

"A New Middle East" Eleven Exhibition 1999-1998

**Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tel Aviv**

Curator: Tal Ben Zvi

Exhibition site: <http://www.hagar-gallery.com/exhibitions.html>

### **Nahalat Binyamin, Arena**

Text by Tal Ben Zvi

The **Heinrich Böll Foundation**, both the office and the gallery, is located on Nahalat Binyamin Street in the south-center of Tel Aviv. The gallery window on the first floor overlooks the Nahalat Binyamin pedestrian mall which extends all the way to the corner of the street. Every Tuesday and Friday an arts-and-crafts market is held in this open-air mall. On a typical sunny Friday more than ten thousand people will frequent the street. On that very same sunny day, however, only a few dozens art lovers will step foot in the gallery.

Every Friday thousands of people leave the open market carrying some small object they deem beautiful. A little something for their home, a hand-made artifact which for them embodies values of aesthetics, beauty, and uniqueness. The relation between craft and art, between objects designed to beautify and decorate one's home and works of art in a gallery space, acquires an ironic dimension.

On the walking route from the street all the way up to the gallery, I imagine switching around the objects of the gaze: scattering art stands along the pedestrian mall, and installing mobiles made of colored synthetic fur and plastic beads in the white gallery.

In what way has the visual culture project – as an imported, essentially western project, manifested in video art, performance, installation, and photography – become part of Israeli culture? To what extent is it part of the agenda of a Tel Aviv resident on her way to the theatre, the cinema, or the book store? Is the role of art to furnish a single moment of beauty, or to generate a political moment, a moment of awareness? Can I ever ask for more than a single moment? Perhaps two? A maximum of five minutes, an average viewing time in an esteemed Tel Aviv gallery.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation gallery has been around for a year and a half. During this period of time the gallery has succeeded in creating a place within the local art scene for young Israeli art, women's art, and Palestinian art. A faithful audience, including seasoned and young artists, art students, curators, art critics, and art lovers, has been following its activity regularly.

As a curator I operate out of a constant sense of suffocation; under the impression that the art I exhibit exists at the margins of the social-cultural- political consciousness of the society in which I live. The limited number of galleries, lack of funds, and the Israeli public's general lack of interest in plastic art renders my activity yet another type of "otherness", as it were.

Next to the gallery space, at the Heinrich Böll Foundation offices, there is a conference room, regularly accommodating workshops and seminars of various organizations: human rights organizations, environmental protection organizations, and women's organizations. The participants in these seminars view the exhibitions. It is a rare opportunity for me to expand the target audience. The conference room as a variegated political-ideological meeting place projects on the gallery space, and the art presentation in the gallery is experienced as part of the human rights list. To wit: The artist's right to manifest his work, to present his point of view in a public space, is a basic human right. As a place of convergence between the private and the public, and as a site where the artistic act is introduced as an act in the public sphere, the Heinrich Böll Foundation gallery is marked as a political site.

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During 1998-1999 eleven exhibitions were displayed at the gallery. Out of these, ten were by women artists, and three dealt with Palestinian art. The catalogue is not a chronological documentation of the exhibitions, but rather a proposal for a re-reading, focusing on common aspects and interrelations.

The first part of the catalogue is an attempt to pinpoint and map out the intimate territory of women artists – their habitat, the cultural and artistic milieu in which they operate – all these in direct reference to the notion of “localism”: This is where I live, this is where I operate, this is where I work, this is where I create.

The notion of “localism” refers, first and foremost, to the place where the artwork is created. Art created in a nation state acquires its legitimacy and is characterized as “local”, “authentic”, insofar as it reflects the spirit of the place. The national project, which creates a correspondence between a geographical space and a national-social-artistic identity, constitutes itself by adopting artworks characterized as local in relation to that geographical domain.

Palestinian art and Israeli art are created in relation to an overlapping geographical realm: the area between the Mediterranean coast to the west, the Jordan River to the east, Lebanon to the north, and Egypt to the south. However, while the place is one, the concept of localism pertaining to each art corresponds with a different “spirit of a place” and with different types of “authenticity” and “locality”.

Tal Matzliah’s *A New Middle East* and Jumana Emil Abboud’s *Rapunzelina* revolve around processes of initiation, recognition, and acquaintance with a local-Oriental culture. For Jumana Emil Abboud, who introduces the perspective of an emigrant returning home, it is a retroactive, fictitious process of socialization, constructing her identity within the Palestinian space she portrays. For Tal Matzliah, an Israeli artist residing in the south of Tel Aviv, it is a process of internal migration, shifting from one reference group – Jewish-bourgeois-Tel-Avivian, to another – an Arab-Jewish group identified with the working class in Jaffa.

Faten Nastas and Jabra Mitwasi’s exhibition *Overloaded*, and Ahlam Shibli’s *Wadi Saleib in Nine Volumes* employ documentary-realistic materials: in the former it is a documentation of the city of Bethlehem and the surrounding desert, in the latter – a photographic register of objects abandoned in Wadi Saleib, Haifa.

Keren Amiran’s exhibition *Ahad Ha’am* is a photographic project documenting 28 *Ahad Ha’am* Streets throughout the country. The photographs expose the inability to recognize and locate the photographed streets in a specific geographical context. However, while in Keren Amiran’s “Israeli” project documentary photography serves as a practical tool for investigating the truth about the link between the notion of localism and the surface findings, in the Palestinian works there is a gap between the explicitly realistic-documentary materials and the fictitious narrational manner in which they are conveyed: in *Wadi Saleib in Nine Volumes* – by virtue of the photographs’ very incorporation within books as part of a narrative, and in *Overloaded* – as an imaginary journey corresponding with the story of escape as a Christian narrative in the life of Christ.

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In the second part of the catalogue, the scale of the physical body serves as a means for distorting and defining the space in which the body exists. The perception of the body is obtained via mediators – either technological or pseudo-scientific means such as photography, computer simulation, or an electro-magnetic system.

In the exhibition *Kraftwerk*, Ruti Nemet and Zoya Cherkassky construct a miniature space, enlarging it in relation to their own body proportions. The fictitious space created in the photograph engenders a sense of disorientation for the viewer standing in the gallery space, resulting mainly from the fact that s/he has no indication whatsoever as to the real dimensions of the hand-made objects in the photograph. In Ran Nahmias’ exhibition, *Body Induction Site*, the work creates an open, thus unpredictable, set of relations between the person’s action and the computer’s response. However, the viewer cannot generate a sequence of coherent or fixed

responses, and the resulting interaction elicits a sense of crisis. In Nati Shamia Opher's exhibition *In Public*, the work is determined by the relation between the human body and the objects in a given space, as delineated through computer simulation.

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The third part of the catalogue delves into states of transformation, synthesis and metamorphosis, exposing the transience of the physical body.

In the exhibition *On the Verge*, Tal Shoshan performs physical manipulation in the course of which she experiences pain, suffocation, extreme discomfort to the point of losing control. In Danoush Lachman's sculptures from the series *Concavity*, the (old) figure and the object (the chair) become a single entity. The synthesis between the figure and the place leads to the moment of disappearance, as a preparation for death. In the exhibition *Depth*, Kim Danieli photographs herself naked, pregnant in a swimming pool, and her daughter taking one of her first baths. The newborn girl and the woman about to give birth share one fate; a chain of reproduction, birth and death underlying the female experience.

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At the core of the exhibitions in the second and third parts of the catalogue is the physical body, a fact which embeds a claim of universality. The physical body is a key concern in postmodern western art; a concern based on the perception that the body is an arena reflecting a human cultural consciousness of a postmodern condition underlied by states of transience, transformation and crisis.

However, the body's instances of deconstruction expose - both there (in the west) and here (in the Middle East) - the setting within which the physical body conducts itself. Paradoxically, the very concentration on the body precisely in situations of disintegration and crisis, further exposes, generates and reinforces the localism.

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During December 1999 Tal Shoshan put on some eight performances, standing on the gallery's window ledge, overlooking the Nahalat Binyamin pedestrian mall, relating her story to the audience on the street. Every Friday at noon, during the performance, the arts and crafts market shoppers joined the merchants and the audience on the street viewing the performance. The fact that her body was tilting diagonally toward the street, hanging non-hanging, on the verge of suicide or about to fall, expressed the body's desperate desire to transcend its boundaries and make a statement in the public sphere, prompting people on the street to express a desire to rescue her, to understand her, to love her.

Artistic practice as an act of intervention and involvement in the public sphere has hit the street. So far, it seems, it is not alone.

From: Ben Zvi, Tal (ed.), 2000. *New Middle East: Eleven Exhibitions, 1998-1999, at Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tel Aviv, Jaffa*: Hagar Association, pp 106-107