

## Revisiting Israeli Art Canon: The Story of *Mashkof* Group, 1968-1970

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### Abstract

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This historiographical article's main goal is to fill the critical gap in the historical narrative of Israeli art by uncovering the activity of a previously unstudied, yet highly influential, *Mashkof* group - a multidisciplinary group of painters, poets and musicians operated in Jerusalem during the years 1968 to 1970. The group aimed to challenge old forms of art made in the city and to undermine institutional conventions of art presentation. *Mashkof* operated during an important era in Israeli art as it shifted from art of the object to conceptual art. While *Mashkof* is not considered to be part of the local, narrow-based, art canon, its role in this conceptual turn is crucial. This article will fill this lacuna in the research of Israeli art and argue that *Mashkof's* unique group activity formed the basis for the growth of conceptual art and conceptualism in Jerusalem as early as the late 1960s, and established the institutional and public acceptance that allowed its nationwide spread in the 1970s.

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**Keywords:** Israeli Art, artists groups, proto- conceptual art, 1960s, 1970s.

### Introduction

The late 1960s and early 1970s are a fascinating and turbulent time in Israeli art history. Much like the art hubs in Europe and the United States at the time, Israeli art responded to surrounding external and internal changes in the art scene; both the art world and art production and consumptions had undergone tremendous transformations. Definite Israeli art canon, traditionally divided into decades, focuses on two cardinal—yet separately distinct—movements in post-1948 Israeli art history: the abstract doctrine of the *Ofakim Hadashim* group (whose operative peak was in the early 1950s but went on through the decade) and the conceptual art of the 1970s; These two canonical styles are divided by the 1960s, widely perceived as the “changing of the guards” in terms of period and style.

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Israeli art historiography presents this decade mainly via events that took place in the city of Tel Aviv, primarily the artistic developments around "Tazpit" Exhibitions (1964), the series of "Autumn" Exhibitions (1965-1970), both at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and the *10+* (*Eser Plus*) Tel Aviv-based group led by Raffi Lavie. As for Jerusalem, notable mentions of the city with regards to its artists and art scene of the period are sorely lacking. This is surprising, given that just a few years later, during the 1970s, Jerusalem received much attention, and was eventually known as the "capital" of Israeli conceptual art.

Yet something must have happened in late-60s-Jerusalem that paved the way for the canonical artistic prosperity of the 1970s. This paper approaches this question via historiography discussion of *Mashkof*, a multidisciplinary Jerusalem-based group of artists which operated in 1968-1970. It fills a lacuna in the research of Israeli art which has thus far barely acknowledged *Mashkof*. The absence of research on the group is incompatible with the avant-garde and innovative nature of its projects, and the fact that some of the most prominent figures in Israeli art and culture were among its members. Nevertheless, the historic account of this study demonstrates the importance that *Mashkof* does have in Israeli art history, showing its key role toward the conceptual turn in Israeli art: *Mashkof* prepared the public and laid down the local institutional groundwork in Jerusalem.

The first two sections of this paper explore the catalyst for *Mashkof*'s formation and outline its activities. *Mashkof* was comprised of interdisciplinary artists – painters, poets and musicians – and displayed its praxis in various forms, including exhibitions, happenings, and poetry as well as painting events. Its activity was innovative for the period, setting it apart from the rest of the Jerusalem art scene. It led a substantial change and attracted the Jerusalem crowds with projects that proposed a local interpretation to foreign avant-garde art practices, making new forms of art approachable to local art enthusiasts. This change trickled down and transformed local art institutions as well.

The third section of this paper discusses the affinity between *Mashkof* and its parallel Tel-Aviv group, *10+*. While *Mashkof* remains not more than a footnote in Israeli art historiography, *10+* is deeply rooted in Israeli art canon and is an integral part of it. The story of *Mashkof* has long been missing from research, and in exposing it we reveal the mutual influence and the overt and covert competition between the two aforementioned Israeli art groups. The last section discusses the influence of *Mashkof* on later developments in Israeli art and in particular Jerusalem art scene.

This article's main goal is to fill the critical gap in the historical narrative of Israeli art by uncovering the activity of a previously unstudied, yet highly influential, group. This paper is based on a thorough historiographical study of Israeli art in the 1960s.

The process entailed the collection and analysis of countless archival materials: newspaper clips, exhibition invitations and posters, as well as personal interviews with past group members and other influential artistic figures of the era.

## 1. 1968-1969: A Multidisciplinary Group

Interviews with past *Mashkof* members reveal that the group, formed in 1968, initially engaged in joint work in the cafés and pubs of Jerusalem – the Bacchus Club, Soramelo Basement, Café Ta'amon, to name a few. Many of the artists recall the founding meeting at the home of Mar-Haim, right above Ta'amon Café (D. Ben Shaul, personal communication, August 8, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Among its members were painters David (Dadi) Ben Shaul, Zvi Tolkovsky, Avraham Ofek, Yoram Rozov, Ivan Schwebel, Yitzhak Gaon, Shaul Shats, Milka Cizik, Pini Moshe and Tzivia Weinman, later joined by Yehoshua Neustein and Michael Gitlin; poets Yehuda Amichai, Gershon Ben-David, Dennis Silk, Harold Schimmel, Yossi Ofek and composer/musician Yossi Mar-Haim.

Two versions co-exist regarding the formation of Mashkof. In a local newspaper interview with Gideon Ofrat, prominent group member Dadi Ben-Shaul was quoted saying:

*"Mashkof* had been formed because the Artist House was in an overly conservative stage at that point, which stopped newcomers from introducing their own ideas. We tried to get in from the outside. It all started with a few guys working in my studio – Gitlin, Lev-Tov, Shats and Avishai Eyal – and I was thinking about keeping that going. I said: why shouldn't I, being a relative veteran at the scene, get a group going. So we gathered up more members and then, as a group, we had more opportunities." (Ofrat, *Mashkof - Bihemians in Red-Blue*, 1984)

Yossi Ofek, on the other hand, told Ofrat a different story:

*"It was one day in Soramelo's, after more than enough shots, that Tzivia, Dadi and I started to toy with the idea of artists creating alongside their audience. The idea was that the piece would first be dictated by the artist, and then evolves according to the audience's response. I did poetry, Dadi and Tzivia painted. We got in touch with Mar-Haim who was in charge of music, and *Mashkof* was born." (Ofrat, *Mashkof - Bihemians in Red-Blue*, 1984)*

Each variation focuses on a different aspect of the Jerusalem art scene into which *Mashkof* entered in the late 1960s. Ben-Shaul mostly emphasizes the inter-art politics that crushed young artists, implying that the conservative style was prevalent in the city.

The latter is what is explicitly stressed by Yossi Ofek's version, who considered *Mashkof* to have been an opportunity to introduce new and experimental art practices. Whatever the case may be, the friendship and social bonds between its members are a core factor in both narratives. While a single truth cannot be determined, there is an immense importance to the political and artistic Jerusalemite backdrop the two versions imply.

First, the dominance of the 'German Clique' – a group of German-born artists who had immigrated to Israel in the 30s and settled in Jerusalem—although gradually subsiding, still prevailed. The remarkable past of this unofficial group is comprised of two primary elements that formed their core values: the opening of New Bezalel in 1935 - an arts and crafts school built upon the Bauhaus ideas migrated by the artists from their country of origin; and the establishment of the Jerusalem Artist Society, with its first Artist House opened in collaboration with the Jerusalem municipality in 1949. The individual style of artists comprising the 'German Clique' was inspired by their heritage and homelands, primarily German Expressionism. The collaboration with the Jerusalem municipality juxtaposing with the national Zionist context they had come to know in Israel, gave birth to mostly figurative and propagated art.

The city in all of its glory took central stage in many of the works displayed between the 1930s and 1960s. Yet the Artist House, heart of the Society, was shut down in 1964 due to local bureaucracy, and would reopen only three years later. During that time the Society was nothing more than a list of members, and in fact did not actively exist.<sup>2</sup> As the Artist House reopened in 1967, discord prevailed among the managing society members - its members coming from various cultural strata and of various ages (Artist Society, 1967). Alongside the Artist Society's turbulences, the second political stronghold, New Bezalel, also underwent numerous changes in the early 60s.

After going for nearly a decade without proper management, in 1964 Dan Hofner was appointed director of the institute, and for the first time in many years the school was directed by a visionary and active leader. His appointment marked the beginning of an ideological shift away from the founding generation of German origins. Hofner's arrival at New Bezalel ushered in a new era of accelerated academization and change in pedagogy (Ofrat 1987). Unlike the Artist House, New Bezalel welcomed the newer generations, and young artists (some of them members of *Mashkof*) became teachers in the school.

The Israel Museum is another venerated institute in the Jerusalemite and Israeli art scenes. It had opened in 1965 and was a notable expansion of the Bezalel National Museum founded by Boris Schatz in 1906 (Mashiach, 1964).

The two institutions differed in ideology and content, and the late 1960s were a critical period for Israel Museum's separation from its past. If the Bezalel National Museum, like the 'German clique', viewed Jerusalem and Israeli nationalism as a prominent, recurring subject matters for local art, the Israel Museum looked outward, craving art from abroad, so-called "universal" art. The new program of the Israel Museum was an intriguing amalgam of nativeness with contemporary cultural dialogue with the West (The Israel Museum, 2005). The young curators—Yonah Fischer and Marten Weil—produced exhibitions that were contemporary in nature.

A review of the exhibitions showcased at the museum throughout 1965-1975 portrays a careful blend of international art side by side with veteran and contemporary Israeli art.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding, Jerusalemite artists operating in the latter years of the 1960s received only partial acknowledgement from the museum and its curators (Majaro-Mintz, 1970).

*Mashkof* began operating in the midst of these developments. Unsurprisingly, the inauguration of *Mashkof* took place at Volkswagen dealership in the city (owned by a group member's friend), a far cry from the official Jerusalem art scene. The event—several months prior to the first exhibition and officially titled "My Car" - brought all members of the founding group together in an innovative art happening; they played improvised music, read poetry, painted their works over the shop's walls and displayed previously-prepared paintings (B. Brent, personal communication, January 10, 2015). It was a chance for the members to be familiarized with one another and prepare to collaborate on their first exhibition as a group. The chosen location and its experimental nature convey the non-traditional character of the group. It is this discrete tone that would characterize *Mashkof's* short but significant activity in Jerusalem, thus awakening the city from its slumber.

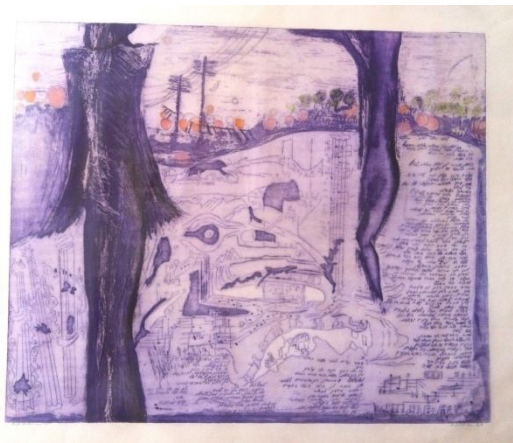
*Mashkof's* first public project was an exhibition titled "Combined Arts: Painting Poem Music". The exhibition opened at a well-known commercial gallery in Jerusalem named Engel Gallery (7 October 1968). The exhibition's review in *Davar* dated October 9 1968 mentioned the location was chosen because: "we first tried to realize our vision via the Artists Society, but nothing happened". Interestingly, the opening of the first exhibition took place on the same week as the traditional "Autumn Exhibition" of the Artists Society at the Artist House. One would deduce that this was a response to the Artist House's rejection, a rebellious defiance. The tie with Engel Gallery is also intriguing, since the gallery was "touristy" in nature, and mostly sold outdated paintings depicting Jerusalem, whereas *Mashkof* sought to create new art.

In a radio interview regarding the exhibition, musician Yossi Mar-Haim explained the concept behind that first *Mashkof* exhibition:

"The idea is to combine poetry, music, and painting in such a way that a painter takes a text by a poet, a written text, and rewrites it as a painting. That is, not only be inspired by it, but the song could be read in painting. Next comes the musician, in this case myself, and adds certain guidelines within the painting, as aesthetically as I can. I don't write in regular notes, for those I would just put an aptitude. I want the musician who plays it, a certain type of musician, an improviser, to be inspired by the painting as well, from lines of texts that may pop up because perhaps they appear bolder, and also by my instructions which include technical directions and graphic components."<sup>4</sup>

The exhibition showcased 20 artists, paired off according to the three categories, comprising the name of the exhibition (painting, poetry and music). After prolonged collaboration, the trios (or frequently duos) presented prints which they called "poem-painting"; several were accompanied by a musical soundtrack, as described in the exhibition's review. The collaborative piece of Yossi Ofek, Tzivia Weinman and Yossi Mar-Haim, as one example, presents a dialogue between Ofek's lyrics and Weinman's visual depictions, and the graphic elements in the piece's center representing Mar-Haim's music (Figure.1).

**Figure 1: *My Dear Orphan Son*, Tzivia Weinman, Yossi Ofek and Yossi Mar-Chaim 1968.**



**Source: Tzivia Weinman and Yossi Ofek Collection.**

The exhibition's opening night featured a musical performance in which the pieces were played using such non-traditional methods as blowing into gardening hoses, or hitting piano keys with axes (Balas, 2000).

The Jerusalem Post's weekly Gallery Guide section on 18 October 1968 reviewed the exhibition and claimed that music accompanied the exhibition throughout its run. The intermediary characterizing the pieces and the exhibition was an innovative practice, mainly familiar to artists who had spent some time in Europe and the US of the 1960s - regions buzzing with happenings and Fluxus events. Members of *Mashkof*, the prominent of whom indeed interned in such art hubs as Paris and New York, brought the zeitgeist to Jerusalem. Unlike many young Israeli artists who had studied about artistic developments by reading about them in sporadically appearing art journals (Fischer & Manor-Friedman, 2008), the uninterrupted familiarity of *Mashkof* members with overseas tidings was fundamental to their work. Reviews of the first exhibition were enthusiastic, and *Mashkof* enjoyed ample media coverage. The group was depicted as young and daring, its members as - "news", in *LaMerchav* article on October 10, 1968 B. Yigal described the members as "the very best of Jerusalem's up-and-coming artists".

The second exhibition, "Mashkof Red Blue Mezzanine 220x125", took place at the middle floor of the Artist House on January 4 1969. Use of the mezzanine was granted to the group for both the exhibition and for continued year-round public work. "Red Blue" was described by art critiques as an introductory exhibition, and the invitation carries the first mention of the name *Mashkof* (Ronen, Turned on at the Jerusalem Artist House, 1969). Strikingly, *Mashkof* gained use of the middle floor of the Artist House only three months after the first provocative exhibition was explicitly rejected by the very location.

The "Red Blue" exhibition was comprised solely of the group's painters. Each of them purchased a standard 220x125 cm piece of plywood and brought it to the Artist House, laboring from 8AM until opening time at 8PM. Throughout the day the artists worked side by side; some of the poets were present, although they did not take an active part in the actual exhibition (Z. Tolkovsky and H. Schimmel, personal communication, March 25, 2014). The public was invited to view the artists at work, and the crowds were indeed drawn to the Artist House (D. Ben Shaul, personal communication, August 8, 2013). After a day's work, Jerusalem's city art lovers were treated to an exhibition compiled of 11 large plywood boards spread across the small-spaced, low-ceilinged mezzanine in (mostly) red and blue, featuring various styles and subjects - from figurative de Kooning-nudes to Rauschenberg-style assemblages. The exhibition was a success, and reviews hailed the group as "those who will put Jerusalem back on the map" (Ronen, Turned on at the Jerusalem Artist House, 1969). The practice of working in front of the public was inherent to the exhibition, and unique to it. This performative act was new in the Jerusalem scene, and *Mashkof* was the bearer of news.

The third exhibition, "Mashkof 3 – Apartment at the Mezzanine", opened on February 10, 1969 at the Artist House. It marked a creative apex after eight months of intensive group activity. In preparation for the exhibition, the artists collected various scraps from a Jerusalem trash pit, renovated and painted them in fluorescent colors and installed a "standard apartment" in the Artist House mezzanine. The "walls" of the apartment were adorned with artwork by the participating artists. These included paintings and framed poetry. At the end of the exhibition all items were auctioned off. Group members cooperated throughout the preparation period, and apart from the paintings and poems, all furnishings were the result of collaborative work. Although the exhibition's poster seemingly invited the public to attend another showcase of multidisciplinary art, in reality, visitors were overwhelmed by a full-blown artistic environment: bedroom, living room, hall, kitchen, heating, sewage system, bathroom and shower, and even a sewing machine and a baby cot (Ronen, *Pop Environment Integrated with Painting*, 1969); the bed in the bedroom was occupied two mannequins, a man and a woman, and the three toilets played out a recording by Mar-Haim (Segen-Cohen, 1969). A photograph from the Jerusalem Post captures some of the mezzanine setting (Figure 2).

"Apartment" was a comprehensive piece: each item was a standalone work of art which, put together, engaged all of the senses. This practice, alongside intermediary and public creation, was directly influenced by European and American art scene of the 1960s. Interestingly, the first attempt at creating an artistic environment was in an exhibition named "Labyrinth" which took place in 1967 at the Israel Museum (two year prior to "Apartment"). The exhibition was curated by Yona Fischer who invited seven artists to create a collaborative multimedia and site-specific installation inside the museum as described in the exhibition catalogue, "Labyrinth: an Environment by 7 Israeli Artists", Israel Museum, 1967. Nevertheless, it was an ill-fated attempt, and "Labyrinth" did not live up to the expectations of its curator (Yona Fischer, personal communication, December 15, 2014). The *Mashkof* exhibition, on the other hand, was the first successful manifestation of artistic environment in Israel, as demonstrated in contemporary critiques comparing between the two exhibitions.



**Figure 2: Photo documentation of “Mashkof 3 - Apartment in the Mezzanine”**



*Source: Jerusalem Post, February 21 1969, 13*

After “Apartment” it seemed that the group’s activity somewhat subsided, at least in terms of collaborative exhibitions at the Artist House. Yet the group’s presence remained in social gatherings in local hangouts or at their communal living spaces in Abu Tor, Yamin Moshe and Ein Kerem (Y. Mar-Haim, personal communication, March 30, 2014). It was in these neighborhoods—primarily Abu Tor and along the invisible line separating the eastern city and the villages—that the artists took up residence in derelict Arab homes which they renovated. In the heart of no-man’s land, the houses were open and bustling with activity at all hours of the day, bolstering a communal atmosphere which contributed to the artistic creation (Z. Tolkovsky and H. Schimmel, personal communication, March 25, 2014). Therefore, the uniqueness of *Mashkof* lay, among others, in the social bonds between its members and the will to work together and examine how personal and communal creativity could be driven by joint work. Apart from the projects it produced, *Mashkof* manifested in the daily collaborative creation of its members.

In keeping up with this communal spirit, the group’s poets would hold private and public poetry reading nights in Jerusalem. Recordings of these events unveil the poets reading out their contemporary works, accompanied by improvised music. During the readings and intervals, unconventional instrumental music was played. It was disharmonious, void of clear rhythm or melody, performed in part using classic instruments such as the piano, flute and bass – but in grating melody and non-standard fashion (for instance, a piano played by use of axe). The classic instruments were joined by music from synthesizers and ready-made music from various media devices. Other elements such as banging on objects, clapping, table dragging, screeching, whistling, etc., were also part of the musical affair.<sup>5</sup>Yossi Mar-Haim reminisces of these nights:

"The context of my time in the US is clear, one can hear synthesizers and hard-to-produce sound effects. It was a type of ready-made poetry influenced by Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky. We knew the Beat Generation and the concept of poetry nights that combined readings and music simultaneously. They still do that in Manhattan. No improvisation or action is unexplained. I play while reading. I improvise the music as I listen."(Y. Mar-Haim, personal communication, March 30, 2014)

Such events were yet another step in the group members' attempts at breaching the conservative boundaries of the Jerusalem art scene and expose local art lovers to avant-garde, contemporary, international art in the spirit of the global 60s.

## 2. Towards the 1970s: Group of painters

In the summer of 1969 some of the non-painter members of Mashkof left Jerusalem. Their departure essentially cut off collaboration with poets and musicians, and the group ceased to exist as a multidisciplinary troop and consisted only of painters. It was at that time that the painters of *Mashkof* began to appreciate the political power embodied in taking an active role in the Artist House. The minutes of an Artist Society meeting from November 12 1969 reveal a noticeable presence of *Mashkof* painters who until then were mostly absent from such gatherings (Artist Society, Member meeting minutes, 1969). Moreover, the handwritten record names the artists one after another, hinting that they had been sitting together, thereby denoting their presence as a group.

The group operated in the mezzanine of the Artist House throughout 1969. The last exhibition held at the mezzanine and related to the group was called "Conflict of Pieces". The exhibition included many artists from the Artist Society alongside *Mashkof* members. For two nights, on December 29 1969 and January 5 1970 (one week apart), the artists joined together at the artist house and worked in front of an audience. The exhibition was comprised of these paintings, created on-site, as well as ones made in the studio (Tal, 1970). Like in previous group projects, the incorporation of the audience in the work as a performative act was significant to the exhibition. The Jerusalem crowd loved this breath of fresh air.

As Dadi Ben-Shaul put it: "*Mashkof* dominated Jerusalem and reached far and wide"(D. Ben Shaul, personal communication, August 8, 2013). The Artist Society, only a year earlier so vehemently reluctant to host the first *Mashkof* exhibit, was now collaborating with the group and its young members. The freshness of *Mashkof* had a considerable effect on the exhibition. It seems that thanks to them, the Artist House had become an attractive hub of youthful creation, at least for the time being.

Public performance as in "Conflict of Pieces" was a guiding principle since the very first days of *Mashkof*, and prevailed throughout the two years of its existence. Dadi Ben-Shaul tells of another radical example of public performance played to an audience at PusPus club. In this event, the public was invited to see group members paint over models wrapped in toilet paper (D. Ben Shaul, personal communication, August 8, 2013). It is reminiscent of Yves Klein's 1960 "Anthropometries de l'Époque bleue" show in Paris. Klein invited the public to view nude models painted blue, creating body prints on paper to the sounds of "The Monotone Symphony". Ben-Shaul spent time in Paris during the time Klein was active, therefore it is quite plausible that he knew of this ground-breaking performance and migrated it to Jerusalem.

In March 1 1970, ShaulShats sent out a postcard to ZviTolkovsky, and possibly other members of the group as well. It read: "You are invited to a *Mashkof* meeting, to be held on Monday 9.3.70 at 7:00 at Ta'amon. The purpose of this meeting is to allow the continued activity of *Mashkof* even without the participation of all of its founding painters. In order to revive *Mashkof* it was proposed that whenever the founding members of the group (at least three of them) initiate an activity, they could do so under the name *Mashkof* (should this proposal be accepted)."<sup>6</sup>

A document dated March 9 1970 lays down the *Mashkof* charter, nearly two years after the group's foundation (*Mashkof* Charter, 1970):

1. Number of members shall not exceed 15.
2. Admission of new members requires the consent of half of *Mashkof* members.
3. If a memorandum is sent out to all *Mashkof* members concerning a project or gathering, and only three attend, their decision on any discussed matter is final.
4. A member of *Mashkof* who is absent from up to three consecutive projects shall no longer be considered a group member.

It appears that after two years of collaborative work, the members of *Mashkof* wished to make their group formal and manage themselves accordingly – official meetings, memorandums, obligation to participate, etc. If at first it was the social/familiar context that bound the group together, by its second year of existence the dominant characteristic was political advancement, whether personal or as a group. These efforts were an attempt to preserve their status.

April 1970 was a bustling and busy month for *Mashkof* under the new charter. It began with two simultaneous exhibitions: "Odd Objects" which opened on April 4 1970 at the Artist House, and "4x4" which opened a day later at Engel Gallery. The two shows were vastly different from one another.

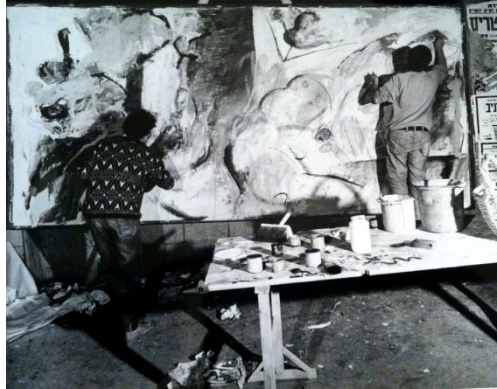
First, in the number of participating artists: While "4x4" was comprised of works by four artists, all of whom were *Mashkof* members, "Odd Objects" was open to all the Artist Society's members. Additionally, "4x4" was a painting-only exhibition in which each artist created pieces inspired by the other three participants, totaling in sixteen paintings; the Artist House, on the other hand, presented a large environment-like exhibition - an eclectic collection of "Odd Objects" gathered from the homes of the artists and their friends: a collection of Japanese art, African religious objects, junk, ready-made, collages and assemblages - "not all of the objects are odd, and not all of the exhibits are objects", as described by Miriam Tal in *Masa* at April 10, 1970. The press published favorable critiques of both exhibitions, noting them to be a refreshing change from the mundane Jerusalem art scene.<sup>7</sup>The *Mashkof*-Artist Society collaboration on "Conflict of Pieces" and "Odd Objects" exposes the extent of the group's impact of the Jerusalem art scene.

The veteran artists of the society came together to produce exhibitions that were unlike anything seen before in Jerusalem, clearly influenced by the group.

Yet another interesting activity took place in April 1970 in the form of a joint project by Yitzhak Gaon and Shaul Shats. The two members of *Mashkof* rented out a large billboard in the city and painted it together overnight (Figure 3). The collaborative piece was on public display for three weeks, the entire rental period. The project was not only a defiant act against galleries that refused to allow exhibitions by all artists, it was also defined by Martin Weil, in "Art in the Street of Jerusalem" article in *Haaretz*, May 29 1970, as an innovative local practice - an act of a socio-ecologic nature: art in the public sphere. Weil mentioned the action as one of the first step toward new art production in Jerusalem and Israel.

The last reported exhibition of *Mashkof* opened at Safrai Gallery Basement on May 14 1970 under the name "Mashkof 5 hosts Michelangelo". The artists were asked to paint pieces inspired by the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The fact that the exhibition was held at the basement of Safrai Gallery—only a month after "4x4" ran at Engel Gallery—indicates that the commercial galleries had grown interested in the group following its dominance of the city. Neither the theme of this particular exhibition nor the pieces were groundbreaking in and of themselves; however, this exhibition stands out as hard proof of the competition—direct or indirect, overt or covert—with the Tel-Aviv group 10+.

**Figure 3: Photo documentation of the joint act of Yitshak Gaon and Shaul Shatz on a local billboard**



**Source: YaffaGaon Collection**

### 3. *Mashkof* and 10+

Israeli art historiography gives little attention to *Mashkof*, for the most part mentioning it simply as the Jerusalemite equivalent to the Tel Avivian 10+ (Ofrat, *One Hundred Years of Art in Israel*, 1998). While 10+ was formed three years prior to *Mashkof* and preceded it in the Israeli art field, the relationship between the two cannot be said to be one-sided: *Mashkof* was affected by 10+, but the Tel Aviv entity was affected by *Mashkof* as well. The term *entity* is explicitly used because despite common conception stating 10+ was a group, it had true communal nature only during the first year of its being; after its fourth exhibition—some 13 months after its formation— 10+ ceased to exist as a group and became a one-man show led by Raffi Lavie. As early as 1969, while 10+ was still considered a collective, Lavie admitted:

“...I stayed in Israel, and felt bad about the whole thing. I decided to keep going as a sole initiator and decider. A dictator. My only crime was in keeping the name 10+. It was a good name. It was worth keeping attracting the public.” (Keren, 1969).

From 1966 onward, 10+ was practically no longer a group but an artistic entity defined by Lavie as an “exhibition production company” (Tsalmona, 1975). *Mashkof*, on the other hand, remained a group throughout its existence: the artists worked closely together even if not on the same project. The intergroup friendship bonds were consequential and affected the personal work of its members and the nature of their exhibitions. Artistic grouping and group creativity as concepts were fundamental to *Mashkof*, unlike in Lavie’s production.

There are many examples of the influence of *10+* on *Mashkof*. For one, *10+* held its first exhibition in collaboration with a business outside the art world (Maskit Fashion House), and did so well before *Mashkof's* Volkswagon happening. Second, the concept of painting in front of an audience, so fundamental for *Mashkof*, was already attempted in the second *10+* exhibition in 1966, "Large Pieces", in which all artists presented large-scale works and on opening night created a shared piece in front of the spectators (Kelev, 2008). The idea of multimedia, too—the integration of painting, music and poetry which had been the staple of *Mashkof* in its early days—was part of "Large Pieces", as electronic music, young poetry, theater, cinema and even an auction took place on opening night. Moreover, the task faced by the *Mashkof* painters in their second exhibition, "Red Blue"—large format, two dominant colors—is evocative of the fifth *10+* exhibition—In the 1967 "*10+* – an exhibition in red" the artists were asked to create in red. In a way, "Red Blue 125x220" was a conceptual merging of the two *10+* exhibitions ("Large Pieces" and "*10+* – an exhibition in red").

Although it cannot be denied that *10+* was an influencing factor, and at times a model, for *Mashkof*, yet the Jerusalem group set out on a path of its own and later also affected the TelAvivian counterpart. Thus, one can also find a clear competitive link between the two groups in the form of an exhibition in the Artist House which was overlapping with "Red Blue": It was titled "Stop! Green" and was held by the Tel Avivian Gordon Gallery in collaboration with RaffiLavie and curated by Yona Fischer. The similarity between the two names was not coincidental. Moreover, the artists presenting in "Stop! Green" were ones associated with *10+*, and Gordon Gallery regularly showcased *10+* in Tel Aviv. In a sense, "Stop! Green" was practically an unofficial *10+* exhibition. According to the press release, the organizers of "Stop! Green" exhibition wished to bring the gospel of contemporary art to Jerusalem:

"The exhibition will showcase, for the first time in the capital, contemporary and dynamic art in Israel. Global contemporary paintings and sculptures are leaving a significant impression on art and society, and young Israeli artists are catching on." (Press Release "Stop Green", 1967).

It is safe to assume that the artists of Jerusalem in general, and members of *Mashkof* in particular, were none-too-pleased with their meager representation in a show claiming to map contemporary art in Israel and present it to the Jerusalem public. Were the Jerusalem artists intentionally overlooked in such an extensive exhibition? Was RaffiLavie's part in producing the exhibition in Jerusalem a deliberate response to the Jerusalem group? The similarity between the names and dates of the exhibitions strongly suggests a veiled competition between *Mashkof* and *10+*'s RaffiLavie.

To further exemplify the mutual relations and competition that were developed between *Mashkof* and *10+*, one should consider the exhibition "*Mashkof* 5 hosts Michelangelo". Opened on the same day as "*10+* takes on Venus", the two exhibitions challenged artists to create under a specific theme. While *Mashkof* clearly presented Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling as the core inspiration, *10+* had a more open concept of "Venus". Yet surprisingly enough, all of the artists in *10+* exhibition used Sandro Botticelli's Venus as their model. The similarity in names, the resonating of Renaissance Art, and vicinity of dates of the two exhibitions are undeniable – the two groups were most definitely aware of the other's activities. Two groups of artists were simultaneously working on the same concept in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv; we can never know which came first. Nevertheless, BenoKelev notes that preparations for "*10+* takes on Venus" exhibition were chaotic – a behavior completely uncharacteristic of RaffiLavie. Perhaps word of the *Mashkof* exhibition reached Lavie; wanting to provide a Tel Avivian response to the Jerusalem show, he produced his exhibition posthaste.

However, this is merely an assumption based on circumstantial evidence. Whatever the case may be, Israeli art canon remembers only *10+*'s exhibition, and in fact only *10+* in general. *Mashkof* as a group and as the sum of its exhibitions remains, for the most part, forgotten. I shall provide a short possible explanation to this phenomenon in the end of the paper.

#### 4. After *Mashkof* – Toward Conceptual Art in Jerusalem

While no single event is known to be the cause for the group's demise, the "Mashkof 5" exhibition was the last documented group exhibition. Just like the formation of the group, reasons for its collapse vary according to the chronicler. Tolkovsky recounts an event in which one group member took the majority of the exhibition space when the core concept was that of communal painting. ShaulShats speaks of intrigues that rose when the group's participation in some kind of biennale was considered (Ofrat, *Mashkof - Bihemians in Red-Blue*, 1984). However, in the interview with Gideon Ofrat in 1984, Dadi Ben-Shaul recounts:

"We broke up because we got tired of it. That's it. Once it became artificial – we lost interest. We were happy and carefree, and as long as that lasted, so did *Mashkof*." (Ofrat, *Mashkof - Bihemians in Red-Blue*, 1984).

After "Mashkof 5" exhibit, *Mashkof* faded from newspaper headlines. The artists' multiple versions for why it happened only reinforce the idea that the group simply fell apart, as often happens.

Interestingly, Ben-Shaul also recounts a meeting with Yona Fischer concerning a possible exhibition at the Israel Museum, a farewell exhibition of sorts, to “create our best work, burn them and showcase the remains” (D. Ben Shaul, personal communication, August 8, 2013). Essentially, this is a conceptual idea, which indicates the changing tides in Jerusalem, as conceptual art gradually took over the capital and the whole of Israeli art scene. Indeed, October 1970 marked the conceptual turn in Jerusalem with Joshua Neustein’s conceptual work, the “Jerusalem River Project”, first of its kind in Israel.<sup>8</sup> Graduates and teachers of the Bezalel Academy stood at the forefront of this artistic revolution, and throughout the 1970s Jerusalem would play the role of the “capital” of Israeli conceptual art.<sup>9</sup> The Israel Museum and curator Yona Fischer closely followed this transition; conceptual art was interacting with global art in real time and fitted in with the museum’s agenda – a shift toward international art. The museum presented conceptual exhibitions that are monumental in Israeli art history, such as “Concept + Information” (1971) and “Sketching Above and Beyond” (1974). These exhibitions were part of the conceptual turn, as well as its representation in Israeli art.

What role did *Mashkof* play in these processes? Dadi Ben-Shaul describes the importance of *Mashkof* through its connections with Bezalel Academy:

“Many of the teachers at Bezalel started off in *Mashkof*, and so the spirit of the group was passed on to the students. We started the concept of communal work, and many wonderful things at Bezalel followed that spirit. [...] we, as young teachers, were very dominant in meetings and discussions. I think the influence on the method of teaching in Bezalel is undeniable. It also influenced many painters who suddenly turned up on the scene.” (D. Ben Shaul, personal communication, August 8, 2013).

Notwithstanding Ben-Shaul’s claim, I would like to argue that the connection is even deeper - *Mashkof*’s activities immensely changed the Jerusalem art scene and paved the way to the artistic reality of the 1970s. *Mashkof* presented the Jerusalem crowds an artistic alternative: avant-garde, social and environmental art that advocates intermediary and the incorporation of the public in the creation process, whether as spectators (in “Red Blue” exhibition) or as active participants (in “Apartment”). Their departure from Jerusalem as a subject matter, paired with group work, set the groundwork for conceptual art, by challenging taste and bringing new artistic horizons to the Jerusalem public. Nevertheless, *Mashkof* did so without truly belonging to conceptual art, and most of its prominent members remained loyal to painting throughout the 70s.

Before *Mashkof*, the Artist House would typically exhibit individual work by members of the society, in rotation. During and right after the *Mashkof* era the Artist House was inspired to include contemporary group exhibitions.



However, as the collaboration between conceptual artists and the Israel Museum increased, the Artist House gradually stopped being the hub of art in Jerusalem. The Artists Society grew and the House returned to its original function as an exhibition space mostly used for displaying solo-exhibitions of its members. Years after *Mashkof* fell apart; Zvi Tolkovsky was appointed chairman of the exhibition committee at the Artist House. He then attempted to re-establish the artistic integrity of the institution by producing a *Mashkof* reunion-exhibition. It did not materialize, but his attempt echoes the central role of *Mashkof* as a part of the golden age of the Artist House, a success Tolkovsky wished to recreate.

Although *Mashkof* had nearly disappeared from the pages of Israeli art historiography, I have shown its undeniable role in the evolution which took place in Jerusalem and shaped the canon in the following decade. The avant-garde projects it initiated in Jerusalem were crucial for the conceptual turn in Israeli art. Its impact was significant not only in its local sphere (Jerusalem) but also in the national one, as its actions motivated similar developments in Tel-Aviv.

Still, the structure of the Israeli art field and the prominent figures populating it in its first 50 years –Tel-Aviv as the sole artistic center dominated by Yossef Zaritsky or Raffi Lavie –had essentially “sucked” all of Israeli art history into Tel-Aviv as though it was an all-consuming black hole. This paper does not attempt to discuss the politics of historic amnesia, a research subject in and of itself, but the very disappearance of a prominent group such as *Mashkof* from the collective consciousness demands further discussion and explanation.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Information regarding specific *Mashkof* events was gleaned and crosschecked via numerous interviews held as part of this research.

<sup>2</sup>We learn of the central role of Jerusalem as subject matter in local artwork from an extensive study of exhibitions taking place in the city in the years preceding the Six Day War, and even more so after. The bond between the Society and the municipality is seen, for instance, in acknowledgements printed in the catalogue for the inauguration of the Artist House in 1949 and in 1967 – *Jerusalem Artists Exhibit Catalogue* (1949), and *General Exhibit of the Jerusalem Artist Society* (1967). The catalogues can be found at the Jerusalem city archives, Box 92/93.

<sup>3</sup>A comprehensive list of the Israel Museum's exhibitions in the years 1965-1990 was given to me with the courtesy of Tamar Soffer, archive manager at the Israel Museum.

<sup>4</sup>Yossi Ofek, Tzivia Weinman and Yossi Mar-Haim, radio interview with Dan Ben Amotz, October 1968. Recording courtesy of Zvi Tolkovsky.

<sup>5</sup>The recordings were given to me with the courtesy of Yossi Mar-Haim.

<sup>6</sup>Postcard courtesy of Zvi Tolkovsky.

<sup>7</sup>For the exhibition reviews see Miriam Tal, "4x4," *Masa*, April 17 1970; "The 4x4 Exhibition", *Gazit* 27, 317-320 (1970): 91; Leah Majaro-Mintz, "Jerusalem Exhibitions," *Davar*, May 8 1970; "Gallery Guide – Odd Objects," *Jerusalem Post*, April 10, 1970; "Gallery Guide – Gaon/Ben Shaul/ Gitlin/ Shats," *Jerusalem Post*, April 10 1970.

<sup>8</sup> In the project, Neustein installed dozens of loudspeakers playing water sounds along three miles of a dry Jerusalem wadi.

<sup>9</sup> For more information regarding the Jerusalemite identity of conceptual art in Israeli art history, see Mordechai Omer, *My Body-Myself: The Seventies in Israeli Art* (Tel Aviv, 2008), 11-26.