

An Introduction

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When different types of knowledge and practice meet, they enrich each other. *Possession and Dispossession* reflects on this meeting of divergent processes in Jerusalem. Through this collection of essays, documents, and artworks, we summarize the work of the Ethnographic Department of the Museum of the Contemporary since its founding on December 31, 2014, in the spaces of the Mamuta Art and Research Center located at Hansen House in west Jerusalem, at the initiative and under the curatorship of the Sala-Manca Group.

The Ethnographic Department of the Museum of the Contemporary led an art-research project on the relationship between Jewish ethnography and Israeli contemporary art, between academic research and art research. This collection is a result of this project and it serves as a record of a particular way of working and as a catalogue of these projects, where the book is another creative phase.

This collection was originally published in Hebrew in 2017. In the English edition of this book, we want to share these art-research projects and our process of research and creation with a wider audience. *Possession and Dispossession* is not a traditional catalogue, though it does document the exhibitions; it is also not a traditional academic book, though it does contain in-depth research articles. Instead, we see this collection as an invitation—to continue the dialogue created by these projects, to reflect on and interpret these works, and to continue blurring the lines between research and creation.

In the pages that follow, we present fragments from conversations between

the editors of this collection¹ to introduce where these projects took place, how this experimental method of research and creation works, and how the Ethnographic Department's approach to contemporary ethnography came to be.

Lea First, it's important as a reminder, that at Mamuta, we host the Underground Academy. It's a group of people meeting and working together. In this Academy are not only artists, but also philosophers, architects, writers, designers, etc. We would meet together once a week. We were both developing projects together and individually. That year, in 2014, we were working with ethnography. The Underground Academy is both a residential program and also Mamuta Art Center's research institute.

The Ethnographic Department was inspired by the João Delgado's Underground Academy – a process that champions the development of experimental methods of learning, research, writing, and creation.²

¹ The editors are Lea Mauas and Diego Rotman (the Sala-Manca Group), and Michelle MacQueen (who assisted with the preparation of the English-language edition).

² In 1963, the Portuguese-Argentinean poet João Delgado wrote a never-published manifesto in which he said that all museums, universities, and sports clubs should be closed and reopened only a year later. After locking two municipal museums with his own locks, Delgado was arrested and imprisoned. During his sentence, he wrote the basic guidelines for the Underground Academy. Later, the poet Delgado, the painter Rodriguez, the theater critic Arturo Maure, Tilsa Tilsova, a character from a play, and some prominent figures in Delgado's books and in real life became the first staff of the Underground Academy. It is not known if any student applied to study at the Academy, or if the project interested anyone except for the members who used to meet twice a week for night courses at Rodriguez's home. Later, the Academy functioned in the basement of the local leprosarium. The spaces hosted groundbreaking art exhibitions, and operated a publishing house that issued thirty-five titles and manuscripts, all of which have been lost. The last book it published dealt with the history of the Underground Academy.

- Diego The Underground Academy should be read in relation to the Bezalel Academy for Art and Design based on the second floor of the same building, where they run different graduate programs. Our Academy was established in the basement, so in a way we are going underground... In Hebrew actually, the residency is called “The Academy of the Contemporary.”
- Lea I don’t know if this is relevant but the name ‘The Underground Academy’ was also a kind of reaction to the way the academy is grasped. The Hebrew University is based on a top of a mountain, on Mount Scopus, so in a way we are referring to the idea of bringing the Academy back to the ground, to grassroots.
- Diego I think we were trying to combine our specific way of working in the art field in connection to our academic practice. We invited scholars to meet artists and artists to meet scholars in order to affect both worlds.
- To date, The Ethnographic Department has hosted encounters³ and day-long seminars; sent ethnographic delegations to the urban spaces of Jerusalem and the nearby desert; produced projects in visual and performance art; exhibited in other venues in Israel and abroad; begun various research projects; and edited this volume, which reflects, expands, and interprets the processes we have undergone.
- Michelle In this way, it seems like the aim is to create a process that works in the middle of two approaches. On the one hand, you’re taking a grassroots approach: working with artists at

³ We held encounters and day-long seminars with Rachel Elior, Yoram Bilu, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Ruthie Abeliovich, Yair Lifschitz, Danny Schrire, Haim Yacobi, Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom, Chaim Noy, Freddie Rokem, Alon Cohen-Lifschitz, and Elad Orian.

the Art Center, working at the “Underground,” bringing in various communities—taking everyday experiences that allow for learning and creating knowledge. But on the other hand, you’re also approaching it from a conceptual space: working in an academic place, working with scholars, engaging with and creating theory and methodologies—learning and creating knowledge from perhaps more “traditional” modes of inquiry. It seems like both approaches are in dialogue, but it creates a new, different approach.

Lea Absolutely. We attempt to create a kind of interchange where both the artists and the scholars can learn from another kind of research or knowledge creation or even just new ways to approach matters in art or scholarship.

Diego The Museum of the Contemporary attempts to approach history through art, ethnography through art, art through ethnography. We look for other ways to understand how art can influence the way that scholarship can be approached or can be practiced and vice versa. I think in those meetings—blurring those more stable definitions—that’s where we were working.

Lea In some ways, I think our approach is something that if it would happen at the University, could have been called ‘research-creation.’

Michelle Lea and I were classmates in the Cultural Studies program at Queen’s University in Kingston ON, Canada. There, we learned about research-creation as an approach to research that combines creative/arts-based practices and academic research. In the Canadian context, the creation process of research-creation is defined as “situated within the research

activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms).”⁴ Research-creation projects often focus on process, tentative explorations, and experimentation. It obfuscates certainty, in that it does not give us tangible, clear “results.” I think research-creation works well in areas that are fuzzy—when delineations are imprecise and there are only vague contours. By working consistently in the “in-between,” these projects can bring a new dimension of knowledge to these fuzzy areas. In this way, research-creation can be a means to challenge traditional modes of knowledge. In Natalie Loveless’s words, “Research-creation, at its best, has the capacity to impact our social and material conditions, not by offering more facts, differently figured, but by finding ways, through aesthetic encounters and events, to persuade us to care and to care differently.”⁵

Diego Some of the scholars we worked with are artists themselves. But research-creation is something that is being developed at the university to include the arts. We were, in a way, trying to include academic scholarship and research methodologies into the art practice being generated at the Mamuta Art Center.

Lea We wanted to give to the artists another kind of way of working that is more research-based, but as Diego said, also influencing the ways that knowledge is created in the academy, both for him as an academic and for other academics that were

⁴ The full definition according to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is available at: <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx>. Accessed August 2020.

⁵ Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 107.

part of these meetings. And also, many of the scholars who came to talk with the artists felt that it was indeed a possibility for them to do so. It is an amazing and on-going process.

Michelle It sounds like you brought this all to a middle ground. It wasn't just inclusion: you were not aiming to include artistic practice at the university and it seems like you were not trying to just include academic research at the Art Center. It appears to be more than that— creating a process that was not incorporating one into the other, but rather taking the best parts of each world to meet in this new space in the middle.

How did this process start?

Diego The process actually started some years before when we worked together with Ofira Henig, the director of The Lab, a theatre space in Jerusalem. She asked us to curate an exhibition related to the Golem project. Instead of curating an exhibition on the topic, we decided to develop a research project together, by bringing some models from the academy – like a symposium, open calls, long-term research. We started with a symposium with scholars and artists, open to artists and the public in general. And with a similar symposium, we started our project on contemporary ethnography, focusing on the Dybbuk. That was actually the starting point for those projects

Lea We had many different events where we were trying to blur or combine or make other kinds of situations where the art world and the academy get to be in touch.

Michelle These events were another invitation? A chance to meet and talk?

- Lea It was never just an invitation to do a talk or to listen to a talk. It was more deep, something more intense.
- Diego We were looking for long-term research, for long processes. The events were invitations to relate, to create another stage in this long-term research that combines different practices and approaches to specific topics. I think that artists and scholars might want to be part of something different than what they are used to. Like this book—it's not a typical academic book and it's not a typical catalogue with some articles. It's trying to find other ways of communicating practice and knowledge.
- Lea Also in these events, we get to break those hierarchies in terms of who's producing knowledge or who has the right to do what.
- Diego Also those tensions that are sometimes in both worlds regarding the other, the biases about art, about the academy. For us to relate it to the academy and us being together as part of our natural, everyday life—I think that those lines just don't really exist, so we play with them.
- Michelle Right, and if we can play with these tensions, we can reach areas that you wouldn't find otherwise. If you have to work within a particular discipline or tradition, you are confined by the boundaries of that discipline/tradition. But if those boundaries become arbitrary (or at least not of the utmost importance), you can work to break them down and find out what lies in-between. When the lines are less distinct, when the borders are blurred, you can make a new space that would have been otherwise hidden by the boundaries of these traditions in art, research, ethnography, etc.

- Lea Scholars are artists, everyone is participating and observing. We wanted engaged scholarship, collaboration, and creation.
- Diego But it's also in terms of content—we are never working from nowhere. We are working within Jewish ethnography in the Israeli/Jewish/Palestinian context. We relate to our cultural baggage to connect in these instances.
- Michelle Yes, and I think the Eternal Sukkah project is a good example of that. It deals with the political context directly, in addressing significant issues about land and borders between Bedouin communities, Israel, and Jewish settlements, as well as the longer histories of conflict in the region. But it also brings up questions of boundaries and lines in terms of culture and traditions, in the transformation of a tin shack belonging to a Bedouin family into a Jewish Sukkah that ended up at the national museum. Does the shack/sukkah belong to one group or the other? Whose culture is it? What tradition does it belong to? These questions are obviously in response to that socio-political context. But even asking these questions raises important political implications. It allows us to question the status quo. But the aim of this process isn't only implicating the political and the cultural, right?
- Diego We also wanted to blur ethnography in terms of its divisions in folk art and contemporary art. Our ways of doing research and creation allowed for more possible paths to do this work.
- Lea A starting point for us was to propose other ways of “ethnographic research.”
- Diego We were being critical of “traditional ethnography” but we

were using those tools to make inquiries into new topics about possession and dispossession, about the role of the academy, the artist, the ethnographer—we don't have any clear answers about what is good or not. But we ask questions about these entities. We were also dealing with auto-ethnography. We put ourselves inside. The research was put forward through this exploration of these relations to the context.

Lea We are always rooted in the context, in the socio-political, dealing with our immediate surroundings, the representation of space.

Diego We're approaching all of these projects, about tourism, gentrification, land, social media, it's from a critical point of view. We're trying to break open and give new ways, new perspectives of thinking on these issues.

Michelle In dealing with the immediate surroundings, there are always new questions to explore. The context always changes, and then new questions arise. Since this process invites long-term research, and there are so many points of reference, there is also a lineage and conceptual resources to draw on. So, there's constant invitations to explore and a host of tools to draw from while experimenting.

In creating all of these opportunities for questions, I think this process brings attention to the importance of blurring these lines between traditions, ethnography, art, the academy, etc. By blurring the lines, there's creation of this new space where we can maybe find reasons for how and why these distinctions become so solid.

Diego The projects also kept developing through the writing about

them, and talking about them in the artist talks, in the symposiums, etc. – these were always instances of sharing brought back and provoked new approaches and re-framing of the projects. It's naturally never-ending.

Lea Yes, always adding new layers. Every movement brings another movement into the art projects. The research and art always come together, they overlap. It's a new layer upon a new layer, new movement again and again.

Michelle In that way, the process becomes self-creating and self-sustaining. It becomes a new space where we can challenge all of these borders, boundaries, and distinctions. And it's also a new space where we can move with uncertainty, but we can grow greater political, cultural, and creative imaginations.

The first part of the book relates to historical aspects of two sites. The first site is where the Museum of the Contemporary was first established in Ein Karem (after some independent research, we discovered that the actual house was built on the base of Issa Manoun's former house, which was under construction in 1948, declared "abandoned property," and later became the home of the Jewish Polish artist Daniela Passal). The second site is where the wandering museum moved to next, and where the Ethnographic Department was introduced – the former Leprosarium Jesus Hilfe and currently the home of the Hansen House of Art, Design, and Technology. The majority of this section of the book documents works dealing with Hansen House's historiography. This includes the film *Heim*, refashioned by Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmel, and the series of amulets created by Yeshayahu Rabinowitz and Hanan abu-Hussein, which correspond with the amulet collection that belonged to Palestinian folklore scholar and physician Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, the

medical director of the leprosarium from 1919 until 1948. Also in this section is documentation of *Paradise Inn: A One-Person Hotel*, a project that operated in the summer of 2015 in the courtyard of Hansen House. This project dealt with the mythology of paradise, its connection with leprosaria in general, and the Jerusalem leprosarium in particular. The projects, whose participants were artists Nir Yahalom, Itamar Mendes-Flohr, Shaul Tzemah, Oz Maloul, Chen Cohen, Shiri Singer, Pessy Komar, and the Sala-Manca Group, corresponded with Boris Schatz's book *The Rebuilt Jerusalem: The Rebuilt Reality* (1924).⁶ The text "On the Borders of Paradise" by Diego Rotman offers a reflexive reading of the project and ends this section of the book.

The second part of the book deals with the figure of Jewish folklorist Sh. An-sky (born Shloyme Zanol Rappoport) and the ethnographic expedition he organized and led in 1912-1914 through the Pale of Settlement, almost concurrently with Canaan's ethnographic research. Here, you will find an update of the questionnaire An-sky composed following his historical ethnographic expedition in Volhyn and Podolia, consisting of some two thousand questions about the way of life of the intended Jewish respondents. Sala-Manca's updated questionnaire consists of twenty-five new questions dealing with "Israeli time," and comes complete with a machine that sounds Israeli national sirens (the siren signaling the beginning of the Sabbath, the Holocaust Remembrance Day and Memorial Day sirens, and a true air-raid siren) available for a symbolic fee.

Rachel Elinor and Yoram Bilu's essay "Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Spirit Possessions and Demons, Angels and Maggidim" begins the inquiry into the Dybbuk phenomenon and Ansky's play *Der Dybbuk: Tzevishen Tzvei Velten* (*The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds*). Freddie Rokem, in his essay "The Many Worlds of the Dybbuk," deals with the stage design of the production of *The Dybbuk* put on by the Habima Hebrew Theater in 1922 and the role

⁶ Boris Schatz is the founder of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design.

of the text in the stage design. In his essay “My Homeland, Der Dybbuk: About Possession and Nationalism in the Old-New Film *Der Dybbuk* (1937-2017),” Rotman presents a fragment of a research project dealing with Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmel’s film *The Dybbuk* (1937-2014), which is in some ways a re-editing of the Yiddish movie by Michał Waszyński, and in some ways a subversion of it, in part by the integration of *The Moldau* by Bedřich Smetana into the film’s soundtrack. The next piece is the documentation of the installation *Tisch* by Sala-Manca and Nir Yahalom, which also includes the work *The Eternal Sabbath* by Samuel Rotman and *Cover for Ark of Fire*, an anonymous work. In his essay “Always Sabbath: Electric Sabbath Candles,” Shalom Sabar embarks on a journey to discover the history of electric candlesticks and deals with the applicable questions of Jewish ritual law, the history of their design, and the custom of lighting Sabbath candles.

The third part of the book deals with the holidays of Purim and Sukkot. It begins with a series of photographs from the video art piece *Masks* by Esther Bires and Amitai Arnon, who for 12 years documented their nieces and nephews’ Purim celebrations in the city of Ramle and reveal the structuring of social roles among Israeli children through their costumes. The extensive treatment of the festival of Sukkot begins with the essay “The Wandering Jew’s Home and a Temple Everywhere” by Galit Hasan-Rokem, a key figure in conversations about ethnography at the Underground Academy. Daphna Ben-Shaul’s essay, “Civic Bi-longing: Politicization of the Domestic Site in *Eternal Sukkah*,” deals with the project *The Eternal Sukkah* by Sala-Manca in conjunction with Itamar Mendes-Flohr and Yeshayahu Rabinowitz and its performative aspects, and analyzes the politicization of the domestic sphere. Also in this section are documentation of the project and the model *The Eternal Sukkah* created by Ktura Manor at the request of the Ethnographic Department.

“Absentee Landscapes,” a project of the Sala-Manca Group in conjunction

with Nir Yahalom, Ktura Manor, Max Epstein, Adi Kaplan, and Shahar Carmel, includes an original copy of the Deller family's painted sukkah (Fischach, 1850? / Jerusalem, 2017) at The Israel Museum. The project is accompanied by a documentary film about the process, a model of the sukkah, and a copy of the lithograph by Yehosef Schwarz, which was the inspiration for the sukkah's depiction of Jerusalem.

The fourth and final part of the book deals with China, a temporary exhibition presented at the Ethnographic Department by Reuven Zehavi. The book concludes with activity pages for children created subsequent to conversations we had with Anat Vaknin-Appelbaum, the designer of this book and an artist who did a residency at Mamuta. Vaknin-Appelbaum invites us to relate to the didactic aspect of shaping the Israeli citizen and Museums' pedagogy.

The projects detailed in this collection are collaborative and ongoing, in dialogue with different artists, researchers, families, and communities. Throughout these projects, we attempt to challenge the apparent division between contemporary art and ethnography, between tradition, preservation and representation, in an approach we call "contemporary ethnography," where the borders between ethnography and contemporary art are blurred. This volume aims to reflect, expand, and interpret the Ethnographic Department's process that develops experimental methods of research and creation.

Diego In the process of being written, the book becomes the museum.

Lea Everything is temporary, but they're all starting points
for conversations that go beyond conventional frames. We're
adding new layers.

Michelle And now this is a new layer. Taking these projects, the

process, all of these conversations, and bringing them into a new language, into different contexts, and with new viewpoints.

Diego These meetings that happen between the art projects, between the works of scholarship, between these works and viewer and reader—this moment, where through the book, we are confronting the reader with these pieces of art-research—that's it. The book is not done to remember the exhibition. It's another invitation.

