

ARTFORUM

Ohad Meromi

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View of "Rehearsal Sculpture," 2010.

The Israeli-born, New York-based artist Ohad Meromi was recently commissioned by Art in General to create an installation in its sixth-floor galleries. In response, he has constructed an evolving rehearsal or workshop space in which participants can gather to create what he terms "ad-hoc group sculpture." The show is on view until March 5, 2011.

IN THE PAST, I've worked a lot with architecture and based my installations on all sorts of dystopian sites: a border crossing, a classroom, a clinic. Eventually, a particular place began to stick with me: the stage—the place that can shift into all those other places. I began to think: How does one create a stage? Architecturally speaking, is it the divide between performers and audience? Would it be enough to point a camera and say "Action?" I'm thinking about what it signifies to designate a space for a type of ritualistic activity, and what that designation enables us to do. For this show I decided to simply paint the main part of the gallery black, and to think of it as a rehearsal room: a studio. The space should serve as an invitation for participation—and over the course of the exhibition, it will actually hold a series of rehearsals; I call it all "rehearsal sculpture." As opposed to the installation mode of the piece where one could walk through it alone, the rehearsals are best experienced in a group, and the participants will become my troupe, so to speak. Social sculpture might be overstating it, but we could maybe call it ad-hoc group sculpture. As far as the objects go, there will be a small

booklet with scenarios, and props such as boxes and ashtrays and large egg shapes painted on panels. These lead the viewer-participant to come up with motions, though that might require some creativity on his or her part. There's also a framework of geometric wooden paneling that joins together to create a half circle of sorts, a concave backdrop that starts to set the stage and backstage apart from each other. I'm trying to look at actions that have a center. An accompanying projection currently shows scenes from a storyboard I drew, which I hope we can look at and say, "That would be a good moment we could bring to the stage." I'm inviting a couple of friends—Anna Craycroft, Halsey Rodman, and Molly Smith, among others—to direct some of the rehearsals.

I stumbled upon Bertolt Brecht's learning plays a few years ago and have used them directly in several earlier pieces. They're short, didactic, and very brutal. What I really liked about them beyond their sense of direct commitment to an ideology is Brecht's indication that they do not require an audience. I'm very interested in thinking about the performative as a site for learning rather than a show or a spectacle. Eliminating the audience allows one to think of relationship between the actor and the script—the actor and the idea. There's also Augusto Boal's term *spect-actor*, which has to do with the attempt to provide agency to the participant. As a twist on Boal's book *Games for Actors and Non-actors*, I named the booklet of script excerpts I've created for the space *Stage Exercises for Smokers and Nonsmokers*. To me, smoking is always the first "non-action." I'm not a director, so when I set up a performative space I need a lot of these non-actions. And then there's also the American Spirit logo on some of the props in the space that I wanted to acknowledge at some point; in a way, it's sort of a suppressed primitivist figure.

I'm fascinated by the idea of the model. You have some sort of different agency over the world when you decide that it's a model. And in a sense this room remains a model of a room: A place for me to think about the black box as something that enables. Being in a model is something I imagine the modernists had in mind; they had us performing this new world, or perhaps the new man. These hyperideological moments are fascinating to me for their sense of relationship with the future. Of course each of these big "-isms" has its own set of problems. But what about them can be saved? Or, if we're not rebuilding them, how can we create models that do preserve something of their ideology? It's why I'm interested in modern ruins. (Kibbutzes, for instance, are a particular modern ruin I have a lot of interest in, having been born on one.) Perhaps if we can't re-create the utopian democratic city tomorrow, we can at least work on a model for one, which could be a good place to start negotiating our ideals and hopes: a good place to think about us and about our future?

— *As told to Dawn Chan*