICQHWLDU5CEM&sprefix=the+frankincense+trail%2C%2Cmovies-tv-intl-ship%2C186&qid=1669719594&sr=1-2](https://www.amazon.com/music/player/albums/B08X1KGL2X?ref=sr_1_2&s=movies-tv&keywords=The+Frankincense+Trail%2C&crd=3ICQHWLDU5CEM&sprefix=the+frankincense+trail%2C%2Cmovies-tv-intl-ship%2C186&qid=1669719594&sr=1-2)

over time in the region's narrative due the dominance of the academically institutionalized historical narrative of the region, one may begin to sketch out the underpinnings of a renewed regional imaginary.

In the spirit of Haraway and the notion of “situated knowledges” as a form of feminist objectivity rooted in partial perspectives, the curatorial act of re-engaging with micro-narratives of trade and commerce histories in the Negev desert reveals a plethora of artistic and creative expressions that may enrich current Negev art collections.

Following this ethos, I would like to propose the development of a ‘new’ historical route: the ‘bitumen (a type of asphalt) of Judea’ route that joins the silk and incense routes and raises the need to develop other histories of the Negev that present its significance in the region and beyond. Evidence of how a western perspective in academic research many times commits a certain region to a limited role is evident in the archaeological investigations of ancient rubbish excavated along the incense and spice route (168 BCE- 106 CE) led by Israeli archaeologist Guy Bar-Oz and his team of researchers concludes that the Negev was an: “...economic belt...” and an “...avenue of the route[...]” a corridor for transporting exotic substances in antiquity.<sup>231</sup> A similar conception of the Negev as an economic belt also appears in the research project and exhibition, *Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev*, initiated by UNESCO, World Heritage Convention (2005) that focused on the Nabataean culture in the Negev region (168 BCE- 106 CE). According to the project's website, the prosperity of the Nabataean kingdom was due to their control of trade routes that carried substances to the western parts of the globe. “The Nabatean towns and their trade routes bear eloquent testimony to the economic, social and cultural importance of frankincense to the Hellenistic-Roman world.”<sup>232</sup> *Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev* main concern was to explain the prosperity and advanced cultures of Nabataean civilization in terms of the significance of exotic substances in the western parts of the world. The project's title clearly discloses its rationale: desert cities such as Shivta, Haluza, Mamshit and Avdat were constructed as the result of Nabatean presence on the incense route. Yet, historical research that deals with the Nabataean civilization has shown that, along with their authority on trade routes that crossed the

<sup>231</sup> ——— Guy Bar-Oz, Ram Bouchnik, Ehud Weiss, Lior Wiessbrod, Daniella E.Bar-Yosef Mayer, Ronny Reich, *Holy Garbage: A Quantitative Study of the City-Dump of Early Roman Jerusalem*, *The Journal of the Council for British Research in the Levant*, 39:1, (2017): pp.1-12.

<sup>232</sup> ——— *Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev*, November 29, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1107>

Negev, they were nonetheless an agrarian community.<sup>233</sup> Titling the project as such, the UNESCO-led project discourages teasing out additional reasons that may have led the Nabatean community to construct desert cities in the Negev such as botanical, terrestrial and geologic conditions of the Negev highlands. *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans* (2015),<sup>234</sup> yet another rather recent European project that dealt with Nabataean culture, was the result of a collaboration between the European Union and The Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme that promoted cooperation and financing projects that contribute to the economic, social, environmental, and cultural development of the Mediterranean region. The project clearly states that the research of the Nabatean kingdom was through the perspective of a civilization that, “controlled and managed the routes from the south of the Arabian Peninsula that allowed sumptuary products coming from India and the surrounding regions to arrive in the Mediterranean area[...].”<sup>235</sup> An exhibition that was part of the project, focused on artifacts including pottery, architecture, decorative arts and script that were associated with the Nabataean civilization in Jordan.<sup>236</sup> The first chapter of the catalogue was based on the exhibition *Nabataean Innovative Pottery* (curated by Ziad Al-Saad together with Alla Shabib Odat) exhibiting amphoras and flasks that held perfume and other liquids by Nabateans. The curatorial text explains that the significance of bottles and flasks in terms of the Nabataean kingdom, was that they evidence that “...they were used to store incense and perfume, the mainstay of nabataean trade.”<sup>237</sup> Opening the catalogue with such an ebullient face of the Nabatean civilization, one cannot avoid the curator's motivation to draft out the identity of the Nabatean kingdom as a civilization in transit, strengthening the facet of the Nabatean kingdom that was based on ruling the incense route. In yet another exhibition that is included in the project *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans*, the curators of the exhibition *East Blend with West in Nabataean Architecture and Decorative Arts* (curated by Ziad Al-Saad and Fandi Al Wacked) emphasize western influences on Nabataean art. The exhibition text

<sup>233</sup> ——— Yehuda Kedar, *The Early Agriculture of the Negev Heights*, Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1967

<sup>234</sup> ——— Alessandra Avanzini, Francisco del Rio, Ziad Al-Saad, Odat Shabib Alla, Al Wacjed Bader, Ajlouni Nabil, Tashman Ahmend, *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans Exhibition*, Museum of Jordanian Heritage of the Yarmouk University, European Union and ENPI CBCE Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme, Dedalo-Pisa, 2015. p.1

<sup>235</sup> ——— Ibid. p.17

<sup>236</sup> ——— Alessandra Avanzini, *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans*, Jordan: Medina Partners, 2015. p.24

<sup>237</sup> ——— Ibid, p.35

that explored Nabataean architecture and decorative arts in terms of their cultural influences, stresses that the Nabataeans had a “penchant for borrowing ideas as they traded throughout the Roman world.”<sup>238</sup> Despite efforts of the curators to regard Nabatean culture as an “eclectic mix of tastes”<sup>239</sup>, other scholars point to the originality of Nabatean culture. For example, Joseph Patrich, a scholar in the realm of archeology of the near east in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods, references how a pair of Al-Uzza earrings (dated 1st century-2nd century CE), found in the necropolis of the Nabatean desert city of Mamshit belong to a non-figurative tradition for the representation of gods developed by the Nabataeans. Patrich asserts that this finding: “...should dispel any previous doubt as to the existence of a genuine Nabatean tradition in this art form”<sup>240</sup>. Partrich’s research of the engravings on the earrings revealed effigies of non-figurative female deities represented by a pair of eyes that were found engraved on standing stones in several locations in the region. The discoveries of ‘eye idols’ in the Negev and the region tell of a tradition of non-figurative iconography that is quite specific in their nature and seems quite at odds with the assertion of the curators of *East Blend with West* that Nabatean art was based on borrowed ideas from their frequent visits to western parts of the globe along the trade routes. One may find indications of the curator’s claim in two relics taken from the walls of “Qasr al-Bint” a religious temple in the Nabataean city of Petra (1st century BCE) in the exhibition. The first relic, a decorative element from the external walls of the temple shows signs that the temple was originally stuccoed in bright colors, a tradition of Greco-Roman art roots. Another relic, a marble object extensively decorated with plant leaves and a palm tree that was made of high-quality white marble, was most likely imported from Italy. However, another relic from the city of Petra that was included in the exhibition, of a seated, draped, mourning Isis (1st century CE) demonstrates quite a different source of inspiration. A vent hole at the bottom of the sculpture points to the fact that the figurine was most likely fired in a pottery kiln like those used in Egypt at the time. The Isis figurine reveals that the structure of influences on Nabatean art was based on a complex system of ties between civilizations of the region. In an essay included in the exhibition catalogue titled “Nabataean History”, Francisco Del Río Sánchez cites one the first descriptions by a

<sup>238</sup> ——— Alessandra Avanzini, *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans*, Jordan: Medina Partners, 2015. p.24

<sup>239</sup> ——— Ibid

<sup>240</sup> ——— Joseph Patrich, *‘Al-Uzzā’ Earrings*, Israel Exploration Journal, 34:1 (1984), pp. 39-46

Greek historian of the Nabataean civilization:<sup>241</sup> “...nomads who neither sow nor reap, nor do they build houses, living from the trade of goods from Arabia. their rocky, arid land is impenetrable by enemies and only they understand.”<sup>242</sup> Río Sánchez claims that the Nabatean control of the trade routes linking Arabia with the continent was key to their prosperity and that: “...remains found in areas as far apart as Egypt, Phoenicia and Italy (Pozzuoli and Rome, where the Nabataean colony had its own temple), bear witness to the eminently commercial character of their civilisation.”<sup>243</sup> Río Sánchez’s assertion that the discovery of Nabatean remains in distant regions provides evidence of their commercial character, and discounts evidence that the Nabataean civilization primarily represented an agrarian way of life and had cultivated the land of the Negev.<sup>244</sup> *Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev* spirals into an analysis based on Nabatean relics that reinforce the notion that the Nabataean civilization mainly functioned as a nomadic community, traveling along the incense routes that connected Arabia and India with the west and disregards evidence of a Nabatean agrarian community with a distinct artistic style. Reading from an archive of historical personal documents challenges the assertions of Río Sánchez. The Babatha Archive (2nd century CE), a set of personal documents that was excavated from a cave above the Dead Sea, belonged to a woman who was born and lived in Mahoza, a Nabataean port town on the Dead Sea shores. According to Babatha’s documents, her father came to Mahoza, at the time part of the Roman province of Arabia (established in 106 CE), to cultivate dates. Babatha’s father had bought the property from a Nabataean provincial governor. Writing in Greek, in Nabataean (a dialect of Aramaic spoken mainly in the area southeast of the Dead Sea), and Aramaic (the Jewish dialect of the time) Babatha recorded legal matters. The documents corroborate

<sup>241</sup> ——— The catalogue attributes the quote to Hieronymous of Cardia, a Greek official that ruled the region of the Dead Sea although it seems the description was written 1<sup>st</sup> century-BCEE Greek scholar Diodorus Siculus, possibly drawn from the writings of Cardia.

<sup>242</sup> ——— Francisco Del Río Sánchez, Nabatean History in *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans*, Jordan: Medina Partners, 2015. p.22

<sup>243</sup> ——— Ibid

<sup>244</sup> ——— In the *Bibliotheca historica*, 1st century-BCEE Greek scholar Diodorus Siculus reports: “.. for not a few of them are accustomed to bring down to the sea frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kind of spices, which they procure from those who convey them from what is called Arabia Eudaemon...”The Library of History of Diodorus Siculus, Loeb Classical Library edition, 1954, see: [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus\\_Siculus/19E\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/19E*.html) last accessed 17/05/24

Babatha's ownership of date palm orchards, houses, courtyards, and trust funds in the region. It fleshes out the life of a woman living in what was at the time a flourishing center of Nabataean agricultural civilization. Furthermore, it substantiates that the Nabataean civilization lived in permanent settlements, relying on cultivation of land for a source of its income.

The Babatha Archive provides a personal perspective on Nabataean existence. The archive enriches our knowledge of Nabatean civilization and provides evidence of life in Nabataean settlements along the incense route. The archive challenges western-funded projects such as *Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev* and *The Mysterious and Innovative Nabataeans* that focus on the historical routes of exotic substances to the west. As a historical source, Babatha Archive broadens the types of historical sources to consider personal documents. Following Haraway's proposal to open the edges of theories and stories to reveal surprising new and old connections, research of the Babatha Archive demonstrates the pursuit of knowledges that challenges the main historical narrative of the region. The Babatha Archive draws into the Negev knowledges that broaden our scope of the curatorial. Taking in account micro histories that had disappeared due the dominance of the academically institutionalized historical narrative of the region, one may begin to consider the underpinnings of a regional imaginary that considers alternative and nuanced histories.

## 5.2 Limitations on Research in the Negev: Alternative Curatorial Research Methods

Considering alternative and nuanced trade routes in the Negev necessitates historical research that provides evidence of the significance of certain substances to civilizations in the region. I have singled out the historical 'bitumen of Judea route' since I have found evidence that bitumen from the Dead Sea was used extensively in very different contexts in a wide range of civilizations, from prehistoric times to the modern era in the Negev and in western parts of the globe. As implied earlier, academic research on commercial routes that had transported natural resources from the region, inside the region and to other regions is quite meager.<sup>245</sup> Limited academic research on trade routes of the Negev is due to three main causes: 1) European-funded projects' interest in investigating the geographic roots of exotic substances that had reached western parts of the globe in antiquity; 2) Globally pronounced religious interest in Jerusalem as the center of Judaism and Christianity attracting western funding bodies to research pertaining to Jerusalem and its vicinity rather than the Negev; 3) Inaccessibility to reach vast regions of the Negev and Dead Sea due to security infrastructure (see Chapter two for a discussion on the limitations of field work in the Negev). The state of limited research on trade routes of the Negev brought me, in the summer of 2019, to embark on field research to restore knowledge regarding a historical 'bitumen' trade route in the region. The research initiated in the Dead Sea and continued westward towards Gaza. It was based on a calculation of a series of rest stops that took in consideration the distance that animal conveyances can carry goods in one stretch. Soil specimens were collected from the estimated rest stops of the proposed bitumen of Judea route to detect residues of the substance. According to my calculations, the first rest point of the bitumen of Judea route laid roughly 30 kilometers west of the Dead Sea and south-east of the city of Arad.<sup>246</sup> Arriving at the des-

<sup>245</sup> ——— For the sake of comparison, one may find multiple sources of research on trade routes that had originated from the Judean desert and the north shores of the Dead Sea to Jerusalem. For example, see: Menashe Har-el, *The Ancient Landscapes of the Land of Israel*, Kinneret, Zmorea-Bitan, Dvir – Publishing House Ltd., 2005

<sup>246</sup> ——— I calculated 30 kilometer stretches originating in the Dead Sea and

tinuation - an open area that was neither fenced nor signposted - I was apprehended by a security guard working for I.C.L (Israel Chemicals Limited).<sup>247</sup> The guard warned me that I had entered an operating mine and escorted me back to the main road. An official appeal to enter the area for research purposes gained me a one-time entry permit to the grounds of ICL. This time, after showing the approval letter, I was escorted by a security guard who accompanied me to a refining area of ICL. A laboratory test of soil specimens did not show signs of bitumen in the phosphate mine. The second rest stop of the proposed bitumen of Judea trade route fell in the middle of the Arab Bedouin city of Kuseife. The built environment and the densely populated city did not allow me access to fallow soil to secure soil samples. The third calculated rest stop fell in the vicinity of the historical village Tel Malhata. Tel Malhata was a central station for the British Mandate in Palestine including a school and a medical facility. Since the late 1970's, when the IDF air force base Nevatim was constructed, historical Tel Malhata is enclosed in the military base. Nevatim air force base is just one out of numerous bases that were relocated from Sinai to the Negev with the withdrawal of Israel from Sinai under the terms of the peace agreement with Egypt (1979). The withdrawal from Sinai was followed by a law for the expropriation of 82,000 dunams of the Negev area for Israeli military uses. The same law obligated residents of Tel Malhata to relocate their village to areas outside of the new military zones.<sup>248</sup> Reaching the original village of Tel Malhata necessitates a special permit on behalf of the IDF.<sup>249</sup> (See Chapter Two for a discussion on military land-use in Israel).<sup>250</sup> Continuing westward, the remaining rest

advancing towards Gaza based on the distance a camel can travel without a water source.

- 247** — ICL is the modern extraction company that had inherited the concession given by the British Mandate to P.P.L. to extract Dead Sea minerals from the lake and the region. For further information see Chapter Four.
- 248** — Once a year the Arab Bedouin community that have lived in Tel Malhata visit their village and graveyard that are still partially intact.
- 249** — Another example of an archeological site that is inaccessible due to its use as an IDF base is "Tel Yona" a site from the 6th century CE, where findings include a wall system, a mosaic floor and wells. For more information (Hebrew): Tel Yona, Wikipedia, November, 29, 2022, [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/תל\\_יוֹנָה](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/תל_יוֹנָה)
- 250** — 46% of Israeli land is security territories while in the sparsely populated Negev desert (66% percent of the area of Israel, 8% of Israeli population) the percentage of lands that are security territories reaches 50%. See: Amiram Oren, "Shadow Lands: The Use of Land Resources for Security Needs in Israel", in *"Militarism and Israeli Society"*, Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak (eds), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

points of the proposed bitumen of Judea route fall in the dense urban areas of Be'er Sheva, and the western Negev that includes dozens of kibbutzim and other agricultural settlements of the Gaza envelope. The last point on the proposed bitumen of Judea route is Gaza, which is not attainable.<sup>251</sup> Research on the proposed bitumen of Judea route met its limitations. From this point onwards, I had to depend on meager academic sources regarding Dead Sea natural resources and their trade in the Negev to pursue my research on the bitumen of Judea trade route, initiating in the Dead Sea and moving westward towards Gaza, and from there to the western world.

### 5.3 A New Historical Trade Route in the Negev: The Bitumen of Judea Route

The human use of bitumen of Judea goes back ca. 10,000 years ago to the Neolithic Period when it was used for waterproofing baskets and for decorative purposes.<sup>252</sup> The significance of bitumen in the Egyptian mummification process (1550 – 1070 BCE) is discerned in the etymological roots of the term 'mum' – the Arab term for bitumen.<sup>253</sup> Due to its high resistance and external shielding, bitumen was used to seal the mummy's surface, preventing intrusion of insects, fungi and bacteria, while its high sulphur content prevented the flesh from decaying.<sup>254</sup> Bitumen of Judea's unique traits of resistance and shielding were also discussed in the Bible (the Book of Kings) in regards to King Nebuchadnezzar, one of the most infamous kings of the Bible (ca. 600 BCE), who reigned on Babylon, the capital city of the ancient Babylonian Empire in the Mesopotamian area. Nebuchadnezzar repaired the dried clay brick city wall of Babylon with a mixture of bricks, bitumen

- 251** — Since the attacks on the Gaza envelope settlements of 7/10/23 and the subsequent conflict in Gaza, the region has restricted access.
- 252** — Arie Nissenbaum, *The Dead Sea – an economic resource for 10000 years*, Hydrobiologia, 267, p.130, 1993, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Belgium
- 253** — An additional use of bitumen of Judea in Egypt was as a pigment and traces of it are found on ceramic shards and wall paintings, see: Kate Fulcher, Rebecca Stacey; Neal Spencer, "Bitumen from the Dead Sea in Early Iron Age Nubia," *Sci Rep* vol. 10, 8309 (2020)
- 254** — Arie Nissenbaum, "Dead Sea Asphalt in Ancient Egyptian Mummies – Why?," *Archaeometry*, Vol. 55, Is. 3, (June 2013): pp. 563-568

and clay, strengthened with reeds to curb the flooding waters of the Euphrates.<sup>255</sup> The bitumen-based system was so effective that Babylonians were able to use it to build towers up to twelve stories high. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was not only proud of the towers of Babylon, but he was also gratified with every paved street made with bitumen mortar; sewers lined with a mixture of bitumen clay and gravel and bridges. For Nebuchadnezzar, bitumen was a substance of advancement and success. He describes the use of bitumen in the technological and architectural feats of Babel as such:

In Babel, my favorite city that I love, was the palace, the house, the marvel of mankind, the center of the land, the dwelling of majesty ... In consequence of high waters, its foundation had become weak, and owing to the filling up of the streets of Babel, the gateway to that palace had become too low. I tore down its walls of dried brick, and laid its cornerstone bare, and reached the depth of the waters. Facing the water, I laid its foundation firmly and raised it mountain high with bitumen and burnt brick. Mighty cedars I caused to be laid down at length for its roofing. For protection, I built two massive walls of asphalt and brick, 490 ells [English linear measure equal to 114 centimeters (45 inches)] beyond Nimitti-Bel [the outer wall of Babel]. Between them I erected a structure of bricks on which I built my kingly dwelling of asphalt and bricks. This I surrounded with a massive wall of asphalt and burnt bricks.<sup>256</sup>

The structure of asphalt and bricks in which Nebuchadnezzar built his dwelling is considered by Biblical and historical scholars as the “Tower of Babylon” (Babylon and Babel are interchangeable).<sup>257</sup> The “Tower of Babylon” is mentioned once in the Bible, (Genesis 11:4,5) as an incomplete building. Nebuchadnezzar describes the tower as an important ancient Babylonian monument: “... I built and finished it ... A former king built it—they reckon 42 ages [ago]—but he did not complete its

<sup>255</sup> ——— Olof Pedersen, *Babylon: The Great City*, Munster: Zaphon, 2021, p.33

<sup>256</sup> ——— Zayn Bikadi, Bitumen – A History, Aramco World, Arab and Islamic Cultures and Connections, see: <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/198406/bitumen.-a.history.htm>

<sup>257</sup> ——— The unfinished tower of Babel as told by Nebuchadnezzar, fits squarely with the biblical narrative of the tower of Babel as it appears in the Bible (Genesis 10:10; 11:4). According to the book of Genesis, the Babylonians wanted to make a name for themselves by building a mighty city and a tower with its top in the heavens. God disrupted the work by so confusing the language of the workers that they could no longer understand one another. This biblical narrative emphasizes the significance of language in the act of creation.

head. Since a remote time, people had abandoned it without order expressing their words.”<sup>258</sup> As demonstrated by archeological research, bitumen was a central substance in the building of Babylon: “By far the most common building material with inscriptions in Babylon is baked brick... Babylonian construction practice required pouring bitumen on every layer of brick and then a small amount of earth upon the bitumen before the next brick layer.”<sup>259</sup> Apart from its strength, bitumen was widely used in the region due to its availability in various forms: as a solid material in the form of bituminous limestone; as a liquid that oozed out of the ground in certain places; and as lumps floating on waterways that assisted in its transportation.<sup>260</sup> Siculus the Greek (c. 90 BCE- c. 30 BCE) was the first historian to describe bitumen in terms of its commercial value.<sup>261</sup> According to Siculus, the bitumen that appeared on the surface of the Dead Sea, especially after earthquakes, was sought after especially by the Nabataean civilization. This is apparent in one of Siculus’s accounts concerning the battle (4th century BCE) between the Romans and the Nabateans over the control of bitumen of Judea. The Nabataean victory on the control of bitumen of Judea, led to an era of Nabataean bitumen extraction and exportation during the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (332–30 BCE), mainly for processes of mummification<sup>262</sup>. Siculus describes how the Nabataeans (he calls them barbarians) recognize the appearance of bitumen on the Dead Sea surface and its potential trade in Egypt:

[...] and from its centre each year it sends forth a mass of solid asphalt, sometimes more than three plethorum in area, sometimes a little less than one plethorum. When this happens the barbarians who live nearby habitually call the larger mass a bull and the smaller one a calf. When the asphalt is floating on the sea, its surface seems to those who see it from a distance just like an island. When the asphalt has been ejected, the people who live about the sea on both sides carry it off like plunder of war since they are hostile to each other, making the collection without boats in a peculiar fashion... the barbarians who enjoy this source of income take the asphalt to Egypt and sell it for the embalming

<sup>258</sup> ——— Nebuchadnezzar’s, “Tower of Babel”, Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archeology, see: <https://armstronginstitute.org/125-nebuchadnezzars-tower-of-babel>

<sup>259</sup> ——— Pedersen, *ibid.* p.20

<sup>260</sup> ——— The bitumen used in Babylon was from the Mesopotamian region.

<sup>261</sup> ——— Philip C. Hammond, “The Nabataean Bitumen Industry at the Dead Sea”, *The Biblical Archaeologist* V. 22, no. 2 (1959): pp. 40–48

<sup>262</sup> ——— The use of bitumen of Judea in mummification processes probably began in Dynastic Egypt.

of the dead; for unless this is mixed with the other aromatic ingredients, the preservation of the bodies cannot be permanent.<sup>263</sup>

Siculus's inquisitiveness regarding bitumen of Judea continues in his global historical account, *Bibliotheca Historica*, that consisted of forty books that were divided into three sections (60 and 30 BCE).<sup>264</sup> Siculus describes the abundance of bitumen and its uses in the Babylonian building industry and as a heating substance.<sup>265</sup>

Although the sights to be seen in Babylonia are many and singular, not the least wonderful is the enormous amount of bitumen which the country produces; so great is the supply of this that it not only suffices for their buildings, which are numerous and large, but the common people also, gathering at the place, draw it out without any restriction, and drying it burn it in place of wood.<sup>266</sup>

Due to the centrality of bitumen of Judea in Greek culture,<sup>267</sup> the Dead Sea was named the Lake of Salt and Asphalt.<sup>268</sup> In *Materia Medica* (1st century BCE), Greek physician Dioscorides pointed out the potency of the bitumen from the Dead Sea in medicine due to its antimicrobial and biocidal properties.<sup>269</sup> Another Greek, the geographer and philosopher Strabo (64 or 63 BCE – c. 24 CE), who lived in Asia Minor during the period of the Roman Empire, also recognized the lake's special qualities due to the asphalt composition of the lake.<sup>270</sup>

<sup>263</sup> ——— The Library of History of Diodorus Siculus, Loeb Classical Library edition, 1954, see: [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus\\_Siculus/19E\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/19E*.html)

<sup>264</sup> ——— Fifteen out of forty books of the global history compendium, 'Bibliotheca Historica', have survived intact.

<sup>265</sup> ——— Bitumen is also mentioned in the bible as the substance involved in the building of the Tower of Babel under the name "tar". Genesis 6-14 (NIV)

<sup>266</sup> ——— The Library of History of Diodorus Siculus, Loeb Classical Library edition, 1954, see: [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus\\_Siculus/2A\\*.html#note32](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/2A*.html#note32)

<sup>267</sup> ——— The first century Romano-Jewish Jerusalem-born historian and military leader, Josephus, who periodically lived on the Dead Sea's shores describes appearance of bitumen of Judea on the lake's surface as if the lake was vomiting massive chunks of bitumen, shaped and sized as headless bulls. See: Jewish Antiquities, Lib I, c. xx, and Jewish Wars, Lib 4.

<sup>268</sup> ——— In the Madaba mosaic map of 6th century CE the Dead Sea appears as the Lake of Asphalt.

<sup>269</sup> ——— Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica: Being an Herbal with many other Medicinal Materials*, Johannesburg: IBIDIS PRESS, 2000.p.99

<sup>270</sup> ——— That part of Judea which is on the eastern side of the Jordan, between the lake of Tiberias and the Dead Sea, contained a district called Silbonitis. The resemblance of this name to Sirbonis probably misled Strabo.

[The lake] is full of asphalt. At random times, it rises up with bubbles like boiling water from the middle of its depths. The surface [of the lake] bulges and has the appearance of a ridge. A great amount of soot is also carried up [with the asphalt], which is smoky but invisible to the eye.<sup>271</sup>

The Romans also discovered the potency of bitumen of Judea. The Roman author and army commander, Gaius Plinius Secundus, or Pliny the Elder, (CE 23/24 – 79), was the first to sketch out a 'Bitumen of Judea' route. In *Natural History* (1st century CE), the largest single work to have survived from the Roman Empire, Pliny describes bitumen of Judea as an important substance for the Roman Empire: "The only product of the Dead Sea is bitumen, the Greek word for which gives it its Greek name, Asphaltites."<sup>272</sup> Pliny the elder was not the only Roman who indicated the substance's significance in the Roman empire. Vitruvius, a renowned Roman architect, spoke of bitumen's absence during the building of the Roman Empire, and emphasizes its consequence for the Romans in this absence.<sup>273</sup> During the height of the reign of the Ottoman Empire, bitumen of Judea was distributed from the Dead Sea to many parts of the globe for various uses. During this era, it was a British chemist and physician William Lewis (1708-1781), who named bitumen of Judea "Jews' pitch". Lewis's chronicles reveal how Britain's interest in the region during the Ottoman Empire was rooted in their enthusiasm to control the trade of precious substances of the region, including bitumen of Judea, linking them with the Jewish people of the bible:

It has long, however, been disregarded in this country: the college of Edinburgh has now expunged it from the catalogue of officials, and that of London retains it only as an ingredient in one of the compositions which complaisance to antiquity has preserved in the shops. Nor is it, among us, to be often met with; its place being generally supplied by different bituminous substances found in France, Germany, and Switzerland...<sup>274</sup>

<sup>271</sup> ——— Strabo and Galen on the Dead Sea, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2017, Ancient Medicine, <https://www.ancientmedicine.org/home/2017/2/6/galen-strabo-dead-sea>, last accessed, 16/04/22

<sup>272</sup> ——— Pliny the Elder, "Natural History", Loeb Classical Library, November 29, 2022, [https://www.loebclassics.com/view/pliny\\_elder-natural\\_history/1938/pb\\_LCL352.275.xml?readMode=recto](https://www.loebclassics.com/view/pliny_elder-natural_history/1938/pb_LCL352.275.xml?readMode=recto),

<sup>273</sup> ——— Wager Halleck, "Bitumen: Its Varieties, Properties, and Uses", Washington: U.S. Corps of Engineers, 1841. p.8

<sup>274</sup> ——— William Lewis, "An Experimental History of the Materia Medica", 1791, Printed for J. Johnson in St. Paul's Church-Yard

By linking the Jewish people and 'bitumen of Judea' Lewis points to the religious sentiment that was at the root of the British interest in (and later occupation of) the region. Many British explorers of the region linked biblical tales with actual sites in the region.<sup>275</sup> For example, Scottish Reverend James Aitken Wylie (1808 – 1890) compiled a collection of accounts of explorers to the region. Wylie, who was famous for publishing the "History of Protestantism", published travelers' accounts to the Holy Land that became frequent at the time due to newly available steamship travel. Wylie's compilation of explorers' accounts describes bitumen of Judea as one of the most abundant natural resources of the region:

With regard to the origin of the bitumen found so abundantly in this sea, the Arabs told Burchhardt that it exudes from the cliffs which impend over the eastern shore, and becoming detached from the mountain, rolls down with terrific noise into the lake. We must seek a different origin for this substance. Before the destruction of Sodom, the plain "was full of slime pits," that is, wells of bitumen, and there is nothing impossible in the supposition, that these wells may be still in action at the bottom of the Dead Sea, and thus sending their produce to the surface...<sup>276</sup>

Through the accounts of bitumen of Judea throughout the above mentioned chronicles of human history, that include Greek and Roman historians and scientists, Siculus, Strabo, Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder, one realizes the significance of bitumen of Judea in antiquity. The accounts of the British explorers Lewis along with Wylie's compilation reinforce that bitumen of Judea was a major substance that had brought colonial interest to the region. These research threads that I had articulated emphasize the need to further advance the research on the bitumen of Judea route and to eventually publish this research.

<sup>275</sup> ——— The term 'Jews pitch' for bitumen of Judea first appears in: Lewis, William, "An Experimental History of the Materia Medica", 1791, Printed for J. Johnson, in St. Paul's Church-Yard; R. Baldwin, in Pater-noster-Row; J. Sewell, in Cornbill; and S. Hayes, in Oxford-Street. The term also appears a book on practical engineering published by the U.S. Engineering Department for the use of officers of the U.S. corps of engineers (1841).

<sup>276</sup> ——— Aitken James Rev. Wylie, "The Modern Judea Compared with Ancient Prophecy", Glasgow and London: Williams Collins, 1850. pp.246-247

## 5.4 Bitumen of Judea Reaches the West

A few kilograms of bitumen of Judea that were delivered from the French Consul at Jerusalem to France probably led to one of the most surprising points on the bitumen of Judea route. Bitumen of Judea was transported to France for agricultural research in the mid 19th century and was intended to be used as a pesticide during the Phylloxera scourge.<sup>277</sup> The substance's appearance in France in the mid 19th century had probably brought quite different consequences. Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce who, at the end of the 19th century created the first photographic experiment, used bitumen of Judea as a solvent to coat a glass plate that would later be exposed to light in a camera obscura. Basing his photographic experiment on the waterproof traits of bitumen of Judea, the first photographic plate coated with the substance was a pewter sheet of metal that was fixed inside a camera obscura pointing towards the view from the window of Niépce's flat in Paris (1826) **Figure 53**. After his photographic success, Niépce partnered with the French artist and photographer Louis Daguerre (1829) and together they continued to experiment with photography.<sup>278</sup> They pursued to develop a photographic technique that was sensitive to light and would permanently capture the images they saw in the camera obscura while fixating it to further exposure. After Niépce's death (1833), Daguerre finally devised a way to permanently reproduce an image that needed less time for exposure. The daguerreotype method used iodine instead of bitumen of Judea to make the photographic plate sensitive to light.<sup>279</sup> Since the invention of the daguerreotype, bitumen of Judea was much less involved in photographic processes. Some scientists continued to develop photosensitive procedures that were based on bitumen of Judea, including: lithography, zincography,

<sup>277</sup> ——— Arie Nissenbaum, "Utilization of Dead Sea Asphalt Throughout History," *Reviews in Chemical Engineering*, vol.9, no.3-4 (1993) p.376

<sup>278</sup> ——— Dying at an early age, his pioneering work in photography was largely overshadowed by the daguerreotype invention of which Niépce received no posthumous credit.

<sup>279</sup> ——— While Niépce's invention was a breakthrough in terms of its ability to produce endless images, the daguerreotype produced only one image. The daguerreotype was used to produce images in books through contact printing. Whereas the copper plate could stand thousands of prints a day, the daguerreotype print on paper slowly faded away and proved to be a tedious and non-efficient method.



fig. 53, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, *Untitled 'point de vue,'* 1827. Courtesy of Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

calotype, electroplating and halftone engraving but essentially its use in photographic processes were limited.<sup>280</sup> The role that bitumen of Judea played in photography, one of the most significant inventions of the modern era, provides evidence of the existence of a historical bitumen of Judea route. A route that had most likely begun with prehistoric communities who had discovered the importance of Dead Sea bitumen of Judea and had exported it to neighboring Egyptian civilization for the mummification process; continuing with explorers from the west to the Dead Sea region discovering bitumen's medicinal, agricultural and architectural properties that had reverberations across western parts of the globe and finally with its role in the invention of photography in late 19th century France. Histories of contact, interaction, and commerce of bitumen of Judea evidence that, beside the extensively researched incense route by European organizations such as UNESCO that have historically ossified the Negev an economic belt in ancient eras, consider the Negev an epicenter of rich natural resources such as bitumen, that has, over centuries, enriched regional civilizations, and also contributed to ground breaking modern inventions such as photography.

## 5.5 Alternative Historical Perspectives and Counter Narratives of the Negev

The invention of photography is considered by many a major pinnacle of western ingenuity and scientific advancement. It is many times attributed to the ingenious work of European male scientists. Nevertheless, a careful analysis of the origins of the substances involved in the invention of photography reveals the mechanics behind the creative invention. That the invention is the result of the intersection of global knowledges that had reached Europe in the 19th century through colonial expeditions to the colonies seems to be an inevitable conclusion. This is true regarding other substances involved in the photographic invention. For example, the tin in the plate that that served as the basis of

<sup>280</sup> In 1925, L. R Clerc wrote: “the only technique used at the start of photo-engraving, Syrian bitumen, called judean (asphalt), has gradually been abandoned in favor of bichromate albumin. This later technique obtains the same results but takes much less time”. Bitumen does not seem to have been used in photomechanical processes after 1930.

the first photograph most likely originated from the southern regions of the globe. By decoding the substances involved in the European invention one may comprehend how European scientific advancements are dependent on “situated knowledges” from around the globe. Exploring the impact of the extraction of substances involved in the invention of photography leads one to recognize their contribution to the current climate crisis of our day and age. This idea is articulated by the research project and exhibition “Mining Photography: The Ecological Footprint of Image Production”, led by three European institutions: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MK&G) specializing in design; Swiss Gewerbemuseum Winterthur that explores the points where design, art and society intersect and Kunst Haus Wien, a museum founded by Hundertwasser that focuses on ecology-related issues in contemporary art. In the foreword of the exhibition catalogue edited by Boaz Levin, Esther Ruelfs, Tulga Beyerle, the three directors of the museums write:

The exhibition and book tell the story of photography from its origins in the 19th century through to today: it is a story that is inextricably tied in with human-wrought climate change—a web of entanglement that was evident from the very beginning. In the early days of photography, the primary materials required in the progression from the daguerreotype to the gelatin silver print were copper, silver, salt, and gold; in today’s digital age, meanwhile, there is more emphasis on rare earths and metals like coltan, cobalt, and europium, which are built into the shining color displays of all our smartphones. Our focus on the material aspect of photography provides confirmation, for the first time, that the medium’s development has always depended on the global trade in raw materials and the ruthless exploitation of people and nature.<sup>281</sup>

The research project links substances that were involved in the early era of photography: copper, silver, salt, and gold, with substances that compose our current cameras in smartphones, such as coltan, cobalt, and europium. In “Photography and Climate Change: The Engine of Reflection, and its Footprint”, Boaz Levin and Esther Ruelfs connect

<sup>281</sup> ——— Tulga Beyerle, Bettina Leidl, Susanna Kumschick, Foreword to “Mining Photography: the Ecological Footprint of Image Production”, editors: Boaz Levin, Esther Ruelfs, Tulga Beyerle, MK&G, Spector Books, 2023, p.9

Niepce’s invention of photography with the commencement of what they call “fossil capitalism”.<sup>282</sup>

According to the authors, the invention of photography was rooted in over a decade of research of Niepce along with his brother, on the invention of the world’s first internal combustion engine based on “white oil of petroleum” (kerosene). The invention which preceded today’s car engines met its culmination due to engineering problems not solved and the early death of Niepce’s brother. According to Levin and Ruelfs, the same logic was at the heart of the invention of photography. Levin and Ruelfs discuss Niepce’s entrepreneurial interests in implementing the use of fossil fuels in both inventions. The scientific breakthrough that involved coating a metal plate with the petroleum substance, that, when exposed to light, became non-soluble is intertwined with his use of white oil of petroleum in the exploration of the invention of the combustion engine. By linking together both research processes, Levin and Ruelfs touch on one of the significant issues in climate change studies: substantiating ties between excessive human interference in the environment, exploitation of human labor and the climate crisis. This same logic is followed in essence by most academic researchers, contemporary artists and curators that deal with the climate crisis. Evidence of the complicity of colonial powers in the escalation of the climate crisis are dealt with by scientists, researchers, artists and curators around the globe in a wide range of contexts.

If one should speak of regions that were in the past points of interest to colonial powers due to their richness in natural substances and were used to advance humanity into the age of industrialization and modernization, the Dead Sea region may serve as a compelling example. Evidence of a wide range of interests in bitumen of Judea, from ancient times until the invention of photography, directs us to consider the foundation of the ‘new’ historical route of bitumen of Judea. The recognition of the substance route that originated in the Negev and was influential in a series of inventive uses --including for sealing purposes, in agriculture, medicine and photography – point to its potential in inscribing a regional imaginary that is based on micro histories and alternative trade routes. And if the wide range of uses of bitumen of Judea over vast time frames from antiquity onwards, and its esteemed role in modern inventions, did not transform the Dead Sea region into

<sup>282</sup> ——— Boaz Levin, Esther Ruelfs, “Photography and Climate Change: The Engine of Reflection, and its Footprint”, in “Mining Photography: The Ecological Footprint of Image Production”, editors: Boaz Levin, Esther Ruelfs, Tulga Beyerle, MK&G, Spector Books, 2023p.14

a nexus of economic and social importance, this is due to a world system that recognized the colonial territories of imperial forces as subordinate to their powers. Validating retrospectively the bitumen of Judea route has its advantages for the region, especially regarding its curatorial future. Considering the role “situated knowledges” from the region played from antiquity to modernity is the basis of the curatorial horizon of the Negev region. This notion is crucial especially in face of the potential to (re-) learn how ancient societies of the region formulated ways of living that adapted to the extreme environment. Survival tactics that have gradually lost their relevance in modern ways of existence but prove relevant in an age of climate change. An investigation of the bitumen of Judea route, confronts one with a variety of applications and uses that to strengthen the notion that from the dawn of humanity, mankind has created imaginative uses of natural substances. This notion does not in any way strengthen the exploitation of these resources nor the mistreatment of human labor that is applied in mining natural resources, but rather points to the inventiveness and creativity that are implied in human explorations of natural substances that can lead to future understanding of dealing with the climate crisis. How to implement the curiosity and inventiveness that were implicated in the inventions of Niepce and others into current climate crisis research? The conclusion of the dissertation has demonstrated how by integrating “situated knowledges” and alternative perspectives on the cultural history of the region, curators working in regional cultural institutions may use their authority to shape the artistic future of their regions. How they can become powerful agents that challenge the dominant social and governing agendas of the region. The development of a ‘new’ historical bitumen of Judea route is the enunciation of alternative perspectives and counter narratives of the Negev - an exploration took me on a curatorial journey. Accompanied by the dark, oily substance I have begun to consider artistic interventions that may visit civilizations that have survived the extreme environment of the Dead Sea and have cultivated new ways of existence on its shores due to its potent powers. Artistic expressions that demonstrate how substance routes have impacted societies of the Dead Sea region and of the western world and together instigate the creation of a renewed regional imaginary.<sup>283</sup>

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283 ——— One can imagine a future research project and exhibition that explores the presence and use of bitumen of Judea in the Negev desert, the Dead Sea region and in the western world.

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Curators working in cultural institutions in regions that are distant from cultural centres hold the power to participate in shaping the artistic and creative narrative of their communities. They can reproduce and reinforce a western curatorial agenda, or they can become powerful agents in introducing other forms of knowledges, ideas, and creations from their region that have not yet been globalized.

Keeping the Edges Open is rooted in re-visitations of regional, subjugated, creative expressions and knowledges of the Negev desert. Hadas Kedar explored the desert to consider forms of expressions from ancient times and from recent ones that have resisted the subjugating forces of Western art. Examining a series of curatorial interventions in the Negev, where she lived in her teenage years and returned to as a professional in the arts, Keeping the Edges Open offers an original and extensive study of curatorial interventions and methods that shape artistic and creative narratives in remote regions, exploring how they may stimulate a democratization of the curatorial.

**Hadas Kedar** is an artist, curator and researcher based in Tel Aviv and the Negev Desert. Kedar established Arad Art and Architecture international residency program together with Arad municipality and established and curated exhibitions at Arad Contemporary Art Center, Negev desert. Kedar established, directed and curated Studio Bank, Tel Aviv, a temporary art center. She has participated in and curated exhibitions including in Camden Arts Centre and Five Years Gallery, London; Asperger Gallery, Berlin; Herzliya Museum, Herzliya, and in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



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