

Reincarnation

Tsibi Geva in Conversation with Yona Fischer

Abandoned Objects

Yona Fischer I've been thinking about a sort of proximity between art and life in which, rather than art offering itself to life, it is life that offers itself up to art: "Take me in, isolate me from my surroundings, from the totality called life, and do with me whatever you like, including art."

Tsibi Geva I like this way of putting it. When I'm on the move around town, wandering about, sometimes while driving (in the southern part of Tel Aviv, for instance), I see the things that are placed or tossed by the side of the road as evidence of something. Almost every object has potential, holds a different option; it is offered up as a choice, an option on the "shelf." Very rarely, I stop and pick up an object that "flickers" at me. When I do, it isn't normally with any purpose in mind, at least initially. Rather, I identify something that offers itself to me. The act of picking up these objects reminds me of Lord Tennyson's poem about plucking a flower, which is often used to illustrate the Western (as opposed to Eastern) mode of observation.

So sometimes, just as Beuys described it, something calls out to me and I stop and pick it up from the sidewalk. Without knowing what's going to become of it. It may be useful or useless, but it is always something that has a particular resonance for me. It is an external object that makes some inner membrane vibrate, probably because it corresponds to some formal pattern or a particular thematic sensitivity, and seems to offer itself to me.

YF These objects were abandoned in specific surroundings. They are part of a particular place, in the most fundamental sense. You wouldn't find inscriptions written in Finnish or in the Mongolian language in southern Tel Aviv, only Hebrew and Arabic. These objects are like your appointed representatives of their environment. You don't ask them if they're willing to be such representatives, you determine it. Had you seen some of these objects in an antique shop, for instance, I don't imagine you'd buy them, even if they were offered at blowout sale prices... They belong to the corner where you found them, to that gesture of getting rid of something or abandoning it.

TG That's right. When I did once or twice carry some object here from a flea market abroad, it lost its soul en route, it just didn't belong here.

Things from “over there” speak a foreign language – not just literally, but a different cultural language, and I don’t feel like I have anything to say about that world. But even in relation to “abandoned objects,” as you call them, there is always a moment of oscillation, wondering whether I should pick it up; yes-no, yes-no.

YF Is this “yes-no” also part of your thoughts about the place to which you intend to carry the object?

TG In most cases, it is. At the moment of picking it up, I have no idea what’s to become of the object. I just know that I am taking it into my place. For some reason, in order to create I have to be in a place where the materials speak to me, where they emanate or generate a particular atmosphere or temperature. In fact, without meaning to, I have built around me a mental environment, a lab, a private world. I have no interest in immediately turning the object into a work of art. A great part of the objects that have made their way into my studio I have placed on the floor and that’s where they’ve stayed for months on end, even years. I haven’t done anything with them, but I pass by and see them daily. They collect a thin, almost imperceptible layer of dust.

YF That is, you in no way deny their existence.

TG No, these objects are like “obstacles” or jags that keep me alert. In order to walk from point A to point B in the studio, I must take care not to step, for instance, on this half-red half-white panel, of which I have no idea what it used to be. Like Barnett Newman said of sculpture, it is “a thing which you trip over when you walk backwards to view a painting.”

Your metaphor, of life offering itself up to art, reminds me of a conversation I had with my friend, the artist Yitzhak Golombek. We were speaking about the state of the art scene nowadays, about all these artists whose mode of operation almost makes it impossible to speak about life in these terms because for them, the art scene is life itself: it is the entire playing field, and there is hardly any life beyond it. This sort of professionalism in art is problematic, because ultimately what is emphasized is a preoccupation with representation and representational tactics, and nothing else remains. During our conversation, Golombek said: “Some artists just don’t have the stamina,” and I said: “They don’t have a suitcase.” I am interested in life, perhaps more, and certainly no less than art – I’m referring to “aimless” life, to “leaking sideways,” putting your trust in the “music of chance” and doing things without having any idea how they’ll turn out. In this sense, I’m a spendthrift. My daughters were arguing once, one of them said: “Dad, you’re a spendthrift,” and the other spared my feelings and said: “That’s not true, dad’s generous.” Starting out on an open-ended adventure is fascinating for me. One must

have some fundamental confidence in order to linger in the unknown and not flee from it. Winnie the Pooh says: “I spent all day doing a lot of nothing.”

A Project is also a Projection

- TG When I modify a found object, it is an act of adding something to an object that already exists, that has a biography. It has led its life somewhere, I have no idea where or with whom – I hope it had a good life – and now it is covered with a patina, with rust, dust, scratches.
- YF Is the modification an addition, or a shift?
- TG It’s a shift, too. Sometimes it’s an ironic shift. Often, its aim is to draw the object into my field of reference, into my playing field. The broken mirror with the green frame that I found in the street, which we were looking at earlier, is a case in point. I wrote on it “Jasser A-Zarka,” ▶ because ▶ p. 38 the shape of the fracture was hill-like and I had just seen photographs taken by Ron Amir in Jasser A-Zarka – and thus I added the name of this place to a whole list of names I’ve used before. This act generated a dual context: it referred both to the mirror’s fracture line and to my own personal story of names of places in Israel. I have just finished a new work, a big, dirty, blue plastic trashcan lid with a hole in the middle, on which I wrote “Kinneret” (Sea of Galilee). ▶ The names and words I have written over the years accumulate into a sort of mapping: it is my own selective mapping, my own choices from the general map, which I have put on the table – if you draw a line through these reference points, they accumulate political content, they point at something. ▶ p. 41
- YF Do the names of the places you choose always have political connotations for you, or do they sometimes have poetic connotations?
- TG I think about it in terms of a political haiku. The musicality, the reverberations, too, are content in the world. The names generate a frequency that has an origin and a resonance, or impact. They are a linguistic, musical, conceptual and political element that accumulates – first in me, and then in the works. I like this sort of concatenated thought, the idea that to a great extent the deeper meanings of what you’re doing can only be revealed through an observation of the entire project, not by single pieces. A project is also a projection. A single piece is like a single word in a sentence or story. There’s a fundamental difference between a painting of a terrazzo tile and tiling, if you will, or occupying a territory, territorialization. Already at a very early stage in my career, in the series of works that includes *Umm el-Fahem* and *Biladi Biladi*

(1983-85), I thought that such works, in which the inscribed words are a key image, may work on their own, but when you stand in a space that's completely surrounded by names of Arab places written in Hebrew, it becomes a whole sphere and generates a reference field that is charged with meaning. As a viewer, you find yourself "confined" in a suggestive electricity field. Pointing at invisible villages is an act of indicating and focusing, bringing them to the foreground and defining an alternative territory to that of the Zionist narrative, to this story we were raised on. This act also defines itself along the time axis. Things have added up, have been built one on top of the other, very slowly.

YF In one of our conversations you told me about a paper you wrote about Beuys as a student at Hamidrasha School of Art. In his exhibition currently on view at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, there's a box of twelve or fourteen of his drawings, out of some 400 he gave to the Lodz Museum together with the boxes they had been kept in. In Jerusalem, one of the boxes is exhibited, and the drawings it contained are hung on the wall. The box is an integral part of the exhibit.

TG I know that in some cases, when Beuys would cast a sculpture, bring it to the museum and take apart the negative mold, he'd decide to keep the negative and even the broom with which he had swept the bits and pieces that had dropped off onto the floor. In this sort of act, the installation is an integral part of the creation of the objects, part of an ongoing process of thought that keeps on reformulating, changing and updating itself, endlessly. Nothing is ever finished. Even when the show opens, it is still unfinished. I believe it was at the Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, where his works are on view in several galleries, that he would go every few months, move things around and change the installations. This ability to be open with regards to the composition and alter the status of elements in it is interesting to me. Within one's accumulating project, over the years, single works may function much like Lego blocks, revealing new meanings in diverse placements and contexts.

In our case, too, the exhibition cannot easily be categorized. I have noticed it, among other things, in the process of making the catalogue. Recently, when you were travelling abroad, I wanted to call you one day and tell you that there is one category we haven't discussed. You spoke about "abandoned objects," but there are some found objects that I just framed, sometimes signing them and at other times even forgetting to sign. I tried to point at an object, frame it, "shed light" on its existence – but my flashlight has conferred no meaning on it. When Michael Gordon came to my studio for a preparatory meeting about the catalogue's design, he inquired about some object whether it's a work of art or a

found object. That's when I realized there was an additional category: an adopted abandoned object. For instance, a book page with a question mark and the inscription "Questions and Answers" – I did not touch this page, only turned it into my work by signing it. The works in the exhibition straddle the entire gamut from "abandoned object" to work of art. It's an axis with many interim stages or varying levels of modification, including the most extreme option: a work of art that masquerades as an abandoned object (such as "Wonderland," which I titled *Altneuland*). ►

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Rescuing the Painting

YF Are there cases when you feel the need, like Rauschenberg, to "rescue" a painting? When it's turning too chaotic, unresolved or irresolvable?

TG Yes, there are cases when something doesn't work, and the painting turns too "congested." I think that's when courage is called for, mainly the courage to turn against myself, to betray my sentiments and the fact of having invested time and all sorts of things, and to start all over again, reopen it entirely. Sometimes it's done through gestures of erasure – which are never in fact erasure, since the erasure has form, the form of the erased surface, and thus is not a void but an entity; it's a new image. The act of annulment is also one of opening new options (as in the Yom Kippur hymn, "Open for us the gate, even as the gate is closing, for daylight fades, the day is waning"). If I've been working on this piece for a month and then suddenly "attack" it, if I feel deadlocked and end up wounding it, then I have everything to lose or gain. It's quite similar to the way Arie Aroch used erasure in his work and thought about it.

I recently finished a new work, in which I painted over a painting I made twenty years ago. It was not too big a canvas, with a towel glued onto its surface and something painted on it. It had lain there in its corner, and every once in a while I would take it out. I knew something wasn't working, but there were also some nice elements there. A couple of weeks ago I succeeded in painting over it. Some elements remained, but I just composed a new painting out of it. I jeopardized what it was, and tried to give it a chance.

YF How are you going to date it?

TG It was from 1992.

YF So it should be dated 1992/2012?

TG Possibly, I'd have to think about it. I suddenly realized that I regard my own painting from twenty years ago as a readymade, just like an abandoned object, or a hopeless one...

The Studio as a Place

- YF You are in the midst of moving from your studio in southern Tel Aviv to another studio, also in the southern part of the city. Had the move been to the northern part of the city, it may have shaken up your work. Southern Tel Aviv has particular social and cultural characteristics, which have become more and more pronounced over the past few years: large minority populations, tensions between “our own” poor and “theirs,” our own violence and our neighbors’. Your studio is part of this environment, but also a separate, enclosed island in this turbulent sea.
- TG Yes, that’s right. The area I’m moving to is adjacent to the Shapira neighborhood. From my window, I can see my daughter’s home, which is right there.

When I first moved to Tel Aviv, it was to a studio in the Noga building complex in Jaffa. I soon realized that I was being affected by something in the urban nature of the area: all these garages and gates – iron gates welded in X forms – and the color divisions. The first paintings I made there were of Xs. The blue-and-white painting with the triangles was made after the iron gate of the Christian School on Yefet Street in Jaffa. It is still there, has stood there since before the Andromeda gated housing estate was built. This was my model.

I imagine that if I’d have worked in the northern part of Tel Aviv, something else entirely would have happened. Just yesterday, someone asked me: “You like southern Tel Aviv, right?” – and I replied that I do indeed, because there’s a sort of disorder here. There is no law and no Law of the Father, it is like the Wild West. Here, you allow yourself to do things that you wouldn’t do in any other part of town, you even drive differently in southern Tel Aviv and in Jaffa. Jaffa follows its own rules. Improvisation is much stronger here, as well as dirt, in all meanings of the word, and this corresponds to some hankering I have for a “delinquent” sense of freedom. It relates to the malfeasant, boundary-breaching side of my personality.

- YF The way you think of your studio seems to be a reduction or schematic of the connection between the interior and exterior in your work. While the studio is isolated from its surroundings, its exterior and interior are still connected. The outside environment always supplies you with visual or actual objects – right there, beyond the wall or outside the window, someone may have abandoned it just three minutes ago – and you always consider taking these objects in.

A funny metaphor for your studio occurred to me: a refrigerator, in which one places all the products required for straightforward

sustenance – food and drink. On the outside, people usually hang objects that have a very different function: stickers, cartoons, family photos, a plumber’s phone number; things related to the exterior envelope or outer shell, whose function is also vital. In the exhibition, the interior and exterior will be on view as one – both equally enveloping your work and nourishing it.

Trans-positions

YF I would like us to ponder the relationship between the place of things, their function, and their time. The status of an “abandoned object,” as I insist on calling it, is relevant to a specific place and time frame. The object has been abandoned for an hour or five years. It had lived in its environment, and after being removed from it has a second stretch of time, with you. If you use it and turn it into your work of art, it is the start of a new period – and a new status, new purpose. And when you put it on show in an exhibition, you once again make it part of a new order and a new space, which either imposes itself on the work or adjusts itself to it, just as the object’s previous environment had done prior to its abandonment.

You yourself are now facing a new period in your life as an artist. You are ending the period of all you have done and accumulated in this particular environment, which is infected by and replete with a particular presence, both anonymous and concrete. And now, as you leave for a new place whose dimensions and organization are different, some of the things you’ve accumulated over the years may be abandoned once again.

TG That’s true. I have no idea what the new studio will look like. It will become “soiled” by objects and works. I believe it was Amos Oz who once said that “the Levant is full of microbes.” In my case, the microbes inhabit the objects themselves.

There is something interesting about moving from one studio to another. I know it from my past experience. Often, I am so tired after moving, that I just leave things in their boxes, sometimes for months and months. And then, gradually, some of the things make their way to the walls, while others remain packed, because they are part of the old world, the previous chapter, and their function has come to an end. But I haven’t let them go, I have dragged them along with me like a photo album, perhaps out of some separation anxiety. It is the superstition that the self is made up of our past and our defects. One goes to therapy, but by repeatedly addressing the question of “what happened there?” one

sometimes deepens existing fissures. We often become attached to the most unnecessary things – things that make us suffer, that are toxic, even.

YF Or they may be “in hibernation”...

TG They could be “hibernating” until at some point I may make them part of a new scene, or they may no longer be suitable for the new place, which is also a mental place. The new place will be new, I guess. I have no desire to replicate what I’ve had before. In the near future, while some of my things will be at the Ashdod Museum and others will be on show in the present studio after it will have been vacated (in addition to works that have traveled for a show in Italy), I will be maintaining two studios in Tel Aviv concurrently, as well as another studio in New York. It is a situation informed by impermanence, which is not easy for me. It’s an unstable place, without equilibrium, like walking with both feet in the air. It’s a lesson in instability, an important lesson.

Image, Concept

YF Generally speaking, one may say that the objects in the exhibition are still part of Duchamp’s tradition.

TG He referred to the artist as pointing at the object and altering its context: removing it from its functional context and making it part of an artistic one.

YF Here, we have other nuances, which may bring to mind both Duchamp and Magritte – as in the case of your father’s pipe. You deal neither in metaphors nor in symbols.

TG I guess I’m more comfortable speaking of typical elements, which is not the same as symbolic ones. I am drawn to gray, un-exotic objects that have a presence but are not forceful. I thought a lot about it while I was painting the *Keffiyeh* and *Terrazzo* works. The terrazzo tile is a functional object typical of a specific environment, but it’s not a symbol. The shutters, too, are typical of our nearby environment, but have no specific symbolic meaning.

YF They are objects seared by significance. When the keffiyeh appears in your work, it clearly refers to its particular status – its usage, its organization, its entire visual appearance – but also takes you further.

TG In the process of abstraction, which has occurred over time, the keffiyeh in my work has turned into a fence or lattice, generating a shift in its meaning – from a symbolic element to one that typifies an environment. The fence isn’t a symbol, it is a suggestive element that faces us, which affects us psychologically and has various connotations. Fences and walls

exist almost everywhere around the world, confining and delimiting. They have been internalized and turned into a mental or psychological notion. When we speak of boundary breaching we refer to taboo breaking, to acts that either ignore or trample accepted norms. In the paintings, the fence either creates or presents a situation in which one faces a barrier. This image may refer to imprisonment, or function as a conventional “no passage” sign. It is a construction of an existential and psychological situation, which to me is an extension of the specific symbolic aspect through a wider, more universal complex of meanings. The painting does not merely represent a fencing element in the environment; rather, it creates the situation and presents it to the viewer. An abstract reading is also possible here. It can easily (and mistakenly) be read as pattern painting, in the spirit of American and French artists who worked in this vein, or some of the neo-geometric painters of the 1980s. A viewer who does not carry the same cultural, conceptual and historical “baggage” as the artist and is unfamiliar with his realities of life may experience this pattern as an arbitrary, formalistic preoccupation.

This dichotomy between what you see and what you know has always been of great interest to me. If you are unfamiliar with the symbolic or cultural load of an object, what you see is a form or pattern whose meaning is sealed to you. When I use all the cultural and political knowledge I’ve accumulated to create something that brings together image and notion, picture and knowledge, it is an act of pointing at something, saying: “This is it.” And the question arises, “is this it” or “is this not it”? Is the pipe I’m presenting Magritte’s pipe, or Magritte’s painting, or Cuba’s – that is, my father’s – pipe? When he died, I took this pipe with me to the studio. I loved its smell and taste. I would hold it in my mouth while painting. I got used to it. In time, probably through tension, I gnawed on the stem until it broke off. Then, for a while, I was unable to paint without it. The conceptual element, the knowledge you bring with you and apply to the image, entirely changes its reception and reading.

I love the fact that the reception and interpretation of a work of art are multidimensional, and that one can carry on this game of hide-and-seek. One may speak about works and read them through their formal aspect, and they can also be charged with political meaning. In Israel, my works have always been read only in political contexts. In my *Lattice* project (2002-03), ► critical interpretations only referred to the lattice as a symbol of the political situation. Hardly any mention was made of the whole art-historical dialogue these works engage in – a study of modernism’s and postmodernism’s underlying organizational forms and patterns, theories of order against chaos – probably since these signals

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were not caught by the antennae of writers here, or did not correspond to their thought patterns.*

On the formal level, there is proximity between my work and that of artists from other parts of the world, who have arrived at similar things through different experiences and an entirely different way of thinking. My painterly thought has never been a formalist one. There are some “bugs” in my personality that only make it possible for me to create abstractions that have a hold in the actual world, even if unawares. When I make this X, for instance, an American viewer would read it as the hard-edge painting associated with Ellsworth Kelly, or as abstract formalism – but here, we know that it is also a sign, a notice posted at the entrance to military bases. It is both. An image may be charged and completely discharged at one and the same time, and this dialectic is fundamental to my work. The works’ different levels of signification (and interpretation) are layered on top of each other, like an archeological mound (“Mound of Things” was the title of my 2008 one-person show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art). It’s like doing a split, straddling two poles that coexist without cancelling each other out or averaging out. I drain things that are full while charging things that are quite empty.

Exposing the Mechanism

YF The museum in Ashdod seems like an apt venue for your exhibition, stressing the interdependence between your work and Israeli reality. For Ashdod is a place that is marginal to all this – because of the nationalist vibe, and the exclusion of all that is foreign – yet is also part of Israeli reality and as such allows a reading of your work as Israeli art. It seems to me that the viewers here, regardless of whether they appreciate the works or not, will sense that the artist who made them is “one of them,” that they are able to follow his work process, since its cultural and social references are familiar ones. Notwithstanding, I believe that our attempt

* The project was first shown in the exhibition “Lattice” (2002) in Hagar Gallery, Jaffa. The exhibition comprised two sets of lattices designed by Geva and industrially manufactured, with evolving patterns of surface divisions – patterns culled from popular culture, local symbols (such as the Star of David), and modernist abstract geometric art works (such as paintings by Piet Mondrian and Sol LeWitt). On the walls inside the gallery projecting lattices were hung, while around the gallery’s balcony flat lattices were installed in walls specifically constructed for this purpose, mapping the views seen through them. The project engaged in a fascinating dialogue with the notions of fence and lattice, through a subtle dialectic movement between interior and exterior, functional and cultural, modernistic purism and decorative ornamentation. The project was also partly presented in “Master Plan,” Geva’s one-person show at the Haifa Museum of Art, 2003. (Roni Cohen-Binyamini)

to distinguish between art and materials that aren't art is not specifically relevant to any particular place.

TG This exhibition puts on view the “kitchen” or the raw materials, which artists are not in the habit of showing – usually, only the conclusions make their way to public viewing. As a rule, a clear distinction is made between the studio space and exhibition venues. By foregoing this distinction – that is, externalizing the private space of the studio – I allow people to enter the bowels of the works, my inner world. Obviously, there is still a selection process and we have control over the way things are exhibited, yet this means that I am not only exhibiting my heterogeneous work products but also displaying a formal glossary of sorts, my archetypal sources. These are things that have accumulated, a great many of which have been with me for years, they are like the “compost” layer of the work... It's a very exposed course of action, and it entails some risk, precisely because it does not in fact show everything. One cannot draw conclusions from it about the totality of my body of work, because this body of work is not exhibited in its entirety. It is a concept show: it cuts off a very particular slice from the whole, but it cuts deep. I expect it will reveal mechanisms of thought.

YF I would say: mechanisms of decision making. Each and every object or work is the outcome of a specific decision you made, or several consecutive decisions.

TG I believe art is about exposing decision-making mechanisms. It documents decisions. The surface of an artwork (certainly the surface of my work) exposes the turbulence that is at the core of thought. It is painting that deals with the way painting contemplates itself. The work does not conceal its reflection about itself – on the contrary, it externalizes it.

An interesting point is the indecision regarding the question of what is this object that is “possibly art” – art that is still a possibility, which will either become art or not – and whether my modification of it should be with a heavy hand or a light one. Like this plank that I have taken into my studio and have passed by hundreds of times, always asking myself whether I should do something with it. Some things one touches “just so,” seemingly off-handedly, while others are modified extensively, and yet others one doesn't touch at all.

I have a table board from the 1950s with a red and white composition, it's very nice. I've tried to paint on it several times, each time realizing my own weakness in the face of the power it has in its present form. Finally, I gave up and said it should remain as it is, it's a finished poem, whole. ▶

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It's different when you're working on an empty canvas and start building it from scratch. Once there's already something there, you must

be very attentive to it, and know when or if you should leave it alone or let it go. The question isn't just what I do, but also what I abstain from doing.

YF That's true of any painting. It's interesting that as an artist you make the distinction between "art" and "not art." Almost every twentieth-century artist declared at some point that he or she was examining the boundaries of art. If this is the boundary of art, could I push it a little deeper, a little higher? Am I still within the bounds of "art"? You seem to be saying: "My world is made up of all these objects in my possession, and everyone expects me to make a decision, for which I am solely responsible, for I know how to take something that is 'not art' and 'naturalize' it in the realm of 'art' by signing, drawing a line, juxtaposing." I understand that in some cases you hesitate and ask whether the object has a presence that makes it an artistic entity in itself, or invites you to perform some act that would turn it into art.

TG Usually, I don't bother with such distinctions. What do I do when I don't know what to do? I tend to work according to a working hypothesis, that is, I do something "in the meantime." In the meantime, I carry out actions whose outcome is unclear or unforeseeable. I know these actions must lead somewhere, but I allow myself to be swept by a process that has no unequivocal predetermined conclusion, that does not assume its conclusion. This is what I find fascinating about art.

Henri Michaux wrote: "I write in order to peruse myself." From this point of view, "perusing oneself" is more important than writing. To a certain extent, art allows me to understand the peruser – that is, myself. In this exhibition, I have no intention of showing finished products. It interests me as an open-ended project, which keeps asking the same question I've been asking all along. This is an open-ended experiment that follows some rules and accumulates over the years, generating products "along the way." We've been examining these products, attempting to categorize or classify them in order to organize an exhibition, but the whole point is that the categories are shuffled constantly – and I have no desire to draw a dividing line between my inner world and the outside world, between the pre-work and the finished work. The work contemplates itself.

What you said about the interior and the exterior in my work is indeed true: the studio space is both a reflection of its environment and an extremely closed space, a bubble of specific things that I had brought in from the outside. There is an exceptionally selective act of sifting and condensation at play here. These are extracts. It's a lab in which filters and selective codes are in use – but what they are exactly remains unclear.

The codes are quite intuitive. This is “knowledge that does not know,” as I believe is written in Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*. The fact that you don’t “understand” what you’re doing or cannot explain it doesn’t mean that it’s meaningless.

Non-place

- YF Among all the things you’ve chosen to include in your environment that represent the public sphere or the outside world, there’s a chapter devoted to “your own corner.” In this corner, everything has to do with you, personally: your memories, nostalgia, relationships – with your father, for instance, or with buildings he designed. The elements that connect you to your past self are different from elements such as a keffiyeh or the name of an Arab village.
- TG In retrospect, I can see that in the studio – the way it has been until now, the way we photographed it – I have tried to realize a fantasy of something that has always been missing from my life, having grown on a kibbutz; a late compensation for the difficult experience of having no privacy. It’s something that just happened, I hadn’t planned it. I grew up in a “children’s home” on a kibbutz, and for years we had no sense of intimacy there. One was exposed to the others’ gaze 24 hours a day.
- YF Whatever you had, everyone had.
- TG As a rule, there was no “mine.” Only “ours.” “Mine” always had to become “ours,” and “I” always turned into “we.” I think that’s the function this studio, as it has accumulated over time, has had for me – a place that is mine, in which I have everything; an autarkic system, with all the things or materials I require in order to be and act. It is a place of being, not just a productive enterprise. To a certain extent, I am wrapped up in my own works. This environment is an echo chamber that enables creativity.
- YF I thought about you earlier as a Robinson Crusoe, arriving at your island and starting to build up your world, everything you may need.
- TG My friend Zali Gurevitch wrote a wonderful essay about Robinson Crusoe as a castaway who reached an island and wanted to build a place there – but built a “non-place” instead. He addresses the whole Jewish issue of “non-place” and God’s place. The “non-place” makes me anxious. In the transition from one place to another there is suddenly, for a moment, a “non-place” – until a new place may be established.

Speaking about the relationship between the private and public spheres, I believe that the “we” aspect of the kibbutz made it incredibly difficult to create art that speaks about the “I.” It took me many years

to realize that my political engagement is part of, a reflection of, at times a “cover story” for personal contents, a construct that allows them expression, but a keen eye is needed in order to see it. This in no way detracts from the political aspect of my work, which in Israel is often interpreted superficially and classified dogmatically. I am merely offering a wider view, which regards the political, psychological and aesthetic aspects as reflections of one another. Speaking about conflict, for instance, may refer to intercultural conflict, or the political Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or it may be related to an inquiry of the self – an inquiry that is often carried out through the Other, through one’s opposition. I’ve been asking the question about the conflicts within my own self. I haven’t finished asking the question about the contradictions that coexist in my work in a single canvas. It’s an ongoing project. There is the precise, architectural, organized aspect on the one hand, and, on the other, the expressive, wild, sensuous aspect – cultural and formal contradictions coincide in my work in a way that does not correspond to common artistic classifications, such as an “expressionist” or “architectural-constructivist” style of painting.

YF Rauschenberg claimed that categorizations were thought up by critics for their own convenience, to exempt themselves from the need to discuss what makes an artist’s work unique. As to the contradictions, they may also be manifested in the order and disorder that are evident in your studio concurrently. Some things are arranged meticulously, pedantically (you straighten the books with the touch of your finger), and the paintings rest against the wall side by side, for practical reasons – but everything else is just scattered around offhandedly. These are two sides of your personality.

TG Indeed. And since I recognize that both are part of me, I’ve searched for strategies that would allow both to be expressed. In my *Terrazzo* paintings, for instance, I realized that I can use masking-tape as an organizing procedure within which I can make expressive, spontaneous, fast-tempoed gestures. This doesn’t mean, however, that the process of painting is speedy, nor that its reception is quick. Since the painting is constructed in layers, the process may take a long time and the work’s reception time may also be protracted – thus, an organizational procedure is required. When you’re “inside,” you are swept away by gesturality like an action painter. It’s a proximity from which it’s difficult to see the “whole picture.” And then you take a step back and gain perspective, from which you’re able to examine the composition and make sensible decisions on how to proceed, as in cinematic or literary editing.