

The Office As Studio **A conversation between Oren Pinhassi to Doron Rabina (2009)**

Translated by Noam Arie Darom

Doron Rabina, 39, graduated from "Hamidrasha"¹ School of Art, Tel-Aviv. As an artist he participated in many exhibitions in Israel and out of. He received Kipfer Award For Young Artists (1997) and the Ministry Of Culture Award (2008). Rabina represented Israel in San Paulo Biennale. For 8 years he was the curator of "Hamidrasha" Art Gallery as well as other shows. From 2009 he functions as the new director of "Hamidrasha" School of Art.

Oren Pinhassi, 26, this year will graduate (Fine Art and Art Education) from "Hamidrasha" School of Art, Tel-Aviv. As an artist participated in number of exhibitions.

A.P: You stepped this year into a new function, the director of "Hamidrasha". I would like us to speak about the meaning of this position for you and about its wider meaning in relation to art and culture. The way I see it, you could understand it as an administrative function, one that is not natural to the artist. On the other hand, I feel that there is something here, with your personal background, something to do with your personal history, something about your art practice that goes side by side with writing and curatorship. Those activities that do not generate an "art object" in the simple meaning of the word, but express a certain mode in culture and art today; a mode where art takes over more and more activities that are not necessarily involved with object making - for example, social or educational activities. I would like to relate to this position of director as an artistic activity and as an conscious choice of the artist.

D.R.: While an artist's activity is being grasped as refining the individual territory (even if it has impact on shaping culture), a head of an institution is positioned in a territory that is driven from a public or common thought. As such - and this is almost an ethical demand - it is usually expected from him to ignore the individual he is and his personality. Many times management is thought of as an averaging activity. That activity should allow the existence of many different individual perceptions under one organising principle. That is why a parallel practice of art and management is perceived as a betrayal to the artist's outlook of the world. It is perceived as institutionalization, and a move from the creative sphere to a sphere of "wheeling-dealing". Spheres that art and culture are only the "subject matter" of in the better case, or just an "appeal" in the worst case. I would like to offer a model that refuses this dichotomy and contains those different activities together in the wider discipline of "art practice". This refusal derives from a partial position towards art. It has become something that characterizes my work but it's also something I would like to believe in as a value. When I say partial, I don't mean doing something just partly or offhandedly, but to a position of partial belief in what you are doing and also in the field of occupation. As the artist I am, partial position means I am not working with a total belief, almost religious and very internal. Partial position means working with the perception of art doing or thinking always as part of an existence with external values to it. When I think about my first steps as an artist, they were never done only in the studio, but from an early stage, formed an active view about artistic and cultural context that was beyond my individual artistic research. It's not something that any art practice demands, it's connected to personality and types of interest. In my case, it's also connected to a very strong link to writing and literature. If you look at this very unexpected (from my side) decision to stand as the head of the school, or in other words, to bring into my thought questions about art education, it is a drastic change in my life, but also something very logical and continuous to my art perception and the way I work within it.

¹ a Hebrew word for school or a college, usually (but not here) with religious connotations to Talmud and Jewish laws.

A.P.: I would like understand how do you see this role, as an extension of the definition of “Artistic Activity”. I have the feeling you do not give up on your definition or approach of an artist. I do this separation between management and art because such a role seems to demand giving up on art doing exclusively. Therefore, the question is, how can this role be an artistic activity of its own?

D.R.: The more challenging question, that you are asking, is whether something happened to the art that enabled us to think of this activity as a work of art? Can we grasp an educational activity as a work of art?

But your question also includes the prior stage – the stage of giving up on the artist’s work in the studio. This question has been directed to me along the way regarding the parallel practice of art and curatorship. If you don’t think about curatorship as a position or as an external view on art, but as a point of view from within the art, as a channel of creation and thinking about art in a different format, outside the studio, that seeks partnership with other artists and asks for a broader view on art - then you can grasp it as another way of thinking and acting in the world (of art).

As soon as you don’t differ art and curatorship, you do not differ art and life. You don’t differ it to love making (unless you do it in the studio). If we look at art as another activity in the world, as an activity that gives meaning to your existence, that creates movement and dynamics and it rebels against the meaninglessness of our existence, a life that finishes with death, then you don’t have to controvert those two creative activities that art is standing in their base(?).

I curate not as an artist, but as the being I am. My principle was always to satisfy my desires, my curiosities and the need to produce a meaning. It is the same if it’s called artist’s work that makes an object, or a curator that creates an exhibition (which is also an object). The difference is not that big. The decision to stand as the head of the art school was primarily to create for myself an unpredictable moment, a whole new perspective about art. What could be more seductive for an artist than such an experience?

A.P.: I would like to speak more, but differently, about the definition of artist, curator or an art school director and the separation between them. I agree there is some artificiality in the separation between them, especially because ideally, the motive should be similar for all of them. But you cannot ignore that practically, in many cases, curatorship and management roles are connected to the establishment of status, or political and commercial power. Their motive (if they are aware or not) is not exactly the change you are talking about. I think about artist in the 70s that created from radical thought and ideology. Today, with the rise of art fairs, for example, in an era that brought capitalism to a new level, it seems to me that radical thinking of artists and art world people is less possible.

D.R.: What you have started to describe is a strong ideological moment in the art of the 60s and 70s. There was a will to extend art’s fields of action. If we think of the capitalist logic that was put to the test then, you can say the ideology (of the art) lost, but, practically it didn’t only lose, because art today is full of resolutions gained at that moment.

You mentioned a situation where art, mainly in the last few years, became an activator of parasite mechanisms. You mentioned art fairs; I would like to speak, though, about the big art events, such as the different biennales, that supposedly art is their theme, but truly it’s only an alibi to an activity that has nothing to do with art at all. For example: the municipal use of art, using art’s aura to improve the image of a city and to raise the real estate prices. Or alternatively, all sorts of supposedly radical platforms, independent, where new platforms are

offered as a virtue, but it's not really sure what kind of new thought made this platform possible. The art is being exploited to create an aura of criticism and it involves some fake democratization of the art. But all in all, it just creates a false impression of movement and artistic vitality.

A.P.: Don't you think that these are market forces? The art schools, for example, should confront and act against them in order to produce artists who can look at those phenomenon in a critical way?

D.R.: There is something about the terms "Academy" and "Museum", that assume some type of continuation, of stability, of absolute belief in its existence. The processes in art are more dynamic, more revolutionary and more doubting compared with those existing in the academy. The academy in most cases is busy with maintaining and spreading existing knowledge, rather than producing new knowledge.

Art as a discipline is bound to critical thinking, to a continuous check of the temporary basic assumptions that stand in its base, to dismantling the ways of expression and the modes of action, and above all, to a non-compromising self-doubting. Art schools usually exalt those values in their own perception and as an ideal they question both the content and the institutional structure. But there is still a need to ask questions about the validity and the level of radicalism of the institute's self-questioning and the will to take the true risk of dismantling symbolic assets accumulated. It is common to say that art is a practice that contains a self-destructive mechanism that bring it frequently to the edge, destroys it and therefore also revives it. That motion of relinquishing of assets and beliefs where the art is striving to get is hard to demand in general, and is surly hard to find in the art institutes. Art school that constantly mixes its own basic assumptions - including a real confrontation with the question, of whether there is a need for art schools - is a phenomenon that is almost unknown, certainly not in long traditional institutes. This kind of move can be found in activities that challenge the whole definition of institute, academy or school. Even so, there is no real validity to an educational institute that does not turn the reflection and self-criticism to a constant element of its own existence. When the subject matter of the institute is education and art, the moves of examination and renewal through doubting are especially critical.

A.P.: And how do you intend to create that reflection?

D.R.: There are many means that will break the continuity and duration of the rhetoric and activity of the place. It involves a constant insertion of new voices that will enable dismantling and decentralization of the place's axioms. My feeling is that even if you gather (and in our school there already is) a collection of bright, critical, temperamental and unusual people, the way they reflect in the long run and even their most severe and radical examination of their work will always stay within their own tools. That is why I have created different types of formats that will diminish this monolithic.

For example, in the "Shulchan Agol"² discussion forum I've established - I've directed those responsible for it that the first parameter for inviting other people to it will be on the basis of their difference. Not only in their outlook, but mainly their rhetoric, their tone of speech, against the tone of speech you can imagine the school has. Such a thing as the forum, beyond the effect it has on the different perceptions that are consolidated and petrified in any educational institute, is meant also to offer many models for the students. For example: the

² Round Table

way we speak about art and culture. It should create legitimacy to different speech modes that don't exist in this specific art school.

A.P.: Can you explain the format of "Shulchan Agol", how it will work and the relation to the students?

D.R.: My first motive for that decision to have the format of "Shulchan Agol" is connected to language. There are more motives, like to diminish the centrality of Thursday critics (critiques?). This is a historical format where a panel of teachers discuss students' works and it conserves some type of authority and an outlook that also represents a very certain type of rhetoric. The new format aims to create symmetry between content and shape, in the sense that the tools are words and the objects of speech are the artworks. In the "Shulchan Agol" the object and the means to discuss it are identical in the sense that we talk about talking, or think about thinking. The idea is to discuss different issues that are related to art and culture, concrete or abstract "burning" issues. It comes from the belief that growth is achieved through argument. There is also a performance element here, one that externalizes outlooks, outlooks that are not hidden behind text, and this should allow creation of a wide variety of speech modes. Speech that is more instinctive, or less intellectual, less fluent or less convincing and this element supposed to have a destabilizing effect.

A.P.: You spoke about different speech modes, less fluent or less academic. This is very interesting for me, because I ask (also myself), how can you produce a different type of speech? Why there is such a huge gap between the way I speak with a friend about art and the way people speak, or how it is taught to be the right way to speak about art?

D.R.: The other speech mode, or more rightly, the endless number of different speech modes exist. They don't get publicity in the academies because students learned to shut up. Many of them don't identify with it, or aren't capable of it, but they accept it as the standard, as rhetoric one should aim for. I think that there are very strong forces that (unconsciously) work hard not to allow different modes of speech. Educational institutes should be - side-by-side with encouraging the student to raise questions, appeal or doubt - also responsible for creating legitimacy not only of different types of thought but also of a different type of speech. It's not only connected to the insertion of speakers of a different kind, but also to the mode of activity within the institute. For example: the connection between an institute with un-institutional activities and bodies. This confrontation is something that has the potential to arouse questions on both sides. For the school, for example, to ask again and again about the need of its existence and also about the price it carries of being an institute, including the institutionalization of language and certain mode of speech about art.

There is something important, maybe the most important, that's related to the people you gather around you, what kind of personas you place in central positions. Almost anyone who's in an important position in the school is an active artist. There is some kind of "forced" thinking about art, and a thought that comes from the art about what's called academic position. There is a mixture that fundamentally changes the position, when all that is related to the academy's construction and the way the academy is conducted are managed by people with critical artistic thought influenced by artistic activity and thought born in the studio. For this matter, it's important for me to act not through commissions, but through thinking groups and intimate meetings. I would like to take the term "pedagogic committee" and to turn it into an event with artistic content and meaning. It needs to be a moment of thinking or enjoying together, a gathering that has the status of an event and not of an instrumental bureaucracy. My office is designed as something between a salon and a studio, from the

understanding you cannot think creatively under the florescent light. We have to meet in Tel Aviv, in the houses, in the pubs and in Café's no less than in the boarding room. The mode of speech and the type of discussion is totally influenced by the visual climate and the context of where it takes place.

A.P.: I'm interested about the office as studio and also the place and physical space of working meetings. Along the conversation there is a motion of the term "Object", between artwork to curatorship, for example. Also the art school turns this conversation into an object. The artist is occupied with the creation of the art school. I would like to hear more about the way you understand the physical conditions of space in the school. The classrooms, the office or in meetings are the spaces where your thoughts are realized inside the object, the school. How the surrounding can encourage the creation of new thought and not only the conservation of existing knowledge and perception.

D.R.: It seems very right to me, to think about the visibility or the realization of all thinking structures or ideologies in physical objects in the world. One of the first times I came to the school, I was commented upon about the way I look and dress; tattoos, short pants, etc. I had a very strong reaction. "One," I said, "This is totally out of place. Two, if you managed to get along with the haircut of the previous director for 13 years, and with the sandals of the one before him, you should get along with my short pants." One of my fears was (again, related to the principle of partial identification) over-identification with the conventions of the place, sinking into some establishment and even officialdom. What I have demonstrated here, through insisting on not matching what is expected from the position of director, is similar to the working environment. The office-salon I have designed, beyond its pleasantness and similarity to places I like to be in, is a very clear statement: I do not continue what was here before me. That means I don't enter old shoes, waiting to be filled, but I produce new shoes. Another thought, for example, is to turn the campus into an Architectonic laboratory, and through "light construction" and with collaboration of architectural institutions, the campus will change again and again. Things will be built and taken apart, meaning that even the physicality of the place will not be enslaved to stability and continuity. If it will later make a change related to students' dress, or more importantly to their visual perception, then it is a blissful process. It is not essential but it's blissful. The important thing is that everything related to the physical existence, or to the existence of people in general, is a very important component, not a side product of the academic activity but integral part of it.

A.P.: In the interview on your exhibition "Aluf Haarak"³ you said that for the first time, you gave yourself permission not to be smart, but sentimental. How do you see the decision to take this new role facing that statement?

D.R.: You are asking about the emotional dimension this role contains? This role is bound to taking responsibility on a rich, complex fabric composed of people, not functions. The humane dimension is an exciting element in all the types of activity the school makes. I laugh at myself when I say that I bring "feminine management". Many aspects and a lot of energy in the last months involved thinking about what I generate in the lives of the people I work with; firstly my colleagues – lecturers, teachers, admin workers, etc, and then also the students. I have to understand that the big drama to me is firstly in my own life. There is no drama of work here, but psychological human drama that is connected to growth, in turning to a man and is also related to age and lifestyle shakeup. Even if the field where this drama happens is

³ Brand name of (very cheap) oriental anis spirit. Literarily also means champion of Arak.

public and communal, the big drama is an intimate one. From my perspective, that is the sphere.

When I was a curator of the 90s exhibition “Ubasof Namut”⁴ in Herzliya museum, I got caught in a project drowning in a sea of officialism, national representation, histories and generalizations. One of the first things that shaped my work was the understanding that I am doing a very intimate act within the culture. That is to say, I bring a feeling or anxiety that occupies me, and my thoughts about death and its implication about the purpose or the lack of purpose in this life. From a very intimate and emotional occupation in this matter, I designed the subject of the exhibition and the choices in it. Eventually, there was something that was created, that had very strong echoes and was perceived as a relevant action. Suddenly, in a new position, your weaknesses, your strengths, your desires or your human abilities turn into something that impact is much more present in real-time. That’s why my feeling is that something is already growing very quickly within me, with or without me, as a human being, not as a professional. When I say that I love my students, I don’t speak about appreciation, I really speak about love.

The interview is taken from “Machol”⁵ art magazin, issue no. 1. January, 2010, Israel, pages 18-19



⁴ And in the end we’ll die.

⁵ Dance