

liminalspacesqalandiareviewinenglish - yochaiavrahami

The Tower

The watchtower of the Qalandiya checkpoint resembles a giant knight. It is tall, gawky, and has two large expressionless eyes made of black, rectangular, latticed holes. When I was attempted to photograph the strange sight, a thunderous crier roared in objection. I retraced my steps and walked north with the rest of the participants, towards a deserted furniture shop in Qalandiya, the location of the conference that opened the project <http://liminalspaces.org>.

This conference took place in Ramallah in the beginning of March this year. It had two main themes at its heart: the one was the exposure to, and ways of dealing with the malignant chaos in Israel, the occupied territories and other places (ways that usually function through an understanding of the apparatus and an abuse of its elements and functions). The other was the possibility to act silently from within, like a Trojan horse, instead of performing a frontal, demonstrative attack from outside. These two ways of action, it became clear, were the ones that allowed for the ongoing work of a group of creators and curators – Palestinians, Europeans, Americans and Israelis.

The conference announced the beginning of an international art project that will end with a group exhibition at the [Gallery of Contemporary Art in Leipzig \(GfZK\)](#), at the Center for Palestinian Association for Contemporary Art (PACA) in Ramallah, and at the [The Israely Center of Digital Art](#) in Holon. The curators of the exhibition are Galit Eilat from Holon, Reem Fadda from Ramallah and Philipp Misselwitz from Berlin University. These were also the organizers the conference, which lasted three days and included presentations, discussions and guided tours.

The project as a whole aims at creating a platform for contact and exchange between artists from the region, in the face of the over-all deterioration that is manifested in racial segregation, restriction and denial of the freedom of movement and of other human rights, and a feeling that such collaborative projects will be much harder to accomplish with the completion of the separation wall in the Jerusalem district. The restrictions of movement were among the factors that lead to the rental of the furniture shop in Qalandiya, on Road 60, for the conference. I was invited together with other artists and architects to take part in the conference and in the larger project that it pertains to, to develop works that deal with the procedures taking place in the urban succession between Jerusalem and Ramallah.

The Gate and the Market

The market of Nablus gate has three different locations: the original, the regularized and the operational. The original market was located just in front of the gate, and was active there for years – spontaneous, colourful and symmetrical – from the two sides of the gate. The second location was sanctioned by the establishment, that created a regularized square some dozens of meters to the right of the gate and removed the vendors from the original location in an attempt to rid itself of spontaneous peddling (a similar process took place in the construction of the new merchant square behind the flea market in Jaffa). This new square, entitled “the merchants square” by the municipality, is paved with Jerusalem style stone cuttings. Stone benches are placed around palm trees, lit dramatically at night, like the old city walls. The physical distance between the new square and the Nablus gate is small, but this new square is silent and neglected. Neither the municipality nor the merchants attend it. The third, active location of the market re-emerged spontaneously around a few street corners north of the gate, in the centre of a vibrant but neglected area. It has been unattended to by the city architects so far, and is surrounded daily by the smoke of traffic jams, and occasionally by that of tear gas.

The first and most difficult day of the conference focused on the Israeli control over the urban succession between Jerusalem and Ramallah. After a short walk around the area of the Nablus gate, guided by Misselwitz, we drove to a tour around the walls (and not those of the old city). The tour, guided by Jeff Halper from [The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions](#), passed by the wall that crosses and divides Abu Dis, the ruins of an apartment building built without permit and demolished by the Jerusalem city council, the wild Palestinian neighbourhoods and the cultivated Jewish settlements of East Jerusalem. The asphalt snakes of the monstrous road system twisted and winded next to the growing concrete snake of the wall, all the way from the Jewish neighbourhoods in the West to their extensions in the North and East.

The camp

The Pisgat Zeev lookout point, watching over the Shu’fat refugee camp, displays a monochromatic grey scene that reminds one of a print of Maurits Cornelis Escher. The lightest shades of grey are to be found in the rubble and gravel on the ground. The darkest shades belong to the black water tanks on the roofs. Between the light and the dark: hundreds of houses in many shades of grey create a deceiving optical effect. The entire camp looks like a geometrical, abstract and intricate pattern, and it is impossible to decipher shapes of houses. Around the end of winter, two colours are added to the scene: the blue skies above and the green grass below. Throughout this cyclopean grid of a refugee camp built on the slope of a mountain, shine the sewage streams, flowing from the grey to the green.

As mentioned above, the conference took place in a deserted furniture shop in Qalandiya. The packed schedule, the distressing and exasperating topics, the tours, some shootings from an IDF jeep, the food, the belly dancing and the hookah's at night – all these left the participants exhausted. The program (downloadable from the [project website](#)) was rich in politics, architecture, topography, geography and archaeology, as well as in art and curatorship.

Ilan Pappé from Haifa University gave a piercing talk about the roots of the occupation, the refugees, the post-Zionists and the ghettoization within Israeli society. His talk began with a tale about a meeting that took place during the War of Independence, in the Red House in Tel Aviv. The Red House operated as defence headquarters during the war and as the Kibbutzim federation house during peacetime. One of the resolutions that came through in this meeting was the decision to deport the Arab residents of the Land of Israel. The attendees of this meeting were all part of the mainstream: Ben-Gurion, Alon, Dayan and their comrades. The deportation was not completed, but it did establish the character of the Israeli-Palestinian interrelation, as well as the ghettoization process inside the Jewish community of Israel. Pappé described the ways in which rulers manipulate the fear of their citizens. The refugee problem is derived from this fear, which is an originally “Ashkenazi fear”: a fear that created “white” enclaves. Jewish people from Arab States belong these enclaves as well, although they usually live in separate communities, and must go through a process of “becoming Ashkenazi” to become a part of mainstream society. Pappé's words were unequivocal and distressing. Such was also his pragmatic conclusion: a support of the boycott on Israeli universities, analogous to the boycott on South Africa during the Apartheid regime. It was a shame that Pappé did not mention the mistakes made by the other side, or the fact that a historical mistrustfulness is to be found on both sides of the conflict. As one who is acquainted with leftist activism, I am weary of such unilateral and apologetic approach. The critique of the Zionist enterprise is of utter importance, especially in its exposure of the tendency of the Zionist consensus to ignore the mistakes of its leaders. However, the leftist parties in Israel are almost never exposed to the criticism drawn by Palestinians about the mistakes of their own leadership throughout the last hundred years.

The city

Ramallah is a city without clear borders. Herds of shepherds permeate the city, while construction waste is disposed of at the fields. Te wooly and the chiseled blend together. Stone blocks surround an ancient olive tree. The streets are full of dust from constructions and demolitions. There are dozens of ghost quarters; multi-story buildings without a façade, window frames without glasses. New construction projects are abundant, in the heart of central streets and in the remaining

natural growth area.

Khaled Horani, artist, curator and general director of the Fine Arts department at the Palestinian Ministry of culture, described the route to Gaza in a most gripping way. He based his talk on the subjective experience rather than on precise empirical data. His account, read in Arabic with simultaneous translation to English (and currently presented in “People, Land, State”, a joint project of with Miri Segal at the [Digital Art Lab](#) in Holon), lead the listeners through Qalandiya checkpoint, with its merchants and taxi drivers, who adamantly hold on to a place that has almost nothing to hold on to. The road to Gaza emerged in Horani’s lecture as a virtual wander in a maze without proper signposts, a deserted wasteland that ends with a checkpoint. The crossing of the checkpoint is policed: the traveler, surrounded by cameras and loudspeakers, must execute endless commands that all give the air of utter importance. At the end of this Sisyphean pseudo-biblical expedition, one arrives at a ruined and torn city, where no one is interested to hear the hardships of the arriving party. Horani’s tale is funny and depressing at the same time. His talk summarized, in fact, all that was seen and discussed in lectures and tours of the preceding three days. It emphasized the changes that can occur with alarming speed in the life of a person: being a resident of Qalandiya, and living in a refugee camp constructed in 1948 by the UN, Horani managed to fly to Egypt before 1967 from the adjacent airport (Atarot) that is now closed. Half of the residents of the camp carry Israeli identity cards; the other half carries the orange cards that were issued to the residents of the West Bank. These details are a testimony to the checkpoint and the wall in their various reincarnations since the war of 1967. The story of Qalandiya sways from hope, mobility and progress (the airport) to despair and an inability to move (checkpoints, wall).

Khalil Nijem, regional planning specialist and the Director General for Spatial Planning at the Palestinian Ministry of Planning, had a more didactic way of describing the complexity of the situation. Scores of maps flickered on the screen, displayed in layers. Just like the reality on the ground (topography, roads, control of water sources), the presentation was built in layers that described “phases”, “road maps” and alternatives. The more you see, the less you understand.

At the end of the first evening, Avi Mograbi presented three fragments from his film “Avenge but one of my two eyes”: two very strong fragments from the checkpoints, and one less strong, from the Kfar Tapuach settlement. The first two depicted the occupation as a caricature that mocks itself, with or without the help of the director. The third scene showed a “small group of lunatics” at a Kahanist rock concert. The presentation of the Kahane Chai group (or similar groups) as those who “spin the entire nation” is problematic, because the conviction in their power releases the public from any responsibility.

The square and the hotel

The square in Northeast Albira seems to fuse all kinds of occupation metaphors. The Israeli civil administration of the West Bank emerges to the East of the square; an olive vineyard with remnants of teargas grenades can be seen to its South; looking West I see the main road to Albira; and the City-Inn hotel is located north of the square. A beautiful building in Bauhaus style, the hotel resembles the special edifice on the corner of Petach Tikva road and Nachmani Street in Tel Aviv. The violence that the City-Inn hotel has suffered is not apparent, as went through a three-year renovation period after the treatment it received from Israeli soldiers during Operation Defensive Shield.

David Garcia, lecturer at the Utrecht School of Art Media and Technology, discussed activist art projects that use the tactics of the ruling apparatus. As an example, Garcia mentioned Rebecca Gomperts, a doctor that also studied art in a program of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and established the organization <http://www.womenonwaves.org>, with the purpose of raising health awareness through visual mediums (and supports abortions, among other issues). Another example Garcia mentioned was an Italian group Telestreet that constructed [pirate stations](#) throughout Italy in order to oppose the oligarchy of media tycoon Berlusconi using his own strategy.

The use of pirate strategies came up also in Mikael Rasmus Nilsen's presentation. Nilsen is part of the Danish group [Superflex](#). The group's works, exhibited around the world, raise debates about the structure of monetary control and merchandise production. Among the projects presented was a devise that looked like a big balloon, that was placed in Thai villages and extracted [heating gas](#) from human faeces and animal droppings. The group members also presented a campaign for a fabricated soda drink that imitates a real product produced in an exploitative factory.

Such practices of artist groups, subverting the mechanisms of the ruling apparatus, bring to mind Irit Rogoff's lecture at a curators conference in Tel Aviv University a few months ago. Rogoff, Professor of Visual Cultures at the Goldsmith College in London, proposed to use tactics of smuggling or espionage in curating. A good example for such tactics was presented in the talk of Erden Kosova, a Turkish curator and a doctoral candidate at the same department in Goldsmith. Kosova discussed an exhibition he co-curated with the Greek curator Katerina Gregos in the demilitarized zone of Nicosia, Cyprus. The exhibition, that proved to be difficult to implement, exhibited objects that were censored during their creation or that were never executed at all (such as pink stripes drawn at night on the road, leading to gates in the separation wall, and erased before morning; or fictive laundry and peaces of carton that were hung on an apartment building

by the border and then removed). During the lecture, the screensaver invaded the PowerPoint presentation and displayed an idyllic image of a beach with palm trees, so different to the images Kosova brought from the island in conflict. This incident seemed to me so fitting, as an example of the irritating control of the establishment over the arts.

Azra Akšamija, a Bosnian artist and architect based in Cambridge, presented a few of her projects, that deal either with prayer houses in Bosnia after the war, or with Muslims in the west in recent years. [Arizona Market](#) (named for the military's Route Arizona along which it lies) is the largest black market in the Balkans, residing in the city Brčko in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A mixture of official and unofficial systems, the market exemplifies how the adaptation of chaotic action can become an instrument for attaining order: the legal and the illegal depend on each other to exist.

Photographs, maps and diagrams that tracked transactions and merchandise accompanied this part of the presentation, following a trend recent years of projects that track mobility and trade in different urban spaces (especially in developing countries), such as the projects presented in "Mutations", a book by Rem Koolhaas, published by Actar in 2000.

Other projects by Akšamija dealt with the visibility of Islam. She researched the flourishing phenomenon of newly built mosques after the destruction of the last war, and executed projects that fashion new dressing items for Muslims living in the West. Such projects ridicule the so called "war on terror" in the West, by proposing clothes that turn into mosques and invite people to join the Muslim prayer, or "Survival Mosques" to the Muslim in the west, including Muslim ritual devices in a patriotic American disguise.

The wall paintings in Glasgow, presented by Francis McKee, were another good example of visual subversion that originates from popular resistance. McKee, curator of Glasgow International (a festival of contemporary visual art in Glasgow) and interim director of the Center for Contemporary Arts in the city, gave a funny-sad lecture about the life in his country. Unlike other speakers who mostly discussed artists' or architects' responses to military realities within civic societies, McKee displayed popular reactions to such realities. He focused on street paintings, which look like invested graffiti, and originate from Celtic tribal styles. The paintings could remind one of record covers of the seventies, pages from the Passover Haggadah or posters of Shahids. In addition to direct treatments of the daily reality in Glasgow and Belfast (such as a signpost that warns from falling fighter choppers, or a signposts that read "conquerors in action"), the Irish street paintings display an international awareness and identification with other oppressed people in the world (such as the Palestinian people, or other Arab groups that their land has been conquered) as well as a connection to pop culture (like the usage of the portrait of Princess Dianna). There is also a group of "real" artists that relate to the dreadful conflict between Catholics

and protestants in Ireland. Some of them were suspected of propagandism, some were arrested or killed. Others, especially musicians like Van Morrison and the Chieftains and writers like Gary Mitchell, gained worldwide publicity.

Simona Nastac, a curator from Bucharest, reported on the art scene in post-Communist Romania. Until that time, the Rumanian art did not receive worldwide representation, as the international art world disregarded it. However, since the fall of Communism, local institutes, artists and curators are making an effort to gain visibility and world recognition, and exhibit in all kinds of European contexts. Nastac presented the national museum of contemporary art, opened at the end of 2004 in the parliament palace, as the main example of her talk. Built by Ceausescu, and known more in its epithet "the people's palace", the disturbing location of this museum created a serious debate. Nastac reviewed also projects that took place outside the museum, and mentioned some of the artists that work in relation to the politically-saturated discourse in Rumania (among others, she mentioned Dan and Lia Perjovschi from Bucharest, Matei Bejenaru from Las, and Attila Tordai from Cluj)

Reem Fadda, a co-curator of the project and the director of the Palestinian Association for Contemporary Art (PACA) in Ramallah, talked about "[Chik Point](#)" by Sharif Waked and "[Wall](#)" by Catherine Yass – two works that Fadda used as examples of the ways artists touch on the "situation" or the "conflict".

Waked's work, exhibited in 2004 in the Herzliya Museum of Art, is a film of a men's fashion show, with clothes designed for checkpoints. The outfits are an invitation to upturn the status of checkpoint crossing, from humiliation to defiance. Yass' film, also presented in the Herzliya Museum in 2005, abstracts the brutality of the separation wall; in the film, a small piece of grass or sky occasionally peer through the edges of the concrete wall that runs across the screen.

Other projects presented by artists and architects were works by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, who compared the time it takes to travel with an Israeli taxi and a Palestinian one inside the occupied territories, and who filmed families living in a cemetery in Cairo, and [Sean Snyder's](#) affective use of fictive broadcasting as the background sound to altering images of the Iraq war and of other areas.

Charles Esche from the van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, who co-curated the last Biennial in Istanbul, discussed the resistance potential of free association. He discussed Snyder's presentation (using war images and background broadcasting) as an example of the ability of artists to explain to the world why things need to be changed. This ability, Esche claimed, is based

on imaginative interpretations, that politicians or journalists are not supposed to provide.

In his lecture, Esche brought up two concepts that have to do with the relationship between art and politics: “engaged autonomy” and “modest proposal”. The first concept relates to the integration and the compromise between the freedom of the artist and his awareness of the audience and of the display space. An engaged autonomy is necessary in radical situations, and the created objects are a result of the attempt to imagine from a critical viewpoint, and thus to offer an encounter with the imagination of the viewer. The concern of the second concept, “modest proposal”, is the need for a work to be speculative and imaginative but also modest in relation to the place where it is made. These concepts are inherently related to the way in which Esche curated the [last Biennial](#) together with Vasif Kortun in Istanbul. The exhibition spaces there were part of the daily urban fabric, required minimal modifications in order to accommodate the exhibition, and were in general characterized with a sloppy appearance. The exhibition was grasped as a reaction to the [previous Biennial](#) curated by Dan Cameron, which was much more extravagant.

Referring to the previous days of the conference, Esche discussed the clarity and the opacity of various talkers. He suggested that the contrast between the clear-cut and direct words of Ilan Pape, and the intimate and personal viewpoint of Khaled Horani, clarify the different abilities of the political and the artistic. What he missed in the conference was more a critical attitude from and about the Palestinian side, an attitude that would have contributed to a more complex debate about the occupation. I agree with this claim, because the radical left in Israel tends to ignore the criticism about the other side and to remain apologetic, sometimes to the level of self-hatred. Esche concluded that the political discourse suffers from a lack of openness, a lack of equality and from populism, contrary to the language of art, which offers more individualistic and intimate possibilities. His discussion of the different levels of opaque references to a complex situation incited a sharp debate that took place at a later stage. One of the prominent participants in this debate was Ayreen Anastas, a Palestinian architect living in New York. Anastas opposed the use of the notion of opacity in relation to the situation/occupation/conflict. Her objection, coming from a point of view of a Diaspora Palestinian, suggested that even the centers of power of the arts (one headed by Esche himself) suffer from a lack of openness and equality.

The debate, analogous to other political debates in different settings and in the media, sharpened the problematic character of debates around the “situation”. This problematic character arises from the opaque delimitation of art and politics, from the multiple narratives, and from the conflict between cooperative and subversive action. Such aspects create constant jams on the one hand, but can also challenge people to act on the other.

The ride to Jerusalem

The conference ended one day before Purim. Late in the afternoon, a full curfew was enforced throughout the territories. Two hundred meters separated us from the official Jerusalem, but the Qalandiya checkpoint was closed, and an attempt to leave from there would most probably lead to a police interception. Two East-Jerusalem minibuses, carrying yellow license plates, took us back over unpaved roads on a journey that lasted an hour and a half. Instead of driving three minutes southwards, we drove up north, crossed Ramallah, Albira and Bir-Zeit, turned Eastwards and came back South to Ar-Ram in north Jerusalem on a by-pass road that connects the settlements Ofra, Psagot and Kochav-Ya'akov. Throughout this entire ride, we haven't seen any checkpoints or soldiers. It must be so difficult to carry out a terrorist attack.

Lunch at the Refugee Camp

At the outskirts of the camp, in a garden surrounded with brick walls, long, brown veneer tables were set. On the tables, in plastic cutlery, we were served: a bowl of pickles, a bowl of soup, a glass of yogurt and a big pita bread with fried onions, sumac and half a pullet. We ate with our hands. The sun beat on our heads, and the light skinned guests reddened up in no time. Greasy hands and the sound of gunfire in the background slowed the digestion process down. Seconds after the gunfire, a military jeep passes us by. Then more gunfire sounds, followed by an alarming silence. In hindsight, there was fortunately no connection between our presence there and the shooting. The lunch was protected by the Tanzim, which also organized the tour in the refugee camp. A mysterious arson of PACA offices only two weeks before the conference lead the organizers to ask for the protection of one branch of the Fatah, in order to allow the conference to take place at all.