

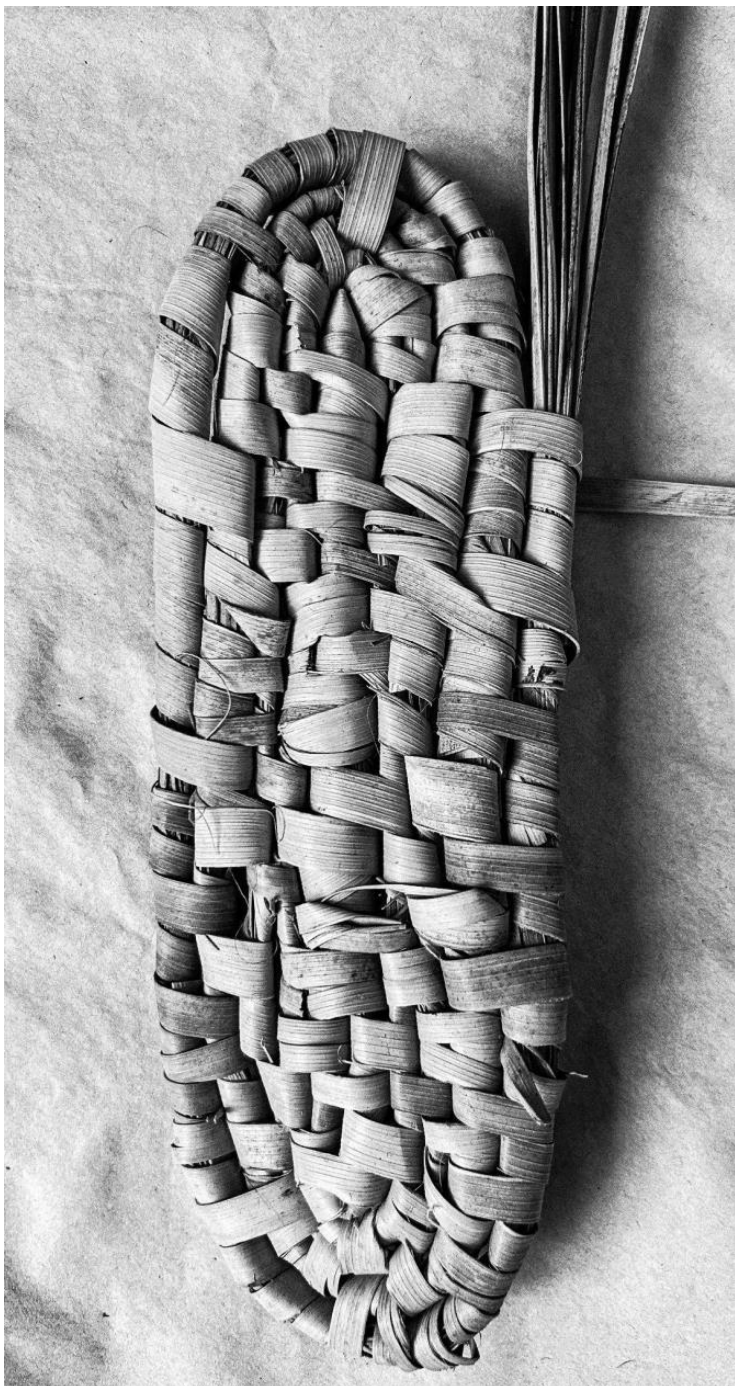
## Arthood Beyond Objecthood

A Field Study in Israeli Art, Commissioned by the Plumas Foundation

*by* Albert Swissa

## Featuring Artists and Research Collaborators

Lubna A-Sana



*Vessel of Containment*, 2024, remnants of palm wood, variable dimensions.

Photo: Lubna A-Sana

A Bedouin architect and artist from the village of Al-Lagiya, Lubna A-Sana weaves together architecture and art through acts of social and civic activism in public space. She is among the founders of *Saada Movement for Art*, a multidisciplinary and activist initiative focused on fostering artistic expressions of and within the concrete terrain of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

---

## Roger Ishay Benichou (Z"L)



*Totality and Infinity*, 2015, collage, mixed media, 400 × 250 cm.

Photo: Shmaya

A uniquely interdisciplinary artist in every fibre of his being, whose beginnings lay in music and spiritual thought. Benichou's plastic work — both figurative and abstract — fuses philosophical-spiritual meditation, creative collaborations, and active, engaged teaching that carries a profoundly ethical dimension. Though born of the personal, his work emerges on its own strength and character into the communal and the universal.

The project *Labyrinth* was presented as part of the MusraraMix events, Jerusalem, May 2024. A documentary film on his work will be released in 2025.

---



## Nidal Jabarin



*Young Man with Down Syndrome*, 2015, oil on canvas, 115 × 80 cm.

Photo: Nidal Jabarin

Nidal Jabarin sets out an exceptional, epic journey winding between the inward susceptibilities and vulnerabilities of the psyche, and the places, people, and objects reflected in the mirror of painting and embodied in stone. Above all, Jabarin strives toward the darker extremities of the psyche — moods, maladies, deformities, and madness — not as sites of forbidden or voyeuristic fascination, but rather as natural, concrete and genuinely shared modes of living and being in the world.

---

## Aaron Pinchas (Roni) Grundman



*Lot's Wife*, 2022, colored pencils on paper, 20 × 40 cm.

Photo: Aaron Pinchas (Roni) Grundman

Aaron Pinchas (Roni) Grundman grew up in an environment steeped in art. As a child, his gift for drawing was soon acknowledged — though met by his surroundings with estranged indifference. His early paintings display graphic intuitions of singular inspiration, followed by decades of almost total rupture. After years of spiritual peregrination, in his old age he returned to painting — in search of where it may be found anew, if not, perhaps, returned to. Yet the future, too, promises nothing. He simply draws.

---



## Shlomo Vazana



*The Tongue in Colors: The White in the Book*, Katamon, 1986, sculpture / performance / installation, mixed media, 40 × 20 m.

Photo: the artist

A prolific social activist and multidisciplinary creator who employs sculpture, video, performance, happenings, theatre, and film as active, site-specific, and boundary-breaking tools for social and political initiative and struggle.

---

## Yael Topol (Z"l)



*Self-Portrait*, ca. 2010, oil on canvas, 46 × 68 cm.

Photo: Vadim Liddin

Topol's paintings depict the daily life of the Yemenite community in the Israel of her childhood and youth. She specialized in Yemenite ceramic dinnerware and Judiaca, leaving behind an impressive corpus of paintings and ceramics.

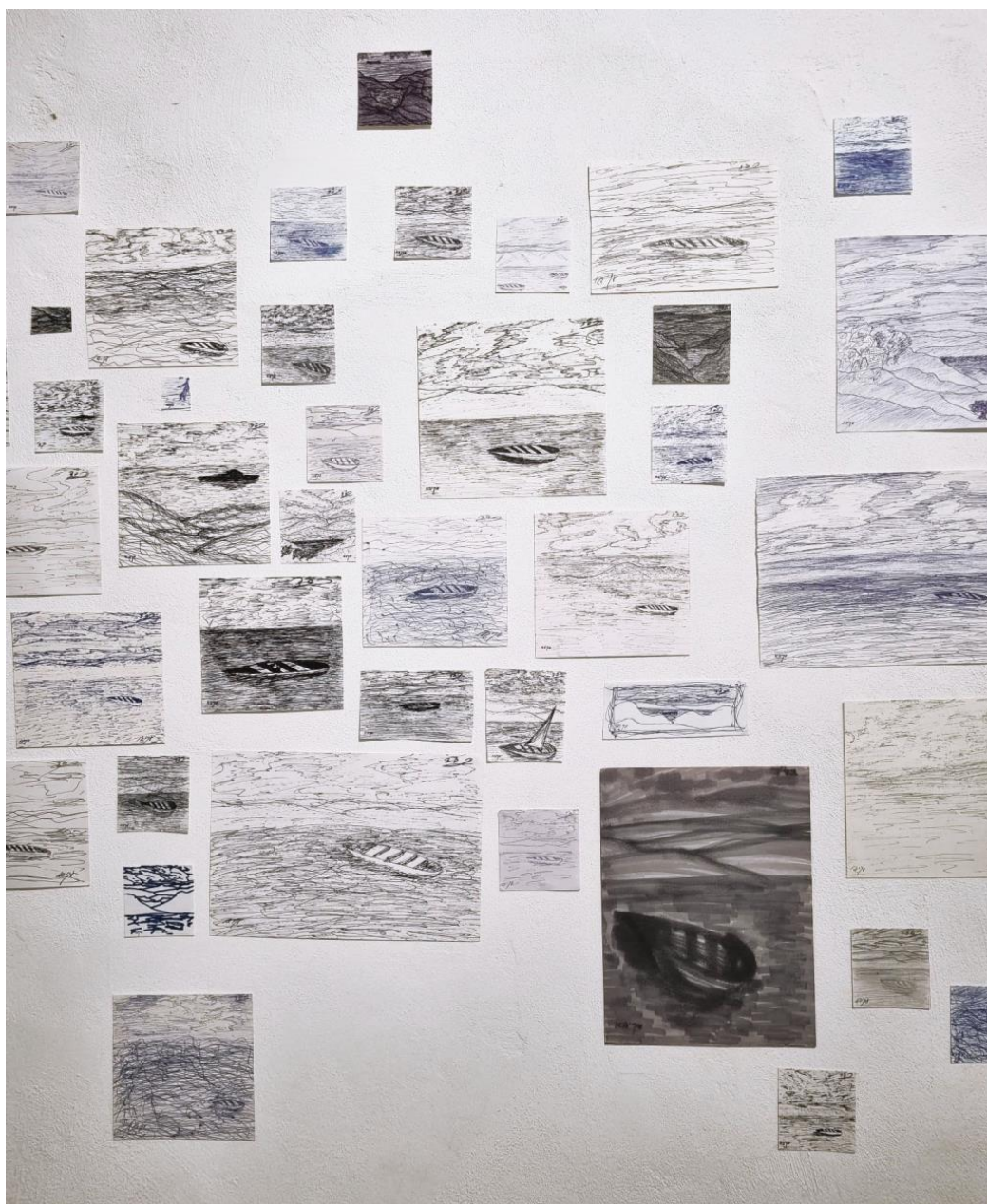
The preservation and accessibility of her oeuvre to the public is a cause of poetic and cultural justice, as Topol's work gives voice to an entire generation of women artists — like the remarkable Sarah Alimi — who, in the latter half of the twentieth century, worked outside the Israeli mainstream, and whose incisive, critical art never received its due recognition.

A retrospective of her work will be presented concurrently in two galleries, in May–June 2025.

---



## Akiva Alon Torovetzky



*Boat*, 2023, pen and pencil on paper, various dimensions.

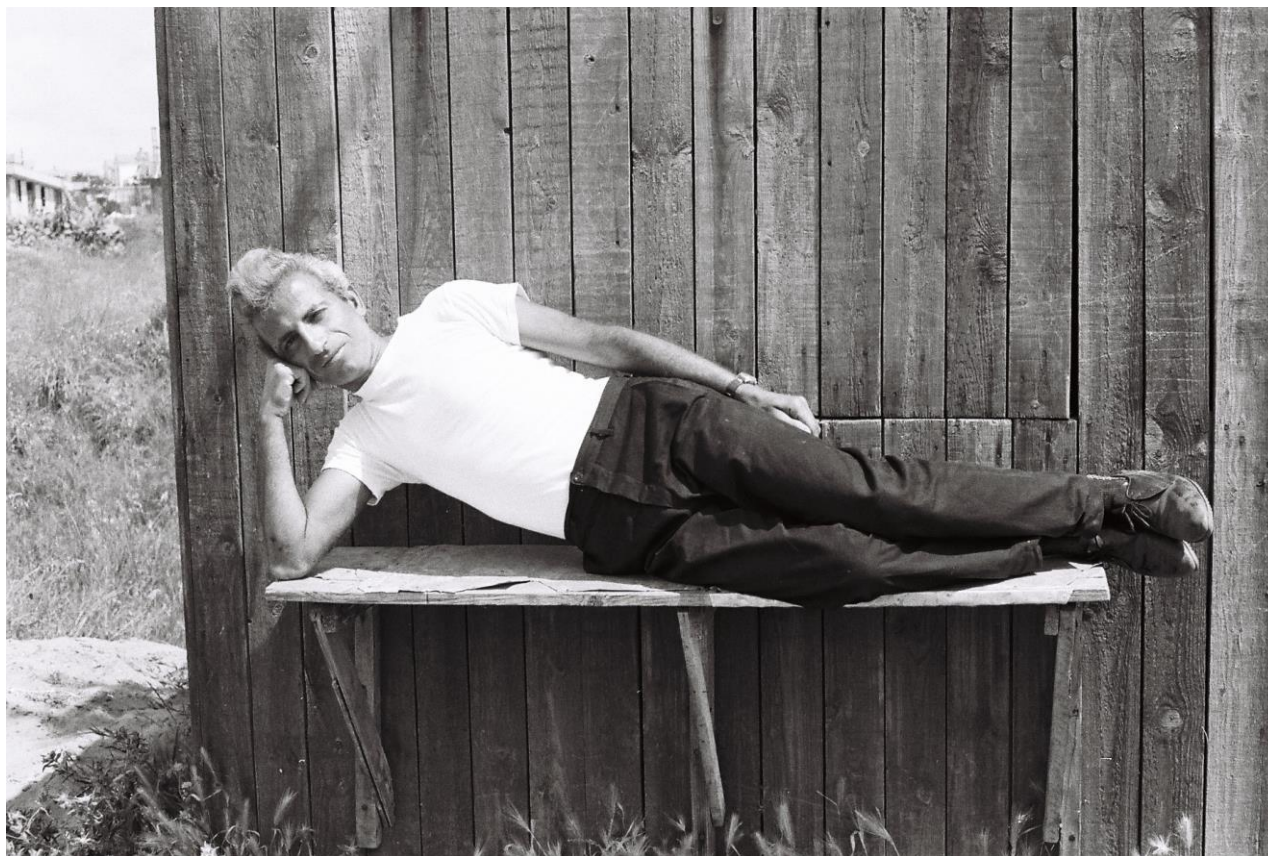
Photo: Shimon Pinto

Torovetzky's world originates in a cosmic union of heaven and earth — in which a slight pre-eminence is held by the former. This union is not staged in opposition to the traditional horizontal division of nature in painting, and its premeditated redoubling of psychological and spiritual constructs; as Turovetsky is not concerned with the language of painting as such. It arises from childhood experiences of near-revelatory intensity. His skyscapes and earthscapes play out as distilled reflections of one another — unmeddled and unmediated by human hand. His painting is neither meditation nor sentiment, but a brush lent to a furtive, inscrutable spirit.

A solo exhibition of his works was shown in 2024 at Ashkila Gallery, Jaffa.



## Yitzhak Yerushalmi



*Untitled*, 1960, photograph, 70 × 40 cm.

Photo: the artist

A self-taught photographer who never knew he was an artist — nor demands recognition as one. As an “external child” in a kibbutz of the 1970s, he laboured in the fields outside the immigrant transit camp (*Ma’abara*) of Morasha, his childhood neighbourhood, to buy himself a camera. Over eight years he photographed, with great love and devotion, the residents of Morasha — 1,400 photographs in all, every one from the *Ma’abara*, not a single one from the kibbutz.

His images embody a unique photo-poetics and photo-therapy, while also inviting reflection on their social and political resonances, which speak volumes in a resounding silence.

His exhibition was shown at Musrara Gallery.

---

## Miri Neshri



*Nimrod*, from the series *Birthing Earth*, 2001, photograph, 47 × 49 cm.

Photo: the artist

The core fascination of Miri Neshri's work is with everything lying in-between creation and dissolution, in its concrete manifestations within lived experience — not merely in thought. Her interdisciplinarity is that of matter and corporeality, not of genres or concepts. The body in her art is foremost her own — its biography, and the feminine experiences of birth and embodiment as an authoritative, singular source of artistic creation.

"From my flesh shall I behold God" is the axiom she follows, even as her work extends into wider social, public, and political spheres.

---



## Nurit Agur



*Angels and Fools*, February 2022, installation, military stretcher and cabbage heads.

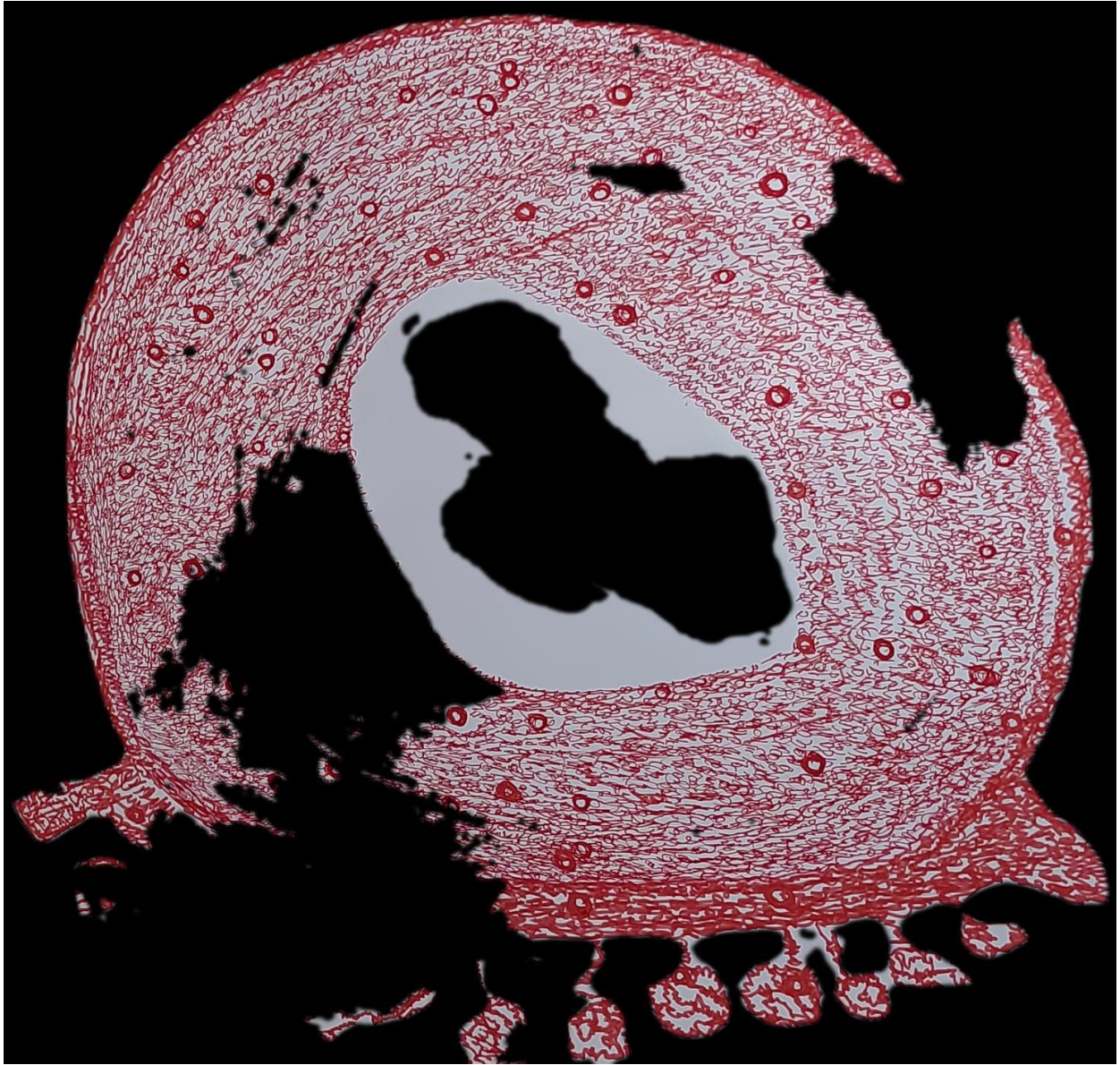
Photo: the artist

Agur's art moves simultaneously along two complementary yet diametric vectors: on one hand, a redemptive, utopian striving toward the consummate and perfected work; on the other, an embrace of the threshold between soul and body, sacred and profane.

Her diverse media are not for experimentation's sake, but material and formal dimensions of a single pursuit — the pursuit of healing and restitution for the human being, for every human being, not only the artist herself.

---

Tahel Ran



*Without Address*, December 2024, markers and ink on paper, 50 × 50 cm.

Photo: Tahel Ran

A striking artist who came upon painting, almost by surprise, as her sheer, immediate medium of expression. Her new project and the accumulating sheets of paper are a fresh revelation of the visual and plastic dimension of writing itself.

Both the artist and her work elude familiar templates.

---

**Researcher:** Albert Suissa



## Introductory Note

My title, *Arthood Beyond All Objects*, gestures toward two ends of the phenomenon of artistic creation. On the preceding, exploratory end, there is *arthood*: a concrete presence and experience, rather than “art”—which points to an abstract, inexhaustible totality of artistic phenomena (stretching far beyond the surveyable bounds of history and criticism). On the opposite end stands the artwork: the tangible object or manifestation of arthood.

There are philosophers and critics who regard this reified manifestation of the artistic phenomenon—say, a painted canvas—as its consummate form. Everything the work required for its existence and display has here been brought into fruition. The present author accepts this assumption for methodological purposes only, as a convenience for discussing the artistic phenomenon, but does not regard the art-object as its essential embodiment. The latter is only a liminal appearance, a residue or requisite of the creative process, rather than the full-fledged phenomenon. Even in its most exalted and exemplary instances, the artistic object remains only the default requisite of the arthood that brought it forth. Human creation, in this regard, stands as an emblem of its creator: the body is the work in its concrete materiality, while the soul is arthood. The psycho-physical problem *is* the problem of artistic creation.

By way of foreshadowing the argument that follows, let us recall one of Chazal’s allegories about “glorious wisdom in an ugly vessel”:

Rabbi Elazar son of R. Shimon, an outstanding scholar, rode along the riverside on his donkey, and was feeling happy and elated as he had studied much Torah. He happened upon an exceedingly ugly man, who greeted him, ‘Peace be upon you, my master!’ R. Elazar did not return his salutation but instead said to him, ‘Wretch, how ugly is this man! Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?’

‘I do not know,’ said the man. ‘But go to the craftsman who made me, and say to him: How ugly is the vessel which you have made!’

A few preliminary remarks on the agenda of this essay:

The chapters that follow aim to address all issues pertaining to the itinerary of the research—namely: its basis and motivations; its commissioning body and principal initiators; the researcher’s preliminary thoughts and theoretical dispositions; the stations and methodology of the research; the various proceedings and strategies implemented on course; together with the author’s reflections, queries, and conclusions. Examples and illustrations drawn from the work and conversations of the featured artists are incorporated sparingly, in keeping with the particular aims of the discussion and without any presumption of offering an exhaustive survey of the works considered.

As a sequel to the present essay, the author intends to devote a separate essay that will compile detailed discussions of works by each of the featured artists, and serve to open a broader perspective on the questions and thoughts raised in the following pages. Although what they present remains a work in progress, the author wishes to stress that the chapters assembled here are not offered as a summation of his personal reflections but are rather to be viewed as the joint fruit of his encounters and ongoing exchanges with the artists who participated in the research. It likewise bears noting that the essay has not

been shown to the artists prior to publication and makes no claim to represent anyone other than its author, including in its occasional recourse to direct quotation.

The heading of “research” was suggested by the Plumas Foundation, and need not obligate the author. It certainly does not describe his aim in these pages in the sense the term carries in the social sciences—or, a fortiori, in the exact sciences. At most, the present undertaking constitutes a search, a quest, an experimental journey whose terms and steps are largely of the author’s own making and discretion; the rest is left for the reader to judge.

I have placed these remarks at the outset, rather than at the conclusion or margin of the essay, so that the reader may bear them in mind throughout and keep them at hand when considering each particular topic discussed, according to their own best judgment.

\*

*Art does not interest me. It is the artists that interest me.*

Marcel Duchamp

## The Origin of This Study: Troubles in Ethics

The present study owes its origin to an invitation extended to me by the Plumas Art Foundation to take part in discussing the process and guidelines for selecting applicants to the Foundation’s artist-grants program. Prior to my invitation, an elaborate system of criteria and regulations—impressive in its meticulous concern for equal opportunity and treatment—had already been prepared by the Foundation’s internal committee. Its main articles included, *inter alia*, the following: strict maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity for both applicants and referees throughout the entire review period; ensuring maximal representational diversity in the selection of members for the awarding committee; striving for maximal objectivity and transparency in the specification and application of evaluation criteria; allowing applicants to indicate a preference for a reviewer on the basis of cultural background, medium, gender, and so forth; employing an automated system of data collection and processing to create an overall ranking matrix for the totality of submissions; and the like.

Given the gravity of the efforts invested in preparing and implementing this meticulous protocol, it bears asking whether the latter indeed fulfills the ethical vision underlying the Foundation’s *raison d’être*. Namely: does it meet the strict requirements derived from the values of transparency; equal opportunity for all; freedom from discrimination based on race, religion, nationality, or gender, as well as political, cultural, and geographical biases; and, above all, a vigilant guarding against the various ills, prejudices, and suppressive or repressive practices that are admittedly, and inevitably, extant within the field itself? In short, is this intricate system up to the task of detecting and communicating with the diverse modalities



and potentialities of artists active within the nationwide scope of the Foundation's strategic purview, yet operating at various distances from its center?

My intuitive answer to this question was negative. An unequivocal *no*, to be precise. Notwithstanding the Foundation's formidable efforts to optimize its protocols to the highest standards of equality and transparency, I take it that no such protocol—however ingenious, hypersensitive, or comprehensive, whether human-based or fully algorithmic—could possibly unearth, connect, and interact with the full spectrum of artists active within a given cultural region, let alone within the fraught and conflict-laden terrain of Israeli cultural ecology.

The reasons for this contention are many and varied, theoretical as well as practical, and the present study can attest to a mere fraction of them. The following note will suffice for now: aside from the practical challenge of meeting the requirements listed above—and however reasonable and deserving these may be in themselves—various studies have shown that the implementation of comparable criteria and measures may, in certain circumstances, work to the disadvantage of candidates with special preconditions that preclude accommodating in a regulatory preset.

Moreover, let us suppose an even further extension of the protocol, whereby members of the reviewing committee are provided with an elaborate guidance paper, designed to ensure and enhance their awareness and due diligence with regard to the multiple susceptibilities of personal bias and latent prejudice that typically come with the exercise of evaluative authority. The guidance paper might even include explicit advice on “reverse discrimination,” to be considered a viable counterbalance to a reviewer's habituated dispositions. Granting the implementation of all these additional precautions, it would seem that the equal anonymity of applicants and referees at the stage of submission would no be likely to act as an impediment to both—serving to withhold the latter due's regard for circumstances and candidates that merit special consideration. Other cognate reasons might likewise be brought against an over-precautionary approach, but we shall spare the reader their elaboration.

I will, however, mention two basic, general factors that speak against the standard recipes for putatively unbiased, “objective” assessment and refereeing current among institutions and award committees in both the local and global art scenes. The first is the chronic snobbism that inhabitants of the art world across the board appear to practice as an all but professional creed. The curse of snobbism is the lot of cultural vocations en masse, and of modern artistic milieus in a special degree. By comparison, in the realms of science or, for instance, those of technology and economy, snobbism seems not to be as global a pandemic, or is held in relative check by the counter-forces of standard practice and industry. This is owed to the fact that what constitutes creative work, and its correlative values and prestige, is in these realms governed and measured by systems and protocols acknowledged by the majority of practitioners, and these work to tame the impulse of spiritual arrogance and, not seldom, to foster humility and recognition of interdependence and the virtue of collaborative effort.

When it comes to the realms of arts and letters, there are no authoritative facts or statutory consensuses to which we could appeal, but rather a precarious plethora of symbols, values, intimate affections, and unwitting individual proclivities, which more often than not are only tenuously moored to a shared reality and experience. The second factor refers to the simple fact that aesthetic appraisal, education, and

influence have their mutual provenance in the quintessentially subjective capacities for pleasure-taking and self-indulgence, whose experiential development proceeds in accordingly individualized and a-rational courses. Naturally, when called upon to exercise such capacities in a public context or under a professional mandate, the prospect of acting in defiance of one's intimate preferences and inclinations is as hard as it is unlikely.

In addition to all this, my own sense of aesthetic predilections is of their being, largely, the product of both cultural and personal habituation, possibly even "conditioning" (see below, on my anti-aesthetic approach), such that they are effectively prevenient and ineluctable in all respects—by no means related exclusively to art—and established independently of, and much prior to, their interpolation into the prevalent aesthetic discourse and its wayward modes of rationalization and propagation. What is then propounded as "aesthetic preferences" or "convictions of taste" has, in turn, its own sinuous, unguarded ways of both absorbing and transfiguring into all sorts of ideological preferences, persuasions, and agendas, personal as well as social, including in people of an intensely progressive bent.

I, for one, am of the opinion that what is commonly referred to as "reverse discrimination" is not a matter of enforcing the current statutes of political correctness, but rather an exigency of justice, a duty, and an obligation. Others, by contrast, see it as a measure of goodwill or humane leniency, especially those who would prefer that both one and the other be dispensed with (whether or not they are willing to say so out loud). For the most part, when that is not explicitly the case, there operates an—at best—unconscious inclination toward one or another variety of this all-pervasive form of bias. Against the latter, only a self-conscious adoption of explicit and obligatory "reverse discrimination" on one's part can serve as antidote.

Yet here as well our less-than-conscious vagaries are far from exhausted. For now a shrewd interlocutor may still query: very well, but according to which or whose standards? Since even if everything that disagrees with my own leanings must count as an option, it appears that I would still have to discriminate between different prescriptions of reverse discrimination according to my own taste for reverse discrimination. And this can go on forever. Or might it really?

In any case, notwithstanding the pains taken by the Foundation to ensure transparency, equal opportunity, and freedom from bias, they too had come to the conclusion that under the current cultural zeitgeist the existing presets and protocols, however perfected, must be complemented by actual, "on-foot" fieldwork—such work as would enable tracking, and possibly even interacting, with those precious few artists laboring in the out-of-sight recesses of our much-too-organized social jungle. All this, the Foundation agreed, should provide for an edifying, fruitful experiment—if not a mending, then at least a worthy attempt at comprehending our virtual, panoptic, and pan-illusional here-and-now.

And so it happened that I was invited by the Plumas Foundation to go out exploring those very much existing yet undetected recesses of creativity; undetected and unsuspected, whether because undiscernible to the "tracking equipment" at the Foundation's disposal, or because they take initiative to remain incognito, or, ultimately, because tracking systems and their potential objects are as often as not "programmed" to maintain their mutual distance and alienness—as much recent experience with cutting-edge military technologies would seem to confirm. At last, I accepted the invitation shortly after



its proposal to me, not without a share of doubts and misgivings, but with as great a share of anticipation and expectation.

## Ethical Troubles at Home

Fair enough. However, as it happened, only now did my ethical quandaries truly begin to unfold—to say nothing of the methodological puzzles that still lay ahead. I had just been granted the mandate of a thoroughly inverted lectorship within the closely regulated system, and danger seemed to lurk in every direction. For one thing, how was I any different from any other agent in the local art scene in terms of my vulnerability to evaluative prejudice and bias? What were the principal soft spots in my own aesthetic mindset that most required my vigilance? If anything, as an independent agent, operating on my own without external supervision, I was all the more susceptible to danger than the lectors serving in the Foundation's internal committee under the aegis of its strict ethical code.

Although there had been general guidelines and commitments agreed upon between myself and the Foundation (viz. a working contract) as far as my work on the ground and responsibilities in allotting the grants to the elected artists were concerned, these were by and large of a formal and technical nature. They did not touch upon the matter of my method and manner of working, which latter were left entirely to my discretion to devise and apply for myself. And indeed, it was not long before I realized that everything concerning this essential facet of my assignment will have to be worked out in the course of my future encounters with the artists themselves.

However, the questions I gathered in prospect of this chapter—where and whom should I be looking for? what and why and to what end? who is worthy and who is not, and on what grounds? and how was I to ascertain these matters?—all betokened issues beyond mere methodology that had to be carefully weighed and accounted for. Of these, many touched directly on ethical questions in which my own personal inclinations and preferences were implicated.

After thinking hard and long on all these matters, I came to the conclusion that there was no way I could furnish the reader with an exhaustive account of my position respecting each and every one of them—on pain of her own exhaustion. Instead of readymade answers and premeditated justifications, destined at best to stand as premature rationalizations, I therefore thought it better to evince my person, my thoughts, and my actions for her to appraise for herself. The wavering thoughts, hesitated steps, and suppositions with which I embarked on my endeavor, together with those changed and revised along the way—the steps I took and the ways I chose to go about the numerous challenges involved, in particular concerning my dealings with the participating artists—all these, I trust, will ultimately bear out the true course of my journey, for better as for worse.

Here is one example of a serious ethical difficulty, directly related to my topic. It appears to be an all but inherent tendency of selective juries, broadly speaking, to center their concerns on the positive side of the process, so to speak: i.e. on choosing the few, rather than on rejecting the many. This fact by itself incorporates a social paradox, which yet gets passed routinely as commonsense. The sheer majority of the rejected party should, I should think, be enough to give the lie to this complacency.

In fact, in my experience—and according to many artists I have met who found themselves on the rejected end of many a such proceeding, especially those I encountered in the course of the present study—knowing the reasons behind the decision process is no less crucial in cases of rejection than in cases of acceptance. Aside from the formal letters of rejection such as are customarily issued by various agencies in the field (museum boards, galleries, public and private funds, award committees, etc.), sincere and informative summaries of the relevant considerations are all but unheard of in replying to rejected applicants.

We can only puzzle over how a matter of such obvious importance to so many in the art world, complex and delicate as it may be, has stirred so little serious discussion and response across the board. As in the case of lottery councils—whose Israeli government-owned version (“Mifal HaPais”) happens to be the major allocator of artist grants in the country—the image of a blind drawing of lots, of chance as the ultimate medium of arbitration, is, I suppose, an appealing source of consolation to many an artist who has been more or less consistently out of luck in playing the game.

Just picture, for a moment, the gigantic economy of brute competition these same organizations wield and monopolize for their own sheer benefit—at the expense of countless hapless artists, many of whom find themselves consistently and systematically excluded. For all that, it would have been highly appropriate—not merely interesting in its own right—to devote one of the forthcoming chapters to the matter of those artists who were potential candidates but ultimately did not get to participate in the present study.

In effect, however, and much to my regret, this was a task far exceeding my powers and the means at my disposal, including the ample budget the Foundation had secured for my purposes. Apart from one artist who was elected but eventually withdrew his participation—and who will serve as my case study—the want of a more extensive treatment of this cardinal issue stands as a serious lacuna of the present study.

Here would also be the place to note that the possibility of issuing a public call for entries at the launching of my research was rejected at once. Not merely for fear of being flooded with submissions from all areas of the field—of which, as a solo investigator, I could not possibly consider more than a small portion—but mainly because the very procedure goes against the grain of the personal initiative that is the essence of the present undertaking, as explained above, notwithstanding its own inherent difficulties. Moreover, not only did I avoid any public or private announcement of my research, I also did my best to ensure that the artists I was to meet for the purpose of my study would not know of their candidacy for the grant prior to my final decision on the matter, which I delivered to each in private and in due time.

The same considerations hold as regards my general position on candidates’ right to be informed of the reasons for their rejection or disqualification. Given that, in my case, the basis for selection was a face-to-face encounter with each potential candidate—some of which developed into a friendly relationship beyond the bounds of the research—the circumstance of having to deal personally with the disappointment of rejected applicants, and to provide detailed explanations to each, was best avoided in advance. Such, indeed, was the case with one artist who came to learn of her candidacy from a verbal lapse by the person who had facilitated our initial contact. Following the incident, I summoned her for a personal meeting and gave her my detailed explanations for her ultimate non-admission, since a friendly



letter or even a phone call would have seemed too formal and frustrating a gesture in the context of the relationship that had formed between us in the meantime. To my great relief, my reluctant announcement and elaborate explanations were, on that specific occasion, met with utter understanding by the person in question. Yet to have gone through an entire series of such occasions would certainly have been too great a brunt to bear.

Still, as the matter may not be left entirely without comment, I will henceforth present myself as I am, exposed in my leanings, infatuations, tastes, and thoughts vis-à-vis the art world in general and the Israeli one in particular. I will touch on local issues—the object, aesthetic agendas and tendencies, center and periphery, among others—that exert vast influence on the ways of appreciating art, my own included, examining them in the special light cast by the artists chosen for this project, each by way of her own heart's gift and oeuvre. At the same time, I must remind the reader once again that the better part of what follows is not a summation of my personal reflections but rather the fruit of efforts taken, shaped, and refined in close collaboration with the artists I encountered in the course of the research, and which belong as such to the body of knowledge assembled in the process.

Shall I therefore say that I have, ultimately, gathered myself an ensemble of artists in my own image? that I had been searching for my potential recruits under the beam of my own headlamp? The charge itself I am quite ready to admit. Yet even so, with my personal flaws on display, the reality I attest to, even in these preliminary passages, from the standpoint of the artists I have met—may no longer be overlooked. This reality will persist regardless of our best efforts, and it is for each person to respond as he sees fit.

## My Relation to the Art World

Let it be stated that, as a rule – and with this I already fail to make an exception to the majority of agents in the mainstream of art – of all the efforts and actions and writings I have gathered under my name in three decades of work in and about the arts, virtually none was driven by a sense of “caring for art”. For art, so I hold, has been here from time immemorial regardless of anyone's care for its sake, and certainly in spite of the countless concerns shown throughout history to have considerably less of it, or none at all. For the most part, I set out on my work without holding to any agenda, aesthetic or ideological framework in relation to the art that had exercised me. Firstly, since I never had any kind of formal education or training in art, and mainly since, to this very day, I am not quite certain what it is exactly – art. This consciousness (of unknowing), far from a mere *façon de parler*, has been an underlying intuition of all of my preoccupations with art. In its every dimension and revelation – artist, work, object, aesthetics, exhibition, discourse, philosophy, etc. – I have found myself repeatedly preceded and outpaced by art, doing my best to follow in its footsteps, and not the other way around. That includes these very lines, which indeed run ahead of me, rather than in my wake. And, judging from the look of things, a reversal of these roles is scarcely to be expected.

The “caring for art”, as one of the central currencies of its mainstream discourse, also serves the latter strategically, if not compulsively, as a means of self-propagation and preservation. In my opinion, except when it speaks from the mouths of free-standing artists, who have also created their own revolutionary

discourse, this sort of talk has its source in a far-reaching material and cultural politics and economy, which has one of its numerous ramifications in art, more precisely – in its local and global mainstream. When it comes to the Israeli artistic mainstream, this caring bon-ton appears to be accentuated to a degree that may well be singular. This is, possibly, an offshoot of the general baggage of existential concerns that have come to haunt Jewish people, and Israelis especially, when and where their existence as a nation has been effectively solidified, and while the strength of their collective mainstay appears only to be growing (of this I have already written elsewhere). On top of that, a feature of the contemporary epoch that hardly needs emphasizing is the tremendous outgrowth of intermediary and secondary agents that are regularly at play in the art world: collectors and dealers, critics, curators, heads of cultural departments in national and city councils, teachers and schoolmasters, academics and commentators from various disciplines, whose diverse interests and motivations for partaking in the general trend of care are, to my mind, drawn from the sociology of art much more than art itself. Every so often a call of alarm is issued from within the midmost quarters of the Israeli art world, in the form of symposia, topical conferences and calls for contributions, alerting against the increasingly precarious condition of the arts in every respect – material, economic, political and quality-wise. And yet it is plain to all that, for its own sake, art itself requires little more than a reasonable laissez-faire and basic material conditions, and the rest already pertains to the politics of the art scene, whose *modi operandi* are generally in the service of their institutions' own symbolic and material wealth. In this last respect, the art scene is no different from any other sphere of human enterprise, be it cultural or economic.

Likewise known to all is the fact that the mainstream art world is subject to a spiritual devaluation in proportion to the increase of its assets' material-economic value; for the more time passes, the clearer it becomes that art has no single immutable essence, or no essence at all. Art is not one thing, but things; it is the variable of an unbound, unknown and un-fully-knowable value. The artistic mainstream comprises not much more than its own fortuitous centrality, determined as it is by the habits and limitations of our place- and time-bound natures.

With all that said, I should still like, so far as is possible, to avoid making the mainstream art world into an object of criticism and preoccupation, even if occasional commentary to this effect may not be entirely avoidable as a by-product of the present study. Naturally, when speaking of artists who are positioned outside the mainstream, or who relate to it by way of their preclusion, we are, quite inevitably, casting a shadow over or implicitly criticizing the former, even if it is not our explicit purpose to offer such a critique and call for revision. Nor do I intend this study or its immanent agenda to serve as a pamphlet for some *dernier cri*, much less as a call for the reigning authorities to offer their due acknowledgment and encouragement to the artists this study concerns itself with. My statement, in gist, is rather along the following lines: Here are artists who come from outside the mainstream, who live and breathe art (just where they are); they are not “peripheral” to anything, are not eccentrics or “outré”, nor even autodidacts; they are, quite simply, different, and are such as to enable a different conversation on art to take place alongside, rather than in place of, the prevalent one. Besides, it goes without saying that the art world is much too brimming with unseen sceneries and dwellers for any single explorer, no matter how relentless, to presume to have an exhaustive acquaintance with. Making a visit to the museum or to a reputable gallery is not least an opting for the efficient, economic resort on the average spectator's part. As I see it,



the converse recourse is preferable on both counts, that is: go out to visit a painter's studio in the neighborhood or simply wander around the nearby flea market, and even, every now and then, find yourself walking back with a piece in your hand, gifted or practically gifted for a few of one's pennies.

## Me/ethodological Troubles

### Center and Periphery

As the next section unfolds in detail, I had first set out on my assignment with the notion of the relationship of center and periphery as my guiding theme. However, by the end of 2022, with several artists already on board the project, I wrote the following in my interim summary:

*Between the unprecedented expansion of the art scene and the tremendous 'art culture' enterprise led by public and private institutions alike, the question arises whether there are still artists and art-workings that manage to elude – by default or by will – this all-encompassing coordinate-system, which now spans the entire cultural, representational, and semantic dimensions of the social sphere. Can it be that, despite all good intentions and efforts, in an age of global communicational networks, both professional and social, available to all and used by all artists living within the Israeli cultural sphere – can it be that some recesses of creativity have managed to remain unmonitored and undiscovered? Has the global online network truly undone the traditional power-relations between center and periphery, between the extant and virtual art-world and those outside it? Is there life outside the web, off the grid?*

*For the purpose of my research, I take the relation to the art-object as both point of departure and touchstone. The 'artistic object' is at once the consensual middle ground and the principal battleground between the traditional and the current mainstream of the Israeli art world and the complex of new public and private sponsors and patrons. Alongside them, or as their natural allies, stand the entrepreneurs of both the institutional and free-market sectors of the culture industry, who operate within the space of cultural production to sustain and promote art as a universal value that structures and engages communities. Nonetheless, the 'artistic object' is often assimilated to the 'artistic product' – the universally accepted and agreed-upon value that becomes both the beginning and the end of all that is done and made in the actual and symbolic spheres of artistic activity. This remains the case despite the clear difference in the evaluative relation to the 'object' between these two contiguous (and cooperating) spheres.*

*Against this background, I propose to examine zones of activity and modes of artistic being that exist on their own, not necessarily as 'products' addressed to the collective cultural sphere or its public. My interest lies in the living possibility of artistic creation that takes place in the intimate and concrete vicinity of the artist themselves, where the 'art object' emerges only as a secondary or unlikely byproduct, sometimes superfluous or insignificant in and of itself. My focus, rather, is the very act/activity of artistic creation as situated in the existential sphere – whether in its fully private, unpublished and unconscious forms, or in deliberate renunciation of the private in favor of an emphatically communal and social orientation, but without mediation by the mainstream institution or scene for the sake of its own cultural or political ends.*

However, in my interim summary at the end of 2023, I wrote the following:

*At the close of 2022, we laid down our first premises for the field study, *Arthood Beyond Any Object*, under the broader theme of "Peripheries of Art." Since then, a multitude of intricate and complex issues pertaining to our overarching*

*theme has amassed on our desk. Apparently, that theory and scholarship on the subject of “art and/in the periphery” are at present experiencing unprecedented momentum worldwide.*

*Far removed from the traditional geographical paradigm of “center and periphery,” with all its implications, current research tends to preoccupy itself with dismantling the center of its symbolic values; with closely examining the historical paradigms that had formed within the various centres of the global art world; with criticizing the methodologies of different historiographies and the politics of art-historical writing; with interrogating the relations between tradition and canon formation, addressing postcolonialism and postmodernism, authorship and origin, the psychic dynamics of kernel and periphery (psychoanalysis), among other themes.*

*Within this discourse, “periphery” no longer signifies a passive, subordinate concept, ancillary or subservient to some center, but a multilateral, metamorphosing notion whose changing and metastable homonyms include “other,” “alternative,” “hermaphroditic,” “multiple,” and “self-sufficing.” No longer a singular, generic periphery that the center reproduces and unifies worldwide, but rather peripheries—in the plural—multidimensional and independent, from the center as from one another.*

*In keeping with the plurality of facets, manifestations, and modi operandi of the various peripheries, the present study will refrain, as far as possible, from any methodological movement from its center—that is, from the theses and conceptualizations already accumulated in the area of “art and peripheries”—towards its object, namely the various peripheries of the Israeli art scene. From now on, the movement will be reversed: from the artists selected for the study to the delineation of their autonomous zones by way of the contrast they make with the centres and peripheries as perceived by themselves, and from there to the particular conclusions and creative vistas opened up by the artists themselves. They will set forth the principal claims, and by their words and their works will the matter be decided, their judgment standing with them.*

*Accordingly, the peripheries that have so far emerged in our study are: death, femininity, design, bastardy, infantilism (to be distinguished from childhood or childlikeness), escape, faith, and others.*

That is to say, my thinking at the time was marked by a restless oscillation with regard to the subject of center and periphery. At the outset of my work, “center and periphery” determined the initial footing and the actual terrain I was aiming to explore in my research. By the end of 2022, however, as a result of my first round of encounters with artists, few of whom were already selected for the project, I got cold feet and sought my retreat. Later on, during 2023, and in the course of meeting with further artists, I returned to the subject after all—albeit with a certain hesitation. What, then, was the meaning of these pendulous antecedents? In what follows I will attempt to trace my own footsteps, while at the same time following those of the artists who, in the meantime, joined the study; for in the end they were my compass, in both senses of the word—my guides in the research, and by their deeds and works the matter will be weighed. This oscillation itself is the very body of the research, and not any final conclusions that one might be expected to draw from it.

## A Problematic of Center and Periphery

To begin with, a simple fact: my being steered, from the very outset, into the problematic path of “center and periphery” can be easily understood in view of the place whence the question had emerged and the identity of the body that issued the call I responded to: the Plumas Foundation for Art. By their very



nature, prizes, grants, and subsidies for the encouragement of artistic creation are the prerogatives and privileges of the center, just as the foundations that administer such prizes and grants are institutions of the artistic mainstream, which is concerned primarily with itself, its self-glorification and self-congratulation. Only on occasion do these open their doors to outlying regions, which are accordingly – and rather problematically – labeled “peripheral.” In other words, and rather bluntly put: I was appointed as a representative of one of the most prominent power-mechanisms of the center, and thus found myself, whether I liked it or not and as though possessed by a dybbuk (ethnic? or sectarian?), in this entanglement between center and periphery.

Yet it must be admitted that I too had a hand in the matter, since from the very beginning, in the course of my preliminary discussions with representatives of the Foundation, the main thrust of my critique – briefly outlined above and to be further elaborated below – has been aimed against the mechanisms of the artistic center, and the ways in which, even when turning outward, it tends to preserve its own patronizing and centralizing quality, transplanting its centres into the periphery and, in practice, only entrenches itself further through various methods of annexation and absorption. As a sample of my initial claim, I adduced the basic model – which, in my view, still holds – of the mechanisms of exclusion enacted against Mizrahi art, which have been part and parcel with the broader Mizrahi struggle in Israel, as a model that illumines and illustrates the relations of center and periphery in Israel to this very day, despite the changes that nonetheless took place over the years.

That said, it never occurred to me to focus my research on Mizrahi art or Mizrahi artists, let alone to conflate the periphery with an exclusively Mizrahi representation, or to enlist the artists who happened, through no fault of their own, to cross my path in the course of this study into a discussion of the so-called “Mizrahi question.” For it is plain enough that the global discourse – and for some time now also its Israeli counterpart – on centres and peripheries (in the plural! already a complicating shift in itself) revolves around transformations and highly complex configurations, as well as additional dimensions of power-relations between center and periphery. Beyond the significant tectonic shifts in the geography of the problem – centres relocating themselves into the periphery, and the periphery in turn migrating to settle within the center; centres spawning new peripheries of their own, and peripheries creating centres of their own – part of the struggle has also moved, among other territories, into the domain of writing: the traditional or canonical writing on art in general, and on art history in particular. And all this even before mentioning the rise of a global postmodern and postcolonial discourse, both elusive and “corrective,” in the academy, as well as newly founded art institutions that have lately entered the scene from within the religious or Orthodox sector – a sector that has been, and remains structurally, peripheral. (That includes the Orthodox art department at the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem, which is to say, a “branch” of the periphery planted at the very heart of the center, as its built-in periphery, nurtured under its tutelage or patronage. And to refine the complication by another turn: the separateness of the Orthodox department from its center is at the same time a gendered and religious separateness of the Orthodox sector itself, according to its own needs, from the center. That is to say, a “resistant” joining of the periphery to the center).

From this, and from other such rather intricate examples, we learn that we are, in all likelihood, compelled to continue speaking in terms of that old and dismal model of center and periphery. For after all,

notwithstanding universalism, globalism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and the like—and despite the fact that this research, in the end, turned away from them, branched elsewhere, and at a certain point went underground into what lies beyond them (we shall soon see where)—despite all this, the old model is still alive and operative everywhere in the world. It occurred to me that perhaps we cannot escape the almost deterministic grip of this model so long as there exist national and nationalist territories, and mighty armies deployed to sustain them. For the model of center and periphery is first and foremost a primeval military model (in Israel one would say a “security” model), tied to the rulers’ anxieties over sovereignty across the dominions of their empires. As is well known throughout history, but also in the technological reality of our own day, even the mightiest empire in the world may suffer—and indeed suffers now—from an acute vulnerability in its peripheries. (From a more local historical perspective, one might recall the Persian, Greek, and Roman empires in their dealings with the peripheral kingdoms of Judah and Israel). And all this by virtue of the simple fact that there exist other “peripheries” which persist as “centres” of resistance along the empire’s borders, destabilizing the peripheries annexed to it. This sensitivity weighs heavily and decisively upon the standing of both sets of peripheries, on either side, in relation to the center, whether we like it or not. That is to say: having a firm grip on the center requires an even firmer control of the periphery. Such is the case in our own time with the United States and Mexico and Greenland, Russia and Ukraine, Europe and the Maghreb, Israel and the Arab world on every side, and so forth.

No one can deny that this military model is operative also among us, by force of the bare reality that unravelled itself to us on October 7, 2023, in the South as in the North. And although the history of Mizrahi culture in Israel has already demonstrated, for decades, that in times of peace the basic model of center and periphery may be mental, cultural, ethnic, racist, or class-based rather than geographical, October 7 will have seemed to throw all the cards into disarray. Seemed—for, the problem is that models coexist simultaneously, and still, even in wartime in Israel, the periphery of Kiryat Shmona and Netivot is not on a par with the periphery of Kibbutz Kfar Giladi or Be’eri. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that this military model radiates outward on every dimension of human space, becoming also the economic and political model, and from there, radiating on all levels of all the other models, including—of concern to us here—the cultural and artistic.

In other words, we must always remember: the relations of center and periphery are not unique to art; their origin lies much deeper, in more fundamental strata of existence and lived reality, before they are manifested in art as symptoms. And yet our modern, humanistic cultural perception leads us to think that it is precisely art, as a symptomatic stratum of human spiritual existence, that may, by dint of its sensibilities, detect structures and phenomena within society, expose them, indicate directions, and point toward change. And, true enough, much has been done in the art world toward unsettling the reality of center-periphery relations: whether by marked shifts toward the representation of peripheries—spatial ones, or those internal to the power-relations of the centres themselves, or peripheries that are temporary and mobile; whether in the fields of empirical research and the writing of art history in order to redeem past peripheries from oblivion; or in the domain of critical and philosophical writing, which detonates the very models of “art” as they are produced and reproduced in traditional and canonical centres. All this holds a fortiori in relation to the digital revolution, which flows with immense sweep beneath, above,

and within the art world—undermining every system, and bringing about a true upheaval in all the territorial, horizontal, and linear structures of the old modernist constructivism and structuralism.

One of the strongest theories to have anticipated this process is, without doubt, the subversive and inverted model of *A Thousand Plateaus* or the *rhizome* (the “deterritorialization”) of Deleuze and Guattari, in which the relations of center and periphery are turned upside down, or at the very least drift into dynamic systems that undermine the old (military) model. Yet for all that, all this is still very much a matter of theory and philosophy—drawing only in part from science and empirical reality—conceived rather as a vision that is yet to be found, prefiguring instead the future that ought to come.

By way of aside, let me remark that my own manner of writing on art is not, as is customary, to lean on tall intellectual scaffolds, but rather to attend mainly to new ideas insofar as these are clearly and manifestly drawn from lived culture, accessible to anyone with eyes to see. And indeed, such is the theory of the rhizome with all its illuminating implications for our subject; I myself have already entertained it elsewhere in connection with the percolations, collapses, or infiltrations of the periphery into the center, in acts of self-circumscription and self-affirmation rather than in submission to hierarchical authority.

Be that as it may, I hold that, on the plane of reality, the theory does not describe a wholly novel or radical process of sudden reversal, of outright abolition or abrogation of the center. Rather, it concerns itself with the recognition and tracing of those stealthy, peripheral incursions into the center—emerging from the latter’s own overexpansion—that gradually transform it into a bulbing and self-bulging system, ever less stable. Through its own loss of orientation, the center itself assumes a rhizomatic character, while the rhizome extends its proliferating tendrils into it, dissolving it into the thousand non-hierarchical plateaus. In general, the rhizome-model is in any case a potential model, one of a metastable becoming, not an effective reality. As was noted, the relation of center and periphery may at any moment engulf the rhizome, for the model of domination can persist even within the rhizome—through armies and forces of destruction. In the last account, the one and only place where no periphery at all is to be found is in utopia itself, that is, in fable. For example: in the utopia of Babel—when the whole world was one people, one city, one language, and one speech, with a single tower/center, an auto-panoptic monument, set up to safeguard the “one” at all levels of life.

Still, even in the case of utopia, the utopia of Babel is by no means the utopia, the vision, we are striving for. On the contrary: our utopia is one of many nations, many tongues, countless cities, infinitely differing languages and discourses, coexisting in peace and freedom in the world. Does the biblical vision of Babel imply, then, that every alternative is doomed to be dystopian, destructive, and deterministic—save for the familiar Jewish eschatological promise of the End of Days? According to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the very opposite is true: the utopia of Babel was founded upon the sin of auto-dictatorial tyranny. Still, he does not explain how own utopia came to be plagued by its maladies, nor what precise role the Jewish eschaton plays here—where it may in fact be nothing but the same old Babylonian legend, retold this time as history (or tragedy).

We have, it would appear, wandered rather far afield. And yet, from my personal experience with artists—especially those who took part in this study—I was surprised to discover that talk of utopias is not as abstract or impractical as we might assume. It turns out that the utopian model plays a significant role



precisely in the inner life of the individual, more so than in the broader social reality, where numerous mechanisms exist to restrain it. Naturally, the individual too is constricted by the collective on the level of outward behaviour; but when that individual is a poet or an artist, the story is altogether different. In their case, utopias continue to exist, often in secrecy yet positively so, within art—and many of them in the true periphery: the monadic, the militant, or the rhizomatic periphery, far from the overpowering sway of the center.

By contrast, the bon ton of the center also traffics in utopias, but chiefly in their dystopian and destructive guises, or else in their spectacular, Disneyfied forms—commodified spectacles marketed to the masses. Serious, deep minded utopias are the brainchildren of artists outside the center, or of those it brands outsiders only to later embrace them as curiosities—exceptions that prove none but themselves thereby reinforcing the whole/center.

In this context of utopia as a category of the mind or psyche—restrained, as it is, by the realist actuality of lived existence—I would like to return briefly to the level of concrete models of center and periphery, so as to examine the psychic category in their light. On the level of reality, wherever I speak here of center and periphery, we must bear in mind one important distinction, derived, to a certain extent, from the military model. The military model is given to us as a decree of fate, a rule of mankind, even when it concerns the seemingly most progressive societies in the world, as in the case of the United States and Greenland. This is because the military model and the imperial model harbor one another.

Empires are not utopias, nor are they utopian—they are simply empires, imperialist through and through. Even as they rule over diverse populations or peoples, they have no share in our normative utopian horizon, which is the very opposite of Babel's. Empires are political-magisterial, not ethical; they are built upon the notion of limit, of border, upon the resisting—even militant—periphery at their frontiers, and not upon inclusion. What every empire incorporates, and no utopia ever does, is precisely the idea of a limit, of a border. Which is why utopia, as a category of reality, apart from all myth-telling and legendry, is at its root a category of the mind—it alone (though I am not certain of this philosophically) can do without the notion of limit, of confines.

If we now return to spatial reality, the periphery is defined as such because there is always another periphery adjacent to it, set apart from it either by tacit, informal agreement or by some juridical arrangement—and, as is well known, often enough threatening or endangering its neighbouring periphery. From this emerges a bifold dynamic inherent in every periphery: on the one hand, its bare and self-conscious subordination to a correlative center and its reliance upon it; and on the other hand, the periphery's tendency to assimilate the centre's mores and laws regarding the relations between center and periphery, quite irrespective of its hostilities toward the neighbouring periphery. Moreover, the periphery goes so far as to refine and replicate the centre's perceptions and laws with no critical scruples whatsoever of its own, in the fashion of a second- or third-rate subjects, vis-à-vis the sovereign center.

This means that every center always has two peripheries, in effect: the subordinate one, which reproduces it, and the one that sets it apart from it, which is rebellious or threatening to it, and thereby forming its periphery. Along with these, we may imagine to ourselves a third periphery: one existing in a kind of vacuum, utterly unaware of the centre's existence—or one that "knows" of its existence but is neither

subservient to it nor defines itself by opposition to its periphery. This third periphery is not a second-order category; it is neither dependent nor derivative of another entity, and still less is it devoid of initiative, though it may very well afford itself a certain equanimity.

Be that as it may, it seems I have drifted a bit too far out in Torovetsky's oarless boat (henceforth: the artist Torovetsky) into the open waters between center and periphery. At the very least, the reader may gather from this my innocence of the intention of mounting the artists I was about to meet aboard that ship of fools, which I am truly at a loss to steer through these stormy, choppy waters to safe harbor. As was previously mentioned, the reader perusing the research reports from the years 2022 and 2023—groping and searching as they were—will at once sense the movement of thought: from the basic, concrete model of center and periphery toward questions concerning concepts such as the object (in art, of art), and further beyond it, toward a melange of concepts, hauntingly if not necessarily hintingly kindred: space-time, monads, folds, burrows, the out-of-sight, and others; concepts that imply the dissolution of models and their collapse in on each another, such that each artist I would meet could afford themselves apart from the patronizing admonition to position themselves in relation to the center-periphery axis.

In any case, the reader may already observe that the topic of center and periphery is far too large and expansive to be borne on the shoulders of so limited and eclectic (and, as will turn out, problematic) a selection of artists. At the same time, its presence is nonetheless embodied in nuce in the particular relations each of these artists will reveal with their own unique surroundings.

It is worth noting that, as an inner emotional question, the question of center and periphery proceeds from the assumption that every individual, at bottom, perceives themselves as a center. Belonging to a nuclear center—e.g. family, close community, broader community—is not initially grasped in dialectical terms (as the tension between center and periphery). Rather, the self-center coincides with the familial and communal centres, and so on; the self-center expands outward by way of the centres external to it. Indeed, I believe that the first omens of the tension between center and periphery manifest themselves to the artist—who has been exposed, however faintly, to the magnetism that continually prevails between them—in that sense of belonging or non-belonging, whether it is a conscious feeling or an external circumstance. Often, something cracks within the sense of belonging, and that crack may widen into a fracture, a rift, a rapture, estrangement or exile—with or without a scar. The feeling of belonging or non-belonging soon becomes behaviour and action, and the relations of center and periphery therewith transfigure into a to-and-fro of dispositions and indispositions: by will, perforce, or indifferently. And it is these that we wish to contemplate and study.

Yet it is not always appropriate to spin out a psychological thread through the life of the artist, and at our own leisure—or for the pleasure of weaving our plot—braid in fracture, rupture, and exile, to a continuous narrative that suits our own consciousness. At times, a person finds their promised land in the form of an oarless vessel: unbound and boundless, oblivious even of such notions as center and periphery

Moreover, the present research is barred by definition from being one-sided. I do not come to the artists I “choose” out of some obscure center, with them being at the mercy of my judgment. On the contrary,

what is at stake is a reciprocal relation in which I too stand to be tested from the perspective of the artists before me. In point of fact, I do not know exactly who I am, nor even what it is, precisely, that I want from the world at large—or from the matter of art and artists in particular. I thought, as I said, that the whole affair was best allowed to clarify itself in motion. I set for myself, as a principle, the ongoing examination of my own subjectivity at each stage, together with the possibility of making deliberate course-corrections within the well-worn triangle of putatively objective criteria, self-awareness and acknowledgment of one's subjective aesthetic predilections (pleasure), and the principle of explicit corrective discrimination.

Thinking of center and periphery in motion, I found myself more and more drawn to reflect on the birth of these notions in the heart of the artist: how they emerge in the artist's consciousness, and how they act upon him, or else compel him to act in relation to them. At first I thought of myself as one who had exchanged a religious way of life—i.e. a life in which the observance of commandments dictates the order of private and social existence, and the study of Torah constitutes the crowning virtue (analogous to artistic creation)—for a secular life in which the binding order of daily living is far broader, more open, and more diverse, and even affords a relative measure of individuality. Yet, in my own case, it was a life in which art had come to take the place of Torah study by the force of an inner compulsion. That inner necessity was of such a kind as to rule out the very prospect of a life not centred around an ongoing inquiry and investigation of life itself, at the same time as it is lived. Torah study had played such a role, and the possibilities that remained available beyond it were art and philosophy. At first, it seems to me that I had made no distinction between them; art and philosophy were two ends of a single rope; and together with the soul, the threefold bind would not be broken easily.

Still, on the other hand I say to myself that my model of personal choice does not, in the end, go beyond privilege, and in many places even coincides with an accustomed recourse among art-mentors, star curators, moneyed collectors, historians and critics, and other specially favoured players of the center-field—to strive always, in art as in sport, to present their dream team.

## Outsiders? Eccentrics? Self-Taught?

*Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adapt themselves to its demands. Hence, in this sense, they are irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely by virtue of this disconnection and anachronism, they are better able than others to perceive and grasp their own time”.*

—Giorgio Agamben, *What Is the Contemporary?*

Now, having discharged the selected artists from their exclusive consignment to the theme of center and periphery, and since some of them have turned out to be peripheral to their own periphery—or even to the very concept—there loomed on the horizon, more and more insistently, terms such as “outsiders,” “eccentrics,” and “autodidacts”. For how else are we to describe, categorize, or call artists who remain off the radar of the artistic center, while belonging no more exactly to the periphery of that center?



Wherefore I must note from the outset that several of the artists chosen are a long stretch from fitting the standard profile of what the global art centres classify, broadly, as “Outsider Art,” while others do indeed share certain features that may correlate with those definitions. However, since I myself reject the bearing of such definitions on the essence of art, and since I do in fact regard the chosen artists as, in varying degrees, “foreign residents” of the Israeli art field, I should better pause to expand somewhat on my position in this matter.

The inexhaustible fashion and the global discourse surrounding the representation of Outsider Art have ultimately failed to deliver its practitioners from the notorious Foucauldian ritual of being shipped aboard a ship of fools—away from the territorial waters of the normal center into the uncivilized reaches of the ocean of art. They have certainly failed to extricate them from the psychosocial conceptual prison that in due course consigned them to asylums of different sorts. From the progressive, inclusive discourse of the twentieth century, one might have expected at least to salvage these artists from their literal confinement, or from their social isolation—ironically dubbed “hos-pitals” (from the Latin *hospes*, meaning “guest” or “host”)—into the embrace of a true *hospitalitas*, a metaphorical hospitality translated into actual, not merely symbolic, citizenship. Such, at least, should have been the case in the art world, where things supposedly stand beyond the question of guarding against madness or protecting from insanity. Yet it turns out that in the so-called normal world even art—which is ostensibly the city of refuge for the soul in all its expressions—is required to be normal, and to operate according to norms. The madness permitted in the art of the normal world is, at most, a supervised madness: a realm where the border between a rational center and a periphery of delirium is subject to comprehensive oversight and control.

At bottom, this discourse—with its representations and its hypocritical hospitality—has remained squarely within the clinical practice of the hospice, far from the truly inclusive values of hospitality. At best, its outcome has been to settle the outsiders in a place of honor within their psychiatric periphery: that is, to hammer the nail, once again and deeper still, into their very flesh. Our great museums, with their periodic blockbuster exhibitions of Outsider Art, are nothing more than our own safe harbors; from them, as in the past so too today, we still indulge in watching the ships of fools pass through our territorial waters under careful watch, feeling so very central, and so very secure.

In any case, it had never occurred to me to drag these artists into the contentious domains of Art Brut—the sincere and significant enterprise of Jean Dubuffet—and to claim that the condition of artistic novelty is a childlike, primordial, savage, autodidactic consciousness, and the like. Ultimately, even this immense undertaking, which indeed broke through the boundaries of art and paved the way for several important artists into the mainstream, did not succeed in breaking with the categorizing machinery of the art world, which serves its own centrality and needs. The art world consumed its shell and discarded its kernel: the outsiders did indeed bequeath to it the “style” of Art Brut—an oxymoron by itself—but the outsider artists themselves, with the exception of rare individuals who stand as exceptions to the rule (those who broke out both of the world of outsiders and of the conventional art world alike), mostly returned to star in sideshow exhibitions of Outsider Art rather than of Art Brut, which were designed, in essence, to preserve them as an anthropological curiosity, as opposed to a living emergence at the heart of art.

This absurd situation becomes all the more striking once it is clearly recognized that the art of the exceptional, or of outsiders, is very far from homogeneous in any respect: visually, materially, or in its use of media that are peculiar and endemic to itself. Thus, in the course of its sterilizing and segregating treatment, Outsider Art has been splintered and distilled into ever-new styles that suddenly flourished in the art world: naïve, brute, raw, atavistic, savage, “bad,” folksy, intuitive, autodidactic, and such like. All of these—now recognized as stylistic idioms adopted by artists from the artistic mainstream—were and remain the original traits of outsider artists who taught the world what art is, and what it truly means to be a singular and unique human being in the world, rather than merely to aspire to be so.

With all that in mind, I resolved to abandon altogether the notions of “outsiders,” “eccentrics,” and the like. In essence, art itself is already a peculiar phenomenon of humanity, anomalous at its very core—such that one cannot “deviate” from it or stand “outside” it. Whoever makes art is, ipso facto, already within art, without exception. By contrast, an artist can certainly live outside the *field* of art, for that would be a purely sociological distinction, a matter of the field as a social phenomenon, and not something essential to art itself. An artist outside the field is simply that—an artist outside the field, full stop—neither for better nor for worse, from an artistic point of view.

In addition, on a personal note, I do not accept definitions in art—neither of styles nor of media—and I make no distinctions between art and craft, high and low, professional and popular, beautiful or ugly (without quotation marks!). This, precisely in recognition of the fact—or rather, because of the fact—that the question of the essence of art remains unresolved: not only in relation to the art world as we know it, with all its manifold and curious players, but also in relation to each specific work of art, every time we encounter it. The question will remain forever open, and can by no means be settled.

Indeed, I go further still, and doubt whether any work of art depends on definitions or inner delimitations of what is presumed to be essential to art across all media and styles in terms of quality, beauty, proportion, objecthood, lastingness, technique, harmony, and the like. In general, I mistrust anything that calls me to order and yet remains open to doubt. Conversely: whatever breaks through boundaries, slips away from them, unsettles them, or fails to acknowledge them at all—draws my heart.

When I encounter artists who have never studied art in any academy or school, who in fact do not know or are unfamiliar with the craft of classical or modern drawing and painting, or who are not disciplined colorists—or who do not engage with color theory at all—who are not in the *bon ton* of any genre or conception, and so on, and yet nonetheless produce a painting that stirs in me some mysterious emotion or awakens my curiosity, I do not concern myself in the least with the question of whether such artists “know how” to paint. Still less am I interested in whether the artist is an autodidact in the conventional sense. For if an artist has learned nothing on their own, but only what was taught to them in some recognized school or by other accredited artists, then the question of what is creative in their work is perfectly legitimate. The professed autodidact—a figure burdened, perhaps excessively, by stereotypical regard—merely teaches themselves knowledge and skills long since available, or learns what is deemed “worthy” of knowing in the eyes of others. Such an artist inevitably subjugates themselves to an existing canon, or gives themselves over to the gaze imposed on them by the center of the artistic mainstream,

which judges them, and thereby compels them to judge themselves in relation to its conventions. But what, then, of a painter who is not concerned with such knowledge at all?

For instance, in the case of Akiva Alon Torovetsky, we are faced with an artist who never bothered with either classical training or self-training in painting, as any kind of established knowledge of painting had no interest for him. Standing in front of one of his canvasses some people say, “*Ab, he doesn’t know how to paint,*” while the more forgiving will remark, “*You can tell he’s a self-taught artist.*” In both cases, the speakers do not actually see the painting itself, but only painting as it ought to be, in their mind’s eye. But Torovetsky paints rather than learns how to paint—and this is the fact: he is not concerned with painting techniques. He simply paints, and finds his own solutions to his aspirations, for better or worse. This does not mean that he learns nothing from himself, but it does mean that he does not learn what is conventionally agreed upon as the “right” or “wrong” technique.

By contrast, the truly independent artist does not learn *how* things are done in art at all; rather, he does what he does, and his doing becomes less of a lesson and more of a “thing.” The same holds true for the so-called *outsider*—a term that is problematic not only intellectually but also ethically. For the outsider, unlike perhaps the autodidact, not only does not cooperate with any center whatsoever, but more often than not, his work does not address the outside world at all. In many cases, the very exposure of such work beyond its immediate surroundings verges on sacrilege.

In another respect, Torovetsky draws a single motif hundreds, even thousands of times: a boat without oars, floating on a lake or some body of water, between mountains or in desolate place. Most often, it is rendered with an ordinary pen on small scraps of paper, but also in colourful markers, acrylic, and oil, on larger formats or canvas. Indeed, in this repetitive act, day after day, week after week, there is the aspect of a ritual—evidence of some inner, emotional, or cognitive impulse, which predates the creative process itself and would continue beyond it, like a burning bush that is never consumed. At the same time, Torovetsky maintains a kind of singular attitude toward his works in general, and toward these drawings in particular—an attitude bordering on consecration. So much so, that it was only with great effort that we managed to convince him to allow these works to leave his home for display in the gallery. For his part, he would have preferred that we exhibit only photographs or reproductions of the originals, so that he would not be forced to part from them, even for a short while.

As is well known, such traits are among the most prominent markers of outsider artists, and one of the defining features of their work, among others. But should we then refer to Torovetsky as an outsider artist? That question will be examined in depth in a chapter devoted specifically to him. In the meantime, however, we may well ask: what does it matter? Does not the very process of categorization within the art world—those that we have already touched upon above, from “psychiatric art” to Art Brut and its many derivatives, the naïve, the intuitive, and so forth, and back again to outsider art—betray the ever-shifting attitudes toward such artists, alongside problematic dynamics of appropriation and exploitation?

Let us therefore conclude that we may, indeed, call these artists “exceptional” or “outsiders” —but only if we strip these terms entirely of their mainstream acceptance, and grant them solely the meaning that



the artists themselves ascribe to them, in relation to the condition of art as it appears from the artist's own perspective. From this vantage point of the chosen artists, where I too position myself as researcher—that is, from the *out*, the *outside*, to the *side*, the other side of the art world's center—art today is, for the most part, sociology rather than art. And it would not even be accurate to speak of a “sociology of art,” since today art itself—together with its artists and their objects—is intrinsically sociology and socialization, with all their economic and political ramifications. And in all this sociology there is very little art. But this does not mean that there are not also a great many objects; on the contrary—precisely the opposite is true: once art becomes sociology, it is only logical that objects proliferate within it, proliferate still further, exactly as the case is in economics and politics.

## The Modus Operandi

### Researchers in the Field of Art and Periphery in Israel

At the outset of my research, in my naïveté—or shall we say, in my childlike enthusiasm—I went straight out into the field, on foot as the saying goes, or by bus or train, equipped with the barest minimum of foreknowledge. Naturally, I turned first to the actual peripheries in the South and the North, to the towns officially designated as “developed” and yet, for some reason, still branded as “in development”—both physically and through a steady stream of bureaucratic reports. By the same token, I sought out art institutions, museums, galleries, and art schools—better or lesser known—that were located in the heart of these peripheries, as well as figures from the art world—better or lesser known—who worked in these institutions, or who simply lived in these peripheral areas.

It is worth pausing here for a few observations. I will not feign innocence: my attitude toward this art-field of the geographic periphery, as shaped by three decades' worth of experience working in art, can be readily inferred from what I've already written in the chapter on center and periphery. My expectations were, to put it mildly, not particularly high. This is not, God forbid, because most or all of them were unwilling to cooperate. On the contrary: I almost always encountered the warmest and most welcoming reception. Rather, the difficulty was that, for the most part, they simply could not understand exactly what I was looking for, nor how they might assist me—for a fundamental reason that I will shortly illustrate with a telling example. I must admit, however, that I myself was hardly able to specify clearly what I was seeking.

That said, in my experience, practically all of the major art institutions whose physical seat lies at the heart of the so-called peripheries—and which receive funds allocated specifically to the peripheries—function as unmistakable satellites of the center, with an all but astonishing faithfulness. The artistic agendas of these institutions, along with the curators, directors, and artists who serve them, are imported almost without exception from the center, whether by training, education, or by affiliation of one sort or another. And yet, I considered my encounters with these institutions and figures to be an integral and highly relevant part of my research subject—namely, artists outside the field. For the very character of these institutions, their particular histories, and the outlooks of the quite specific individuals who

directed them, are crucial, as well as fascinating and even riveting in their own right, in setting up a mirror image of their relationship—if, indeed, any “relationship” exists at all—with those artists who stand apart from them.

As a rule, I noticed that it was precisely those informants who belonged most clearly to the cultural world in a professional capacity—or, more specifically, to the art field of the center—even if they lived in the periphery, who were the ones most faithful in enforcing the boundary between what, in their eyes, counted as “high art” and what they deemed “low art.” This was far more pronounced than among the local informants from the (development) towns, who had never previously belonged to any center, even though some of them had received their training in central institutions. The former, in effect, served as unmistakable agents of the center’s aesthetic snobbery; the latter, at the very least, remained divided.

And from here to a second remark. From the beginning of my account, and likewise throughout, I have refrained from presenting specific experiences in which specific institutions are mentioned or encounters with concrete individuals are detailed—and this for reasons of ethics. Since I hold that the primary character of the art field is a sociological reality rather than an ideal, philosophico-aesthetic, or essential-conceptual one, claims of this kind ought to stand, if not by scientific standards, then at least by the basic criteria of research in the social sciences. Moreover, to posit the art field as a sociological reality does not altogether deny the existence of certain principled, ideal, or philosophical idylls in their own right within the field of art—an assumption that renders this discussion and this interdisciplinary research doubly entangled. As noted, the present inquiry is not such a study, nor can it meet the material conditions and resources required for a thorough sociological study. Instead, it should be regarded here as an experiment, an experience, in which seeds, ideas, and questions may hopefully be found for future research, should it come.

As matter of fact, there already exists a considerable body of socio-cultural research, as well as historical and philosophical work, on the relations between center and periphery in Israel generally, and in the realm of art and culture in particular. Notable and impressively in-depth studies have been undertaken—e.g., those of Shlomo Swirski and his wide and distinguished circle, of Tali Hatuka on the question of the marginalized more broadly, of Sara Chinski, Yali Hashash, and of Haviva Pedaya, who is dearest to me of them all, for she comes closest in her research to the artists who interest me: those who dwell *outside the law*, in the full polysemy the term “outside” may carry here. At the same time, almost without exception, these studies concern themselves with such artists in terms of the mythological argument vis-à-vis the mythological center, and with the various strategies of overcoming it—not with artists who exist beyond any center, and beyond all four of its winds.

In short, I quickly realized that the approach I had taken was consuming my time and energy long before I could reach the starting point of the research of these respected scholars, and more crucially, long before I would have ten artists in hand to begin the work with. And in any case, after having modified my habits and shifted to working with greater efficiency—primarily based on as much specific information as possible (including photographs and preliminary telephone inquiries) that I had collected in advance—it was naturally still necessary for me to meet far more artists than the number originally planned. Yet, on

each and every encounter, I could not be certain that the artist before me would be the one I would choose eventually.

Artists, needless to say, are human beings, not merely potential research candidates, and humans form relationships—that is, connections whose outlines and boundaries are not formal. Moreover, the story of the artists I met who were not eventually selected is itself a source of heartache and concern, for it is inherently interesting and fascinating, both physically and theoretically. Perhaps, according to my method in which every “yes” in the world is also a “no” at the same time, they ought to have been included in the research as well, at least ethically, but I would also argue, fundamentally. But, alas, even here the resources of personnel, time, and text were restricted by various budgets, and although I exceeded them to my own detriment, the proper scope for these cases was still not found. And even so, I remind myself—and I hope to one day be able to tell—there is far more that ought to be said and recounted about the artists who ultimately were selected.

Nevertheless, I will provide here an example of a fairly typical experience of encountering the center within the peripheries, which repeated itself in various strange and unexpected forms. In fact, at the beginning of my journey, I was quite curious to explore even the peripheries in established kibbutzim and moshavim, but I abandoned this rather quickly, because in the kibbutzim and moshavim I was unable to overcome the barrier of differentiation my sources (informants) imposed between “high-quality” artists and “amateur” or “folk” artists.

For example, I approached for assistance a well-known artist from the center of the field who had relocated to one of the kibbutzim in the north and had established there a special social gallery, no less and no more, for the sake of promoting “art in the periphery.” As a headline, this was my wet dream: artists from the periphery exhibiting in the periphery, rather than in the center, in a gallery that addressed itself and its own periphery, apart from any center.

The distinguished artist, after having listened with marked attention to my words—which at the time were surely tentative, searching, and perhaps overly philosophical—replied immediately, without preamble or unnecessary queries. “Listen,” he said, in a quick-witting tone that saw to the bottom of what I was trying to articulate despite my blurred words, “let it be clear: even though I’m in the periphery, I aim for highest standards in art, without compromise. “And...” he interrupted my first attempt to explain myself, “this art must be activist; it must be committed to the urgent social and political issues of the time.”

This had thrown me into utter confusion. God is my witness that social issues are close to my heart, and political ones, why not, provided that this political stance is not a one-sided, predetermined position. After all, I did not come here as a social worker nor as a commissar of education; I came as a philosopher, concerned with art, to engage with matters of art. However, the moment someone identifies that you have come to the “periphery,” and furthermore, in search of artists off the grid, beyond any “periphery” and beyond anything you and I imagine as artists, the social and ideological intricacies jump to the forefront—masked by the righteous facade of aesthetic snobbery, or putatively aesthetic. The “without compromise” and “art must” bothered me even before I thought to debate him on the matter of quality, something I was altogether opposed to. I knew only too well that here was an intricate topic for



conversation, and that, psychologically, it is unwise to reveal all one's cards offhand in a philosophical parlay about art. There is no true philosophy to be found in the artistic mainstream; there is only a sociological discourse dressed as aesthetic concern. To my great surprise, the genuinely philosophical, even if they are not always aware of it, happen to be peripheral artists residing outside the periphery.

After repeated negotiations that came to nothing, I asked myself: what exactly is this thing called quality in art? What quality, precisely, are we talking about? Who gets to decide what counts as quality in art? It all sounded very familiar. There is no need going too far: any run-of-the-mill psychologist or neo-Marxist, on hearing such talk, would burst out laughing. Who is it that "refuses to compromise on quality" in art, speaking from a business-like, power-driven stance, rather than a philosophical one? We know it all too well: this is white, neo-liberal discourse, paradoxically leftist above all, straight from the finest repertoire of Israel's artistic center, which refuses anything that falls outside its own rules of quality. And all this, characteristically, without so much as a blink, a stammer, or the slightest confusion—unlike yours truly.

"Just a moment there—might there not be a righteous one or two to be found in peripheral Sodom?" I ventured.

"Forget it," he cut me off at once. "I'm not going to mess around with all those Saturday art-aunties with their macramé and mandala paintings."

His tone was firm and self-assured, in a way that instantly reminded me of a discourse I knew only too well: the snobbish discourse typical of the centre-field players in Israel's art scene. On second thought, I knew what he was saying. When he said "art for the periphery," what he really meant was the familiar philanthropic aegis, which is at once appropriating and domineering—something outside the periphery, supposedly for the periphery, yet defined entirely in the terms and values of the central field: white, secular, neo-liberal, capitalist. In short, colonialism in new trappings.

It is well known that there are circumstances in which even artists, or groups of artists, in wide-ranging fields such as theater, dance, and music—not only the visual arts—prefer to relocate their activity from the center to the periphery: when the center becomes increasingly crowded and competitive, while the periphery then turns into an expanded arena for the struggles between center players. And so, along the way, in their exotic passage from center to periphery, they harvest from the latter symbolic qualities and the cultural capital of pioneers, alongside concrete advantages deriving from economic management aligned with the major cultural center (government support for the periphery, as opposed to harsh capitalist competition in the center). These advantages stem directly from the migration of central sophistication into peripheral zones of activity, treated as fresh, fertile ground they have come to cultivate.

Such artists no doubt contribute something to the periphery, no less than high-tech companies that, with knowing winks, make excuses to relocate to the periphery thanks to government incentives. But as I see it, they have nothing whatsoever to do with "art in the periphery," and certainly not with an authentic "peripheral art." Yet, through a terrible mistake—reinforced both in the public discourse that stitches together (as if "peripheral" simply meant "whatever happens to be in the periphery") and in the press and cultural writing—they manage to enjoy every possible representational advantage: pioneers from the

center in the barren periphery, always on the good and righteous side of the image, and far less on its potentially subversive side.

To cut a long story short, I came to the conclusion that there was no escape but to search in the backyards of galleries and art centres, and in the informal acquaintances of artists and ordinary people from the cultural sphere with their own surroundings. I decided to turn to all sorts of people in the periphery who worked in proximity to the cultural sphere but not clearly part of the visual-artistic field: art teachers, musicians, filmmakers, directors of community centres, independent and institutional social activists, and so on. The information began to accumulate, and the list started filling with people about whom, sometimes, even the most basic details—such as full name and exact address or place of activity, let alone the precise nature of their work—were missing. And so, I would often arrive at people whose very encounter with me, and even more so my interest in them, was met with great bewilderment, sometimes even hesitation and suspicion that did not subside for quite some time.

This did not make my work any easier—but so be it, work is work and it must be done. The trouble was that such a process requires a great deal of time and leisure, and I was short on both. Reality itself—the artists and their undertakings—fit uncannily with the core philosophical and ethical questions: popular versus canonical, therapeutic versus ideal, beautiful versus ugly, explicit versus obscure, maker versus observer, active versus passive, and so on. In most of these aspects, there was seldom an immediate resolution to be found. And time, as mentioned, was pressing while the work was plenty.

Deciding on the basic framework was a key step, since it alone enabled the very beginning of the research work itself: what, in fact, does the artist before me do, and why does he or she arouse in me that sense of uniqueness? From this it will be understood—albeit in an ethically problematic way—that, little by little, I realized my intuition, what in popular parlance is called “love at first sight,” was the quickest and most effective tool at my disposal in the peculiar situation I was in.

This ethical issue troubled me more and more, and I had to come up with a way of resolving it. Technical shortcuts in research are legitimate in certain situations, but never at the expense of ethical questions that must be faced—especially since, often enough, even technical solutions conceal ethical dilemmas that remain unresolved.

With “love at first sight,” the ethical difficulty can, in fact, be met by subjecting it to strict conditions of proof: one must test whether that love is justified independently of the initial—spontaneous—affection. Just as it is certainly possible to apply a conscious corrective to the bias of a discriminatory personal preference, so too is it possible to place the natural bias itself under rigorous conditions of “verification.”

The problem, however, emerges with artists who bear no charm at first glance—and sometimes not even on a second or third. For here we enter the realm of a love that is the diametric opposite of love at first sight: what I call “the love of the village girl.” This kind of love does not erupt suddenly or appear in a single flash; rather, it is the fruit of long attention to what has remained within one’s field of vision for a considerable time. It is a love that blossoms gradually, slowly, and does not strike you like thunder out of a clear sky.

That this is how it often goes in art was entirely clear to me from my own life, and over thirty years of practice in art. Many are the artists who, at first, did not stand out in any particular way within my vision field, either broadly or locally speaking. And by “locally” here I mean something far-reaching in my conception of art: quite literally—the place, the town, the village, the very neighbourhood where you live.

This “place” is not the most important museum in the country (which, as it happens, was only a Saturday-stroll away from my home), and certainly not the world-famous museum you read about in art magazines and cultural columns, the one everyone flaunts having visited, and not even the grand history of art itself. The museum is, of course, an intellectual point of reference. But the humble galleries in your own small turf, the artists you meet on your street day after day, and their studios (often just a room or a corner in their homes), which become the scenes of your everyday social life—these are, to my mind, the most genuine abode of art. In them, art ceases to be only an acquired taste and cultural habitus and becomes instead a concrete part of your very life.

And so, these artists—including poets, writers, musicians, choreographers, and theater-makers—who crossed my path in my own neighbourhood, whose works I would glimpse here and there in their public spaces, a piece in a collective show, a work in a solo exhibition, a long conversation about art and life at the local bar until dawn, or a deep, soul-stirring exchange in their studio face to face with the works themselves—these are the artists and the art I truly loved. Or rather, with whom I fell in love and came to love: with the kind of love that is woven, learned, and penetrates like the love of the country girl, and not like the love at first sight bestowed on already-celebrated, starry artists buoyed by the pomp and circumstance of art’s spectacle industry.

Some of these artists were, for the most part, unknown—hardly anyone had heard of them and “reckoned with” them, or was prone to give them much thought. But in my mind’s eye, as in my heart’s eye, they were of the utmost importance, in every sense. They were the real thing: life itself, and not “culture”. More than once, like the sudden dawning of the love for the country girl—the one your eyes have grown accustomed to until you suddenly realize you are in love with her—I would find myself watching them as they passed at a street corner, unaware of me. And in a flash of illumination I would suddenly see their lifelong labours in art, and I would think to myself: ah, what a work! what a journey! what upheavals! what striving! This, in fact, is what the expression “piece of art” really means: here goes a true piece of art, walking down the street.

It has even occurred to me that, in a genuine perspective, there is hardly an artist who is unimportant, hardly an artist whose life is not itself a profound and fascinating journey. True, retrospective exhibitions are very common in the world of capitalist art centres, in Israel and abroad, but they are founded on an extra-artistic value. They are, in fact, the very opposite of the perspective I am arguing for. In my perspective, what comes to light is what is singular and unique in art—always, and in every artist, place, and time. In the perspective of those ceremonial, celebratory retrospectives, what comes to light are the taste and value-preferences of a ruling minority. They are perspectives for the favoured stars.

And I must confess: all this talk of living art, as I have just set it out, would on occasion remerge between myself and certain artists in those familiar moments of despondency. And then, as in love, came words



of consolation that had no basis and no guarantee. There is no consolation for the artist who sees that no one demands or cares for the fruit of his labours. At such moments I thought: now is the time to repay, if only somewhat, the debts I had incurred in those false consolations I would lavish on my fellow artists, and thereby resolve the ethical dilemma in which I was stuck with regard to those artists who did not strike me at first sight, in the short time I had at my disposal. For why should I draw fresh chestnuts, not yet ripe in my consciousness, out of the fire? For whom? For what? Are artists who are no longer even here with us to hear such false consolations not equally worthy of being spoken of—or rather, of our speaking the words that their art once spoke to the world? Most certainly, yes.

And so what began as a way to resolve a momentary ethical predicament, joined itself to what I had always believed about art: that there is no hierarchy in art, and no earlier or later. If so, then let dead artists, too, come here and speak; and let the art destined for the garbage bin—literally, not only metaphorically—come forth and speak its word.

## The Artistic Object

We are, of course, speaking here of the work of art itself: the actual object, the product or commodity—that tangible thing without which there would be no museums, no galleries, and indeed no great many other economies in the world. In this I come straight to the chase, to the particular aspect of my concern here with the status of the art object, while skipping over a most intricate and lengthy history—the one on which, in fact, all of philosophy rests—namely, the fundamental and mutual interdependence of subject and object, even before we come to the relation between the artist and his artistic object, or to the standing of the actual artwork within the central art fields of the world, here and now. Beyond the massive output of contemporary artworks that are propped up by textual scaffolding, their very feasibility resting on the institutionalized and official philosophy of art, the linkage of the nominal art world—nominal in every sense—to status and to economic capital has thoroughly corrupted not only many artists' relation to the act of creation, but also the very purpose of the creation itself.

What I must do here is to confess before you, which is to say: confide in you, and with confidence lay bare the sea of my unsorted and unfiltered thoughts—often marked by a strange resentment—toward the object in general, and the artistic object in particular. Yet I must do this with measure, lest I drown the reader in a personal and sombre mass; and rather so as to provide background to my particular concern with the artist's relation to his objects: those he creates as art, and those he contrives and fashions as art; those that embody his most hidden wishes, and those that seemingly reflect his soul and spirit, but which, all too often, due to some obscure and intractable bias, he comes to value more than his own body.

In my heart of hearts I despise the object—almost every object—especially if it flaunts itself or carries itself with some air of self-importance, as a creature who had risen against its creator, or as one who feigns a victor's glory while merely girding his armour. The world—especially the one we now inhabit—is an inferno precisely because it is inundated with newly minted objects, and because man relentlessly strives to provide them with a rank of superiority, sublimity, and unreachability: values taken as intrinsic, yet always in fact heaped upon the object itself, like a lavish mausoleum erected over the dead.

We know this only too well: objects have become so important that many, in various fields, have turned themselves—their very bodies, and at times even their souls—into such objects. The development of so called body art in contemporary art is, to my mind, deeply bound up with this. Body art is not necessarily art freed of the object, and certainly not art devoid of object, but perhaps the very opposite: it deals with the supreme object, the ultimate object, the object *par excellence*. There are those who are ready to kill someone for scratching their car—be it even by accident—as if it were their very body. Others will be outraged by the defacement of a work of art as if it were a vile murder. And still others will set fire without hesitation to masterpieces of the Hermitage, in order to warm the bones of an old woman on her deathbed. Our relations with the object are profoundly dark, and call for ceaseless deciphering, vigilance, and detection.

But my concern here is with the simple foot-soldier of art—the artist—and his relation to his objects, the end-products of his art. In a Socratic inquiry, by way of parable, we might distinguish between a soldier whose entire art is to obey the rules of the army and submit to the orders of his commanders, and a soldier whose sole concern is to refine and train himself to be courageous and a consummate master in his martial profession.

The good contemporary artist, in my view, is not the one who chooses one of these two options, but the one who dares to live in the paradox between them. For the one does not necessarily overlap the other, and yet both are required in order to be a good soldier of art. On the one hand, in order to survive, the brave artist, caught in the battle of his life, must heed the rules so as not to perish. On the other hand, he must not seldom break them in order to exist as an artist at all. Without this, his life is meaningless.

Already in my early days as a young art critic, I gradually, through winding paths, came to understand that I must avoid as far as possible both receiving artworks as gifts from artists and purchasing art, or being drawn in any way to the material artwork itself—especially in its proprietary or economic aspect. The number of works that nevertheless came into my possession during thirty years of involvement in art can be counted on fewer than ten fingers, and most of these I gave away as gifts without batting an eye.

Once, in secret, I purchased works of art that were quite costly (relative to my income), from an artist who had gone bankrupt and whose life had unravelled. Yet immediately I deposited them in the homes of art lovers, so that they could enjoy them in their living rooms indefinitely. A well-known collector, one of the sharks of the Israeli art world, reproached me for not extending my hand to collecting. I told him that I was not interested in art. A reproduction, or a photograph of a work—that is, the memory of the work—was to me equivalent to the work itself. The death of artworks has never saddened me more than the death of human beings.

When visiting artists in their studios, I never once expressed any admiration for the monetary worth of their work, and never so much as let a word slip from my lips in that direction. Yet the economic and dire distress of some artists had cut into my living flesh. This matter tore me apart and gave me no rest—especially given that I could not reconcile this feeling with the revulsion that the economic valuation of art aroused in me.

In truth, perhaps somewhere within me I conceal the analogy that has existed in me since my childhood and adolescence in the world of Torah, the analogy that stands in me as an ideal: between the life of the artist and his creative act, and that of the (solitary) man of faith and his study of Torah. Indeed, Torah—art in our case—truly endures only in one who “gives it his life”. And yet the question immediately arises: how may his art (his Torah) be kept alive if he himself is to be sacrificed in the process?

The mystical-faithful solution of the Chazal—which did not withstand the test of reality—that the artist would be sustained and live off his Torah, is not a viable possibility in the artworld of today, where most of it is controlled, maintained, and promoted by ideologues and capitalists. Whereas the rational solution opted by Maimonides—that the artist (the Torah scholar) divide his time between independent labour and artistic endeavour—is a privileged solution, suited only to geniuses, men of singular gifts, and the fortunate few. What remains, then, is only the Jewish solution that gave birth to one of the great creations of Jewish history: Hasidism. It is the community and the Hasidim who sustain the artist independently, out of recognition of the importance of the free and independent artist within the community.

But alas, the artists with whom I am concerned are far from living in such communities. On the contrary: their communities do not recognize their art, but are instead revolving around ideologues, politicians, and men of wealth.

All the same, it may very well be that here, too, I am throwing my complaints on the mere picket through no fault of his own (another military concept that seeped into questions of center and periphery). For the picket here, as a metaphor for the art object, is essentially a fence-keeper or border-warden. A fence or border, as liminal or peripheral concepts, are precisely what appeal to me in relation to the artistic object, the end-product. Yet in the mechanism that became entangled and thickened beyond recognition in our art industry, which began primarily with Modernism, the keystone had usurped the place of the cornerstone—the art object proper became the crowning achievement, while the artist and his activity sank ever deeper into the quagmire of art and were buried there.

It is very likely that I should have focused on the new apexes of the art field: wealthy collectors, curators, gallery owners (from shipping containers to art dealerships, and today also exchanges), commissars on behalf of the state and authorities, critics, and historians, who often serve—or cast glances under/through—each of the hats mentioned above. In short, a major part of what drew my attention to the artists I met was the partial, makeshift they had found, and the way they negotiated with this reality of the artist that I have described above.

Some philosophers hold that art is an idea, a thought, perhaps even a thought/feeling of the heart, and not an object. Hence, the cliché expression of our time, “anything can be art”, like many clichés, contains more than a kernel of truth—provided that the sleek-handlers, in both senses, do not hitch a ride on it. Indeed, cooking and gardening can also be art, if their appearing as such calls for no justification whatsoever.

Art forms that are over-justified, anyway, wither away while other arts that require no justification flourish, conquering the present without words. Yet what dies out in over-justified arts is not the art itself

but the justification, which in turn becomes “history,” the histories, fascinating in themselves, of art. I have always thought that clichés, like jokes, should be heeded with an ear for hidden depth.

From this perhaps arises the proliferation of media that began with Modernism and intensified enormously in Postmodernism and contemporary art. Since there is no medium without an object, what truly proliferates and transforms increasingly in art are the media/objects, but art itself is always preserved as art—eternal, ethereal, and unseen, yet continually revealed in new objects/media.

The overarching expression of our time, “contemporary art”, which sounds like the only adequate and relevant term the mind can currently summon and cannot imagine replacing, seems apposite. Art, from the cave paintings thousands of years ago, through the age of idols and monotheism, to the contemporary scientific era, is always “of the present,” continuously now, because its mode of revelation is through the object—i.e., through what exists now, and perhaps (surely?) not tomorrow.

Art is eternal, a category of the soul, like God, although it likely preceded God in human consciousness. It is probable that art gave birth to faith, to God, and to many other concepts later appropriated by philosophy. From time to time, proclamations announce the death of God and even the death of art, but art remains humanity’s only real consensus, almost. It is entirely possible that art is also the legal mother of philosophy itself, and of human consciousness as we know it today, in general. The “now,” by definition, is always in flux. Art is an idea, eternity, movement, being, a ceaseless duration, independent of anything, and no one can fix it or appropriate it, whereas the object that can be controlled and appropriated is, by definition, transient.

## Aesthetic

When facing a work of art for the first time, the very first thing that strikes the eye—long before thought intervenes—is the aesthetic aspect of the work, which quietly transfigures in the viewer into “beautiful” or “not beautiful”, and consequently, “liked” or “not liked”. It is not at all true that contemporary art has abandoned the ideals of the beautiful and unbeautiful as fundamental criteria in judging and appreciating works of art. This is a myth, likely invented somewhere at the beginning of the ready-made era with Marcel Duchamp as a pioneering figure of contrasts, by artists who wholeheartedly believed in the budding modernist and neo-modernist art’s departure with traditional art, and even more so afterward, especially from the 1970s onward.

Aesthetics, which with Kant became the philosophical guise of beauty in the artistic object, merely transmuted itself—first covertly, then openly—from the aesthetics of the object to the aesthetics of the concept, and from the concept, traditionally and famously, back to the artist, the genius, and the greatest mind, and to the intelligent or intellectual in our contemporary parlance

From this arose the gradual separation from the visual and experiential toward the conceptual and cognitive, and toward a mass of art buttressed by proportionate masses of text. The aesthetic beauty of the concept, of the idea, only rarely manifests in the object of so-called “contemporary” art.



But the ultimate example of such an object was Duchamp's *Fountain*, which bore no beauty whatsoever in the traditional sense of an art object—even when it was elevated to the rank of a sovereign God in the pantheon of artistic deities: in a museum. The urinal itself, in the museum, was and still is the same old urinal from the factory, and its admission into the pantheon of art signalled the return of ancient magic to object of art. Yet the idea itself was indeed one of the most “beautiful” and shocking ideas in the history of art.

All of this is not meant to suggest that I deny the existence of an aesthetics of the concept—in fact, I recognize it fully—but rather to challenge the notion that aesthetics is the essential criterion in a work, when the work, the “artisticness”, for me includes the artist, the action, the object, and the divine presence hovering over them all. Aesthetics, in short, hovers and migrates from place to place within the totality of things it inhabits. It is in recognition of of this danger—the danger of aesthetics—that I have always been cautious in encountering works of art, and was quick to move from it into the twilight realm of questions existing between doubt and faith (intuition), and between the work and the artist: whether I believe him or do not believe him. That is, ultimately: the artist himself.

Conservative or rigid aesthetic theories have long since gone bankrupt in practice, in the realm of real reception within culture, for the simple reason that theories in art are not scientific theories but, at best, positions, opinions, proposals, recommendations — sometimes argued with astonishing brilliance, but more often nothing more than ideological sermons of the mainstream and of hegemonic culture. And yet, in every style of creation (and in every age), the *bon ton* of the aesthetics of the field and of the spirit of the time are replicated and preserved as though we were still in the very heart of one of the classical ages or styles of art. There are still those who hold fast to a scale of the beautiful and a scale of the ugly with almost scientific confidence—even if such claims often take on the most allusive and evasive of languages, so as to avoid stating the explicit “holy name” of the condition for the aesthetics of an artwork.

Some of these theories, as noted, have shifted from demanding aesthetics as a precondition for art and as an intrinsic property, to the aesthetics of the creator in the form of the “aesthetics of the concept.” This is, to me, one of the more astonishing phenomena, and one worthy of being studied in the interstices of the discourse on art, above all in the modes of its presentation—which, paradoxically, have grown ever more severe, reaching peaks of conservatism greater than anything seen even in the classical age.

At times, since the philosophical consensus has already settled that “beautiful” or “not beautiful” is no longer an important or essential claim in the evaluation of art, speakers place the full weight of their arguments on other aspects of the work, in order to mask the aesthetic bias that shapes their judgment. Still, the place where the awl inevitably shows through the sack, in our age as in every age, is in the taboo accepted in the secondary and commissarial profession of art: curation. A work may perhaps still have the right to be beautiful or not beautiful as it pleases, in order to be admitted into the field, but curation may never commit the unforgivable sin of being *un-aesthetic*.

Curation, as dazzling and as beautiful as it never fails to be in our era, exposes the naked aesthetic preference that always stirs beneath the whole world of art. And the same in writing: we encounter many texts that are beautiful and poetic, or alternatively dazzling in their intellectual sophistication and positive critique—all of which serve to mask works that are, in fact, not very beautiful at all. In this way, through

the mediating text, modern art—from its very beginnings—has effectively enshrined within itself one of the iron laws of traditional art: when all is said and done, “this” must, in the end, be “beautiful.”

Now, in reading this very chapter, I find myself wondering about myself: whether I, too, am not prone to fall prey to this very double offense—consecrating my own aesthetic preferences for certain artists’ work beneath layers of supportive text. The question remains open. And yet I immediately leap to my defence: for the very fact that I do not consider aesthetics in art to be a defining or essential property for its appreciation, forces me to search all the more urgently for its hidden essence. Above all, in my view, not every discourse on art in general, nor on a concrete work in particular, is really about evaluating that work—not even about its qualities. Sometimes the discourse itself, as discourse, suddenly wells up, as a direct outflow of the work—and is thus a vital part of its activity: the work stirs the soul and the mind to open and to speak about anything in the world.

The works of some of the artists chosen here were dismissed by colleagues as not beautiful and thus inferior or even invalid from an artistic standpoint. As for myself, I am an absolute heretic against the supposed relevance of beauty or ugliness in a work of art: it is not, in any way, an essential factor in the work. Beyond that, beautiful is a thing, and ugly is a thing; if either provokes delight or disgust in someone, that is relevant to the meaning of the work for that person, and therefore relevant to the work—but still not essential to it.

Thus the matter of aesthetics should be settled once and for all: almost nothing in the world is untouched by aesthetics, this much is well known. There is no longer any reason to demand that the work of art “be aesthetic”: it always already is, for better or worse. The matter of technical skill and craftsmanship is relevant to art—but so is the artist who delivers himself wholly to his creation without any of these skills; he and his work are no less relevant to art. Not to mention the many celebrated artists who found themselves imprisoned within their own knowledge and technical mastery, and who, in their later years, had to summon all their strength in order to unshackle themselves from these binding abilities—which, in the end, enslaved them to a kind of “foreign labour” alien to art. And so they turned for help to liberating currents drawn from outsider art or from the art of indigenous peoples in Africa and Latin America, to folk traditions, to a revival of childhood, to naïveté, to the savage, and so on. Not all succeeded in freeing themselves from the mannerism of the “beautiful,” and some only with great toil—a struggle that led Marcel Duchamp to abandon “art” altogether and to live as an artist without any longer being an artist in the conventional sense, according to his own testimony.

## Style

Is a single, unique, and original style for an artist truly the ideal of art? As far as I see it: no; though its constituting a defining facet of the age of competitive individualism, beginning roughly in the seventies, together with the ubiquitous rise of the umbrella term “contemporary art,” is beyond dispute. But this is, after all, only a trend of the modern age in particular, a trend that weakened somewhat with postmodernism. Many of the great artists of history did not trouble themselves at all with the question of style, nor were they necessarily even aware of the existence of “style” in the

structured and acquired sense we mean today—for the styles that predated the modern age are largely a methodological invention of historians, imposed after the fact.

By contrast, hundreds of artists in every style that flourished at one time or another in early modernism—Symbolism, Impressionism, Surrealism, Fauvism, etc.—devoted themselves to the style of their age without batting an eye, sometimes even writing manifestos in support of that style. Yet still, as with the case of aesthetics, this is a myth that never ceases to haunt the mainstream art world, with devastating effect on the lives and careers of many an artist.

As in sport and science, the drive toward novelty, toward scaling the peaks of mountains and discovering new lands in early modernism, eventually degenerated into an egoistic narcissism of almost neurotic self-isolation in “contemporary art.” Conservatism, absurdly enough, is also a tendency that persists at the very heart of every liberal mechanism. On the other hand, even a unique style itself is a trap that becomes a millstone for the artist: after even a single decade of work in the life of a given artist, we already hear the dismissive claim, “Yes, but he’s no longer doing anything new!” Thus the artist must not only adopt an original style at all costs, but must constantly innovate and transform his originality into something ever more original.

In this way a single genius at the beginning of the last century—Picasso, of course had cast a curse over all the artists who came after him, a curse that hangs over us to this very day. And this despite the fact that Cézanne, the great perseverer, is considered even more than Picasso the true progenitor of conceptualism in art. This has not been researched enough, but in my view the proliferation of new media in art generally, and the tendency of many artists to move from one medium to another as easily as changing socks, have their source in the “mark of Cain” syndrome borne by the artist of our age as the cursed burden of style. In another direction, it may be that the entire art of Marcel Duchamp, the father of the ready-made and of contemporary art, was born only because he too—a highly gifted painter—fled from this very curse. Being, by his own testimony, a thorough hedonist and idler, to invest his life in the labour of discovering a deeply personal style was a taxing, drudging task utterly at odds with his nature.

The chief problem arising from all this, and the point I wish to make here, is the negative and dismissive attitude of the mainstream art world—not toward artists without any style at all, and certainly not toward those who “quote” style with a conceptual wink—but toward present (not “contemporary”) artists who work in some classical style already enclosed and sealed in the volumes of art history for all eternity; or toward those who adopt, in complete sincerity, some modern style newly arrived, without ironic quotation marks or apologetic distance. Such artists will be rejected outright and at once, provoking open pathos from the various art agents of the center. Let us say, for example, artists who paint in pointillism or impressionism.

In defence of these artists I would say this: my position, based on the study of artists who worked within known styles, is that there is no “before” or “after” in art. This does not mean we erase the history of stylistic development, but that every style ever created, anywhere in the world, is alive, valid, relevant, and creative at all times and in all places, for the work of any artist in any place and time. Styles, though they may indeed hold something wondrous in the moment of their birth, and though they may be tied by secret logic to the place, time, and people through which they first appeared to the world, are not mere

historical accidents. They are ideas — forms of the human soul in general, not just the individual artist. A style may have revealed itself in a particular historical constellation well suited for its appearance, but it has always been there, and will always be there in human life.

If not mere whimsy or a casual experiment, an artist who binds himself wholly to a style binds himself to the idea of that style — to some necessity by which the idea of this particular style matches his place, his time, his soul. That is what deserves our study and our learning. The existing technical approach, still widespread pedagogically, of teaching artists to practice in various styles to “stretch” their gaze and arm them with a range of techniques—while it contains a hidden truth close to the direction I point toward—nonetheless misses the essence of style. For style is indeed of the highest significance, but it is not a technique, nor was it ever. Style *c'est l'homme même*: the human being himself, his idea, even when he casts aside his own individualism.

*Albert Swissa, Summer 2025*