

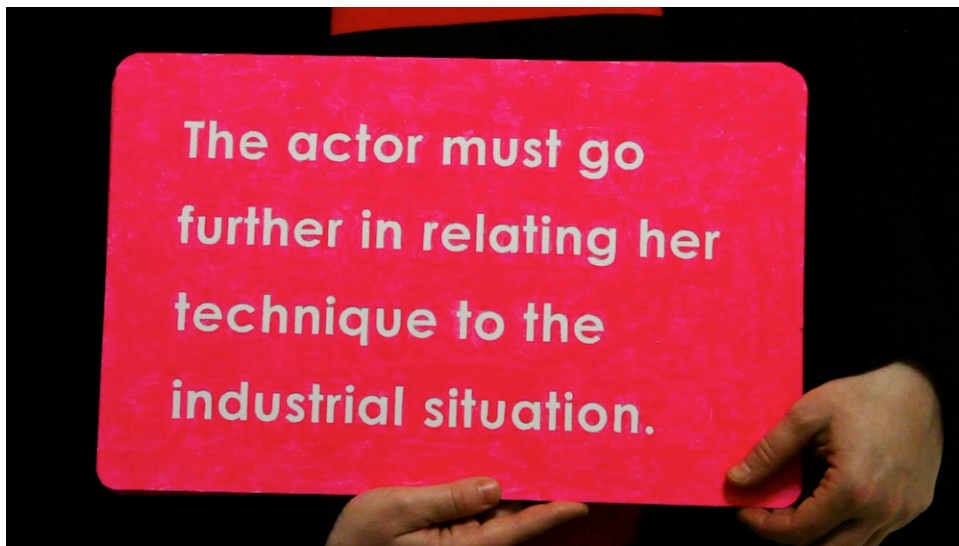
# BOMB — Artists in Conversation

June 2, 2014

Ohad Meromi

by Naomi Lev

*Visions of utopia, smoking cigarettes, acting methods, and other disparate things that preoccupy this artist.*



*Worker! Smoker! Actor!*, 2012. Still from single-channel video, twenty-one minutes.

As part of an ongoing series hosted by Independent Curators International, I invite artists to discuss their work in an intimate environment. These talks are a continuation of a larger series of conversations and panels I've been initiating with artists from around the globe. Here, in NYC, the talks focus on Israeli art and artists. These particular talks aim to explore the artists' work in relation to place and time. While considering their origins and background, these artists react and examine possibilities of reshaping political, religious, and social structures. The series of articles begins with the study of Ohad Meromi's practice and will continue by revisiting Dana Levy and Tamar Ettun's works, as well as proposing a theoretical curatorial vision of the artists' works as a whole.

To read this interview online, visit <http://bit.ly/1jhenwE>

On the occasion of Meromi's participation in the exhibition *Work in Progress: Considering Utopia* at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, we arranged a conversation which featured his recent video *Worker! Smoker! Actor!* (2012), screened for the first time in New York. The talk took place at the ICI Hub on December 5, 2013 and was an attempt to dig deep into Meromi's influences, methodology, and the ideas behind his sculptural, video, installation, and performative works. The recent video as well as other pieces we discussed enabled us to reflect on the notions of art and labor. We started by watching the twenty-minute film with the audience.



Ohad Meromi and Naomi Lev in Conversation At Independent Curators International, New York. Photo courtesy of ICI.

**Naomi Lev** Let's begin with where you're from.

**Ohad Meromi** I'm from Israel. I was born in 1967 in Kibbutz Mizra, which is in the north of the country. I only spent my first two years there but have been to some extent pigeonholed as the "artist from the kibbutz" after moving to the United States; maybe because this is how it works here with art-world identities. I grew up in the suburbs of Tel Aviv so in a funny way, although I didn't live in a kibbutz, I spent a lot of time there visiting my grandparents and going back and forth between it and an Americanized suburb. Having these two ways of life to compare, while not going through the backward education system of the kibbutz, I began to idealize the lifestyle and develop more of an outsider's perspective. The kibbutz seemed to me more perfect than it did for many of my cousins who lived there. All they wanted was to get as far away as they could from that place.

**NL** The Israeli kibbutz—for those who don't know—started as a socialist ideology in Israel in the form of communal living in order to establish the country and to self-sustain. In the past ten or twenty years, most of the kibbutzim have been privatized, therefore not many of them remain in their original structure and functions.

**OM** As my artistic practice took shape I've been dealing constantly with the idealism of the kibbutz, and its aesthetic as part of the larger issues of Zionism and modernity in general. I started making art by creating relatively large-scale installations and architectural environments. My father is an architect and, in a way, I was working with a misunderstanding of what architecture is, mixed with admiration and yearning for a "father figure" architect.

**NL** How did you perceive architecture at that time?

**OM** Originally I was jealous of the relationship architects have with the world, which is this sort of future tense engagement with it, problem solving it, or constantly building models for its improvement. Gradually I became disillusioned with this idea of architecture and noticed that in most cases it actually fills an oppressive role.

**NL** And a few of your earlier works deal specifically with overpowering architecture.

**OM** I started by building somewhat hopeful metaphysical models. I was fascinated with the idea of architectural programming as a tool. I was intrigued with the way an architect designates a place for a certain function and another place for a different one. This division of space and hierarchies between spaces means that life is enabled to happen and you prescribe what will happen—this room is a room for people to be sitting and talking, while another room has tables and chairs and a different type of activity happens; this is for a school, this is for a bathroom—it means that different structures and objects are needed for different spaces. I was interested in how to divide a space and come up with a genius way to rearrange space with the aim of generating some sort of a sublime machine. I thought of folding a space into itself, as if freeing oneself from one dimension into another, a mixture of inside and outside. I was curious about the question of what is the programmatic function of the white cube, or what it could be. What does it invite? And then as my idealization developed these structures gradually manifested into clinics and border crossing facilities, which raise other aspects of architecture.

**NL** Should a space serve a function? Do spaces have to serve a function, or are there other motives?

**OM** I'm thinking of the origins of a structure: What is the function of a space? The word "space" is very flexible. I find myself using this word again and again but each time meaning something else—which means there might be room in there, potential.

**NL** What is the root of your interest in modernism and Constructivism?

**OM** I noticed that in search of models for action I keep going back to a very certain moment in time which I originally thought was an irrelevant one, at least when I was an undergrad. In the 1990s these eras seemed like a dead zone, an evil one. But I was looking at the modern moment and kept going back to the 1930s. When I was drawing, I drew figures from that era. I'm fascinated by this moment and the sense that the world is a place that could be changed

according to big ideas. I was well aware of some of the consequences of this hubris but was still fascinated by the rare sense of agency. I was referring to the modernist architect and his relationship with the world and our place in it as a malleable space that we can contemplate. Creating and rearranging space is something that I am missing—and am jealous of—but I also grew up being critical of it: I know the outcomes of all these lines of thought from colonialism to a long list of regimes which are blind to so many issues and which I have no calling to return to. I am trying to figure out this sense of agency, this position of “we can create the world.”

**NL** Can we use the word “utopia” at this point?

**OM** There is something derogatory associated with the use of the word utopia. You accuse something of being utopian. Recently I've grown more comfortable with using this term and I think it's important to maintain a utopian horizon. It's not as if I want to implement or make the world according to a dogmatic ideal, but lacking a utopian horizon is a big problem in our time.



*Worker! Smoker! Actor!*, 2012. Still from single-channel video, twenty-one minutes.

**NL** In *Worker! Smoker! Actor!* (2012), you use excerpts from Vsevolod Meyerhold's acting system, Biomechanics. Can you talk about that a little bit and how this technique came to play in this specific film?

**OM** I was researching Russian Constructivism and the place that art took during the revolution, investigating questions of commitment like how art serves social change. I got to Meyerhold, the Russian Constructivist director, through the work of Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova. They did costumes and set designs for him, and I stumbled upon Biomechanics, a text that is somewhere between a manifesto and an actors' training method that he developed. The principal behind it was for the actors to learn from the workers about how to use their bodies, leading to a set of movement exercises.

**NL** What I understood about his technique is that these are body-mind exercises. I believe there's a correlation between the two: the body moves in a particular manner in order for the mind to function in a certain way.

**OM** Yes, and the funny thing is that if you look at biomechanical exercises they are really not like anything you imagined. He actually borrows from *commedia dell'arte*. But in terms of what he says he is doing, he is sending his actors to the factory to look at how workers spend their day on the assembly line. He is influenced by Taylorism and the Fordist assembly line. He mentions that looking at a worker while he or she is working throughout the day is a way to understand how his or her body is best used. The actors have to figure out how to move. This idea of the actor going to the factory and the cross between the actor and worker (basically regarding the worker as an actor) and perceiving work as a performative state fascinates me. These Marxist terms send us away from the marketplace and into the site of production where, under capitalism, the fruits of the collaboration between people through technologies are being exploited. This is what the working class is called to reclaim. But in even more basic terms it is the performative role of the worker—the idea of the working class as the actor on the world's stage, as the agent of change—that is the part of this moment's DNA that I'm interested in.

**NL** Let's talk a little bit about your use of materials because this does relate to what you are talking about. For your choice of materials and reference to craft, for example, what materials do you use and what is the agenda behind this use? They're kind of temporary materials or draft materials like Styrofoam and unfinished plywood.

**OM** "Draft materials" would be a good description. I try and think about it in terms of model making, even when I'm pushing these models in scale. I'm also trying to postpone getting to a finished state. I'm trying to keep the work in the workplace, where things are still to be worked on.

**NL** And sewing?

**OM** If you're thinking about the body and bodies moving through spaces and of my role as some sort of passive-aggressive director who builds up spaces that are to invite movement, then sewing costumes just makes a lot of sense. There's another aspect of craft which I'm drawn to, which has to do with the knowledge of creating things yourself, DIY. I mean, when you look at your phone, you have no idea how to open it, let alone make it!

**NL** All of these materials also appear in this video: the little dolls, the television, the buildings or models...I think you said you were working on this video on and off for three years?

**OM** Way too much time.

**NL** I have to say that after watching this movie four times I started smoking! Not religiously but I sneaked a few cigarettes, I have to admit, It's kind of addictive.

**OM** Good job!

**NL** Let's talk about smoking.



*American Spirit*, 2011. Still from single-channel video, four minutes.

**OM** Well I don't know what to say about smoking. I'm an addict. I'm obviously obsessed with it.

**NL** Why *American Spirit*? Why smoke? What does that mean to you? Where does the idea of smoke in your work come from? Actually I wanted to ask how did you even make these hand crafted assembly line machines that create American Spirit cigarettes and packages that appear in the video?

**OM** These are stop motions, very simple tabletop contraptions; they're made in the wood shop. They're a lot of work but since they are looped... Audience member: Do the machines actually work?

**NL** There's an invisible hand that pushes them... Audience member: But they don't work consecutively, this is stop motion?

**OM** They've got no engines. This relationship, with the film and the loop of manufacturing is alluding to social realist films that oftentimes begin with a mechanical ballet, it is a fascination with mechanized production. I wanted this sequence to start the film, and then to end it with a sequence of people echoing these machine exercises. So it is related to the man-machine fantasy/nightmare, if that answers your question.

**NL** This is not the only film you've done about smoking or about American Spirit and also in some of your sculptures there is the American Spirit symbol, which I find interesting in its relation to consumerism. I'm not sure how you interpret the American spirit but it has to do with that on some level.

**OM** I don't have one big answer to what it's doing there beyond me being addicted, or that I turn to American Spirits because I want to be a hipster and that's what a hipster would smoke. So here I am, trying to design spaces that enable something, creating environments for people to collaborate, but coming from an architectural angle, hence not really knowing

how to deal with real time, and how to direct and instruct people in these spaces. The American Spirit pack was on my desk when I was in my studio, and smoking presented itself as a default action: “What do you do on the stage? You smoke!” It became my placeholder for action. Smoking is sort of an in-between event which takes care of time, and takes care of an action. It was almost too perfect to rediscover the primitivist figure on the pack, to mark a line between production and consumption at the core. I’ve used primitivist elements as a sort of an underbelly for such pseudo rational systems, so it made perfect sense. Smoking has to do with time, which the film is obsessed with. I was reading through Marx’s *Kapital* while working, and there’s all this breakdown of time: Who owns what portion of who’s time? When do you work and when do you rest? There are sub-divisions and cultivations of “now it’s my time, now it’s your time” and smoking exists in this weird way as control of one’s time. It’s a break, yet an action.

**NL** It’s the suspension of time. I think you mentioned that, and also the idea that it has to do with doing something but not doing anything and also with taking a step back and reflecting. So, let’s talk about labor and rest because that obviously comes up in the work. You basically talk about these ideas in a utopian world, for example, if you were creative then the difference between work and rest would not exist; work and rest would probably be the same because we’re doing something fulfilling?

**OM** Well that’s what Meyerhold said in a 1920s manifesto—and I don’t think I want to claim anything like that right now—but, I’m assuming that there’s something about the ownership of time. Especially now, many people in this part of the world are freelancers or work on their own. When is “your time” then? It’s a big issue. What happens to your psyche with relationship to technology and time?

**NL** Your conclusion in the film was: “the very craft of the actor in an industrial society will be regarded as a means of production.” Do you feel that art is a means of production nowadays?

**OM** If I have a vision of utopia that has to do with working together, it also has to do with acting or performing, owning the performance, or realizing that you are performing and assuming some sort of agency through this realization. I don’t know. I don’t have a theory and it doesn’t make sense but I’m looking at this moment for potential directions. When I’m bringing in these placards that are taken from Meyerhold’s manifesto (I do take some liberty in the translation), it’s first and foremost putting these concerns and hopes on the table, gathering people to speak about it, and stating: “this is interesting, we’re not there. How can we go toward something similar? Do we even want to? What are the problems with it?” You know, I let people do these assembly lines and exercises, which are beautiful but quite oppressive too. The participants, of course, being controlled and all, are participating by free will—it’s not about their livelihood, it’s about their curiosity.

**NL** Some of the excerpts from *Rehearsal Sculpture* (2010), which took place in Art In General, NYC, are part of that.

**OM** Some of the material came from Art In General, which is where I made much of this film. The setup is an architectural idea: I wanted to transform the space into a rehearsal room that

would function as an extension of my studio. There I try to collaborate with people and bring them into my process and into my unfinished work. I brought a bunch of open-ended storyboards, ideas, and some questions and I tried to use the place as a process space.

**NL** So you basically had workshops there?

**OM** The main space was left pretty much empty and everything in it was moveable. It could be viewed as an installation but people could also sign up for the workshops, which took place every Tuesday evening. We closed the doors and the visitors, rather than observe, could participate. I was there to explain and contextualize. As I said, I don't come from working with people; I work with models in the studio. In the space we would try something out, picking from a list of different prompts. For example, I made a sculptural element called "the instructor" in the hope that it would operate as a dance generator, or that a dancer could use it. My friend Anna Craycroft, who is a visual artist dealing with education, came up with an exercise for engaging large groups. She actually continued developing it later on in a different context.



Ohad Meromi and Anna Craycroft in collaboration as part of Meromi's *Rehearsal Sculpture*, 2011.

**NL** How were the instructions communicated? What was your role as an instructor?

**OM** I had this makeshift drum made out of an MSG container placed in the center of the space. It turned out to be very useful. Basically I was the host in my extended studio. So I was, for better or worse, very present. My tone, words, body. There was a second iteration of *Rehearsal Sculpture*, which happened in PICA in Portland, a year later, and since I couldn't be there the whole time, I asked a local choreographer, Tahni Holt, and her troupe to use it as their rehearsal space, and it was open to the public at certain times within her parameters which were very different. In a way it clarified the separate roles of the installation and the hosts as enablers.

**NL** There is also a practice or rehearsal happening in your installation at the Jewish Museum in San Francisco.

**OM** When I think about participation I worry about its implications. There's nothing worse than bad participation...I never want to go too far or not set it up properly. I'm horrified of that moment when the guy walks off the stage and drags you to participate. There is a lot that is lost by various kinds of participation or interaction—you lose this very thing that happens when you sit still and read a book, investing yourself in it, filling it with your own ideas. But since I'm interested in the notion of working together, in the ensemble, I'm very cautious in defining the terms and with the way this participatory environment is created. One of the key elements is staying away from performance and eliminating the audience. I'm interested in the stage but I'm not interested in the spectacle. I'm interested in investing in “positive” spaces and/or other terms such as “synergy” and “cooperation,” and all of these horrible, new age—type of words. While I am disillusioned with architecture per se, my role is of an enabler and a host. If I am asking people to do ridiculous things then it's my duty to be the one who is most ridiculous. My presence is important and beyond that my role is to apologize, explain, and, to a certain extent, control.

**NL** So is the guidance that the participants receive strictly operational? Functional? Do they respond to “do this, do that,” or do you all discuss further meanings before, after, and/or during the activity? Do they respond? What is their take on it? If you are talking about utopian societies and collaborations, I'm kind of curious to know what their role is—not only physically but mentally. And what is a successful event in a production assembly line?

**OM** I don't know. One of the exercises was inspired from Augusto Boal's book *Stage Exercises for Actors and Non-Actors*. I created my own version, *Stage Exercises for Smokers and Non-Smokers*. In this exercise, Boal has people pass a shoe from one to the other. You stand in a circle, each person taking off one shoe and passing it on. You receive a shoe here and you pass it there. That is the basis to one of my assembly lines and it has to do with creating some kind of synchronicity between people. The body as gateway to the mind. The sound turned out to be very interesting. While the body was doing its own localized element of the ensemble, one could hear and relate to the general sound that we were producing together. Participating and observing at once. I also thought it makes sense in regard to the loop. But there were other exercises. In a way it's a log of failures because each exercise is an experiment with a slightly different mode of engagement.

**NL** We talked about stillness and we can discuss that a little bit further. Stillness also relates to the rest time of the smoker, because it's like a moment of (supposedly) nothingness, a moment of silence, a negative space. If you are moving and suddenly you stop, you don't notice the stop, but that's when you are present. It has to do with the smoking and with a form of rest. You introduced me to the work of Andre Lepecki, a professor at the Department of Performance Studies at NYU and a performance critic. He talks about stillness, right?

**OM** Yes, I stumbled upon his book *Exhausting Dance* not too long ago, when I came across a section where he talks about stillness and goes very, very far with it. He sees stillness as an act of resistance, kind of like going against the whole ethos of speed and change in modernism. He depicts these freezing moments as acts of resistance to the preoccupation with motion. He talks about urban politics as strikes and such events. But to stop on the stage, is almost like a bigger event for him. He brings up this Steve Paxton quote which I

really like. Paxton termed the phrase “still acts” in the 1970s and as a dancer he talks about how, when one stops moving, there is a shift of consciousness that happens and you actually start becoming conscious of these little movements that your body is making, imbalances and minute shifts that happen. What’s interesting about that is that you’re actually starting to observe your own body. You are observing your own performance. I was also stealing this tactic from the fantastic Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter, the Belgian duo that uses stillness in most of their video works. I found Lepecki’s exploration of the dynamics of freezing dazzling.

**NL** Walter Benjamin talks about “historical dust,” the idea that history stands so still it gathers dust.

**OM** Lepecki quotes him on that. There’s something about gathering dust and accounting history and breaking out of this moment that erases the previous moment, and the previous moment.



1967, 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Commissioned for the exhibition *Work in Progress: Considering Utopia* at The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco.

**NL** Historical dust also relates to what you’re doing in San Francisco, an experiment with concrete and reliefs. I’m saying this a bit cynically because it relates to the Israeli-Palestinian history.

**OM** This is something I am just starting to develop. I’m not very far into this line of work, and I don’t quite understand how it would work. In San Francisco I had my first experiment in using these reliefs. Having been invited by the Contemporary Jewish Museum I felt obliged to push some of my political abstractions onto a more concrete sphere. I was working on developing a script, materials for people to work with. The work presented, this script, is a

series of forty concrete reliefs that date back to images from 1967 up to the 2000s. The images are taken from Ariella Azoulay's book *Acts of State: A Photographed History of the Occupation 1967–2007*, which was published in Hebrew in 2007. It is a photographic survey of everyday life in the occupied territories and I was trying to see how I can deal with materials that have a direct historical aspect. In the reliefs I am reducing the photographic realism to an abstract language that generalizes bodies, or the interaction of groups of bodies. In part this was a way of controlling the introduction of this subject to this particular audience. I'm postponing the more obviously controversial layer to when the participants are already at work, as a group.

**NL** I'm interested here again in the "historical dust" and also the fact that it's a relief—something that is made of concrete—and it's also a negative space. I find that interesting and related to the formalist side of other sculptures you've created in the past. It's the same formalism and the same structures.

**OM** The same formalism but still asking, Can abstraction make any change within real politics? I don't know. I was trying to create a space and encourage a conversation about this particular history through this very benign-looking object. The idea was to create a stage while these reliefs are present, and to allow things to happen so people could maybe independently initiate a conversation. I was not trying to make any kind of provocation but rather to, very softly, introduce ways to start one. Not sure how well it worked with regard to this hope when thinking of the general audience, but at least in an institutional level it did stir some commotion and had an effect on the terminology used there with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For instance, originally I was asked not to use the word "occupation" but then there was a shift, and the word was brought up by the director at a public talk we held. It's just one word. I'm interested in this material as a script, which I continue to call 67 and I'm probably going to work with more in the future.

*Ohad Meromi's work will be on view at Nathalie Karg gallery in New York from July 10–August 15.*

*Naomi Lev is a curator and critic who lives and works in New York and Tel Aviv. Lev was an assistant curator at MoBy-Museums of Bat Yam and managed Florentin 45 Contemporary Art space in Tel Aviv, curating and producing exhibitions that focused on Israeli contemporary art. She is a contributing writer for Artforum.com, writing regularly about Middle East art and artists and has also contributed reviews for Art in America among other publications.*