

Liminal Spaces

Liminal Spaces 2006-2009

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Contents

7

INTRODUCTION

Galit Eilat

18

ENGAGED AUTONOMY & OTHER PARADOXES

Charles Esche

29

DEALING WITH THE CHANGING NATION

Nina Möntmann

41

DUCHIFAT

Mauricio Guillén

43

STITCHING PIECES OF OUR STORY IN LIMINAL SPACES

Salwa Mikdadi

56

THE LEFT NEEDS MEDIATORS

~

ON CULTURAL PRODUCTION & ITS

ROLE IN POLITICAL STRUGGLE

~

ON THE NECESSITY TO GO TO PALESTINE

*Ayreen Anastas
and Rene Gabri*

72

SOLDIERS, SOLDIERS, SOLDIERS...

*Roni Lahav and Artur
Žmijewski in Conversation
with Diala Shamas*

88

SHOT BY BOTH SIDES

Francis McKee

100

STUDIES ON NEW ISRAELI LANDSCAPES

*Sala-Manca:
Lea Mauas & Diego Rotman*

102

CONSTRUCTION STATUS UNKNOWN

Simon Wachsmuth

106

ISRAEL AS A GATED SOCIETY, PAST & PRESENT

Ilan Pappé

117

EXQUISITE CORPSE

Yochai Avrahami

136

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: URBAN LIMINALITY & THE FUTURE OF BINATIONALISM IN JEWISH-ARAB 'MIXED TOWNS'

Daniel Monterescu

155

CONFRONTING THE ICONIC MYTH: REVISITING JAFFA

*Salim Tamari and
Rema Hammami*

182

UNTITLED

Artur Zmijewski

188
**MULTICULTURALISM
IN COMMON SPACES**
Yossi Yonah

200
RADICAL DISCONTENT
Eyal Danon

223
NOT-YET-NESS
Reem Fadda

232
**THE ROAD TO GAZA:
UNIVERSAL RITUALS
IN A LOCAL CONTEXT**
Khaled Hourani

244
TOUR OF RAMALLAH
Yael Bartana

248
**ASYMMETRIES IN
GLOBALIZED SPACE:
THE ROAD NETWORK
IN PALESTINE-ISRAEL**
Alessandro Petti

271
PLAYGROUNDS (1995-)
Peter Friedl

278
**HOW MUCH DID YOU
PAY FOR THIS PLOT
OF LAND? LAND
VALUE IN RAMALLAH
& EAST JERUSALEM**
*Sabine Horlitz and Oliver
Clemens*

284
**SHUAFAT - PISGAT
ZE'EV PANORAMAS**
Oren Sagiv

286
LIVE EVIL
Francis McKee

298
**20 YEARS AFTER
THE EXODUS 2048
ODYSSEY: MIRI STERN
INTERVIEWED BY
LOTTE MÜLLER**
Michael Blum

**CONFERENCE
DOCUMENTATION**

33-34

51-52

61-64

81-84

149-152

161-162

179-180

205-208

257-264

Introduction

The *Liminal Spaces* project began long before its official launching, in fact long before it had ever been conceived or named. Its beginnings may be traced to early 2004, to another project – *April 1st*. Created by the Artists Without Walls group, the latter included Palestinian and Israeli artists who sought ways in which to voice their criticism of the construction of the Separation Wall which splits and cuts the Palestinian villages located along the Green Line.

April 1st was selected as the project's title and date as a type of hoax intended to make the Separation Wall transparent. To this end, two video cameras were positioned on either side, each with its back to the Wall and its lens directed at the view facing it. Each camera was cable-connected to a video projector located on the other side of the wall, which projected the occurrences captured by the camera on the opposite side in real time, thus creating a virtual window in the wall via closed-circuit video. The

video window was set in the village of Abu Dis,¹ which is cut in two by the Wall. For several hours the village residents could observe the other side of their village and its inhabitants through the window. The event, declared an art event, was initiated to raise awareness of the damage brought about by the Separation Wall, by inviting an Israeli public which, albeit conscious of the Wall's construction, had never physically experienced the presence of this concrete monument, nor its detrimental implications.

The joint work on *April 1st*, as well as the resulting conversations and friendships, formed the basis for *Liminal Spaces*. One of the major questions which accompanied the initial phases of the project was whether artistic projects created by Israeli, Palestinian, and international artists are capable of challenging the separation systems physically and mentally constructed by the State of Israel over many years between Israelis

and Palestinians, both within Israel and between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. *Liminal Spaces* aspired primarily to establish the absent platform ever-so necessary for joint work and action and for dialogue between the Israeli and Palestinian art communities, a platform which would be able to exist despite the growing difficulties experienced by Palestinians under Israeli occupation, such as denial of freedom of movement and other basic human rights.

Three three-day seminars were held as part of *Liminal Spaces*. The first took place in March 2006, and was based on hikes and tours from morning till midday in the areas adjacent to the Qalandiya refugee camp, a visit to El-Bireh and Ramallah, guided by scholars, professionals, and activists from different disciplines such as architecture and urban planning. It began with a tour which departed from East Jerusalem, continued through the matrix of Jewish settlements around Jerusalem, arriving

// Galit Eilat

at the Atarot (Qalandiya) checkpoint. We rented a space located approximately 500 meters from the checkpoint (previously used as a furniture shop) for the duration of the conference, so that every noon following the morning tour we could return there for additional discussions, lectures, and presentations.

Following the first conference we offered the participants to return to the area which we had surveyed during the three seminar days (Route 60),² to conceive of artworks in collaboration with the professionals who had joined us. At that time, we assessed the project's duration as eight months, and the ultimate goal was to stage three exhibitions in three cities: Ramallah, Holon, and Leipzig.

We arrived in Leipzig in October 2006, when most of the works were in different stages of production – "half-baked" was the term we used. The meeting in Leipzig likewise included a seminar. Having departed from the geographical area

addressed by the project, we tried to bridge that distance and discuss a theme which we deemed relevant to the project's continuation as well as to the hosting institute, GfZK – Museum of Contemporary Arts Leipzig. The second conference thus dealt with the social and political responsibility of artistic institutions in the context of the Middle East – characterized by growing violence and the violation of human and civil rights, the continuation of Israeli occupation policies, the construction of an apartheid wall, and the total collapse of the peace process – as well as in the context of central Europe in the post-Fordist era, in which the erosion of social-democratic principles challenges artists and institutions to survive in a harsh social climate and fight for greater public involvement. During the work on the exhibition and the opening of the conference, we realized that the project required no concluding exhibition, and that in fact we were only at the beginning of the process.

We decided to go on with the project without committing to another exhibition or any final project. While conceiving of the exhibition and conference in Leipzig, a considerable gap was created between the way in which we wanted to communicate the project and the way in which the Leipzig museum wanted to exhibit it. Although they were partners to the project, as a German arts center they could not promote the marketing of a project which calls to stop the Occupation, or to be more accurate – could not afford using the word "occupation" in any marketing material. Thus we found ourselves, Israelis and Palestinians, opening a shared front to call a spade a spade, maintaining that this was the only way to face reality. Beautification, indirectness, and the use of political terminology such as "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," only hinder discussion on the "situation," adding layers of ambiguity where clarity is needed.

The third meeting was held in October 2007, approximately

18 months after the first. Like the latter, it consisted of morning bus tours and hikes accompanied by professionals, and afternoon sessions. This time the conference focused on the cities Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa (mixed cities with high percentages of Muslims, Christians, and Jews), Bil'in (a village in the Palestinian Authority whose land was confiscated due to the route of the Wall), and Taibe (a Palestinian village in Israel's north). Thus the three-day seminar largely focused on Israeli territory and the repercussions of the occupation within Israel: the conflicts, tensions, and violence embedded in the daily relationship between the Jewish and Palestinian communities within Israel. Each session proposed a unique glance into the social reality and the intricate interrelations between colonists and colonized, occupiers and occupied.

In retrospect, one of the most important aspects of the project was that it took place, transformed, and adapted

itself to the dynamic reality in the region. At the very outset we postulated that a network of collaboration and sharing of knowledge are crucial to such a project, yet we could not foresee how such a platform would evolve since we had no role models in the form of previously held like projects. In collaboration with the artists, we (the project curators) sought methodologies that would challenge the limits and limitations, explore their penetrability, and their ability to serve as points of contact and communication. We tried to push and challenge the limitations on movement between Israel and Palestine anchored in laws and regulations, and often in prejudice and ignorance. Along with the project participants we sought and examined different ways to explore the physical and mental liminal spaces, ways which either confront or interact with them.

Alongside the scrutiny of the mental and physical liminal spaces and the development

1 Abu Dis is an Arab locale east of Jerusalem, on the outskirts of the Northern Judean Desert, whose population stands at approximately 10,000. In the wake of the Six-Day War, part of it (approximately 10%) was annexed to Jerusalem, and its inhabitants became Israeli ID holders. During that period the Abu Dis population grew as a result of the move of inhabitants from Hebron and the settling of Bedouins who camped in the area of the Abu Dis permanent settlement. This may have been due to the subsistence possibilities in Abu Dis on account of its proximity to Jerusalem. Furthermore, Arabs who lived in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem and were expelled after the Six Day War also moved to Abu Dis. On the eve of the al-Aqsa Intifada Israel was supposed to change the status of Abu Dis to Zone A, but the change was never implemented. As part of the construction of the Separation Wall, a tall concrete wall was erected, cutting Abu Dis from East Jerusalem. Since its erection, in order to move between Abu Dis and Jerusalem, inhabitants are forced to cross several checkpoints, a harsh separation for citizens who had become accustomed to regarding Abu Dis and its adjacent Jerusalem neighborhoods as a single urban fabric.

2 Route 60 is the historic traffic artery and connecting spine between Jerusalem, Ramallah and beyond. Its present condition

of new artworks, a curatorial model for the project began to take shape, based on continuity and the creation of an infrastructure for work concurrent with the construction of a body of knowledge through the shared effort of artists, curators, academic scholars, cultural producers, architects, and political activists. Most importantly perhaps, is that we succeeded in creating the basis for ongoing work between the different partners in the project which has since served as backing for other projects and professional interactions between Israel and Palestine, links which also extend into Europe and the Middle East. The basis for the project, an objection to the occupation and separation policy, has been preserved throughout its phases, its most radical manifestation being our objection to separation and hatred propaganda.

Still during the preparatory phases leading up to *Liminal Spaces*, we sought the advice of the Academic Boycott Committee in Birzeit

University on how a project involving Palestinian and Israeli participants might take place, and what the conditions are regarding such a collaborative project. The committee assisted us in the use of terminology, as well as in formulating the project's goals, thus helping legitimize it for some of the Palestinian participants.

Another act was implemented by Reem Fadda and Khaled Hourani before our arrival in Ramallah as a group for the first time. These were the days following the elections to the Palestinian Authority. The Hamas government had only just been elected, but had not yet constructed a government, and the state of mind on the Palestinian street, mainly in the West Bank, was hard to anticipate. Therefore, Fadda and Hourani turned to the Tanzim,³ requesting that they accompany us on our tour to the Qalandiya refugee camp which was under their supervision. The collaboration with the Tanzim led to a traditional Palestinian lunch held in one of their

meeting centers.

Other actions which accompanied the project were negotiated with the Israeli security forces.⁴ Palestinians living in the Palestinian Authority cannot enter Israel without entry permits. Each such request is filed with the liaison office, which transfers it to the General Security Services, where it is examined, and subsequently approved or disapproved. During the years of work on the project we issued numerous such requests for the project participants, for artists, curators, and in fact, for anyone who turned to the Center for help, regardless of the project. We tried to use our status as an Israeli center and a public body to pressure the security forces into granting entry to all those requesting it, though not always successfully. At times we were aided by Israeli members of the Knesset (MPs) in applying pressure on the security forces for this purpose. Over the years, the permit situation has worsened, bogged down by numerous bureaucratic obstacles. Apart from the desire to help in the

entry procedure into Israel, the other goal was to examine how the systems of separation, power, and control function, and find loopholes. Although this was not an original target, due to everyday constraints we had to confront yet another liminal space – that of Israeli military law.

The struggle for territorial and demographic control is deeply inscribed in the mundane texture of the intersecting spheres of Israel and Palestine. Urban liminal spaces, such as Jerusalem, have become laboratories for the urbanism of an especially radical ethnic segregation. Since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, previously covert obstacles were replaced by concrete blocks, walls and fences often separating Palestinian villages from their agricultural land or cutting villages in two, rather than separating Israeli and Palestinian lands.

The Palestinians and the Israelis live in separate worlds in which the other's space is absent from the cognitive map

of the everyday. Sets of codes, largely incomprehensible to an outsider, demarcate "safe" territories and "dangerous" territories. The clear dominant polarization between Israeli Jerusalem and Palestinian Jerusalem, as a quintessential example, however, fails to convey the full complexity of the social transformations. It blurs and shifts attention from the internal conflicts faced by these two cultures, both tragically forced to define their identities in relation to a so-called enemy. This polarized perception overshadows and erodes the ability to acknowledge the internal conflicts which penetrate the depths of the social and psychological texture of both cultures. The walls, blockades, and barriers, however, are but a symptom attesting to a much deeper ailment between these two nations. Withdrawal and gathering against an enemy equally affect the social relations and other interactions in the internal, communal and domestic context – with family, neighbors, foreigners, and the community.

may be deemed prototypical of the alienation, segregation, and fragmentation characterizing the Israeli method of occupation.

3 The Tanzim was established in 1995 by Yasser Arafat as part of the Fatah. In effect, it functioned as the latter's military wing, and the two formed a single body.

4 During the al-Aqsa Intifada a military law was issued forbidding Israeli citizens other than IDF soldiers from entering the Palestinian Authority. Palestinians living in the Palestinian Authority are prevented entry to Israel without special permit from the Israeli security services.

Although everyday realities in Israel and Palestine are fundamentally asymmetrical, increased undermining is discernible in both cultures due to economic polarization, militarization of civilian life, as well as religious and social tensions. The internal borders are reinforced as a result of antithetical processes of traditionalism versus Westernization, preservation of age-old familial traditions versus a modern lifestyle, social and gender inequality, etc.

A large part of the artistic practice in Palestine and Israel is essentially dependent on this gradually radicalizing reality. Contacts with artistic communities from other countries are made quite easily, whereas artistic activity in the local sphere barely exists between these two groups. The predominant climate is one of disregard on the Israeli side and boycott on the Palestinian, a boycott of academic and artistic institutions in Israel declared by similar Palestinian institutions

and individuals, which has garnered support and has been de facto embraced by academic scholars, artists, architects and many other artistic figures worldwide. The difficulty in crossing borders due to the oppressive closure and movement restrictions renders casual random encounters virtually impossible. Despite these difficulties (and sometimes in response to them), a limited number of artistic endeavors survey social and political agendas in the belief that art is not only a mirror of society, but also a tool for political and social change. Such perception gives rise to works and projects transpiring on the line between representation and action, ones which blur the boundaries between disciplines, between artistic practice and political activism, and generate various models and platforms for artistic and social activity.

A reduction in shared artistic projects may be traced from the early 1990s. During the first Intifada in the 1980s, Israeli and Palestinian artists

collaborated on artistic actions and exhibitions which rejected the activities of the IDF and Israeli government in the Occupied Territories. The Intifada that broke out in the late 1980s was named the Stone Intifada or People's Intifada, forming a catalyst which stirred artists to respond and make their voices heard in public discourse on either side of the divide. The Intifada atmosphere and political stands were discernible in the works of many. Israeli artists co-exhibited with Palestinians in East Jerusalem and demonstrated in front of the political detention houses such as Ansar 3. It was the people's Intifada, and Palestinian and Israeli artists joined forces in acts of protest.

During the second Intifada a fundamental change occurred in the approach of Palestinian artists to collaborations with Israeli colleagues. The sense of personal and professional betrayal and the failure on the part of Israeli artists and curators to fight or at least voice public or artistic opinion

on the Palestinians' condition under Israeli occupation, put an end to the vast majority of artistic collaborations. Today such endeavors are virtually nonexistent, and the rare instances of collaboration are met with great skepticism not due to their quality, but with regard to the motivations to work together. In this context, one must differentiate between collaborative projects involving Palestinian artists living in Israel and those living in the Palestinian Authority. Exhibitions featuring Palestinian artists living within the Green Line are still held, but they are accompanied by great doubts and careful heed to their context: exhibitions criticizing the establishment or conveying explicit political messages can still find artistic collaborations, albeit rare. The main fear with regard to these exhibitions is that they might create the illusion of normalization between the two nations, and fail to reflect the reality of separation and occupation. Another fear is that such artistic projects may be used as a fig leaf for

local and foreign politicians to create an illusion or obfuscation of reality. Exhibitions putting forth an explicit public objection to the occupation may be considered.

Proposals for collaborative projects between Israeli and Palestinian artists today, for the most part, are brought to the region by good-intentioned, yet rather naïve European curators or artists, who try to bring the neighbors together. The motivation behind most of these projects is that if borders in Europe have been opened and walls have fallen, it can happen here too, and that in art, unlike in life, everything is possible; namely, art does not have to reflect reality; it should take positive action, possibly introduce another horizon, in order to enable change in the existing reality. But is it really possible to introduce another horizon to a reality where artists are also civilians, and where the majority of Israeli civilians, artists included, object to the occupation neither actively nor passively for the most part, and do not

fight for the Palestinians' rights.

The chance for local or international projects to garner support or participation of local artists is minimal mainly on the Palestinian side. Calls for a cultural boycott are heard from most art centers, universities, and other cultural institutions in Europe and the Middle East. The situation has deteriorated since 2006, when the project was launched, due to the Second Lebanon War and the attack on Gaza, which invoked little criticism or protest on the Israeli side whether during the fighting or thereafter. Another equally important aspect is the denunciation of Palestinian artists and curators who "collaborate" with Israeli colleagues. Palestinian society today denounces artists who co-exhibit with Israelis, and every shared work or presentation is considered an act of collaboration with Israel. When one collaborates with a stronger force he is held a traitor, since the prevalent definition of a "collaborator" is a person who helps a

foreign power governing his country, and collaborators are considered traitors of their people and nation.

Going back millennia to the biblical collaboration between the Canaanite harlot Rahab and the spies sent to Canaan to scout the land after forty years in the wilderness, Rahab is mentioned in the book of Joshua, in the story about the capture of Jericho, as the one who made the city's conquest possible. She hid the spies sent by Joshua and helped them escape, thereby making possible the capture of the first in a series of cities conquered by Joshua in Canaan. In return for her help, she asked that her family be spared, and indeed, all the citizens of Jericho were killed in the city's conquest, but Rahab and her family went unharmed (Joshua VI). Later, after converting to Judaism, she married Joshua, and, according to the biblical story, gave birth to ten prophets and priests. The lesson of the story is that those who collaborate acquire reward and recognition for their help. By the same token,

in most cases when territories or countries were occupied by another country or empire, the conquerors have been aided by local collaborators to rule over the occupied population. This was the case in Nazi-occupied Europe and elsewhere, and the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people is no exception. Unlike the biblical story, however, in most cases the collaborators are not rewarded nor do they gain recognition for their support, mainly where Zionist operators and Palestinian collaborators are concerned.

The term collaborator is synonymous with traitor, one who betrays his nation, selling secrets or people for personal benefit. Today artistic, academic, or intellectual collaboration has also become considered collaboration with the enemy. While the international art and culture communities pursue projects of collaboration between conflicted parties such as the Palestinians and Israelis, and Israel tries to promote social projects including Palestinians and Israelis, Palestinian

society, as well as many of the Arab countries and cultural activists from these countries today, condemn such endeavors, refusing to take part in activities in which Israelis participate. How did cultural collaboration become equal with collaboration with the enemy? The underlying logic is that anything that does not explicitly help promote Palestinian society or the Palestinian struggle for independence should be banned. This boycott was preceded by ongoing collaboration between Palestinian and Israeli artists, as well as academic scholars and intellectuals. According to the Academic Boycott Committee in Birzeit University, such projects were used to legitimize the Occupation to the world and to whitewash Israel's crimes against the Palestinian people.

But what happens when someone collaborates with a weaker party? Is he a traitor or a hero? How is collaboration between Palestinian and Israeli artists perceived by Israeli society? The past

two years since the Second Lebanon War (as it is called in Israel) and the attacks on Gaza have hardened the attitude of the Israeli public toward the Palestinians, whether those living inside Israel or those in the West Bank and Gaza, with the encouragement of politicians. Thus even projects which previously enjoyed the support of the Israeli establishment, if only to create a semblance of normalization, have been eliminated, and any support or identification with the Palestinian people or position against the Occupation is now considered as an objection to the very existence of the State of Israel. A Citizenship-Loyalty Law⁵ and the Nakba Law⁶ are some of the newly-drafted bills on the political and public agenda in Israel.

In the Israeli art community it is deemed proper to express opinions against the Occupation in the private sphere, among colleagues, or to participate in demonstrations against the Occupation. But as individuals working in museums, galleries

or other art centers, the activity of these people rarely touches upon the evils of the Occupation nor does it take a social or political stand against it. The field is largely dedicated to art which avoids taking an unequivocal stand, preferring a personal view, engagement with the state of the artist or a formalist-aesthetic position which is subordinated to aesthetic or social personal interpretation. In the past two years, an overt position undermining the consensus of the Zionist left in Israel is not legitimized. Questions pertaining to engaged or political art are forthwith invoked by a work that negates the consensus, which is forthwith labeled superficial and slogan-like. Art, it is commonly held, ought to be detached from reality, for reality is so ugly, and art is about beauty.

It is hard to tell whether a project such as *Liminal Spaces* could have been initiated today, or could have received international support as it had in 2006. The project was never exhibited in Ramallah or

5 In order to receive Israeli citizenship, the applicant will have to pledge loyalty to the state and undertake to serve in the IDF or volunteer for national service. The oath of allegiance, according to the bill, will include the following sentence: "I pledge to be loyal to the State of Israel as a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state, to its symbols and values, and serve the state, as required, in military service, or alternative service, as stated by the law."

6 According to the proposed Nakba Law, anyone who commemorates the Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948) may be subject to three years' imprisonment.

in Holon as initially planned. The frequent events, wars, and internal struggles within and between Israeli and Palestinian societies have led to the decision to continue investing in the development of works, rather than in staging exhibitions. Some of the knowledge gathered in the project is presented in this book, and many resulting art works have been featured in various contexts and venues the world over.

I would like to thank all those who have taken part, contributed, and participated in this extensive project, thus helping us explore and object to a reality based on the oppression of the other.



Participants of Liminal Spaces first conference, Qalandiya, 12.03.2006







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