

Tel Aviv, October 26th

- 9.00 A.M.

***“Here’s how people think: There are no Palestinian objects – they’re all ours”
(Michal Bar Or)***



The outskirts of Jaffa. The smell of fish and garbage. Used tires are piled up in backyards. Artists are housed in poorly maintained, concrete buildings. Usually on top floors, as if art is not supposed to expose itself at street level. Michal Bar Or talks about hidden and revealed narratives, about research, history, archeology, archives, colonialism, property theft, ownership, identity and looted objects.



Archaeological objects are on display. Once, long before these artefacts gathered sand and dust, the objects were part of the daily lives of ‘ordinary’ people, living on the western edge of the fertile crescent. Now, dug up and rescued from oblivion by private and public collectors (the notorious political and military leader Moshe Dayan was one of them), the objects have become national treasures – artefacts, solidified data, justifying (in accordance with the Holy Book) the incontestable history of the Promised Land and the existence of the state of Israel.



In a corner of the studio, a video shows a Palestinian musician, playing solemnly in a Museum depot. Playing in front of a silent audience, consisting of stored and wrapped up archaeological objects (or better perhaps: looted booty), a beautiful soundtrack emerges. Is it a death march? A tribute?



I love Michal's projects, however, they do raise questions too: as a scientific enterprise, archaeology is inseparably connected to chiefdoms/states/civilisations – *they* left objects behind. In general, archaeology serves statecraft and ruling elites. Our museums (and depots) tend to overrate these often short lived civilisations and tend to underrate longer periods of dispersal. We should be careful in using archaeology or counter-archaeology as an effective means of criticism. 'People without history' (Eric Wolf) are usually absent in both domains.

- 10.00 A.M.

"There aren't any collectors here – we have to do everything by ourselves"
(Karen Zaltz)

Sovjet- and prison styled concrete blocks. Once built as high rise centres for small workshops and manufacturers, now inhabited by prostitutes, night club entrepreneurs and artists.



Indie Gallery is housed at a top floor. Again.



Indie is run by founder Keren Zaltz and her collective. They love photography. There's no government support – all members pay rent and have specific roles within the fabric of the gallery. 8 exhibitions each year, 6 solo's, 2 group exhibitions. Great space, enthusiastic group of artists – “But there's no cash – we just try to survive”. Carry on!



- 11.00 A.M.

“No nation can exist without culture” (Michael Halak)

Noga Gallery. The complete opposite of Indie Gallery. A wonderful building in a gentrified area. The space has a lot of light, it's clean here, expensive - almost New Yorkish in its appearance. A beautiful, blond director talks smoothly – showing great marketing skills. In a city lacking a taste of collectors, you wonder where the money comes from. Any guesses?



Exhibiting artist Michael Halak was born in a Palestinian village. He studied at Haifa Art Academy but his teachers considered his drawings and paintings “irrelevant”. He is fond of classic Renaissance art, spent some time in Florence and continued his research at Haifa University. He loves hyper-realism and the art of collage. “I mix up styles, historical periods, objects, autobiographical episodes and memories – Who am I? What am I?” He made a rational choice to be an Israeli artist: “I want my works to be shown. I don’t want to become marginalized. I’ve got something to say: No nation can exist without culture”.



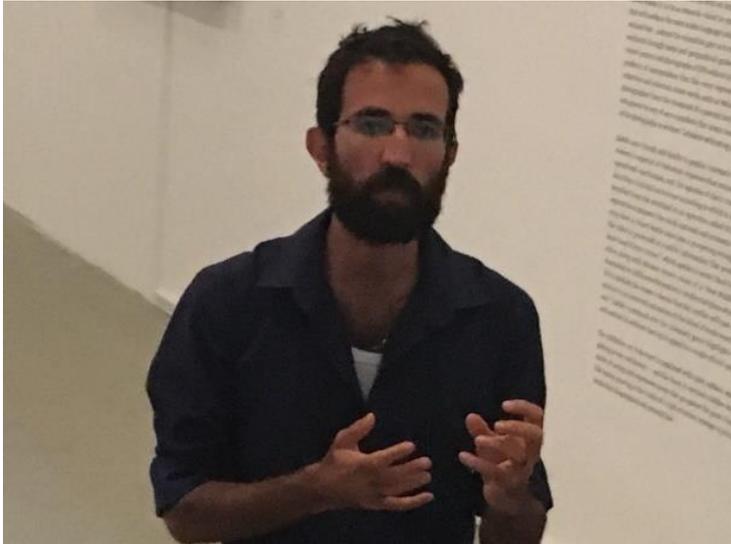
- 12.00 A.M.

“My parents and grandparents spoke fluently Arabian. Our generation lost that art of communication. Even a lot of Arabian street signs in Israel are spelled wrong” (Tamir Zadok)

Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Concrete, modern – as concrete and modern as a bunker or a shelter, or as grain silo’s, rising up everywhere: in Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Haifa. A manifestation of European superiority and brutality? Disguised as utopian, Corbusier-Bauhaus-like architecture, and thus – paradoxically/tragically - associated with progress and civilisation. Why do we keep defending/appreciating these authoritarian modes of architecture?, Nikos Salingaros asks us in his provocative *A Theory of Architecture* (2006).



Meeting Tamir Zadok is a relief. His works are like a fertile oasis in a dry desert. Zadok is a wonderful story-teller, tip-toe balancing on a tightrope between fiction and reality.

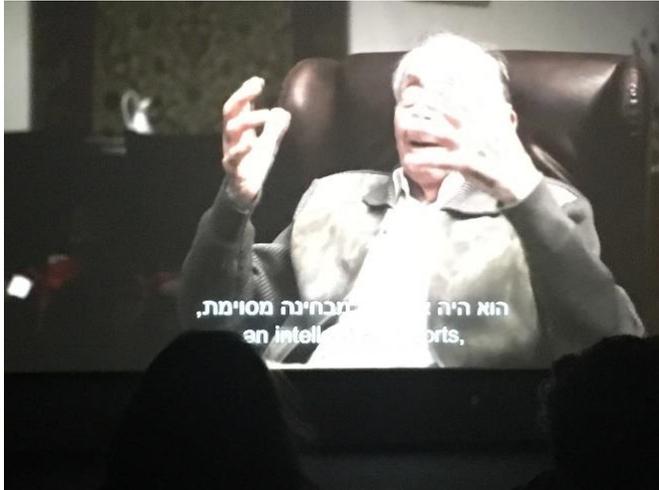


His mockumentary about the digging of the Gaza Canal is hilarious. Inspired by The Yes Men's undercover projects, his short film - presented as state propaganda – offers a scary up-to-date perspective on reality. Considering the tensions of contemporary Israel, the absurd (transforming Gaza into an island and a fence into a canal) has become a totally convincing concept (that is, a radical solution to a serious problem).



I especially liked his other film, also presented in the museum. *Art Undercover* is a wonderful, almost unbelievable documentary about the search for an Israeli Mossad-agent working undercover as the French artist Charduval in 1950's Cairo. If this story is true, I wish I wrote a book about it. I love stories like these.

The new video *Art Undercover* centers on Mossad agent Shlomo Cohen-Abarbanel. Having studied art in Paris, he left for Egypt in the 1950s as an undercover agent in the guise of a modernist French painter going by the name Charduval. This cover succeeded above expectations and a solo exhibition of works by Charduval-Abarbanel was mounted at the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo. Abarbanel-Charduval is presented as a successful model of a hyphenated identity: a spy-artist who succeeds in a performative double act "passing" and assimilating in the designated field — be it the art world, the regime, the intelligence community, or any other body whose actions involve internal language and codes. His story questions the system of indices determining who is an "artist" or who is a "Mossad agent."



Tamir is a modest talker. The film – super-entertaining and presented as a thriller – addresses many interesting topics. Like this one: in the 1950's artists in Cairo were respected members of the elite – even Mossad-agents could secretly dress up as artists. Today, an artist in Cairo is a suspected member of society – art is incompatible with traditionalism. In order to survive in Cairo the artist Tamir has to become an undercover agent. His films deserve a wider audience - they should be presented at Amsterdam's IDFA or Rotterdam's IFFR.

- 13.00 P.M.

Intermezzo, wonderful, sunny weather in a lovely designed park. Reading James Scott, *Against the Grain. A Deep History of the Earliest States* (Yale 2017), Tel Aviv Museum of Art Garden-Square

“My grandfather was crying when the bulldozers moved in and destroyed the land” (Durar Bacri)



Everywhere along the trip you encounter grain silo's, enormous concrete buildings, like this one in Haifa, armed with the inescapable 'Grain Logo'. In *Against the Grain* Scott argues that grain (agriculture) made taxes possible, nessecary to establish non-productive elites and consequently states, civilisations (and priestst and artists). However, agriculture also meant enforced labor,

slavery, debts, suppression, repression of women, a declining health, diseases, religious books and a constant war against 'barbarians' - or non-agricultural peoples (usually combining hunting, gathering, fishing, herding and horticulturalism). City walls (like the ones in Jerusalem) were not erected to keep 'barbarians' out, they had to keep 'tax-payers' in. Agricultural states are particularly good in colonizing 'unused' lands, draining marshes and mining wastelands, in order to expand their territories. However, marshes, deserts and waste lands were never 'unused'. Historians call this prejudice "the biggest mistake in human history". Isn't it tempting also to judge the Israeli/Palestinian-problem from this perspective?

If so, take a close look at this painting, made by Palestinian artist Durar Bacri (we met him in his studio at Tel Aviv two days earlier).



At first sight, it's just a rather sentimental, impressionist painting of a landscape. I asked Bacri why he painted this particular landscape. Smiling: "I made this for my grandfather. He stood there, next to that tree, crying, as the Israeli bulldozers moved in and destroyed the land of his village. They said nobody used the land. And they said they would. They would turn the wastelands into fertile grounds".



Bacri's answer and Scott's book sharply illustrate a deeper, more complex problem. "Haven't you Dutch done the same thing?", curator Udi Edelman asked me in the garden of war memorial museum Holon Petach Tikvaat at Tel Aviv, comparing the colonization of Gaza with the Dutch draining of the Zuiderzee. "Didn't you drain the marshes, create new lands and impose agriculture onto the peoples of Europe?". "Uuuhh, yes we did", I replied quietly (The Dutch even called wastelands 'unland', land untouched by God). I got the message: aren't we all Israeli? Or in Edelman's words: "What makes us so different from you"?

- 16.00 PM

"Take a close look at the hands" (Barry Frydlender)

Studio visit. Barry Frydlender is a wellknown photographer. Great skills, beautiful catalogues. Unfortunately not my cup of tea. I'm just not particular interested of photography. And I couldn't grasp what he was talking about. Perhaps he didn't like our/my presence.



But I did love the way he presented his work – almost performance-like. A lot of folks were needed to spread out his gigantic pictures accross the walls of his house. It was a social event. Arms stretched out, hands touching the wall, bodies in motion... His photographical techniques require digital applications and skills, but his approach to looking at them was totally analogue. "Take a close look. What do you see? Take a close look at the hands".



When we left his place Barry suddenly touched deeper levels. He started to philosophize about two photo's of a particular house, built next to his own building. The first one was shot when the house was occupied by Palestinians, the second when Israeli's moved in. "How would a future third one look like?", I asked him. He looked at me, paused for a while, and said: "Write me". Then he waved us out.



- 17.00 PM

"I am expressing my Mediterranean-Israeli identity"
(Orly Hommel)



Visiting Kav 16, a community gallery (for contemporary art). Situated in a dark, hidden corner of a concrete block – like all the other blocks we have got accustomed to here. The building looks and smells like Dutch urban 1970's-1980's styled cheap community buildings. However, the atmosphere here is vibrant. Local people (and lots of children) visit their doctors here, their local library and other community services. And there's a gallery! Hosted and managed by a very enthusiastic crew (most of them women), community art projects take place here and exhibitions are shown.



There's nothing wrong with community art (I love community art). There's nothing wrong with this group of dedicated artists, there's nothing wrong with the works that are on display, and there's nothing wrong with the kids involved in the processes of art. However, the theoretical/political framework provided by curator Karni Barzilay and artist Orly Hommel hurt my stomach.



Many artists we have visited this week were totally preoccupied with the notion of identity. However, identity, a philosopher once wrote, is a backward journey along places we've visited before. It is not identity we should discuss today, it is interest (from 'inter-esse' or 'being in between'). So don't stick around to argue about fixed stuff (like identity). If we want to get rid of failures of the past, let us explore relationships, our state of being in between things. So I got annoyed when Orly kept talking about her Mediterranean-Israeli identity. If I would talk in the

Netherlands about my Nordic-Dutch identity, I would be welcomed and hailed by Geert Wilders's xenophobic-nationalist Freedom Party.

It was a pleasure Ronit hooked me up with curator-philosopher Avi Lubin. He too got frustrated with all this identity-crap. So we had a marvellous talk, discussing his PhD-research, his exhibitions, his recent visit to Rotterdam and much more. Unfortunately we didn't even have time to finish our delightful meal as our group was supposed to carry on.



- 20.00 PM

"Would you like to buy this sculpture?"

Chelouche Gallery. Wonderful place. A great bookshop downstairs, several floors upstairs. The Tel Aviv elite was gathered here tonight - even the mayor, Ron Huldai, showed up.



I'm not sure if everyone knew what to expect. We were about to witness a performance act, called *Protective Edge*. To be honest, I'm not into performance art. But I did admire the leading lady, delivering a hilarious speech I was not able to understand. She was totally cool.



As the performance progressed and each sequence evolved on another floor, we got caught up in a kind of 1970's punk-rock-show. I couldn't figure out what it was all about though. Someone whispered in my ear, like it was some kind of secret: "The guy is Palestinian!" Oh? Uuhh, so? Yeah right! But hey, it's modern art, isn't it?



What struck me most was the total acceptance of the performance by the audience. It had been a long time since I encountered an audience so tolerant and receptive like this one. Chapeau! The

show ended on the top floor. Here, a “film” was screened, wonderfully done. (And Ronit fitted in there perfectly.)



Fin. Then we were pushed into an elevator. Downstairs, a lovely lady invited me to buy an artefact, some kind of souvenir. “Would you like to buy this sculpture?”



Finally, back to the hotel. Exhausted. Thursday the 26th of October was a very interesting day, however, I also was dazed and confused. Tel Aviv has a remarkable vibrant art infra-structure; I’ve met a couple of very interesting artists/curators, and the willingness of the artists to discuss their art works and their shown hospitality were incredible. However, I also returned to my hotel with a slight headache as I swallowed too much identity today. And then there’s that other thing that kept puzzling me: politics. “Haven’t you Dutch done the same thing?”

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10th Research Trip to Israel (October 21-28, 2017)