

Ewa Kędziora

INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

ORCID: 0000-0002-1902-7217

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Archaeology of the present: Israeli art after the Al-Aqsa Intifada

Abstract

The Al-Aqsa Intifada was the second Palestinian uprising that took place in 2000–2005. The dramatic record of the Intifada expressing itself in waves of recurring terror attacks and the construction of the separation wall on the border between Israel and Palestine overturned the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and triggered international public opinion. The article aims to determine how those events influenced the art scene. The study performs an overview of activities and artistic phenomena which occurred from 2000 through 2015 and problematized the events of the Second Intifada in various ways. The author focuses on individual works of art by both Israeli and international artists as well as art events and exhibitions of the leading kind. The analysis shows the extensive impacts of the Intifada on the artistic environment of that time and leads the author to the conclusion of the Intifada's prevailing role in shaping politically engaged Israeli art at the beginning of 21 century. The dramatic events came up in creating a new aesthetic of the conflict, resulted in expanding a cultural boycott of Israel as well as challenged the position of politically engaged artists of Israel.

Keywords: Israeli contemporary Art, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, cultural boycott, Tsibi Geva.

The subject matter of this article is the impact of the events of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the second Palestinian uprising, on the artistic environment in the years 2005–2015. The rebellion, which took place in 2000–2005, was the aftermath of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict – the annexation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, deteriorating living conditions of Palestinians under the Israeli occupation, and disappointment with the ineffective peace process in the 1990s. In this article, I review art trends and artistic phenomena that emerged after the Second Intifada, an event that I consider to be a major impulse in the formation of political art in Israel at the beginning of the 21st century. I examine how factors such as increased oppression against the Palestinian population during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, a growing awareness

of the conflict among the international public opinion, and the formation of attitudes condemning Israel's policies, triggered the artistic environment. The analysis concentrates on activities and artistic phenomena that problematized the impact of the Second Intifada in relation to shaping the aesthetics of the conflict, a cultural boycott of Israel and Palestinian artists as well as the use of photography as a medium in new narratives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

An outline of the political situation in 2000–2015

The official visit of the Israeli politician Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount in September 2000 is widely considered to have been the direct cause of the second Palestinian uprising.¹ The visit, which was treated as a provocation, triggered a wave of violence against Israeli troops and civilians in the form of large-scale terrorist attacks.² The construction of the so-called security barrier was Israel's response to the Palestinian aggression.³ The wall was to be built along the Green Line, but it departed from it in many places, which resulted in seizing large parts of Palestinian territories and restricting or blocking Palestinians' freedom of movement within the divided areas.⁴ Also, the systemic aggravation of the conditions of crossing the border by the Israeli authorities – numerous checkpoints, an extremely small and inadequate number of permits issued, lack of administrative regulations and numerous abuses by Israeli soldiers – contributed to the development of mechanisms of oppression against Palestinians consisting in isolation and restriction of the movement of the population.⁵ The events of the Second Intifada were recorded as a period of indifference and apathy of Israeli society.⁶ The reality of everyday life was shaped by terrorist attacks, a permanent state of emergency and a failure of the peace process, which created a sense of recurring events, increased the distrust of Palestinians and deepened divisions within the society, leading to an era without dreams and aspirations.⁷

The Al-Aqsa Intifada ended with the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004.⁸ The balance of losses suffered by both sides was overwhelming. The post-intifada negotiations

1 A. Shapira, *Israel. A History*, Brandeis University Press, 2012, p. 446.

2 Ibid.

3 See: I. Braverman, "Checkpoint Watch: Bureaucracy and Resistance at the Israeli/Palestinian Border", *Social & Legal Studies* 21(3), 2012, pp. 297–320.

4 Ibid.

5 See: A. Handel, "Exclusionary Surveillance and Spatial Uncertainty in the Occupied Palestinian Territories", in: E. Zureik, D. Lyon, Y. Abu-Laban, eds., *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory and Power*, London, 2011.

6 V. Vinitzky-Seroussi, "The Decade of Indifference: 1998–2007", in: A. Mendelson, ed., *Real Time...*, op. cit., p. 15.

7 R. Marton, "The Psychological Impact of the Second Intifada on Israeli Society", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2004.

8 See: G.G. Tabarani, *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From Balfour Promise to Bush Declaration: the Complications and the Road for a Lasting Peace*, Bloomington, 2008, pp. 222–244.

resulted in the decision to withdraw all Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip.⁹ Mahmud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, described this action as “the first step” in a steady normalization of the Israeli-Palestinian relations.¹⁰ However, after a short-lived stabilization, this relationship worsened again after the victory of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement party, in the 2006 parliamentary elections in the Palestinian Authority.¹¹ This event caused a split in Palestinian politics and drastic deterioration of the living conditions of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip.¹² In 2008, Israel carried out Operation Cast Lead to destroy Hamas’ armed infrastructure in the Gaza Strip and its underground tunnel network. As a consequence of the operation, also known as the Gaza Massacre, both sides of the conflict were accused of war crimes by the UN Human Rights Council.¹³ In 2014, in response to relentless missile attacks fired at Israel, the intensity of military operations increased again with the launch of Operation Protective Edge, the bloodiest military campaign in the Gaza Strip since 2008.¹⁴ A year later, the frustration and powerlessness of teenage Palestinians in the face of the Israeli occupation and the unchanging political situation lead to the outbreak of the so-called Knife Intifada.¹⁵ The third rebellion differed from the others because it was largely carried out by “lone wolves”.

The aftermath of the Intifada in the international art world

The construction of the separation barrier and the bloody record of the Second Intifada made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the subject of an international public debate, which also echoed in the art world. One of the first foreign voices of disapproval of the building of the wall was an act of the British street artist Banksy in 2005, who painted his artistic pacifist manifesto on the Palestinian side of the separation barrier.¹⁶ Among the nine graffiti murals he created, there were images of a ladder reaching the top of the wall, and a girl digging a hole in the wall. In 2007, on

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 M. Godziński, „Konflikt izraelsko-palestyński w latach 2006–2014 – analiza i bilans”, *Zbliżenia Cywilizacyjne* XII (2), 2016, pp. 40–44.

13 Amnesty International Report, *Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories*, www.amnesty.org.pl/wpcontent/uploads/2011/05/AIR2011_Izrael_i_OTP.pdf [accessed: 23.09.2020]

14 Operation Protective Edge had been the most brutal military operation in the Gaza Strip since Operation Cast Lead in 2008. In 2014, 2,000 Palestinians were killed and over 10,000 were injured. See: M. Godziński, *Konflikt izraelsko-palestyński...*, op. cit., p. 51.

15 H. Moodrick-Even Khen, “From Knives to Kites: Developments and Dilemmas around the Use of Force in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict since ‘Protective Edge’”, *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, vol. 10, 2/2019, pp. 303–336.

16 Z. Krohn, J. Lagerweij, *Concrete messages. Street Art on the Israeli – Palestinian Separation Barrier*, Arsta, 2010, p. 7.

Banksy's initiative, an exhibition was organized in Bethlehem to draw attention to the difficult financial situation of Palestinians, and the proceeds collected during the event were donated to charity.¹⁷ Marlene Dumas is another artist who criticized the Israeli border control policies. At the exhibition entitled *Against the Wall* (2010) at David Zwirner Gallery in New York, Dumas presented a series of paintings inspired by photographs documenting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁸ In one of her works, *The Wall* (2009), she referred to a photo showing Orthodox Jews on a pilgrimage to Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, where the image of men leaning against the separation wall was associated with the prayer scene at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. In *Wall Weeping* (2009), the starting point for Dumas was a photograph of Palestinian men leaning against the wall and being searched by Israeli soldiers. As in *The Wall*, the wall depicted in this painting evoked ambivalent associations oscillating between the image of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and the image of the separation barrier.

The above-mentioned Banksy's street art and Dumas's "afterimages" referring to the topic of the separation wall emphasized the process of shaping visual symbols of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which began during the First Intifada (1987–1992).¹⁹ As the mass media grew more powerful and widely accessible, the international public opinion was confronted with images documenting the Palestinian struggle, scenes of violence and pictures showing tires burning in the streets and Palestinian flags.²⁰ This process was accelerated during the Second Intifada, when, due to the development of mass media and the Internet, photos showing dramatic scenes of bomb attacks and the construction of the separation wall on the border between Israel and Palestine were circulated en masse.²¹ The intensity of these images and their oppressive overtones contributed to the emergence of the new symbols of the conflict that have since permeated the language of foreign artists.

Increased activity of organizations calling for a boycott of Israeli academic and artistic circles was another effect of moving the discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict onto an international level. One of them was the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), which was established in Ramallah in 2004.²² PACBI is an extension of the activities of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions and calls for a boycott of cultural institutions and events supported by official Israeli institutions.²³ Their programme was highly controversial as it

17 Ibid.

18 M. Dumas, *Against the Wall*, New York, 2010.

19 A. Azoulay, "Introduction. A Photographed History of the Occupation", in: B. Mondadori, ed., *Act of State 1967–2007. Photographed History of the Occupation*, (exib. cat.), Minshar Art Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2009.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Official website of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions, <https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi> [accessed: 21.09.2020]

23 See: H. Jamjoum, "The Global Campaign for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel", in: M. Carter Hallward, J. M. Norman, eds., *Nonviolent Resistance in the Second Intifada*, New York, 2011, pp. 133–153.

raised questions of who and what factors should be the focus of the boycott and whether boycotting Israeli academic and artistic circles was based on valid grounds. The report on this matter was presented by Chen Tamir in the online magazine “Hyperallergic”.²⁴ Tamir in her article referred to the incidents in the years 2012–2014, such as the cancellation of the exhibition *Sites of Passage: Borders, Walls & Citizenship* at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh (2014), or the protest at the Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil (2014).

The *Borders, Walls & Citizenship* exhibition was part of the *Sites of Passage* project carried out by American curator Tavia La Follette.²⁵ The concepts named in the title - borders, walls and citizenship – were meant to be a starting point for the presentation. La Follette invited five Israeli and three Palestinian artists to join the project. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled two days before the opening due to the withdrawal of the Palestinians from the exhibition, who decided to resign after facing a wave of criticism from groups opposing the Israeli occupation. The controversy was sparked by the phrases in the description of the exhibition about “cooperation” and “dialogue”, which in the face of very tense Israeli-Palestinian relations could have been seen as acceptance of the current political situation, namely the occupation of Palestine.²⁶ Moreover, the project was co-financed by Israel.

Artists taking part in the 2014 Brazil Biennale in Sao Paulo organised a protest, which was another example of the boycott. It was a response to the military actions undertaken by Israel as part of Operation Protective Edge.²⁷ The Palestinian artist Ruanne Abou-Rahme initiated a letter in which she demanded that the organizers of the Biennale return the funds provided by Israel.²⁸ She believed that accepting donations from the Israeli government in the face of recent events was tantamount to supporting its policy. The letter was signed by over sixty artists participating in the event, including the Israeli ones.²⁹ As a result of the protest, the information that the event had been financed by the Israeli authorities was removed from all promotional materials. The organizers also issued a statement saying that these funds were used solely to support presentations of artists from Israel.³⁰

Another effect of the revival of the debate on the Middle East conflict was a heightened interest in the work of Palestinian artists, which had been marginalized so far. The exhibition entitled *Made in Palestine* was an event that widely ech-

24 Ch. Tamir, “A Report on the Cultural Boycott of Israel”, *Hyperallergic*, 03.02.2015, www.hyperallergic.com/179655/a-report-on-the-cultural-boycott-of-israel/ [accessed: 05.09.2020]

25 Ibid.

26 <http://www.sitesofpassage.org/borders-walls--citizenship.html> [accessed: 05.09.2020]

27 Ch. Tamir, A Report..., op., cit.

28 B. Davis, “Artists Call on Bienal de São Paulo to Reject Israeli Funds”, *Artnet News*, 29.08.2014, www.news.artnet.com/exhibitions/artists-call-on-bienal-de-sao-paulo-to-reject-israeli-funds-updated-88974 [accessed: 14.07.2018]

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

oed in the art world.³¹ Being the first presentation of Palestinian art in the USA, the exhibition was shown at The Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston in 2003, then in San Francisco (2005) and New York (2006).³² It featured works of twenty-three artists living in Israel, in the occupied Palestine Territories, or exile.³³ The presentation of the Palestinian artists' political works in the United States stirred controversy over the accusations of promoting violence and terrorism made by right-wing groups.³⁴ These allegations mainly related to the exhibition in San Francisco. The recently ended Al-Aqsa Intifada, as well as the pro-Israel policy of the United States, intensified the feeling of aversion to Palestinians, who were associated with suicide attacks and terrorism.³⁵ Another exhibition elaborating on the problem of Palestinian identity was *The Subject of Palestine* (2005), organized at the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago by the Palestinian artist Samia Halaby. It presented the works of sixteen Palestinian artists exploring the concept of national identity, but the curator of the exhibition was accused of anti-Semitism by the Jewish community in the United States.³⁶

Photography – a new medium in the presence of the occupation

The events of the Second Intifada, the experience of terror and the development of political oppression against the Palestinian population left a mark on the works of Israeli artists created after 2005. Most of them gave up on the monumental narrative form widely used in the previous decade and looked for media more suited to their contemporary realities.³⁷ A growing interest in photography and its inclusion

31 J. Persekian, "17 Lost Arts Exhibitions", in: L. Kim, H. Nassar, Ch. Wong, eds., *Field Notes 4: Publics, Histories, Value: The Changing Stakes of Exhibitions*, 2015, p. 73.

32 Ibid.

33 The following installations were presented among the works at the exhibition: Emily Jacir *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Which Were Destroyed* (2001), Rajie Cooka *Ammo Box* (2003) and photographs by Noel Jabbour *Al-Azzami Family* (2000) and Rula Halawani *Negative Incur-sion* (2002). See: Ibid.

34 "Palestine US exhibition stirs controversy", *Al Jazeera*, 20.04.2005, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/04/20/palestine-us-exhibit-stirs-controversy/> [accessed: 15.07.2020]

35 Ibid.

36 A. B. Cohen, "DePaul faces criticism over Palestinian art exhibit", *Free Republic*, 27.04.2005, www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1395591/posts [accessed: 15.07.2020]

37 Shaped by the atmosphere of anxiety of war and terrorism, the Israeli art at the turn of the century frequently expressed a fear of a global catastrophe. So it found common points of interest with international art trends, as noted by the art historian Amitaj Mendelson. He referred to the exhibition *Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art* (2000), which analyzed the visual potential of tragic events. Similar rhetoric, based on creating a catastrophic atmosphere, using sophisticated theatrical means and operating on a large scale, appeared in the works of local artists. However, in Israeli art, the apocalyptic themes were illustrated with motifs related to the destruction of nature and images of natural disasters. See: A. Mendelson, "The End of

in artistic activities became one of the main trends in Israeli art dealing with armed conflicts and the occupation policy.

Among the artists exploring the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of the Second Intifada, David Tartakover and David Reeb deserve special attention. One of the most famous works by Tartakover is the series of posters *I'm Here* (2003–2005).³⁸ The artist used Ziv Koren's reportage photos depicting suicide bombings in Israeli cities.³⁹ Tartakover superimposed a photo of himself dressed in an orange vest with the word "artist" on its back onto photographs showing real dramatic events. The bright colour of the clothes resembled a paramedic's uniform. The posters had the sentence "I'm Here" and the date and place of the attack. The text was printed on a distinctive green stripe resembling the logo of the Benetton clothing brand and the colours of the Palestinian flag.⁴⁰

David Reeb, like Tartakover, used themes depicting scenes strongly rooted in the collective consciousness as he painted pictures based on photographs documenting everyday life in the Occupied Territories. The first series of this type, *Let's Have Another War* (1997), was based on Miki Kratsman's reports published in the Haaretz daily newspaper in 1997.⁴¹ More than ten years later, Reeb created a cycle of hyper-realistic images illustrating the protests in the Arab village of Bil'in.⁴² In 2005, the inhabitants of this village, situated near Ramallah, opposed the construction of the wall that was designed to run through their land. Bil'in was one of the first cases of Palestinians arguing their rights before Israel's Supreme Court, which, incidentally, ruled that the construction of the wall had been illegal.⁴³ In Reeb's pictures the viewer was placed on the Palestinian side of the wall, and "through the eyes" of Bil'in's inhabitants looked at the town fenced with barbed wire and armed Israeli soldiers. Referring to Israeli works of art using press photography, Dana Arieli-Horowitz in the article *Art in the Age of Terror. The Israeli Case* evoked the notion of cultural trauma caused by the events of the Second Intifada.⁴⁴ According to the author, photography was meant to have a therapeutic effect. Returning to shocking events through journalistic shots, reliving the experiences and getting accustomed to the memories associated with them was an attempt to work through the collec-

Days and New Beginnings. Reflections on Art in Israel in 1998–2007", in: A. Mendelson, ed., *Real time: Art in Israel 1998–2008*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem 2008.

38 See: Ch. Jansen, D. Tartakover, "Peace now and peace then", *Dazed Digital*, 19.09.2014, www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/21806/1/david-tartakover-peace-now-and-peace-then [accessed: 04.07.2020]

39 M. Hyvarinen, L. Muszynski, eds., *Terror and the Arts. Artistic, Literary, and Political Interpretations of Violence from Dostoyevsky to Abu Ghraib*, New York, 2008, p. 54.

40 Ibid., p. 53

41 Ibid., p. 44.

42 See: P. Smoleński, *Oczy zasypane piaskiem*, Warsaw, 2014, pp. 197–211.

43 The long term struggle of Bil'in's inhabitants became the subject of the documentary "5 Broken Cameras" directed by E. Burnat and G. Davidi (2012).

44 *Terror and the Arts...*, op. cit., p. 53.

tive trauma, and “repainting” the photos was to give them a new dimension.⁴⁵ On the other hand, photos published in newspapers or on the Internet, which testified to the life beyond the wall, involuntarily penetrated the Israeli consciousness, gradually constructing a real picture of the occupation.

Act of State 1967–2007. Photographed History of the Occupation was an exhibition that attempted to include photography documenting the lives of Palestinians in the discourse of Israeli visual culture.⁴⁶ The curator and philosopher Ariella Azoulay was the author of the exhibition. The event was organized on the anniversary of Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War, thus “commemorating” the fortieth anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. More than seven hundred photos by eighty Israeli photographers were presented at the Minshar Art Gallery in Tel Aviv.⁴⁷ Black and white and colour photographs arranged chronologically and with a short text describing their origins were designed to form a kind of an open archive documenting forty years of life of the Palestinian population under the occupation.⁴⁸ It was the first exhibition of this type presenting the history of the occupation of the West Bank on such a large scale.⁴⁹ Among the presented photographs, there were many shocking and disturbing images. One of them was a photo taken by Alex Levac in 1991 showing masked Palestinians holding hands who were escorted by a soldier. It seemed as if they were walking in a dance procession led by a smiling Israeli soldier.⁵⁰

The series by Roi Kuper entitled *Gaza Dream* (2014) was an example of Israeli artistic activities which abandoned the monumental, theatrical form in the narrative about the Israeli conflict, characteristic of the Israeli art at the beginning of the 21st century, in favour of euphemistic, panoramic photographs.⁵¹ This project was developed from May to September 2014 with the work being repeatedly interrupted because of the intensification of the armed conflict and Operation Cast Lead.⁵² The artist intended to photograph the Gaza Strip from the north, south, east and west to create a series of panoramas. The photos were taken from the only accessible and safe perspective – a fenced border line guarded by the military. The project resulted in a series of distant images of Gaza, showing fields, a bright blue sky, and a calm and hazy horizon. Situated beyond the horizon, Gaza appeared to be a mirage. The author of the photos wrote: “We are used to seeing Gaza from a bird’s eye view or photos taken among dilapidated houses, but not from this distance. Not from the

45 Ibid.

46 A. Azoulay, “Introduction. A Photographed History of the Occupation”, in: B. Mondadori, ed., *Act of State 1967–2007. Photographed History of the Occupation*, (exib. cat.), Minshar Art Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2009.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Y. Zalmona, *A Century of Israeli Art*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem 2013, p. 426.

52 N. Gal, “Gaza Dream”, Roi Kuper 2014, www.roikuper.com/gaza-dream/ [accessed: 21.06.2020]

perspective of the fields that are so close to those who live here. While working on the project, I asked myself: what will grow on these fields?"⁵³

Archaeology of the present

In the analysis of the impact of the events of the Second Intifada on Israeli art special attention should be paid to the case of Tsibi Geva's exhibition during the 56th Venice Art Biennale in 2015.⁵⁴ Tsibi Geva, whose work is representative of Israeli conceptual art, in his installation *Archeology of the Present* attempted to examine the political and social reality of Israel. Nevertheless, the exhibition, which engaged in polemics with the official discourse of Israeli politics, became the object of pressure from pro-Palestinian circles. The reception of Tsibi Geva's installation at the Biennale showed the complexity of the relationship between politics and art, which Israeli artists of that period often had to face.

Geva's exhibition, *Archeology of the Present*, during the Venice Biennale in 2015 was the artist's individual presentation in the Israeli pavilion. The first interaction of the viewer with the exhibition took place before entering the building.⁵⁵ The outer walls of the pavilion were tightly wrapped in black tires. Fixed closely one next to another and tied with plastic ropes, the tires seemed to form a monumental net camouflaging the pavilion. Besides, the distinct smell of rubber and the "prickly" surface created by protruding plastic wires were intended to arouse a feeling of discomfort and anxiety in visitors crossing the threshold of the building.⁵⁶

The motif of black tires first appeared in Geva's work in the early 1990s.⁵⁷ Many Israeli researchers perceived the monumental structure covered with tires as a transposition of the geometric pattern of the *keffiyeh* the rhomboidal ornament from traditional Arabic scarves.⁵⁸ The *keffiyeh* appeared in Geva's painting in the 1980s and was a reference to the symbol of Palestinian resistance during the First Intifada, the so-called Arafat scarf. It was in Venice that the monumental tire structure was fixed on the outer walls of the building for the first time. Hadas Maor, the curator of the exhibition, compared it to a monolithic bunker reinforced by a thick layer of used tires.⁵⁹ The pavilion, fortified with walls of black tires, seemed to be both an example of a monumental sculpture transposing a two-dimensional *keffiyeh* pattern, and a paraphrase of a ghost bunker reminding viewers of history, conflicts and wars.⁶⁰

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ N. Barel, ed., *Tsibi Geva. Archeology of the Present*, (exib. cat.), The Israeli Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, Israel 2015.

⁵⁵ H. Maor, "Vernacular Art", in: N. Barel, ed., *Tsibi Geva. Archeology of the Present*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview with Tsibi Geva (by E. Kędziora), Tel Aviv, January 2016.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ H. Maor, op. cit., p. 38–39.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

The interior of the bright, modernist building was filled with numerous items of old furniture and household appliances. They were placed in a niche opposite the main entrance and rows of metal lattices on the first floor. Geva's use of these arrangements created two associations with a typical Israeli house. The first one was the so-called *boidem*, a narrow niche above the entrance which is a specific storage place for Israeli households.⁶¹ The second one was a row of windows lattices where the space between the bars and the windows often serves as a temporary improvised storage room for unnecessary things.⁶² The emphasis on the need for gathering things in the Israeli context brought to mind the Holocaust survivor syndrome – a post-traumatic stress disorder manifesting itself in a continuous accumulation of material things long after the trauma.⁶³ The overloaded space of the installation, filled with a large number of objects, was a reference to the collective memory of the Holocaust and was meant to express the mental state of the Israeli society – a constant feeling of anxiety and fear of unexpected threats.⁶⁴

Among the paintings presented at the exhibition, there was a picture with the inscription *GAZZA*, accompanied by a *keffiyeh* motif, and a panel with the word “*WONDERLAND*” encased in a metal grating which was a bitter reference to the unfulfilled visions of Eretz Israel as a place of unconditional happiness created by the Zionist ideology. The exhibition in the pavilion also featured a series of abstract paintings imitating the floor pattern of the *balata*. The word *balata* in Arabic



Fig. 1. View of the Israeli Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2015. Credits to: Yael Engelhart/Elad Sarig.

61 Ibid., p. 39.

62 Ibid., pp. 47–48.

63 W. G. Niederland, “Psychiatric Status of Holocaust Survivors”, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, no. 139(12), 1982.

64 H. Maor, op. cit., p. 41.



Fig. 2. *Boidem*, 2015, found objects, installation view. Credits to: Yael Engelhart/Elad Sarig.



Fig. 3. *Lattice*, 2015, iron, found objects, installation view. Credits to: Yael Engelhart/Elad Sarig.

means tiles, and in Hebrew, it is used as a term for terrazzo tiles, which are commonly used in the Israeli construction industry.⁶⁵ Balata is also the name of a Palestinian refugee camp whose inhabitants played an important role in the First and Second Intifadas.⁶⁶ On the one hand, the abstract images imitating colourful terrazzo tiles referred to the popular cheap element of the decor of Israeli houses. On the other hand, the series of paintings alluded to the debate about the difficult economic situation of the Palestinian community in Israel, where simple construction work, such as tiling, was associated with low-paid jobs performed by Arab workers migrating from the West Bank in the search of employment.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*



Fig. 4. *Gazzza*, 2014, acrylic on paper mounted on wood. Credits to: Yael Engelhart/Elad Sarig.

The *Archeology of the Present* installation was complemented by a video entitled *Lattice*.⁶⁸ Directed by Tsibi Geva in collaboration with Boaz Arad and Miki Kratsman, the film was made in 2002, in the heat of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. It was shown on television sets placed in a row of lattices.⁶⁹ The subject of the recording was one day in the life of Ajami the predominantly Arab neighbourhood in Jaffa, viewed through the bars placed in the windows of Hagar Art Gallery, the patterns of which changed in successive sequences. The bars used by the artist, whose shapes resembled, among others, The Star of David, the rhomboidal pattern of the *keffiyeh*, or Piet Mondrian's *Tableau I*, symbolically blocked observers in the gallery from accessing the outside world of Jaffa's inhabitants. Geva's film raised questions about creating a sense of safety and security through self-isolation.⁷⁰

The presentation of *Archeology of the Present* during the Venice Art Biennale summarized Tsibi Geva's artistic achievements. The majority of objects used in his work were found on the street or in the vicinity of his studio in southern Tel Aviv.⁷¹ Based

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 49.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Interview with Tsibi Geva (by E. Kędziora), Tel Aviv, January 2016.

⁷¹ Ibid.



Fig. 5. *Altneuland*, 2000, industrial paint on tin. Credits to: Yael Engelhart/Elad Sarig.



Fig. 6. *Lattice*, 2015, iron, found objects, detail. Credits to: Yael Engelhart/Elad Sarig.

on miscellaneous objects and motifs strongly rooted in the identity of contemporary Israel, which he had collected, the artist attempted to recreate the country's political and social reality. The recurring theme of the exhibition was the issue of an obstacle or a barrier. The monumental camouflage walls made of black tires, or the bars appearing in the video *Lattice*, whose patterns respectively referred to the Zionist ideology, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the *cliché* of modernism and European culture that shaped the contemporary state of Israel, drew attention to the omnipresent need to create a sense of security by oppressive means. The motifs

adopted by Geva, such as floor tiles, window bars, or *boidem* storage places were associated with the concept of home.⁷² Hadas Maor described Geva's work as "vernacular art".⁷³ Although connected with architectural terminology, this phrase can describe art closely related to the native tradition or containing a context typical for a given country.⁷⁴ Geva's vernacular art presented at the Venice Biennale seemed to be the artist's commentary on contemporary Israel, whose reality had been shaped by the pressure of living in a place of unstable feeling.⁷⁵

"Occupation" of Israel

In August 2015, the building of the Israeli pavilion was the site of a protest organised by members of the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), a faction of the international Gulf Labour Coalition. The organization is an association of artists and activists working to improve the employment conditions of workers hired for the construction of contemporary art museums in the United Arab Emirates.⁷⁶

On 2 August 2015, as part of the protest, members of the G.U.L.F. hung a poster with the Hanzala motif in the Arsenale building.⁷⁷ The combination of two symbols – the Gulf Labour Coalition banner with Hanzala signified the organization's solidarity with the Palestinian people. The activists made an official statement saying that the question of Palestine had not been addressed during this year's Biennale and that there had been no evidence of support from the BDS movement.⁷⁸ The speech was followed by the "occupation" of the official Israeli pavilion. The gathered audience was invited to participate. The activists occupied the first floor of the building, where the exhibition space became the site of an open discussion on the further activities of BDS and PACBI and the need to implement a cultural boycott of institutions supported by official Israeli authorities.⁷⁹

On 4 August 2015, in the internet magazine "Hyperallergic", the artist and the curator of *Archeology of the Present* published an official statement declaring that they

72 H. Maor, op. cit., p. 48.

73 Ibid., p. 38.

74 G. Rytel, „Wernakularna, czyli jaka? Uwagi semantyczne na marginesie tematu konferencji”, *Budownictwo i Architektura*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2015, p. 143.

75 N. Bodick, "A Broken Home: Inside Tsibi Geva's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale", *BlouinArtinfo*, 04.09.2015.

76 See The Gulf Labour Coalition official website, www.gulflabor.org [accessed: 22.11.2017]

77 The depiction of a ten-year-old boy standing with his hands clasped behind his back was created by the Palestinian cartoonist Nadji Salim al-Ali. The image of a barefoot child standing with his back turned and observing political events has been regarded as the symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance since the 1970s. See: H. Vartanian, "G.U.L.F. Occupies Israeli Pavilion in Venice, Calls for Cultural Boycott", *Hyperallergic*, 03.08.2015, www.hyperallergic.com/226941/g-u-l-f-occupies-israeli-pavilion-in-venice-calls-for-cultural-boycott/ [accessed: 22.11.2017]

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

were against the occupation and strongly believed in dialogue and open discussion. Geva stated that he was pleased that G.U.L.F. had chosen “the heart of his project as a meeting place” and that the protest had taken place among works such as *GAZZA*, the only item at this year’s Biennale addressing the Palestinian problem, and the ironically caged image of “*WONDERLAND*”.⁸⁰

On 11 August 2015, the response of the G.U.L.F. organization to the artist’s statement was published on the website of the same magazine. The G.U.L.F. activists declared that they had “occupied” the pavilion to talk about the daily injustice towards the Palestinian people and to discuss the cultural boycott of Israel, not to engage in a dialogue with the symbols featured in the artist’s paintings. They wrote: “The Israeli pavilion normalizes Israeli occupation and violence. [...] With this letter, we want to respectfully challenge your artistic position along these lines: are you taking responsibility for the actual political effects of your participation?”⁸¹

The emblematic bunker the Israeli pavilion was turned into at the 56th Venice Art Biennale was supposed to be Tsibi Geva’s bitter commentary on the subject of the Israeli “home”, the country where security relied on the policy of occupation, isolation and exclusion. Nevertheless, the exhibition, which was supposed to be a critical voice of Israel’s status quo, became the subject of political pressure. On the one hand, the “occupation” of the Israeli pavilion seemed to be a sad paradox and an additional example of an impasse of the existing political situation. On the other hand, it was justified criticism of the attitude consciously adopted by the artist – a representative of the state that repressed a national minority. However, a predominant feeling of anxiety triggered by the exhibition as well as attitudes of the artist himself as the person who admired that the act of resistance had taken place at his presentation tends to a reconsideration of the validity of the protest. Referring to those issues Noelle Bodick pointed out that this exhibition definitely weakly worked on the positive image for Israel and on the whitewashing of its policy, hence the action carried out by the G.U.L.F. might have been misplaced.⁸²

Apart from the discussion on the matter of reasonableness of the action performed by the G.U.L.F., the most interesting of the mentioned occurrence seemed to be a position of the artist himself. Geva appeared to challenge his position as a politically involved artist and as an Israeli who openly admits his affection for his homeland. Playing such a double role became a common experience of many Israeli artists who live and work in Israel, as well as Israeli politically engaged art in general, as a consequence of ongoing conflict. The exhibition of Geva at the Venice Biennale is a specific case because it illustrates the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which, as assumed in this article, was exacerbated by the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Tendencies based on calls for boycotts slowed down after

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² N. Bodick, “A Broken Home: Inside Tsibi Geva’s Pavilion at the Venice Biennale”, *BlouinArtinfo*, 04.09.2015.

2015. It was a result of increasing debates on the need to create a space for open discussion.

The Al-Aqsa Intifada in its consequences intensified the oppression against the Palestinian people, increased public awareness of the conflict on the international level, and created attitudes condemning Israel's policy towards the Palestinians. The reality of the Second Intifada, shaped by terrorist attacks and the growing mass media coverage, penetrated the collective consciousness, producing visual symbols and a new aesthetic of the conflict. These factors provided a strong stimulus for the artists and developed the trends presented in this article. Examples of the receptions of Israeli and Palestinian art abroad referred to forming new attitudes of the international public opinion to the Israeli-Palestinian relations which put a strong impact on the artistic environment.

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