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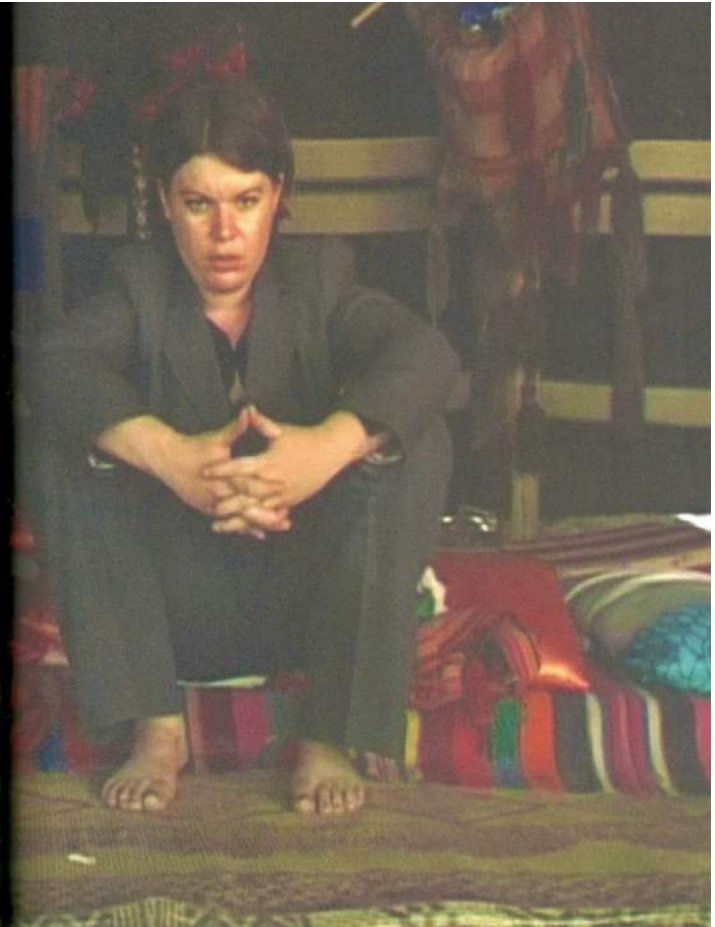


# Trust with a twist

## the engaging practice of Einat Amir

Text by Nicola Tozzi

Artist Einat Amir is a crafter of human interactions. Through the appropriation of tropes and methods that come from social science – like psychodrama, sociology and other disciplines, Amir creates performative structures, immaterial architectures in which primordial sides of “us” – us as human beings, social animals, citizens, individuals, believers, you name it – are brought to the surface and put under the spotlight. Gentle and manipulative at the same time, her practice will sound familiar to scientists as well as to actors and although it can be related to very different fields of research, it never allows the lack of precision. Like as if she would organize an expedition to “planet human”, Amir works restlessly on her projects, accurately trains her participants in order to make sure everything will go according to her strict rules. The amazing side of all this is that just because of the structure she is carefully constructing it is impossible to anticipate what will happen and how the project will evolve and this is related to the fact that her works erase the boundaries between acting and observing, between maker and consumer, between artist and audience. In a time in which the notion of authorship has been once again put under scrutiny by a reality that is ever more fluid, porous and interchangeable, Einat Amir’s practice becomes one of the most fascinating examples in the field of art-making and beyond.



Elnat Amir, "Ideal Viewer", 2009, Installation and Performance



Nicola Trezzi: *We met for the first time in New York in 2008 when you were studying at Columbia. You were already working as a practicing artist in Israel before going to New York – I remember seeing your work "Acknowledgment" (2007) in which you list all the people you knew from the art field. I would like to know how your work evolved after your stay in the United States, and, if it changed, what are the main reasons.*

Elnat Amir: I came to New York in order to become a different artist than I was. I was doing well in Israel at the time, but I was feeling like I was too attached to one medium, too connected to the same subjects. I was extremely occupied with national conflicts here and the political situation, and also with my own issues as a young dyke. I wanted to see what else I could be. What else I could be thinking of.

NT: *So how did you evolve?*

EA: I'd like to think making art is always an attempt to "evolve". I don't like this word very much in your question. But, I could definitely say that the transformation was fruitful and I was able to expand my practice and deal

with broader subjects, such as the concept of authorship and more complex questions about the role of art in society, which are important questions for me till this day.

NT: *What was the work or project that you consider your turning point? I still remember the energy of your open studio when you presented "Columbia Brad, please" (2009). Many things happened since then...*

EA: Most of my projects are a turning point for me in one way or another since I usually invest a long time in producing them and talking with other people during the process. I feel like I am a different person after each major piece I make. I can point out "Ideal Viewer" (2009) as my first attempt to combine participatory aspects to the piece, and "Enough About You" (2011) as my first large-scale production that made me feel like I could work on a bigger scale and still preserve the intimacy I care for in the work.

NT: *How do you define the participatory aspect of your work within the context of visual art? When we speak about participation we can't help but thinking about re-*

*lational aesthetics and yet your work is so different than that. At the same time relational artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick are teaching at Columbia so maybe there is an influence...*

EA: I have noticed that you're eating pasta on your Skype profile picture, and that I am drinking iced tea in mine. It's like we're having lunch! I do feel connected to the notion of relational aesthetics and I definitely see Tiravanija as an influence. However the artists I speak with the most in my head are Tino Sehgal and choreographer Jérôme Bel. Both are much more personal than artists like Tiravanija or Gillick whom I feel are trying to make a general observation about human interactions and artistic politics. Personally I am really trying to create artworks that are attempting to get to know their participants and to create very specific relationships with them. I also care about making the experience as rewarding as possible, to build some kind of trust, that comes with a twist; but every time you trust someone I guess there is a twist at some point.

NT: *I am curious about this desire to create trust, to have a personal relationship with the viewer, which is exactly what relational aesthetic misses – which makes it a kind of populist art. Why this desire? And what makes the art field so suitable for your kind of investigations?*

EA: I guess it comes out of two notions: First, I think that our brain is a limited pond of ideas, and in order to not keep repeating myself in different variations, I am choosing to release control of my piece and in a way I let the participants lead the piece to wherever they want it to go. Second, as I said I am really troubled by the role of visual art in today's society, specifically in galleries and museums. I feel like there is no real justification for it except for being a new church – I think a person should feel when they enter a gallery that they come to a place where they can ask questions about their life, and about life in general.

NT: *I completely agree with you and yet I would like to ask – following your paragon with the church – whether*



Elnat Amir, "Enough About You", 2011, Performance, LHM Performance Studio



Installation shot of Einar Amir's "Our Best Intentions" in Petach Tikva Museum of Art, photo by Claf Seig



*your understanding of the museum is 'dogmatic' or not. In other words, do you enjoy a painting show? Or do you feel that art has to go to a specific direction, whether it is yours or that of Tino Sehgal or Jérôme Bel? What is conservative to you?*

EA: It's interesting that you agree with me and yet the two major shows you recently curated were painting shows – weren't they? So besides being cheeky, I think we both don't really want to dismiss painting as irrelevant. Painting, in potential, can be everything performance could be, or at least this my wishful thinking. I am hesitant about painting as I am hesitant about objects in general. Everything that is a pure form of commodification and is marketed to us as high culture should be suspicious. Sometimes it could transcend beyond it but it doesn't happen very often.

NT: *Let's talk about your project "Our Best Intentions"*

*(2013-14). Please explain the structure, the premise, and its goals. I also would like to know if you see any connection between your work and the notions of readymade and appropriation.*

EA: The space in "Our Best Intentions" is divided into four areas. The audience is invited to come into the space and choose in which area they would like to seat. Then, four group guides walk into the space. Each guide is coming from a slightly different professional field, all located in the spectrum between therapy and performing arts. Each of these guides is joining one of the four populated areas. Then, each of these guides in their turn will lead their group in a unique 15-minute workshop designed as a collaboration between myself and that specific guide. While one group is going through a workshop all the other three groups are watching them. After 15 minutes the spotlight fades out and fades in on another group that



Ernst Amir, "Our Best Intentions", 2013, still image from video

then will take part in its own workshop with its own guide. There is also a video installation that is displayed in the same space in regular gallery hours. It also has four groups in it: each one is performing according to a different scenario, lead by a different guide.

I wouldn't really describe my practice as "readymade" or "appropriation", although I think it is a nice reference to think that, like Duchamp a hundred years ago, we are aiming to rethink the notion of what is worthy of being displayed. However it is more about the exploration of human behavior and its artistic potential I would say.

NT: *What is the difference between "Our Best Intentions" and another ambitious project entitled "Enough About You"? How do you see their impact on the audience?*

EA: "Enough About You" sets up a lab-like situation where chance determines whether you get to be a participant or a viewer. If you are chosen to participate you are asked to go inside a booth with a stranger and have an intimate conversation that is monitored by a voice coming out of a speaker. If you are chosen to be a viewer you get to stay outside the booths and observe other people interacting with strangers through the glass windows of the booths, but you cannot hear their conversations. In both "Our Best Intentions" and "Enough About You" there is a participatory principle where the audience is required to take an active part in order to experience the work. In some ways "Enough About You" is like a younger sister of "Our Best Intentions". "Our Best Intentions" is much more complex conceptually and offers a much more layered experience that can be both emotional and intellectual and aim to enable a high level of self-reflection, whereas "Enough About You" offers a thrill and a rush that are more concentrated.

NT: *When was the first time you involved the audience in your work? How did you feel when it first happened?*

EA: Five years ago, I was working with actors on my previous "Performa" project – "Ideal Viewer". The piece had two stages: on the first stage I had three actors improvising according to character descriptions I provided for them. Then, a few weeks later, the second stage consisted of viewers of the first stage that invited my characters to act according to scenarios they proposed to me. The second part took place in people's homes, all over New York. It was overwhelmingly exciting to watch the outcome. This project made me realize that involving the audience in some kind of a partnership could make the work go to places I could never anticipate and really challenge me as an artist.

NT: *Many things have happened in the last months: there was a war in Israel, right after which you got a new wonderful studio in Tel Aviv, which in the meantime also became my city since I just moved here for a new project. I know this is a very delicate issue but I would like you to tell me how your work as an artist was influenced by the recent events and how do you see your role, your relationship to society and the future of your practice.*

EA: I am always excited to see artists' real time reactions to the current political and local crisis. I think our job as artists is to use our voice in a way that will influence reality. At the same time, not all art and not all artists have the ability to respond immediately, or even to respond within a context that is comprehensive as a response to a specific event. When I am staying in my home country, it's impossible for me to not take upon myself the duty of being a citizen as well as being an artist. And at times of war, this job can be as demanding as the other one. So, I am trying to use my voice in more than one way. I still strongly believe in artworks that transcend the here-and-now; but I think that as human beings we don't have the right to ignore injustice when it surrounds us. In the last months I participated in many demonstrations, signed petitions and expressed anger and frustration anywhere I could. It was difficult to simultaneously keep working on my ongoing projects, and I do feel my enhanced sense of social responsibility had effected my works, but more importantly, since my recent practice is addressing the human condition in a way that leaves the final word to my audience, it would be interesting to try in my next performances to look into how the last summer has changed us as a society, or not.