



## In the Land of the Zombies

“There is a consensus that beyond Julia Roberts’ eyes her heart bleeds, but the illusion is very short term. You go out of the film and you know it’s not true. Art is not in this space yet. In art, you have the illusion that it goes on and on and on and on. You know, art still lies to itself in this sense.”

— DOREET LEVITTE-HARTEN in conversation with FELIX ENSSLIN about the state of art today

Part I:

The Curator, the Art World and the Valley of Death

Why exhibitions are scenes of obscenity, why seeing too much makes us all barbarians and the role of the curator as melodramatic hero

FELIX ENSSLIN: Since nobody can say what art is anymore, Slavoj Žižek asserted a few years ago that in the contemporary art world, the real artists are the curators. What does curator Doreet LeVitte-Harten have to say about this?

DOREET LEVITTE-HARTEN: Until the beginning of the '70s, nobody called the people who worked in a museum or made exhibition curators. Neither did anyone call himself or herself a curator. They were Ausstellungsmacher, that is, 'makers of exhibitions.' The word curator is very new, and it's amazing that you describe me as a curator exactly in the time of my life when I reject this title totally. You can wake up tomorrow morning and be a curator. It's not like being a lawyer or doctor. There is no commitment of responsibility in being a curator. It's an empty title, it's a social title. It will network you in a certain way but otherwise it's totally empty; but as is the nature of empty titles, it also has a lot of promise in it. What Žižek has said brings us to issues of creativity, which are also problematic today. Everybody can be creative the same way everyone can be a curator. I will say that the role of a curator in assembling is a role of somebody who makes spectacle. The very act of assembling makes him a maker of spectacle. And this is not a good place to be.

F.E.: Exhibition-making cannot be a path to avoid the logic of the spectacle?

D.L.: I don't see how. Even more: The spectacle also makes an exhibition an obscene scene. Even if the exhibition is made in order to better the world, they are, by the nature of the enterprise, in the world of the spectacle. Our worlds of experience today are managed as a series of scenes of obscenity and within that museums are mausoleums of obscene scenes in this sense.

F.E.: What's wrong with the idea that everybody can be involved in the creation of a social reality? What happened to Beuys' 'Everyone is an artist?'

D.L.: I don't think Beuys meant it as an aesthetic fact. He meant it as an ethical social

fact. He meant, If you are a good mother, you are being an artist; he never meant that everybody can be a good artist in the usual sense of the word. The problem with creativity is that one is always in a zero condition with regard to it. And at the same time, because everybody is creative, it is not unique. It's like with an assembly line full of cars and every one is as fast and as good as the other. Being in the spectacle means – if one wants to be faithful to creativity and the zero condition in which we are with regard to it – that not being creative is the only act of doing the right thing. It's in a situation when everybody is good that the bad ones start to be interesting.

F.E.: So the true artist today is the one who doesn't produce anything?

D.L.: By a mad logic, this is very true. And that's why the ones that discovered it like Malevich or Duchamps are still so relevant. They said it and we are all stuck with it.

F.E.: This contemporary state of affairs is an inherent fact of the logic of modernism?

D.L.: Duchamps, Malevich and others since presented the issue of true individuality – and now it comes up empty. What I mean with the zero condition is: If all of us are individual, where does this leave us? If we are all a bunch of individuals, where is the one who is not, and where does it locate him or her? But maybe we have a semantic problem. For I don't really know what I meant by individuality or true individuality – and I doubt anyone else could say what those are, either. Except maybe the other way around: What we look at all the time and what we call art might not be art. It's a space where I still search for words. It's not that I wish to come back to true individuality in any essential sense. That would be a backward move, which is impossible. But the search is for a semantic area where the expression will be authentic and this doesn't exist today. This is my problem, and that's why I do exhibitions about melodrama, because what is the melodramatic hero? It's somebody who is mute, who has a

truth as a yoke on his back, but can't put this truth in words or put it in a form.

F.E.: So the curator is the true melodramatic hero?

D.L.: Yes, only he doesn't recognize it. He is sure that he has that truth in his pocket and that he can express it, while actually he expresses everything that negates it. And this is even true of those that uphold post-modernity or cultural relativity or other discourses that question truth as a concept.

F.E.: For Kant, the aesthetic judgment was on the occasion of an object but it was precisely not about the object; it was about a subject finding a rule to an experience that didn't previously exist. So in a certain sense a subject finds itself in the aesthetic experience at a zero condition, needing to find a way to express or universalize an experience that previously didn't exist. Schiller actually coined the phrase 'zero condition' or *Nullzustand* for the moment of aesthetic experience. When you say creativity is the zero condition, is there something that is different for us today or is this always the case?

D.L.: It can't be always the case; it varies historically. Fifty years ago, 30 years ago, we were living in another world. Today, the issue is that we are actually barbarians in the sense that we only look in order to grasp at things by looking. We don't have the possibility to contemplate what we see because we see too much. We are all in the act of consuming images all the time. But it is the moment when you pause that actually you can say what it is that you are seeing. Today there is no contemplative space anymore. We live in individual noise, which doesn't allow us to get out of it and to think about what it is that we see. At the same time, something else happens.

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Because individuality is so celebrated, one is situated in the hubris of believing that it is 'I' that is looking, that one is the center of the universe, because the images stream in one's own direction. I suggest another way to see things. Which may be to ask: What happens if the things seen are the things that are looking at us? What happens if we are the object that is looked at? What happens if, for one moment, individuality is suddenly not there anymore? Maybe this shift is a way to open the door to this space I am seeking to find words for. What happens if the picture is the thing that looks at us? It sounds terribly poetic, romantic or occult. But this is the illusion: We think that we are looking at the world. This is not true; we are being looked at all the time.

F.E.: So what happens at the zero condition if our sacred individuality is in fact an illusion? Let's return to the seeming contradiction in your criticisms: On the one hand, there is this obscene race to individuality and to 'Look at me!' On the other hand, you say we are lacking in true importance, true individuality, true impact. So the way to bring those two criticisms together is to say we have to understand that we are individual precisely in the moment of the absolute breakdown of individuality, in the moment where we no longer have specific importance or meaning in the eyes of a discourse that already exists.

D.L.: Yes, but it takes a certain humility to recognize this fact first, to build from the ruins. We are not in this place yet. We won't give up this illusion so easily. It's a process that takes all and everything. You have to die in order to start living again. Who will do it? Who lives that way? We are not Jesus.

F.E.: It is a deeply Christian topos – or Dionysian in Nietzsche's reading – this idea you have of dying in order to live.

D.L.: Yes, the topos of resurrection.

F.E.: There are two different concepts of death involved in your description: A material death – just plain death – and a symbolic death, losing one's identity. Why is the battleground of this individuality, the need for the death of individuality and the need for resurrection of a different kind, related to art?

D.L.: Because I think art is exactly at the point where it is dead, but not yet resurrected. We are living in the death valley of art. But we don't know it. Art today is before

resurrection. We don't know the future and resurrection might happen or it might not happen. Think about the concept of big exhibitions, blockbusters. It's an interesting concept. Blockbusters are like disinfections of graveyards, it's a place where death rules. We are in this state, and art is not resurrected.

F.E.: We have small galleries, producer-run galleries, we have art and media centers with social groups making a connection between politics and aesthetics, we have local scenes like here in Tel Aviv, not just big MoMA exhibitions in Berlin or in New York. Aren't you taking a specific kind of spectacle to be *pars pro toto*?

D.L.: That might be true, but the fact is that all of these alternative spaces and all these exhibitions that are commenting on the social, and all these acts that look to you as if they are against the disinfecting blockbuster – they all aspire to this place! You see, alternative is what you are when you are not in the blockbuster yet. But this desire or fantasy to be in the blockbuster – even to be the blockbuster – is really a kind of form. It's not something that has inherent content that might change my life. Rather, we speak about a form or a format. And this is the idea or the format of the thing. So you may add an alternative space, but on the level of the form you want to reach the blockbuster. Even if you don't want the blockbuster, you still want the blockbuster. It is a format or a form where wishes, desires, fantasies reside. Wishes don't have a content, they have a form. There is no life beyond the spectacle. There is no life there – you can't be there. The only way to be within the field of visibility is within a framework or – better to say – within the vision or format of the spectacle. That's where we are today. And that's why art is not the name of the game anymore.

F.E.: The only way to work as curators or even as artists is to perform a labor of mourning? We can only mourn the death of art in order to maybe clear the space for something else?

D.L.: Exactly, I think it's what is at stake. We are mourners. This might be a true name, something nearer to where we are supposed to be. Everything else is a sort of grotesque. But I am not talking in apocalyptic terms. It's not the death of art. It wasn't born, so why



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Images  
Raffi Lavie, 2002  
Acrylic and pencil on plywood, 122x122 cm  
Next pages:  
Raffi Lavie, 2005  
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You know that I come from science fiction and that, for me, this is the real reality. Those things in science fiction ‘really happened’ – but in the future

should it be dead? The point is, rather, that we are different people today than during other historical moments. Art is not an issue in our life. Whatever it is when we make exhibitions, we are doing something and dealing with something for which we don't have a name, but it's not really art. This is my claim. We hang onto 'art' because it's a reflex that we use.

**F.E.:** There are many more exhibitions today than there were 15, 20 years ago; there are many more artists exhibiting in the art world today than 15, 20 years ago; there are more magazines, there is more of everything and art seems to be a larger presence at least in social life.

**D.L.:** As what is it present? It's happening on the scene of its absence. It's present as a symbolic trigger, a symbolic carrier for something else that you might say is capitalist society or humanitarian concerns or an economic matrix. This is where art is. Art is a metaphor for many things but it's not an object by itself. When you look at a picture today, it's not what you see in the picture, it's what stands behind it. It represents.

**F.E.:** What if somebody said: You are a romantic in that you believe something that once was there, in a golden age in which art was identical with itself, is no longer there. But art is always not identical with itself – some would say this is what makes it art.

**D.L.:** It was never identical with itself and always represented, whether it was something religious or political or something else. But here we come to the question of aesthetics today. Modernity was supposed to change that art was simply representation. Before that, you could say what art is. It used to be the right proportion. If you could keep the right proportion, then something else happened in it automatically and it could be a carrier for a symbolic meaning, which lay outside of it. And the proportion within all this – its components were being presented in a way that you could breathe in it and you could understand. That's okay, but what happens to be the aesthetic when it can only be wrong in the framework of this old understanding? When it is necessarily so that the proportions are wrong because there is nothing of which it can be the properly proportioned representation of? And yet it still has its being only as symbolic value of something else?

## Part II:

### “Heaven”, “Melodrama” and “The New Hebrews”

On blockbuster exhibitions, art as religion, and the Zionist science fiction that became a reality with horrible consequences

**FELIX ENSSLIN:** ‘Melodrama,’ ‘Heaven’ and ‘The New Hebrews’ are the titles of some of your exhibitions – blockbuster exhibitions, I may add.

**DOREET LEVITTE-HARTEN:** Because if you can't beat them, join them.

**F.E.:** Blockbuster exhibitions that you curated, for which you made catalogues and that are, on first view, very different from each other. After what we explored about the valley of death in which art finds itself today – are these three exhibitions your personal path of mourning?

**D.L.:** No, because as different as they are, they all end up in a phantasmagoria or fantasy. That's different from mourning. Look at the path of those exhibitions: First there was ‘Heaven,’ then I moved on to ‘Melodrama.’ Before I could start conceptualizing an exhibition about ‘science fiction,’ I did an exhibition about power, and then came the ‘New Hebrews.’ Following that path you leave the land of the living and enter a phantasmagoria, because it's a fantasy. You deal with fantasy. You know that I come from science fiction and that, for me, this is the real reality. Those things in science fiction ‘really happened’ – but in the future. And this says everything about the present. The way I think about the future is the way I understand the present. And my present is an amalgamation of smart fantasies, ‘Heaven,’ ‘Melodrama,’ ‘New Hebrews,’ etc. I mean, they are miserable, they are not even interesting – but they are providing a narrative, which allows me to be a hero, a melodramatic hero, the one who thinks he knows and doesn't have the words to express it.

All these exhibitions are on the same topic: Namely, about the sense of wonder when you feel that something actually happened, something of which you know that it could never, ever be. With this I mean to describe what I might call the real aesthetics of life. Because the aesthetics of life are built around the fantasy that you wake up one morning and there is something else, something other than working and giving birth and dying and eating your sandwich and going to the toilet

and falling in love. There is something else – this is a true religion. Or rather, this is what religion used to do. It provided the meaning of life. For me, the meaning of life is to give birth to the next generation. This is, of course, on the biological level. We are not here in order to do great things. We are here in order to go on until the catastrophe will destroy the globe. But nobody can live consciously this way. If you tried, you would commit suicide tomorrow. For what would be the difference, if this is all there is to life? So everything, all the religion in the world, everything is there to provide a sense of wonder, that is, the sense that there is something else.

**F.E.:** Evolution teaches us that the meaning of life is simply to procreate – and art is the way to transcend evolution?

**D.L.:** That's the illusion, the fantasy. There are many vehicles to fight against this barren realization – if you allow this pun – that the meaning of life is procreation. One vehicle is religion, with the promise of an afterlife and the command to follow the law, etc. These are very logical vehicles because they keep civilizations together, and civilization is there in order to safeguard procreation. It comes down to biology, no matter from where you look at it. Art, at the end of the day, is there in order to safeguard the possibility to go on with biological life.

Religion was relevant at a certain time, and then it couldn't fulfill its function anymore for many reasons. With art it's the same. Art replaced religion and worked very well and we are now in a moment when it no longer does

**F.E.:** On the one hand, you say, historically, there are always symbolic forms tasked with preserving the continuity of life. These can have the name of religion, or the name of certain political ideologies, they can have the name of truth, etc., but they always exist ultimately to safeguard life. On the other hand, you are saying, there is something that isn't sufficient in these symbolic forms, something that is lacking. Is that the point where art starts, the zero condition?

**D.L.:** Yes, but that something that is lacking is there to make sure that biology will fulfill itself. Biology is not there to make you a spiritual being, spirituality is there to make you exist as a biological unit. This is a terrible thing to say and a terrible thing to have to lead a life by. But it's there – you can't avoid it. Of course, in a secular reality, in a world robbed of its other illusions, art comes and fills that space. But it's built according to the old paradigms. Because if we look at the establishment of art and you look at the establishment of religion, there is no difference: You have the temples, you have the priests, you have the mob, you have the believers. It's really amazing how symmetrical the system of art and the system of religion are. Art today is a system of belief. It expresses itself through what we call aesthetic form, but it's really a system of belief.

**F.E.:** You inscribe yourself in the tradition of Nietzsche's *Kunstreligion*, the religion of art as a way of forming the aesthetics of existence. How does that diagnosis relate back to the exhibitions that you made?

**D.L.:** In the sense that one tries to find ethical parameters in a world that is secular. Parameters that replace religious guides and reconstruct what the Greeks called ‘the good life’.

**F.E.:** If the task of art is to teach us what the good life can be in the absence of religious or political or ideological frameworks, how do you relate this to your diagnosis that art today is failed and no longer is art?

**D.L.:** The system failed. Or rather, as with the religious systems before, it doesn't fail, it is simply no longer relevant. Systems have their relevancy and then they don't have it and you go on to the next system. Religion was relevant at a certain time, and then it couldn't fulfill its function anymore for many reasons. With art it's the same. Art replaced religion

and worked very well, and we are now in a moment when it no longer does.

**F.E.:** So what you are searching to find the words for is not art but an art beyond art?

**D.L.:** Yes. Or rather, I wouldn't say searching, because I am not that curious a person. I do want to know what will be the system that will replace this moment of ever more art, this system beyond that which I have referred to. It is already there, in a sense, it is something like form in itself, yet I don't have the words to describe it.

**F.E.:** How are the exhibitions that you made experiments with or investigations into that question?

**D.L.:** With 'Heaven,' where I showed artists like Jeff Koons, Vanessa Beecroft, Sylvie Fleury, Gilbert & George, I tried to show that art today functions analogous to a religious system. Had I had enough space in the museum, I would have shown how this extends, for example, to the issue of consumerism, how consumerism actually copies these stage-settings from within the art world. There is no difference between going to a museum and going to a church and going to a shopping mall. They are all already built in the same way. Why is it that in museums today architecture is more important than what you are showing in them? Because it is the temple that is important.

'Melodrama' was explicitly about the modern world we live in since I believe that the modern expression is a melodramatic expression. Modernism in art started with the most melodramatic gestures. There is nothing

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more melodramatic than putting a black square on a canvas. If you read Malevich and what he read into or out of his 'Black Square,' you will realize this is the most melodramatic gesture conceivable. What makes it so melodramatic is the exaggeration. This is the parameter. And why do you exaggerate? Because otherwise nobody will hear you.

**F.E.:** So 'Melodrama' should have started with 'Black Square' by Malevich?

**D.L.:** Actually, for 'Melodrama' I hunted for Barnett Newman, because I thought, a color field with a zip – what is more melodramatic than this? Think about it. Think about any porn and the moment where the heroine in the porn film takes off her clothes. I know that I am on the verge of sacrilege, but from the perspective of gesture there is no difference between the two. Because it is all about the format, we go back to the word format of the spectacle. It has no other life behind, besides, beyond and before the spectacle. That's why we hold on to the system of belief. We know the danger of the pure spectacle, so we have a system of belief that seems to allow us to clearly differentiate between what is pornography and what is Barnett Newman. For without it, we would be faced with what both truly are: the form or format of the spectacle.

This belief system and the need to sustain it is, of course, the reason why I couldn't get Barnett Newman for the exhibition. It would be an act of sacrilege. No museum director and no collector agreed to give me a work and I could understand their point. I thought it's very sad that they didn't see it my way. But, of course, I was being an iconoclast from their perspective. Basically, melodrama is the obsession with the surface, which is conveyed by exaggeration.

**F.E.:** Melodrama is normally not associated with the surface but with the belief that there is something behind the surface.

**D.L.:** Yes, but that there is something behind the surface is being conveyed through exaggerated gestures; otherwise it's not there. This is what makes it melodrama. Everything is coming to a summit, an exaggeration; otherwise it's not there. In melodrama, there is no gray area. You have the good and you have the villain; everybody is cast in their iconic roles. This is what makes it analogous

to a religious system because the roles we play in our lives are defined by this melodramatic system and they are crystal clear.

**F.E.:** How about 'The New Hebrews'?

**D.L.:** It's about a real phantasmagoric project, that is, about the Zionist project. The Zionist project starts with Theodor Herzl, who actually wrote a work of science fiction, *Altneuland*. When you read *Altneuland*, it's like reading Swift without the self-referential ironic component of Swift. The science fiction author Herzl writes about a new Jewish state. The tragedy is that it happened. I say tragedy because it is science fiction – and science fiction is supposed to stay in the future! But, on the other hand, I could just as well say it would have been a tragedy had it not happened. But in the passage to reality there is a tragedy in the making, because if you turn science fiction into life, you are doomed to end up with horrible consequences, and that's what happened to us.

**F.E.:** Is that an aesthetic position? I am reminded of Søren Kierkegaard's asthete in *Either/Or* saying: 'Marry him you will regret it, don't marry him you will regret it. Marry or don't marry you will regret it both.'

**D.L.:** Yes. Absolutely.

**F.E.:** Is that the position from which you look at your projects like 'Heaven,' 'Melodrama' or 'The New Hebrews'?

**D.L.:** Yes. But this is a position vis-à-vis an exhibition. Being an Israeli, I am a person torn apart because I know the costs of this Zionist project and I also know, as an Israeli and Jew, that I don't know how to eliminate these costs. That means that I am absolutely aware that the legitimacy of my being Israeli has a cost and somebody pays the price. And it's a high price. But being Israeli, how can I change this fundamentally? What can I do about it? I am aware of the price and that I don't know what to do about it. It's a sort of obscenity that I have to live with.

**F.E.:** Is that related to the larger point you are making about art? Is that an obscenity that all art has to live with?

**D.L.:** Yes.

**F.E.:** In what way?

**D.L.:** In the way that it puts itself in a certain aesthetic place, which it interprets as a moral place. And thus it is neither.

Part III:

### Raffi Lavie

His centrality in Israel vs. his being unknown abroad; his modernism vs. his Jewish heritage; and artists' authenticity vs. the need to be part of the West

**FELIX ENSSLIN:** Let's talk about Raffi Lavie. For the first time in your professional life, you did not select the artist yourself, but were selected as curator by the same committee that chose Lavie to represent Israel in Venice.

**DOREET LEVITTE-HARTEN:** Since I don't take being a curator terribly seriously, the fact that I did not get to employ the power that is supposed to be the curator's most sacred duty – namely, choosing artists – doesn't bother me very much. My question was, rather, what do I do with the material? There is Raffi Lavie and there is me and now we have to meet. You must understand that Raffi always had a group of people around him and he was part of the group that Sarah Breitberg-Semel named the 'Want of Matter' group. The group, in a way, wasn't even Israeli, it was Tel Avivian in essence. They all related to 'poor' materials, and did this from a very knowledgeable and sophisticated place. I, on the other hand, appreciated him and knew what he was doing, but there was no close personal relation. My guess is this is why the choice fell on me for Venice. The idea seemed to have been that I might make him understandable to the goyim, to the rest of the world. This idea made me smile, but voilà this is where we started.

**F.E.:** For decades Raffi Lavie was the central reference point of Israeli art. His work seems to combine, in a hybrid or eclectic way, the methods of high modernism with a postmodern attitude and with a sensibility that for me – as somebody looking from the outside in – has a strong Israeli sense. As a sense of time, of place, as a reflection on being here, being both here in 'Palestine' but also being here in 'Israel.' I use those two terms as both geographic and political and historical entities, which overlap, become fuzzy, turn into each other, like words, newspaper scraps, paint, wood overlap and become fuzzy and turn into each other in Lavie's work. One question one could thus ask with Raffi Lavie is: Does Israeli art belong to the West or

the East? Can Lavie's work be viewed as an attempt to answer that question or, maybe more accurately, to keep asking that question? He seems to do so in a material way, by which I mean he started from the very fact that he was Israeli. He starts with Israel, with being Israeli, yet even though he starts with that fact he keeps questioning it in his work. He questions it both as an artist in relation to the international developments of Expressionism, Arte Povera, the issues of painterly gesture, of formalism and different types of modernist schools of painting, and he seems to question it also as a social or political fact. It has been said the 'sabrafication' of Israeli art started with him. In that narrative, after a period of struggling with various elements from a European heritage, something particular emerges in Israeli art.

**D.L.:** In effect, the interesting thing about Raffi Lavie is the enormous discrepancy between him being so central here and him not being at all known abroad. I think that this was the reason why people argued, sometimes, that this was an unfortunate choice for the Biennale on the account that he is already dead. Believing that the Biennale is a place to discover young fresh artists, the argument was he takes the place away from somebody who is still a living artist. I think what lay behind all this was fear emanating from the perception that he wasn't understood abroad. But what was not being understood? What they meant actually was his being authentic to this place. What makes him an Israeli, what makes him unique to this place? Another aspect: He really is what I call the 'good Samaritan.' With this I mean that he is the guardian of the values that we want to see when we look in the mirror and all these values are today being totally corrupted. So looking at Raffi Lavie is like looking in this wishful mirror. It's a nostalgic look. It's a look at what we are supposed to be and what we are not. And it's not something that he consciously did or understood; it's what he was. But when you look at his work, it confirms the values that we want to have



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and that we don't have anymore and that's why there was this terrible fear – because you don't know whether this will be understood or not.

Regarding his lack of international presence, I must say he was also a bit of an aristocrat; he wasn't the type to run after curators. You know when curators come see a show everybody around performs a little dance for them. He wasn't that type. This was a deadly combination. First, he hadn't done anything to be known abroad and, second, Israelis were afraid he wouldn't be understood by those that represent judgment within the contemporary art world.

When you look at the works of Raffi Lavie, when you look at these cripples, you look at the fact that the picture doesn't focus in any sense, doesn't really exist anymore. Things are happening in the margins; it is art in which there is, in a way, something terribly disturbed. Of course, this disturbance relates to a lot of art that was done abroad at the same time. But when it's done here, in Israel, it has another taste. It is very difficult to explain why he captures or is informed by the spirit of this place, even all the way to the color that he uses. Even the words, which are a formidable presence in much of his art, relate to this. He would often take a reproduction and scribble on it with a pen, like, say something about Western art.

If greatness stems from the fact that you know from where you work, then he was great because he understood exactly that he was working from the periphery and he knew exactly what this means. He understood the periphery in its double role. The periphery is a geographical place because in the Israel of his time people didn't go abroad. When you went abroad it was a big deal, so you got all your knowledge through reproductions, through books, through stories of others. It is impressive that he understood the geographical peripherality. Even though he never talked about it, I do think he understood it, because it's there in his art. He understood the other notion of periphery as well – namely, of being an Israeli and a Jew. This meant he was with one leg in Western art, because his family came from Germany and, on the other side, he also came from Judaism, which in this context means from

its scopophobic tradition. It's like in quantum theory: He was like an electron that can be conceptualized both as a wave and as a particle but it can never be observed as both at the same time. It's impossible to nail down both elements at the same time, being part of the West and being part of Judaism. Either you pinpoint him or you see him moving.

**F.E.:** With both, you mean coming from a German, Middle European heritage, a classicist heritage, a modernist heritage and, on the other hand, coming from a heritage that you call scopophobic, where scopophobia refers to the injunction against images in Jewish religion?

**D.L.:** Yes. Most of Lavie's knowledge actually came from reproductions. He didn't really travel. But his understanding of the periphery and its double role is what makes Raffi Lavie a good artist that you can relate to seriously. In spite of the fact that what you actually get to see is work very conscious of the international development of art, so that in a sense it could be located anywhere. This prior knowledge of his puts the work on another level. It's another sediment that allows you to understand it. There is something very ethical about the way he functioned, and I do believe he carried these ethics that we are missing so much. And this is what makes him relevant for me; otherwise there is no relevance in art. But today, when we live in Israel in a system that is totally corrupted and you see what was supposed to be a dream being broken every day, there is a sort of deep breath you take when you look at him. You say, maybe it will come back; maybe these ethics will come back.

**F.E.:** So this is why you call him the 'good Samaritan'?

**D.L.:** He still holds a light, something like a decency in being here, in being Israeli, and living 40 kilometers from the Gaza Strip where all human rights are being trampled in the worst way possible, while we live in Tel Aviv and have coffee.

**F.E.:** So how does that translate then into the choice of Raffi Lavie? Is the intent to show the good face of Israel to the world?

**D.L.:** I don't think it went so far. I think it was a sort of opportunity, because he is dead. Because, interestingly, they didn't choose him during his lifetime. They were very careful

to keep him as a secret here in Israel, because they were afraid he wouldn't be understood, because of the two peripheries. I think it was that we had the wish to be normal, to be like everybody else outside of our border – we wanted to be like the Europeans. But we are not normal; we are an abnormal construct. This was one side. And then, in addition, to be an Israeli artist – which meant most of the time to be a Jewish artist – entails chasing after something absurd, because you come from a scopophobic religion and are becoming a visual artist. So that's also not what is the normal condition of modern art. I assume 90 percent of artists won't agree with what I just said, but this is the way I see it.

**F.E.:** But isn't that true of Syrian artist, too, i.e., of Islamic artists as well?

**D.L.:** Who says it's not? Isn't this part of the tragedy? All of us aspire to do what's best, but nobody tries to relax a moment and say, we live in a great place, we live in a big place, we live in the Middle East. It's a place that's a conjunction, and we should ask ourselves, what does this place really produce, what can it produce? Nobody speaks about this, really, because we aspire to ways of expression that come from some place else. But not every Syrian artist needs do a video exactly like a Brazilian artist. There is something totally fake about this, fake and screwed up about an art system that makes an artist do something that, on its own terms, in its own place, is okay, is acceptable. But if its roots are totally somewhere else, then what? And there really is no interest to ask the question this way. Not by Israelis and not by Palestinians and not by Syrians and not by anyone from Abu Dhabi. No one wants to give real thought to what does it mean to make art here and to ask this question from the perspective of art? First of all, is this art something that they, the artists, have to make? Is it something relevant? Are there other ways of expression? We are being expressed by Western ideas, but we are not the best or first within this tradition. So there is a gap where nothing is being done and everybody behaves as though this was the normal way. So, from one side, you do videos and form artist groups about colonialism and, from another side, you are the one who is chasing this absurd dream of the West all the time.



Part IV:

East, West and Middle East

On citing each other, the constant search for depth, Julia Roberts' eyes and the death of art

**FELIX ENSSLIN:** Is there a specific Middle Eastern art?

**DOREET LEVITTE-HARTEN:** Maybe art is not the right term here.

**F.E.:** What would be the right term?

**D.L.:** If I only knew. But artists here – in the Middle East in general, not just in Israel – work according to Western parameters. You might say that art can work only according to this parameter, that it stems from the fact that religiosity and art produced this tradition together. But if everyone works like Christian artists, what does that mean? Is there no difference between Christianity and Judaism?

There are two, three completely different traditions and they are being totally equated? That means that no differences exist. We call that global. Global is the legitimacy to enact art and the art world in that way and to work that way. But does calling it global cover the issue? It's so seemingly self-evident. It's self-evident that when someone makes video art they work like Sue de Beer or someone other within that framework. What if we ask, is this legitimate? Aren't we avoiding an issue that is totally relevant but that we don't know how to tackle? **F.E.:** We obviously live at a certain point in history. Fifty years after imperialism and

colonialism, within something like post-colonialism. We live within 400 to 500 years of philosophical modernity; we live within the history of capitalism. All of those have a certain relationship to Europe and to the West. The West also has a relationship to art as the birthplace of a certain subjectivity tied to Christianity, tied to Christian art, which in turn became secularized and has a paradigmatic status for what it means to be an artist. That secularized subjectivity, if this is the right term, has a place within the history of the West and within Christianity. From this perspective, it is unavoidable that, since the language of art is precisely this language, whoever joins that will inevitably wind up dealing with the questions of matter, of form, of subjectivity that were specifically developed out of the West. Yet another position would be that in that narrative itself is an inherent colonialism, imperialism, an inherent violence

toward any particularity that is specific to different cultures in the world, be they Chinese or Middle Eastern. One question might then be, how do we unearth that particularity, how do we unearth that specificity or give voice to it, room, recognition? Isn't that a false dichotomy? To mark this, one could say Raffi Lavie was in a place in which he knew both were true. He dialogued with modern tradition. But he was also here, in the sense that in his style, in his gesture, in his use of color, as you pointed out, one can formally and materially describe his work as engaged in a particularity or specificity, in being Israeli, being Middle Eastern, etc. So isn't that a false dichotomy to say there is the West and then there is particularity?

**D.L.:** You are absolutely right. But that means that being an Israeli artist, or Palestinian, or any artist who comes from outside Western culture, will be second-best or coming late to the party. And, in that sense, you are always faking something; you're not being authentic. You are doing very well in something that was decided for you.

**F.E.:** But aren't there decades of work about the critique of the notion of authenticity? Isn't much of what has been termed postmodernism, rightly or wrongly, precisely an acknowledgment that in the West itself there, too, is no authentic Western art? There are only strategies, there are relationships to history and its artifacts, there is performativity, there is self-referentiality of the art system. All of which, of course, doesn't leave much room for an authentic expression, either. Or rather, authenticity exists, because a certain desire exists, but it is empty. It is just dealing with forms and with materials that have been handed down and you deal with them in a specific way, in a specific relationship to the development of technology, the 'means of production,' of social organization in ways or with specific strategies, which are different for each artist. With regard to the question of the relationship of non-Western art to the West, I am reminded of that '90s joke by the famous model Cindy Crawford, who once quipped, 'Even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford.'

**D.L.:** You are absolutely right and that's what makes artists outside the West a legitimate phenomenon. Because today, in the melodramatic space that we live in, being

authentic is being able to cite the other. For example, when I say, 'I love you,' I will already have heard it a hundred times – the same day, on television or in a song or I have read it in a book. To put it in even stronger terms, citing what was said is my only possibility to be authentic. And that's what gives all these artists from Burma to Malaysia legitimacy. Because I cite and because citation has become the only original way to express ourselves in a melodramatic cosmos. So this is how all these artists avoid being a joke. But, you see, we all also want to be real. The wish to be authentic is still there, we are not satisfied with this obsession with surface because we are conditioned to believe that the surface is a bad thing. We are conditioned to believe that depth is the real stuff. There is this desire.

**F.E.:** One could say that's precisely the place of art: to again and again criticize this assumption that there can be an authentic place, name, experience, whatever. One could say Hollywood, on the contrary, functions exactly by supporting that assumption. You get a close-up of the star in a romantic comedy, you see the eyes and you are supposed to imagine that behind those eyes of Julia Roberts there is interiority, there is the deep subjectivity you identify with. One might argue that art is called upon to show this is a fantasy. That, in fact, we are clinging to material surfaces.

**D.L.:** If it were we wouldn't have these

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mountains of theory and catalogues. What are all these catalogues? It's legitimating the depth that we insist upon when we look at a picture. We are never satisfied to look at a work of art and see nothing behind it. We are sure that the meaning of art is somewhere that we don't see; it's like at an archaeological site, we have to dig and to find out. What is it that we look at all the time when we look at art? We are never satisfied with what we see, we are sure that beyond the eyes of Julia Roberts there are depths and they are what is important and this is also the artist's thing today.

**F.E.:** So you are saying that if art is claiming for itself a place to be critical of that logic of identification, it is actually not true?

**D.L.:** No, because it's the statement that this is what art is supposedly doing. In a sense, the eyes of Julia Roberts are much more sincere. There is a consensus that beyond Julia Roberts' eyes her heart bleeds, but the illusion is very short-term. You go out of the film and you know it's not true. Art is not in this space yet. In art, you have the illusion that it goes on and on and on and on. You know, art still lies to itself in this sense. Art is not there yet.

**F.E.:** But isn't the work of Raffi Lavie a good example of his incessant labor to escape the logic of identification? Neither in the West nor in the East, neither modern nor postmodern, neither given to a certain feeding machine of international fame nor simply a particularity in Israel?

**D.L.:** I remember once somebody asked Lavie, 'What is behind this painting?' And he said, 'The wall.' I thought this was beautiful because that means he understood the work to be exactly what it is: This is there. There is a present and beyond this present is nothing else.

**F.E.:** That's classic modernism.

**D.L.:** Yes.

**F.E.:** As in, what is a painting? It's a two-dimensional surface with color, with paint, with pigment. That's a modernist statement. It's precisely saying, this painting functions not like the eyes of Julia Roberts, because behind the eyes of Julia Roberts is supposed to be an infinite subjectivity.

**D.L.:** But only for the short term, and this short term is not important, because when an illusion is short-term, you know when it ends so you come back to reality. If in art you say,

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it's only this, the work, and behind it is only the wall, then I ask, why only? Why is it not enough – that is the question. Because it was enough for generations of people who looked at art. With modernity it became not enough. Modernity is the vehicle for saying something is not enough. Art is not enough.

**F.E.:** Why not say the opposite is true? For generations or for millennia it was clear that art stood with and for something else: for the cosmological order, or for the God-created world or for the sublime order of power on earth.

**D.L.:** And that's exactly why it was enough; and why the reference was enough to limit it.

**F.E.:** But it was enough because it was embedded in a whole universe. And with modernity and modernism, that no longer is enough because the universe in which it finds itself no longer is 'one'; it's no longer whole, it's no longer something in which everything – including art which represents this – has its place. So that is what modernism is, that the painting no longer becomes an element in a whole cosmos, in a whole system, it becomes only itself, it becomes a two-dimensional surface with paint.

**D.L.:** I am trying to find the words.

Look, when in the past a picture stood for something else that's how it also became falsified at the same time – because there was a consensus that the thing in the picture is not in the picture, the picture represents it. Now we live in a cosmos where we say the work is not enough, yet it doesn't represent anything anymore. But if this were truly the direction in which we want to go, how do you explain all these mountains of explanation about it? Because there is a discrepancy, if, in fact, we are satisfied that the picture is what it is.

**F.E.:** But we are not satisfied. Didn't you speak of this yourself just a minute ago? We have a desire for it to represent something. The logic of the spectacle is to represent oneself, to find a place in the world, to be acknowledged within given institutional or rather phantasmagoric spaces.

**D.L.:** But the true logic of the spectacle is to represent nothing. That's how it gets its power. Or, say, the logic of the spectacle is that it represents representation as such. It doesn't go beyond that; that is its power because it's an immediacy of the present with

no implications. That it has no implications makes it both: It's a thing of the world, but at the same time it has a total independence. And this is what we don't want art to be. We want art to implicate something beyond what it is. We always want the work of art to tell us something that is not there. We are simply not happy with what's there. Our attitude is 'there must be a big secret that we still have to find.' And I say this secret doesn't exist. This secret is not relevant and doesn't exist.

**F.E.:** Is there a dialectic involved in this? Because, on the one hand, modernism has always been about function over form, as with the Bauhaus, or about form as content, as with 'Black Square,' etc. Wasn't that precisely saying there is no secret? On the other hand, as you pointed out, Malevich and many others wrote mountains of texts, mystical texts, theoretical texts, crazy texts to again invest the lack of secret with a secret. So there is a dialectic involved here.

**D.L.:** Yes, absolutely, and the same dialectic still is involved today. But the project failed. It's a marvelous project – but it has failed. And that's why we are looking for other ways. There is an enormous failure, and that's why the art world is as it is today. There is something pathetic about reveling in a project that failed. One is still in it, and it's a pathetic place to be.

**F.E.:** And it failed, if I understand you correctly, because we cannot escape the desire for representation?

**D.L.:** Exactly. I think so but – maybe – who knows? I don't have the words to really describe it.

**F.E.:** This makes me think of the Lacanian topos of being between two deaths – that we need to own the fact that we are the walking dead.

**D.L.:** Yes, but one doesn't admit to one's failure so easily. But I am still a utopian, you see, because I think there is a third space, there is something else going on, but it doesn't have a name yet. It needs a new understanding of what a person is, it needs a new language.

**F.E.:** In the last ten years, there were tons of exhibitions with the words 'ghost,' 'zombie,' 'death' in them. Just recently, we went in Tel Aviv to the opening of an exhibition called 'Ghost'; I myself curated a show called 'Between Two Deaths.' So, in a certain sense, one might say the art world has acknowledged

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in great numbers exactly your diagnosis. Spectrality, the ghost, the apparition, between two deaths, the zombie and so on – all acknowledge a ghost you can neither just get rid of nor bring back to life.

As a final question to this discussion and to bring together your general diagnosis with your latest work: Where does all of this place an artist like Raffi Lavie? Is he, from this perspective, quaint and old-fashioned? Is he from the old days of glory when we were still alive and not ghosts?

**D.L.:** We were always ghosts.

**F.E.:** For you, as a curator, your task is to show us that Raffi Lavie already was a ghost that speaks to us today on equal footing, eye to eye?

**D.L.:** It's difficult to answer. Raffi Lavie is about something that is gone.

**F.E.:** So is the ghost.

**D.L.:** So is the ghost, exactly. That's why I said we are in the land of the zombie or art is in the valley of death. That's why my 'curatorship,' as you call it, is a kind of Edgar Allan Poe-ism, a nostalgic longing. Maybe the good thing is to think we are on a threshold, that these things are gone and now we are moving into a new era; only it hasn't quite begun yet and that's why we are in the valley of death. But this situation is what also constructs culture in general. Lavie belongs there; his work is a sediment in a cultural development.

**F.E.:** So what is his place in that discourse, the place of the dead artist?

**D.L.:** That he builds a future. You don't have a future without dead bodies thrown around you. I really don't know how to answer your question. You are actually asking what is the relevance of showing him. This is the relevance of showing: We are paralyzed.

**F.E.:** Is there, from this perspective, a new look at Raffi Lavie's work?

**D.L.:** Yes. Because if you know all these things and you see through this mirror, then it makes you understand where you are now. It is another sediment in understanding the impossibility of looking at something. By looking at Raffi Lavie I understand that I can't look anymore. By looking at him, by trying to understand what he wanted to do, I understand that this desire is a work of art by itself and that it's a construct by itself – and that it's pathetic by itself. And that is its beauty. →



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