

# DEALING WITH POWER

## An Interview with Einat Amir

Probing the multi-fold relationship between artist, live performer, audience, and video in different contexts, Einat Amir's emotionally charged scenarios test the limits of "professional" artistic practice. We talked to her about gender and power relations, delegation, and outsourcing, feelings and awkwardness.

BY MARCO ANTONINI

*Marco Antonini - Many of your earlier works dealt with issues of gender and self-representation; more recently, you have been interested in power relations and the meaning and potential of the exhibition space. How do these two aspects of your work connect and coexist in your practice?*

**Einat Amir** - I believe the key words for me are "Power Relations." In all of my works you can find some kind of a reflection on the effect that social structures have on individuals or individuality. As I only deal with social realms I have first-hand experience with, the shift from gender issues and the experience of being a gay woman to the art world and its rules and presumptions was almost obvious to me. In 2004 it was urgent for me to deconstruct my identity as an Israeli and as a lesbian, and more recently I tried hard to dissect the contemporary notion of "professional art." Another thing that happened through time, to be honest, is that I grew up and evolved as an artist, and so I came to realize that I don't have to be completely exposed or to hurt myself in order to make something that speaks genuinely about life.

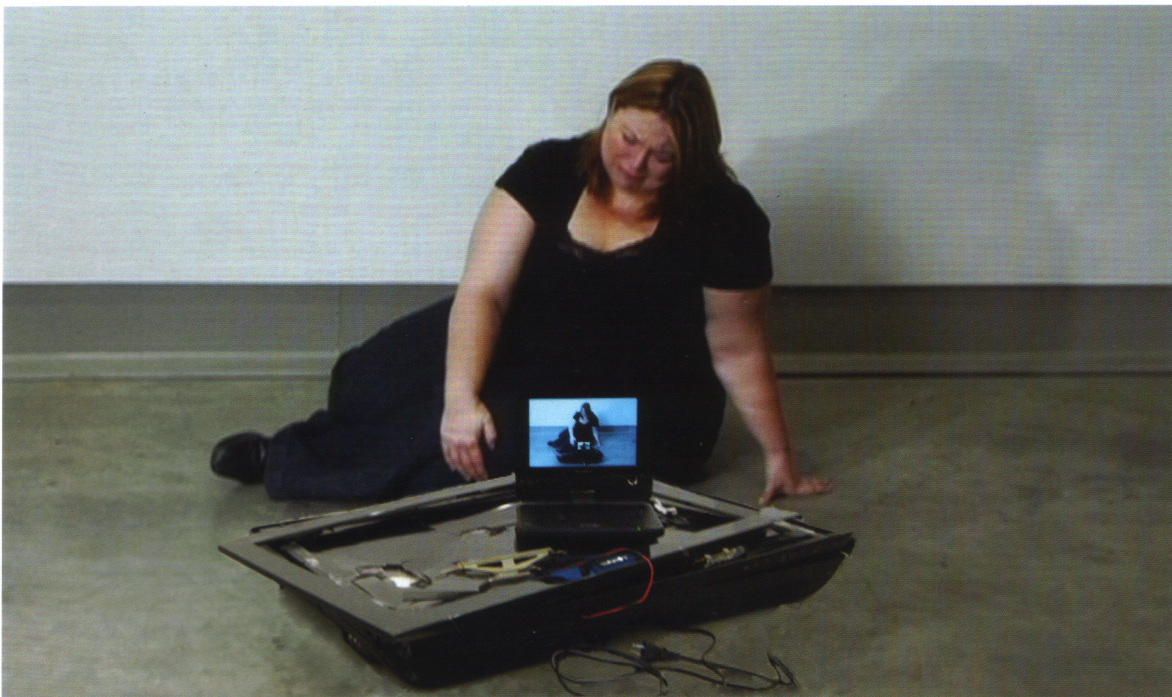
*M.A. - What is the importance of delegation and outsourcing in your performance acts?*

**E.A.** - Recently, after an intense period of work, I began feeling like my brain is a limited structure, and even when I come up with a new idea, its format will always be somewhat similar to my previous ideas. At that point I decided to "outsource"—I started involving other people in the work. I

am trying to give the involved people as much freedom as possible to be who they are, or who they choose to be in the moment, within the frame of each piece. I try to find people who I wouldn't be communicating with otherwise and to embrace contradictions, eccentricities, and confusion in order to get as far as I can out of myself and my immediate associations.

*M.A. - Your work often probes the personal feelings of both audience and actors. Do you consider them objectified "victims" of your work? Where do you trace your personal line in respect to their psychological and physical space?*

**E.A.** - In my personal life, I often feel uncomfortable in certain social situations. It is very common that I say something that I feel I shouldn't have said, or do something that I think was not appropriate according to the cultural code of behavior. It happens to me all the time because I travel a lot between countries, and each place has its own manners and customs. I absolutely hate this feeling. As a sensitive person it makes me really self-conscious, and often it makes me reflect on my physical presence in a much wider sense. But it is also this very feeling that I try to evoke with my works—I want the viewers to be aware of themselves, their presence in the space, and their part in the installation. One of the best strategies I found is to make them witness or even participate in a situation that challenges their presumptions and expectations from the art space and from themselves within it. As much as this emotion of awkwardness is not the most pleasant one, it is definitely one of the emotions that makes us feel most present, and alive.



**Einat Amir, *Ideal Viewer*, 2009**, video installation and performance (still). All images are courtesy of the artist and Scaramouche Gallery, NYC





Phase 3, 2010, performance and video installation.

Since there's always an element of choice in whether you participate in the work or not, I don't see it as victimizing. And anyway, feeling something is always better than being safe and protected.

**M.A.-** *With Ideal Viewer you have brought your delegated performative acts out of the gallery and into the private homes of your audience, where awkwardness and the reaction of the public must always be considered. How do you factor such unpredictable variables into the conceptualization of your performances?*

**E.A.-** *Ideal viewer* tries to contain all the "external" aspects of the artwork within the work itself: the artist and her personal biography and motivations, the art space, the art object, the commercial elements, art criticism, and obviously, the viewer. In this piece there is also an important element of myself giving up control over the piece and handing over the reins to the actors. Beyond a brief character description about their parts, they were free to improvise and interpret their part in any way they chose. I had no control over what they said or did in the final performance, so the outcome was something I couldn't predict.

When I was invited to create a new version of this piece for PERFORMA09, I thought it would be interesting to complete the cycle by spreading the authority even further. Three people who viewed the first performance at the gallery got to invite the characters (an interpreter, an ex-boyfriend, and a crying woman) to their homes and to use them for their own needs for one hour. This experience turned out to be a very significant one for me. It is too early for me to say how it really effected my practice, but it definitely raised ideas in me about ways of working and giving shape to this new material I discovered: the audience.

**M.A.-** *You have been using video to document most of your performances. How does the complexity of your work translate on video? Is the final result different, and if so why?*

**E.A.-** With my performances I have been using video documentation in two different ways. One of them is for documentation per se, and the other way is with the intention of creating a new work from it. The decision about the intention of the shooting is always made in advance. Furthermore, I see the videographer and the camera as an integral parts of the piece, when I choose to use them. I always take into account the ways they change people's reactions and people's sense of significance. It's somewhat similar to the way I use plasma screens both as a display method and as objects, with consideration of all the cultural baggage that they carry (symbols of technological progress, luxury goods, home entertainment, etc.) Sometimes the performance itself is the central part of the process. Sometimes it's just another step on the way to a new video.

**M.A.-** *What are you currently working on? Is there any in-progress (or im-possible) project you would like to talk about?*

**E.A.-** I am currently working on a large scale performance titled *Enough About You*. I am creating a kind of observation lab for physical encounters, which is controlled by a predetermined template. The work explores meeting as a real action and as an image, from the traditional standing point of two people face-to-face. The premier of this project will be presented by Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden, which is the first combined production studio and arena for visual art performance in Europe. The performance will travel to other countries in the near future. ■