Deconstructing "October 7"

Mekhrav Numag by the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group

Dror Harari



Words that Matter

The Ruth Kanner Theatre Group performed *Mekhrav Numag* 14 times within the exhibition space of *Shmini Azeret* at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The exhibition, curated by Dalit Matatyahu, ran from 20 December 2023 to 4 May 2024. Both the performance and the exhibition were conceived independently as separate artistic responses to the Hamas attack on Saturday, 7 October 2023. The theatre group began working on *Mekhrav Numag* in their studio on 5 November 2023. Following the cancellation of scheduled performances due to the critical situation, the group collaborated with poet Alex Ben-Ari to devise an intimate, free-of-charge, participatory event in the studio, mounting it three times in the second half of December. Participants at the event encountered a series of instructions for different writing activities, one of which was to create as many words as possible from the phrase *merkhav mugan* (secure space)—and thus the title of the work *Mekhrav*

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Numag was born.[1] At about the same time, the group learned about the planned exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and visited it on 24 December, finding the dialog with the artworks critical for the work that had started to develop in their studio. After Kanner, the founder and director of the group, presented her new project vision to the museum's management and the group met with Matatyahu to hear about her curatorial decisions, work within the exhibition space began. During January and February, rehearsals alternated between after-hours work on-site and studio sessions until the premiere on 29 February 2024 (Kanner 2024). Both the theatre piece and the exhibition utilized deconstructive approaches that, as I see it, examined and challenged the reality of "October 7," or what has been perceived as its reality.

The Ruth Kanner Theatre Group—one of the prominent independent theatre groups in Israel—is famous for its signature style and form, performing texts that have been adapted for the stage, including literary works, archival material, the company's own research, and documentary writings (see Chawin and Gough 2023). The Kanner theatre is a postdramatic "theatre of language" (Barnett 2008:21) that gives precedence to the materiality, musicality, and performativity of words; their relation with body, movement, and objects; and their vital role in constructing reality. Employing performative "disruptive" strategies—as, for example, decomposing, repeating, or amplifying certain lines, words, and syllables[2]—the group's works reveal layers of private and collective memories and traumas, undercutting national and cultural metanarratives. As is typical for many of the group's works, *Mekhrav Numag* was devised collaboratively with the core group members (currently comprising Kanner and four performers: three Jews and one Palestinian Israeli),[3] who introduced into the process materials that responded to Kanner's thematic and dramaturgical initiatives. The work comprised a diverse collection of written and spoken expressions in Hebrew and Arabic, all related to the events now known as "October 7." These included verbatim transcriptions of WhatsApp messages, media interviews and announcements, radio programs, recorded personal conversations within the group and with others, and dream journals. The opening sequence of the show offers a sense of the disjunctional dramaturgy of the work:

> SHIRLEY [her son's dream]: Mom, I had a dream; I dreamed that I no longer have a mom; something about the war; and that you were killed; and that you disappeared.
>
> RONEN [fitness trainer's post on social media]: Hello and good morning everyone—so, ah, many people have been asking me lately to discuss how to shake off the fight-or-flight response effect, in other words, the anxiety-inducing reactions that overwhelm us during an alarm. So the alarm activates in us [switches to English] "the fight-or-flight response, no doubt."

1. The words *mekhrav* and *numag* are meaningless in Hebrew, however they may sound like words that mean "destruction" and "fading."
2. See section 3 in Chawin and Gough dedicated to a discussion of "disruption" as a dramaturgical strategy in the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group's works (2023:181–224).
3. The performers are Shirley Gal, Siwar Awwad, Ronen Babluki, and Adi Meirovitch.

Figure 1. (facing page) The performers constitute a "speech choir," generating swirling clouds of words and sounds. Mekhrav Numag *by the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 14 March 2024. Performers, from left: Siwar Awwad, Ronen Babluki, Shirley Gal, and Adi Meirovitch. (Photo by Eldad Maestro; courtesy of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group)*

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> ADI [WhatsApp group with friends]: What's going on girls?; alarms all over the country; Crazy...; Yes...; Liat, are you also staying there??????; Girls! Whoever stayed, write what's happening to her!!!!; Who stayed????; Girls, go north! Who stayed overnight??; Oy, it's [the siren] non-stop here; What's going on; Benzi isn't answering me!; Inbal here, everything's fine; Well thank God.[4]

The textual mélange generates what the group poetically describes as "swirling clouds of words" (RKTG 2024a), which aptly reflect the massive volume of verbal communication that flooded every type of media against the backdrop of, and in response to, the lack of knowledge, helplessness, and uncertainty that prevailed on 7 October 2023 and thereafter. It also illuminates that much of what constitutes "October 7" as a major historical event, whose meanings and effects will undoubtedly remain imprinted on Israel's historical memory for future generations, has been heavily mediatized, in all forms of media, particularly on social media. After 7 October, dozens of initiatives emerged whose mission is to collect written, audial, and visual responses to the attack, viewing them as testimonies to the atrocities of that day worthy of archiving and preservation.[5] I consider *Mekhrav Numag* in this context as a deconstructive documentary theatre piece. The work serves as an artistic documentary, compiling a fragmented archive of written and spoken texts related to the events of October 7. This approach is reflected in the production's original working title, *War Journal 2023*, which remains visible on the performance text, stressing its documentary nature. *Mekhrav Numag* is nonetheless a deconstructive archival endeavor as it underscores the idea that the reality of the horrific event is heavily constructed by discourse and its presence in our experience depends on its representation. To frame this observation through a Derridean lens, we can say that the texts as documents, the score as an archive, and *Mekhrav Numag* as a performance of an archive form a chain of supplements—"a supplement to the supplement" (Derrida 1981:109). These are traces that fulfill, replace, and complete the original event, "adding a plenitude to the plenitude" (Derrida [1967] 1978:212), thereby enabling its presence through its disappearance.

Theatre of Too Much Real

October 7 was a horrendous terror attack on Israel. According to data provided by the Israeli Government Press Office to the foreign press on 3 January 2024 (accurate as of 12:00 PM on that day), the number of identified murdered Israeli and foreign civilians on 7 October 2023 stood at approximately 1,200 victims. The number of wounded on that day reached almost 2,000, some in critical condition, and the number of individuals abducted to Gaza, including babies, children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly, as well as foreign citizens, male and female, was 251 (see e.g., Gatenio 2024). The Hamas attack had been planned and coordinated, incorporating assaults from land, air, and sea on the kibbutzim, villages, and cities in the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip. The attack was accompanied by a massive launch of rockets across a vast area from the south to the center of the country. On that bloody Saturday, my family and I woke up in panic in a small town near Tel Aviv at 6:30 AM to the sound of howling sirens piercing the silence, and rushed to get to a shelter. In the sleepy news studios, drowsy reporters began reporting from their homes via mobile phone, speculating what was happening while trying to gather information. At this stage, no one yet had any idea of the dimensions of the horrific attack.

Mekhrav Numag falls within the category of what Carol Martin terms "theatre of the real." This theatrical category encompasses various practices that primarily employ representational

4. All quotations are from *Yoman Milkhama 2023* (War Journal 2023), the unpublished performance text of *Mekhrav Numag* (Ruth Kanner Theatre Group 2024b). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Hebrew-language texts are my translations.

5. The National Library of Israel, for instance, launched a central national repository that collects and preserves "Footage from the events themselves, oral and written testimonies, social media posts, photographs, prayers, eulogies, community documentation, artworks, and campaigns" relating to the events of 7 October 2023, now shorthanded as "October 7" (NLI 2024).

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techniques to recycle and repurpose actual events and experiences (Martin 2013:5). The performance engages with questions of what is real, of what reality is recycled and how, in the face of an extreme event that has generated the "swirling clouds of words" in a bid to make sense of what eludes representation and understanding. *Mekhrav Numag* achieves its effect through a dramaturgy of excess. Fragments of texts pour from the stage like waves in rapid succession, in Hebrew and Arabic, sometimes simultaneously, generating bewilderment, helplessness, and anxiety. These sensations reach their peak with one of the performer's (Shirley Gal) strikingly accurate imitation—or rather, reenactment—of the civil defense siren's wailing, piercing sound. Each of the four times she projected this sound loudly and clearly through the handheld microphone, it triggered in me an instinctive tension, as if I was preparing to rush to the nearest shelter.[6] The repeated, accurate mimetic reenactment of the siren's wail seemed to overwhelm the clamor of texts, nullifying them and leaving only a subtle echo, like a disturbing tinnitus. Thus the failure to represent the events through excessive speech (and howling sonic expression) exposes the powerlessness of language to name or make sense of that "thing" that happened on 7 October 2023.

Shortly after the 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, Giovanna Borradori conversed with Jacques Derrida regarding the horrendous event. She began her interview with the question: "September 11 [*le 11 septembre*] gave us the impression of being a *major event*, one of the most important historical events we will witness in our lifetime, especially for those of us who never lived through a world war. Do you agree?" (2003:85). Derrida responded to Borradori's question through the questioning of language, noting that:

> the index pointing toward this date, the bare act, the minimal deictic, the minimalist aim of this dating, also marks something else. Namely, the fact that we perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name in any other way this "thing" that has just happened, this supposed "event." (86)

October 7 is a "major event"; a "saturated phenomenon" that, unforeseen and in excess of intuition, overwhelmed the perceptual mechanisms of the self (Marion 2002), rendering the reality of the event unresolved. In the period immediately following the fatal Hamas attack, the public struggled with the need to refer to it by naming it, using available appellations such as "our Holocaust," "cataclysm," and the "black Shabbat" to try and express its incomparable magnitude.[7] For many months now the "minimal deictic" of "October 7" has become the common unofficial term to refer to the ineffable event. It is not unlikely that 9/11 set a precedent as a metonym for the incomparable, but it is also likely that it intimately indexes for the Israeli public a new and unprecedented standard of national catastrophe, second only to the Holocaust.

Revisiting and recycling a recent traumatic past in the present through sound and texts undoubtedly presents a paradox. However, our ability to grapple with the past is often achieved through reenactment (Jones 2011:20). While this process does in no way guarantee comprehension, it positions the reflecting participants at a safer distance from the overwhelming event. Through representation, the participants can hopefully contain the experience and, akin to Freud's concept of *Fort/Da*, exercise some imagined control over an elusive and terrifying reality. *Mekhrav Numag* offers a space where the ineffable can be approached, if not fully grasped. Through the deliberate deployment of excess, it mirrors the overwhelming nature of the "major event." In doing so, it not only acknowledges the limitations of our ability to comprehend such traumas but also provides a communal experience of grappling with the incomprehensible. In this chaos of representation, we may find not answers, but a shared recognition of our struggle to make sense of the senseless.

6. It is customary in Israel to warn the audience at the beginning of plays about the use of siren sounds as part of the show, out of concern for panic or distress reactions. No such warning was given in *Mekhrav Numag*.
7. I draw here on my own experience conversing with family, friends, and colleagues who, during our discussions, searched for the right word to fill in the blank space in their sentences.

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Word, Image, Performance

Disintegrated Unity

Mekhrav Numag constitutes a "speech choir": "a polyphonic poetics that offers complex, sometimes bewildering insights, and challenges the notion of a singular, cohesive, and absolute truth" (RKTG 2024a). The variety of short texts that compose the work, with no identified speakers attached to the spoken words, presents personal, popular, and media-mediated responses, rendering the reality and meaning of October 7 nonuniform and uncertain. The postdramatic kaleidoscopic texture of the work underscores the complexity of experience following October 7 that resists confinement to a single voice or narrative, thereby challenging the excessively promoted, all-embracing concept of unity and togetherness. In an opinion article published less than a month after October 7, Avraham Burg, former member and chair of the Knesset, critiques the phrase that has become a national slogan: "Together we will win." He argues:

> The "togetherness" proposed during wartime is deeply problematic. The remnants of Israeli partnership have been completely eroded over the past year [following protests against the judicial overhaul]. Consequently, Hamas has become the definer of Israeli solidarity. [...] This is an identity formed through negation. (Burg 2023)

Burg further questions whether Palestinian citizens of Israel are included in this fabricated concept of unity and what kind of victory is being envisioned.[8] When the slogan "together we will win" is cited within the context of *Mekhrav Numag*, in Adi's verbatim reenactment of her recorded conversation with her eccentric neighbor, it becomes a parody that undermines the power of the original phrase.

> [NEIGHBOR]: [...] I'll tell you what, the earth is going to take all of us—Gaza and Israel and Syria and Jordan and Egypt and Tehran and whatnot. We'll all be together in a big pit in this earth that is hungry for the blood of all of us where maybe we can unite because all the "win together," oy ha ha ha, I got confused how does it go? Maybe you remember?
>
> [ADI]: No, I don't remember.
>
> [NEIGHBOR]: Oh I remember, "together we will win."

The four performers delivered their texts from a small raked platform, 2 x 2.20 meters, tilted at 30 degrees, crowding the actors and putting a physical strain on them (a constant tension of the leg muscles), which together created a sense of unease for both the actors and the spectators.[9] The platform was placed more or less at the center of the *Shmini Azeret* exhibition space so that the show was intertexting with the silent visual works that surrounded it. The exhibition's title references the eighth day (*Shmini*) celebrated at the end of the Jewish holiday Sukkot and coinciding with the day of the terror attack. The Hebrew word *atzeret* primarily means "assembly"—in biblical times it was associated with sacred gatherings—but its root *A-(T)Z-R* is commonly used in modern Hebrew for words meaning "stop" (*atzor*, *atzira*). This meaning imbues the title with added significance, emphasizing the day's tragic halt or end of life. The central axis of the exhibition featured Israeli artist Deganit Berest's work (2012), whose title and content consist of the complete text of an untitled poem by post–World War II Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz: *Time hastens / my time is up / what should I take with me / to the other shore / nothing / so is that / it / mother / yes son / that's all / so that's all / so this is a life / yes all of it (a poem by Tadeusz Różewicz)*.[10] Berest's piece consisted of 31 printed

8. In response to public criticism that the war's objectives were unclear, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu replied with the demagogic and meaningless phrase: "total victory."
9. The set was designed by Kinneret Kisch.
10. The poem originally appeared in Różewicz's poetry book *Płaskorzeźba* (1991). The work's label at the exhibition introduced the title in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and English.

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Figure 2. The small raked platform creates a sense of fragile balance. Mekhrav Numag *by the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 17 March 2024. Performers, from left: Shirley Gal, Adi Meirovitch, Ronen Babluki, and Siwar Awwad. (Photo by Eldad Maestro; courtesy of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group)*

images, each bearing a single word from the poem in its Hebrew translation by Rafi Weichert. Like Samuel Beckett's 35-second play *Breath* (1969), Różewicz's minimalist poem captures life's absurdity through a concise dialog between mother and son. The poem's brevity conduces various interpretations, depending on the perceived context of the speakers: Is the mother alive or dead? Is it life's beginning or end? Its dominant qualities are impersonality, directness, and pragmatism. The words on the images are prints from the poem as it appeared in translation in the literary supplement of *Haaretz* newspaper (retaining the typography and print aesthetics), resonating with and emphasizing the emotion-free pragmatism conveyed in the poem.

Berest's work foregrounds the tension between the fundamental components of the sign, its physical form and conceptual content, exploring the conventional relationship between these elements that typically establish meaning, as well as language's affective quality. By isolating each word on a separate image—and, in some cases, printing on the same image the end of a previous word or the beginning of the next—Berest compels the viewers to decontextualize the words, postpone their semantic meaning, and explore new associations with the accompanying visuals. The word "mother," for instance, is printed on an image showing human legs surreally emerging from serene blue waters, possibly connoting the fall of Icarus and his plunge into the sea. Some of the words are printed on images that bear local traumatic association: e.g., a newspaper page from 3 November 1994, a day before Yitzhak Rabin's assassination; a documentary photograph depicting a Palestinian man carrying a wounded boy; another photo of an Israeli soldier carrying his wounded sister after a terror attack—both connoting a pietà.

It takes mere seconds to read the poem printed in Hebrew, Arabic, and English on the wall at the exhibition entrance. However, when fragmented into individual words and spread across the walls, it transforms into a participatory spatial and temporal event—an environmental, visualized poem that envelops the spectator-participant who collects its fragments in a bid to form a whole.

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Figure 3. The performance setup as the audience enters, with artworks from the exhibition Shmini Azeret *(curated by Dalit Matatyahu) visible in the background. Visible artworks, from left: Tsibi Geva,* Kaffiyeh 33 *(1990); Michal Heiman,* Kochava Levy *(1987–90); Miki Kratsman,* Battle *(2008); Pinchas Cohen Gan,* Fence Work *(1989); Micha Bar-Am,* Soldier Bathing West of the Suez Canal *(2014). The smaller images in between are part of Deganit Berest's work,* A Poem by Tadeusz Różewicz *(2012).* Mekhrav Numag *by the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 14 March 2024. (Photo by Eldad Maestro; courtesy of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group).*

This spatialization of the poem intensifies several experiential aspects: the (silent) gaps between the words become palpable; a sense of suspense builds as the spectator moves from one word to the next; time seems to slow down, emphasizing the present progressive nature of the experience; the gradual accumulation of words creates an unusual rhythm; and finally, meaning and form become fluid, shifting with each new word encountered. This immersive approach turns a brief poem into an extended journey through language and space.

In the gaps between Berest's 31 printed images, curator Matatyahu integrated works from the Tel Aviv Museum of Art's Israeli art collection. These works connected to the trauma of October 7 in complex ways, expanding its cultural context and significance. They conveyed a sense of foreboding, as if Israeli art had anticipated the disaster. Notable examples included Yohanan Simon's oil painting *Shabbat on the Kibbutz* (1947): an idyllic socialist realist depiction of kibbutz members spending time with their young children on Saturday; and two images from Naomi Leshem's *Sleepers* series (2008–2009): photographs showing two adolescent boys asleep.[11] Against the background of a visual exhibition that somewhat screened off sounds from the outside world and slowed down time—in which the viewer could take control of the pace, move forward and backward, or even counter clockwise and so reversing the order of the poem—the "speech choir" erupted disturbingly. Its excessive, amplified delivery through handheld microphones starkly contrasted with the exhibition's somber, muted atmosphere.

11. The immediate victims of the terror attack on the early hours of 7 October 2023 were the inhabitants of kibbutzim and other villages in the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip, as well as the many young men and women who were attending the Nova music festival near Kibbutz Re'im.

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Exercising Deconstruction

As I experienced it, watching the performance within the exhibition was perceptually challenging; the event saturated my senses. Words, images, and the live performing bodies did not combine into a coherent unified event. Rather, the tension between signifying systems, media, spatial arrangements, and temporalities rendered diverse correspondences among these systems and allowed one's attention to drift between them. *Mekhrav Numag* employed a deconstructive approach, juxtaposing various voices from the general public, including friends, children, quirky neighbors, and hosts of niche radio programs. Notably, it featured the Arab Other speaking in their native language (which the majority of the Jewish spectators do not speak), and exposed their fears:[12]

> SIWAR [with her friends, in a WhatsApp group, in Arabic]: It seems Judgment Day has arrived, hasn't it?
>
> Are you watching the news, seeing what's happening? We've been watching the news since 7:30. There's a roadblock in Haifa darling, police roadblocks.
>
> But listen, if you control yourselves and don't watch the news, it will be easier for you. What has come upon us is one big nightmare.

This juxtaposition of texts and voices undermined the dominant official narrative, questioning its authority and credibility while exposing underlying doubt, fear, and mistrust.

The audience actively participated in the work's deconstructive dramaturgy. Upon entry, spectators received writing materials. They were asked to create word combinations from the term *merkhav mugan* (as they had in the group's December studio events) while viewing the visual works and waiting for the performance to begin. *Merkhav* (space) *mugan* (secure) refers to the designated secure space in a building for protection against missile attacks. The performance stage constituted a platform that closely mirrored the dimensions of a typical Israeli residential secure space, although slightly smaller. This spatial choice, alluding to the protective spaces, could also symbolize Israel's or Palestine's limited, confined territories. During the Hamas attack on the land adjacent to the Gaza Strip, many residents of the area sought refuge in these shelters while the terrorists were invading their homes. Some remained in these enclosed spaces for up to 48 hours, until military rescue. Others did not survive when terrorists blew up the safe rooms' security doors or windows, or set houses ablaze, causing those inside to perish from fire and smoke. In the aftermath of the attack, as missiles continued to target Israel from Gaza, the Home Front Command frequently instructed the public to remain near a "secure space," making the term a prominent part of the public discourse.

At the beginning of the performance, the performers read aloud and recorded the audience's words and phrases derived from "merkhav mugan." This recording was replayed twice during the show, marking the pauses after the first two parts. During these pauses, the performers left the stage to listen to the playback near the monitors that were located in front of the stage, thereby directing the audience's attention to their own engagement in the performance. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the phrase "merkhav mugan"—which connotes protection (and supposedly instills security) but also arouses anxiety—and the creation of strange, and sometimes amusing, words and word combinations, enabled the participants to contain and cope with the trauma that the concept evokes. This participatory anagram word game underscored the fluidity of meaning inherent in the original term. By extension, this deconstructive exercise challenged the entrenched national narrative of Israel as the ultimate sanctuary for its people, suggesting that such a concept is as mutable as the words themselves.

The performance concluded with a playback of a specially crafted composition, a poem of sorts. The poem, developed during rehearsals, played with the meanings and sounds of words related

12. Immediately following October 7, Palestinian citizens of Israel quickly recognized the sense of pain, humiliation, and desire for revenge felt by the Jewish-Israeli citizens and chose to keep a low profile, avoiding reaction, and even contact with them.

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Figure 4. A spectator immersed in an anagram challenge, creating words from the phrase merkhav mugan *(secure space)*. Mekhrav Numag *by the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 14 March 2024. (Photo by Eldad Maestro; courtesy of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group)*

to "merkhav mugan," while deconstructing and reconstructing the letters and meanings. It served as a consistent finale for each performance of the work. It presented a tension between destruction (words like "we destroyed," "destruction," and "ruined garden") and hope ("tomorrow we'll connect"), between collective responsibility and personal desire to escape. The poem employed the first-person plural—using phrases like "we fought," "we destroyed," and "we stole." This approach complicated the identity of the speaker, implying that responsibility for the region's escalating crisis and its potential resolution is shared—a collective responsibility not only for Hamas and Israel, as major political entities involved in a tragic conflict, but that extended to include the spectator as well.

No Cool-Down, No Repose

In order to enter the Tel Aviv Museum of Art to watch the show on Saturday 27 April 2024, I had to cross the square in front of the museum. On that evening, as on every Saturday evening since October 7, a rally was being held, organized by the Hostage and Missing Families Forum that represents families of the abductees and missing citizens from October 7, calling upon the Israeli government and world leaders to advance an agreement to bring home their loved ones. Shortly after the horrific attack, the forum of families "appropriated" the square, installing tents with pictures of their kin, inviting the public to share their thoughts and feelings through conversation, writing, and drawing, and to be with and support them in their struggle to bring the abductees home. On 24 October 2023 the forum placed a new name sign on the square, ceremonially renaming it: "The Square of Abductees and Missing Persons." This performative ceremonial act has reconfigured the public character and identity of the museum's plaza, resignifying its urban function, marking it as the principal site of gathering, commemoration, sharing, and identification with the tragedy of the families. Since then, many activities have taken place in the square, including the mounting of interactive installation artworks and interventional performance works that call upon the public to remember the abductees who have been inhumanely abandoned by the indifferent, conservative, and ultra-nationalist government led by Prime Minister Netanyahu. On the evening that I arrived to watch the show, which took place during the Passover holiday, a very long table representing the Passover feast was installed across the square, with more than 200 empty chairs, underscoring the absence of the abductees and missing persons. As I entered the museum space, my mind was overloaded with impressions from the rally and installation outside. While museums of contemporary art have largely moved beyond functioning as autonomous white cubes for art presentation—"that *actively* disassociate the space of art from the outer world," as Miwon Kwon puts it (2002:13)—incorporating political art and responding to sociopolitical issues, there is still a threshold one crosses upon entering an art museum that frames and underlines an aesthetic experience. The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, in this respect, presents exhibitions of contemporary art alongside temporary and permanent exhibitions from the museum's collection, including modernist art from the late 19th century, offering a kind of refuge from the outside world. However, in this instance, the boundary between the external events and the internal art space felt permeable.

The tragedy of October 7, the hostage crisis, and the ongoing war in Gaza have pervaded every aspect of life. In my experience, it has become extremely difficult, almost impossible, to maintain the

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distinction and transition between what Richard Schechner terms the "ordinary world" and the "performative world" (1985:126). I interpret the latter to mean, in a very general sense, any framed extra-ordinary performance experience, such as that constituted by *Mekhrav Numag*. According to Schechner's model, in "transportation performance" (94) the performers and spectators are "transported" to another world—a "performative world"—and, at the end of the performance, they return to the "ordinary world" after a "cool-down" phase. Schechner notes that if they do not return to where they started, they are, in his words, "left hanging" and "not happily" (91). In *Mekhrav Numag* I experienced the erasure of the distinction between the two worlds, between real life and theatre of the real, and was left unhappily hanging.

Upon the performance's conclusion, I left the museum, foregoing any cool-down period. Outside, I joined the rally on the Square of Abductees and Missing Persons and participated in a march from the museum square to a nearby street, where a protest and blockade were being staged, calling for the Israeli government to take responsibility, stop the war, bring back the abductees, establish a commission to inquire into the failures that had led to the disaster, and hold early elections. Both *Mekhrav Numag* and these ongoing demonstrations represent constructive performance activism against the actions of a right-wing government perceived as destructive and incompetent in dealing with the aftermath of the disaster.[13] While employing different methods, these activities share a common goal: to catalyze a positive change in Israel's challenging political landscape.



Figure 5. Empty chairs and a Passover Seder table at "The Square of Abductees and Missing Persons," awaiting the return of those still held captive. Tel Aviv, 27 April 2024. (Photo by Dror Harari)

13. As various political commentators have claimed, Prime Minister Netanyahu is avoiding ending the war and signing an agreement with Hamas for the return of the hostages due to political-coalition considerations, which aim, similar to the judicial overhaul he led, to consolidate his rule and the rule of the right wing in Israel (see for example Zilbersheid 2024).

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