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Remnants of forgotten states and the resurrection of suppressed possibilities

The research project and exhibition *Where to?* was held at the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon. It set out to re-examine forgotten ideological currents and modes of activity within the framework of the modern Jewish revolution in general, and the Zionist movement in particular. This attempt led to an engagement with these lost possibilities, and their problems, within contemporary Jewish-Israeli existence.

The project's point of departure was the similarity between issues regarding contemporary Jewish-Israeli existence and those that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. In both periods we detect a sense of anxiety. In the past this sense came from the failure of Jewish emancipation, the Pogroms, and social rejection, all of which led to mass migration, but also to an incredible ferment of creative ideas and experimental, creative answers to the Jewish Question. Currently, a similar anxiety is felt regarding the deadlock reached by Zionism in general and Israeli nationalism in particular—including the increasingly central role that nationalist and racist trends occupy in Israeli society, Israel's isolation from the international community, and its perpetuation of a sense of threat as the only means of guaranteeing national cohesion.

Our intention was to return to the question that contemporary Zionism aims to present as closed and sealed; to re-open it as a contemporary question, and revive an idea about the Jewish-Israeli present and future: a notion that does not necessarily seek an alternative territory; that has no interest in obtaining a foreign passport or a different "homeland;" a notion that wishes to utilize the imagination in order to deal with what is un-decidable about the Jew, about the place of the Jew; a notion which seeks to give back to the imagination its central place in such processes. The equivocality, the option of not making a single, clear-cut decision, is central to the possibility of re-imagination, and to suggesting alternative forms of existence for Jews in this day and age.

Forgotten Answers / One solution

Throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, European Jewry underwent far-reaching transformations, characterized by fierce competition between national, religious, socialist, and various other ideological currents. Ultimately, the ideological narrative that achieved hegemonic status was that of the eastern branch of the Zionist movement, which argued that the solution for rescuing Jews from their fate as a minority living in a hostile environment was to gather them in their historic homeland, where they would be the majority and enjoy their sovereignty. Furthermore, the return of Jews to their homeland, and their gathering in one particular territory rather than another, was perceived as a means for bringing them back into history: of turning them into a modern people that would control its destiny. Because this ideology was inspired by the dominant model of Western European nationalism, it adopted, among other things, certain ethnocentric elements that were used to define the place and essence of Jews in European consciousness—elements that have Christian and even anti-Semitic roots. As a European-born national movement, Zionism adopted to a large extent a theological standpoint based in Christianity regarding the status of the Jews and the idea of their return to their homeland as a sign of redemption. This generated a paradox according to which Jews had to be displaced from Europe, and from Western civilization, so that they could finally be accepted into it.

The historical movement of European struggles for emancipation, the great Pogroms, and finally the Holocaust, secured the status of the Zionist-Nationalist conclusion: the idea that the establishment of a sovereign nation-state with its own military power, in which the Jews of the world would concentrate—thereby putting an end to their shameful, diasporic existence—was the only solution that could guarantee that people's continued existence.

And yet, during the same period, a variety of suggestions for solving “the Jewish problem” emerged both within and outside the Zionist movement. Some were attempts for a territorial solution outside of Palestine, based either on doubts regarding the possibility of establishing a state there, or on the view that Jewish



Where To? Research phase, 2011

existence in that part of the world would not enjoy peace and security. Other proposals suggested establishing Jewish centers within existing states, with various movements and individuals looking into options in Africa, Alaska, South America, Australia and elsewhere. Eliyahu Binyamini reviews over thirty such historical suggestions for a territorial resolution.¹ Some of these existed only in the imaginings of a handful of people; some received enough support that for a while they were considered viable options for Jewish existence.



Where's Israel? Malkit Shohan & Nirit Peled, 2012. Where To? Installation view

Such suggestions were not marginal fancies; they enjoyed the support of several dominant figures within the Zionist movement and the Jewish settlement in Palestine. The most well-known of these involves the drama that took place during the Sixth Zionist Congress of 1903, with the debate over the Uganda Plan. The plan, presented by Theodor Herzl, received the support of 295 out of 600 delegates. Furthermore, the idea of one territorial solution did not exclude the option of different, parallel territorial alternatives, or the option of ongoing cultural and communal Jewish existence within other states. In this sense, such proposals were discussed not as a single, absolute solution, but as a form of existence for Jews who could not find their place: one that was supposed to be implemented alongside other alternatives. Needless to say it was almost simultaneous with the triumph of the movement that demanded a solution in Palestine, and in the period immediately following the establishment of the state of Israel, these alternatives were marginalized to the point of extinction. The memory of these alternatives, along with their history, was forgotten, erased almost entirely in the effort to defend and validate the land of Israel as the one and only viable solution.

The background of this choice of a single nation-state solution allows us to view a phenomenon such as Israel's fear of Iran's nuclear program in a different light. To understand Israel's fierce objection to the Iranian program and its willingness (at least on the declarative level) to take great risks to undermine such development, this threat must be analyzed not only in militaristic or statist terms. A nuclear Iran appears to threaten Israel by pulling the rug out from under Zionism's main argument regarding the formation of a singular safe haven for world Jews—a promise that an Israel existing under nuclear threat could no longer live up to.

Nationalist Zionism thereby loses its primacy, calling for a re-evaluation of the narrative that triumphed in the aforementioned historical debate.

This realization requires us to re-examine the question of the future of the Jewish people. Is Jewish diasporic existence, previously rejected as precarious and feeble, a more appropriate alternative for survival nowadays? In a world of weapons of mass destruction, is the concentration of Jews in a single territory a safer, or perhaps a more dangerous, alternative? Are there alternatives for a secured Jewish existence? And could certain alternative forms of Jewish existence within Israel be preferable, in light not only of external threats, but also of the strengthening nationalist and racist currents within Israeli Zionism?



Nai Juda – Posters. Joseph Otmar Hefter, 1938-1942. Where To? Installation view

Re-archiving

An initial research phase took place between April and June 2011, during which a historic-visual archive dealing with the Jewish Question and with the solutions that were offered in different times was built.² The archive, which serves as a basis for the entire project, includes literary texts, historical materials, studies, and visual materials, along with works of art. The archive served as a dynamic and temporary basis for raising alternatives, and for a creative re-examination of the past and present. The archive was placed in the service of six teams of artists and researchers for set periods. Each team studied a question that was defined as a starting point, and suggested a way of handling the archive. The examination process was presented through selected materials that were spread across the walls of the exhibition hall, generating an expanding web. The materials that filled the walls suggested both conscious and random ways of connecting and dispersing different kinds of materials, inviting visitors to return to the places from which they were taken in order to re-read them in a different light. In the later phase of the exhibition the archive was open for viewing and reading in the basement of the



Nai Juda- Pioneers. Joseph Otmar Hefter, 1938-1942. Where To? Installation view

exhibition space, acting as a substructure for the entire project.

Over and above the use of the archive for research, the manner in which the materials were spread, and the relations that formed between them, suggested a renewed consideration of the way that knowledge is gathered and organized. The modest attempt to build an archive for this project was also an invitation for people to offer different readings and different modes of cataloging that would be publicly accessible: encoded in their own manner, hiding and revealing certain things, but also admixing with other archives and archivists, generating unconscious modes of access to existing materials that would open new thoughts and possibilities. With this project we suggested reintroducing these forgotten currents and ideas to the public discourse, bringing the “losers” of history to the center of the stage, and once again presenting the question of Jewish existence as a current problem that remains unsolved.

Re-Imagine

The return, via the field of art, to the historic questions that occupied the minds of Jewish thinkers, authors, and politicians in the early days of Zionism, brings to light the complex relationships between art, imagination and politics. If one pays close attention to the visual dimension of the historical materials examined, an extraordinary plethora of images is revealed. .

Photographs and design images, along with documents and other objects, served as an envelope for an ideology, and as central elements in the formation of a new identity. They formed part of an array of practices that sought to turn phantasmatic possibilities into a reality.

The wealth of historical images also suggests the mutual correspondence and echoes between various movements that promoted different alternatives—especially between mainstream Zionism and those alternatives it rejected. This feature of Zionism’s visual repository encouraged both conscious and latent responses in many of the works created for the exhibition. A work of art that addresses such a repository amounts to an experimentation with the creation of



Where to? Exhibition Archive, 2012

similar repositories, thereby continuing the chain of images—a continuation, however, that is already based on a unique interest in the 'visual' and in its critique. Images generated with the same tools and gestures function as “double agents” of identity: they carry on the same practice, while injecting it with alternative—competing and disorienting—content. The reference to the visual dimension, shared by many ideological currents, positions these artworks within Zionist history’s canonic field of symbols and images. At the same time, they form a new generation of images that, although relying on this visual history, uses this history in order to undermine it, or at least to once again take part in the power formations responsible for its creation and preservation. In many ways, the engagement with the question “Where to?” allows the artist to go back to forming relevant images that can operate within the Israeli cultural and national field, thereby re-examining the role and relevance of art, while re-establishing ideological currents and myths.

The works presented in the exhibition and those that served as references can be analyzed via two central directions. One moving between the past and the future, between the written and erased history and that which is yet to be written; the other, between Jewish life beyond Israel and Jewish life that is actively involved with Arab life in the Middle East. Following these two routes in relation to selected works allows for the recognition of some insights on how the crisis of Jewish life in Israel can be dealt with.



Zamach (Assassination), Yael Bartana, 2011. Production photo by Marcin Kalinski

Yael Bartana’s trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* is one of the most well-known and important projects to deal with Jewish existence in recent years. In the trilogy and its accompanying events, Bartana generates the narrative of an imagined political movement, The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), which aims at returning 3.3 million Jews to Poland, thereby rethinking the wider issue of minorities in Europe. This fictive narrative collects and mixes ideological and visual sources, beginning with early Zionism and the invention of the new Jew, moving to European anti-Semitism, and ending in present day Israel.

The conception of the Movement, as is boldly stated in its manifesto, reveals a number of essential characteristics.³

We want to return! Not to Uganda, not to Argentina or to Madagascar, not even to Palestine. It is Poland that we long for, the land of our fathers and forefathers. In real-life and in our dreams we continue to have Poland on our minds. ... We wish to heal our mutual trauma once and for all. [...]



The First International Congress of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, Berlin Yael Bartana, 2012.

Photos by Ilya Rabinovich

We are revivifying the early Zionist phantasmagoria. We reach back to the past – to the world of migration, political and geographical displacement, to the disintegration of reality as we knew it – in order to shape a new future. [...]

This is the response we propose for these times of crisis, when faith has been exhausted and old utopias have failed. Optimism is dying out. The promised paradise has been privatized. [...]

We welcome new settlers whose presence shall be the embodiment of our desire for another history. We shall face many potential futures as we leave behind our safe, familiar, and one-dimensional world. ... We long to write new pages into a history that never quite took the course we wanted. [...]

These segments of the manifesto refine the distinction at the basis of Bartana's project. A series of crises and destructions are currently hovering over Israel and Poland. The longing for Poland is offered here as a means of dealing with the reciprocal history that was set through the workings of national unification and separation. Polish nationalism is atrophying, Jewish nationalism has become corrupt, and both are in a state of trauma, haunted by their nightmares. History has swayed from its path and fantasy has failed in shaping the future. In light of this, history must be rewritten anew by us and for us.

Bartana's project is imaginative and utopian but it also invents itself as a reality. It seeks to go back into history and rewrite it in the present. For that reason it is vital to understand Bartana's return to history not only as an artistic gesture.⁴ The creation of the Movement is presented as a process that exists narratively in the trilogy, but in parallel to it are incursions into political reality that cannot be

dismissed as merely artistic gestures. The ever-growing amount of images and items belonging to the Movement – a flag, insignia, and uniforms, an official stamp, texts, propaganda photographs, and more – reconstruct a set of familiar images and ideological techniques used in twentieth-century national politics. Here they return with a necessary reversal. Instead of creating the singular they form the plural; in place of the closed meaning, potentially diverse readings.⁵ The process of deviation into political reality was felt even more acutely in 2012

when the Movement formed as a real group during the First JRMiP Congress held in Berlin. In it, questions were raised regarding the European, Polish and Israeli situations, and general principles (imaginative and realistic) were set for the Movement's future activities.⁶ Although the Congress opened with commentaries from various participants regarding the essence of its existence as part of an artistic project, these very quickly gave way to serious questions and debates (if at times humorous) touching upon issues of occupation, migration, and refugees.

A different kind of return to history can be detected in Ariella Azoulay's work also represented in this issue of View.⁷ Azoulay traces desires and possibilities that existed in Palestine in the past. Possibilities that carried a potential that was interrupted by the establishment of a sovereign regime that created a political ruling body of a differential and contentious nature. In her work, Azoulay returns to a crucial episode between the months preceding the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine (November 1947) and the establishment of the state of Israel (May 1948), where Jews and Palestinians began negotiations to end the violence that national and military forces were attempting to incite.

In this respect Azoulay suggests the historical path that was lost and erased, the possibility of relations formed locally without the ordering of an aggressive national state. This is not the utopian description of a real option that was curbed, but a representation of a delicate and reciprocal option that existed and was lost at the crucial moment of the appearance of the state.

Another treatment of the fabric of mutual living in the Middle East is presented in the work of Michael Zupraner, which focuses on the disputed present itself. *Heb2*



The First International Congress of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, Berlin Yael Bartana, 2012.

Photos by Ilya Rabinovich

was a continuous documentary project in the form of a community TV station based in Hebron. Through internet broadcasting, *Heb2* described the daily life of a Palestinian area under Israeli control called H2. Since its occupation in 1967, Hebron is the only Palestinian city with an Israeli settlement in its midst. In order to defend the 600 settlers living in several compounds within that city, the Israeli military has placed a series of stifling

movement restrictions on the Palestinian population of H2. A prohibition on traveling the main streets, shutting down of stores, house searches, and roadblocks are some examples of a policy that has led, together with the continuous violence on the part of the settlers themselves, to the mass deserting of Palestinians. The city's vibrant commercial center has turned into a ghost town, abandoned property switched hands, and the few inhabitants who remained are living under siege and threat.

Their story, told through the project's video archive, is also the story of Michael Zupraner, who turned an abandoned house near the Tel Rumeida settlement into his home, and the broadcasting station of *Heb2*. Together with his partners, and through his choice to live in Hebron, Zupraner presents a deviation from the physical and mental borders of Zionist ideology, thereby demonstrating the responsibility Israeli society ought to have for the people and territory under its rule.

Zupraner has this in his presence in Hebron. His is a utopian enclave set inside a nationalistic political one, thus presenting a continuous challenge for the Palestinians, the Settlers, and the Israeli Army, all of whom treat him with suspicion. Zupraner's physical presence in Hebron, and his daily documentation in video and text, reveal a complex array of relations that on the one hand present the Israeli presence ignoring the local fabric of life, and on the other, the vital force of mutual life despite everything.



HEB2. Michael Zupraner, 2012. *Where to? Installation view*

Re-living

The possibilities and works briefly described here, as well as others that were shown in the exhibition, aim at opening an array of possible relations and ways of living that are not present in current Jewish-Israeli reality, and to open a spectrum for another sort of imagining. They wish to deal with the Israeli crisis, with the discomfort many of us, artists and researchers, feel today as Israelis, and with the ruins that this crisis reveals – with the erasure of history and the potential for multiple possibilities that we wish to revitalize in our current reality.

In a certain sense, what seems completely unimaginable today is not the possible existence of a different Israel in a different territory, but the existence of multiple forms of "Israeli" life; of territorial and non-territorial ways of being that exist in parallel. Such an imaginative horizon, even when based on suggestions emerging from within the Zionist movement, poses a threat to Zionism, and can easily be regarded as anti-Zionist or even anti-Semitic nowadays. In this sense, the simple call for bringing imaginative thinking back into Zionism goes beyond the narrow legitimate bounds of the contemporary Zionist being. The ability to imagine aims to overcome the destruction and ruin, and the arrest of a stunted imagination.

Footnotes

1 Eliyahu Binyamini, *States for Jews (Medinot la'yehudim)*. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Press, 1990).

2 About this phase:http://www.digitalartlab.org.il/ExhibitionPage.asp?id=577&path=level_1 Accessed, February 10th, 2014.

3 For the complete manifesto see: <http://www.artnews.com/2013/04/18/yael-bartana-jewish-renaissance-movement/manifesto/> Accessed, February 10th, 2014.

4 On the way history and historiography function in contemporary art see my 2013 "Histories" Catalog text – U.E.
http://www.digitalartlab.org.il/ExhibitionPage.asp?id=774&path=level_1 Accessed, February 10th, 2014.

5 More on these notions can be read in this conversation I conducted with Yael

Bartana for a *Maarav* journal issue – U.E.

<http://www.maarav.org.il/english/2012/04/till-imagination-takes-us-back-%E2%80%93-a-conversation-with-yael-bartana/> Accessed, February 10th, 2014.

6 For documentation of and information about the JRMiP's first congress see:

<http://www.jrmip.org/> Accessed, February 10th, 2014.

7 <http://widok.ibl.waw.pl/index.php/one/article/view139/196/> Accessed, February 10th, 2014.