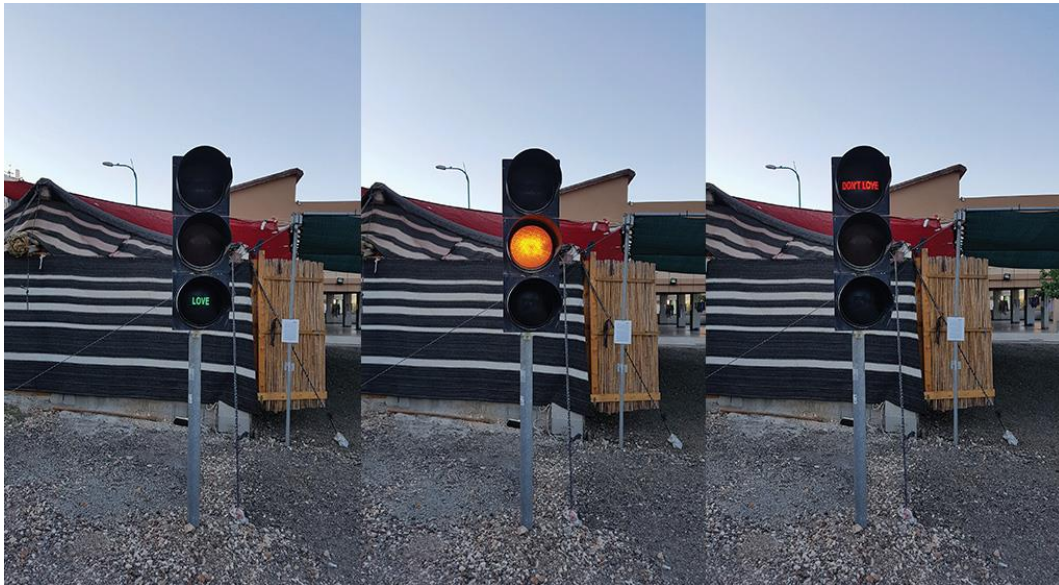# The Third Mediterranean Biennale-Out of Place: A place for change

by Simon Blau

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The Mediterranean Biennale is an art event taking place in northern Israel in an attempt to create cooperation in the region of MENA, the Middle East and North Africa. It is an event in a Mediterranean context that presents the local processes created in the region and their cultural influences.

The art exhibited in the Mediterranean Biennale emerges from the confines of the art museum and spreads out into the city and the public space, thus offering an alternative platform for a museum. Such a presentation addresses the community. It manifests art in everyday life and integrates it with the movements of both the residents and the audiences who come to view it.

The Mediterranean Biennale is being held on the initiative and under the direction of Belu-Simion Fainaru and Avital Bar-Shay. It was initially held in Haifa in 2010, moved to the Arab city of Sakhnin in 2013 and is located today in the Misgav and Sakhnin Valley communities where Jews, Muslims, Christians, Bedouin and Druze live side-by-side. The Mediterranean Biennale strives through artistic activity to stimulate a new approach today to people living in close proximity to each other. It is potentially a ground for cooperation between people and between communities on the basis of equality and reciprocity as well as for promoting a dialogue between them by opening a way to recognize the other and develop a sense of tolerance. The Mediterranean Biennale seeks to restore mutual trust, bridge spiritual divides and encourage pluralism in order to create an environment in which diverse individuals, religions and ethnic groups share common values.

Belu-Simion Fainaru, director of the Mediterranean Biennale: "Politics cannot always overcome borders, but every so often, art can. We believe that the key to change is starting up change-generating projects such as the Mediterranean Biennale, which originated in a field initiative at the local level and is now a multi-dimensional project aimed at creating a significant long-term and multi-sector effect."

Fainaru adds: "With its understanding of local and regional resources the Mediterranean Biennale serves as a place that enables people, from a variety of cultures and in an environment free of fear and prejudice, to meet and create a better and more compelling reality together."

The Third Mediterranean Biennale, currently held on the theme of "Out of Place", focuses on issues of borders, migrations, refugee crises and realities derived from ethnic, gender and religious backgrounds. The exhibition addresses questions of identity, place, time and individuality in an era of global culture and in light of events taking place today.

Fainaru: "In the present era, colonial and post-colonial processes shape historical concepts such as home, exile, border and ethnic dispersion, and create new forms of cosmopolitanism and provincialism competing with each other." In addition: "Assuming that not so long ago identity was defined on the basis of origin, religion and place of residence, nowadays in the context of contemporary artistic activity the concept of "place" is additionally defined by impermanence, aesthetic pluralism and cultural differences."

The current refugee crisis in Europe is the worst since World War II. Millions of people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea and other countries have been forced to leave their homes because of military conflicts or abject poverty. The movement of refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Asia to the West and especially to Europe creates uncertainty and raises the complex question: How does the West see the other at a time when cultural, ethnic and national identities are fractured owing to migrations and refugeeism, economic uncertainties and political perceptions?

The Third Mediterranean Biennale in Sakhnin Valley offers an invitation to an unusual journey in Jewish and Arab communities in alternative spaces. The exhibition features contemporary art by 60 artists from 25 countries including a few with which Israel has no diplomatic relations, such as Afghanistan and Iran. The theme of the Mediterranean Biennale defines the essence of the event as well as the content of the exhibited art works which deal with refugeeism, detachment, a cry for peace and quiet, and a search for a place of refuge and protection. The search for such a place begins in the Jewish village of Yodfat (Jotapata) and passes through 16 exhibition venues. In the second exhibition venue at Misgav, a video-art titled "Un cri court" ("A Short Cry") by the Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed is exhibited. In this work an orchestra conductor, who has been asked to free himself from any restraint, is filmed jumping, crying and lamenting to the ticking of a metronome. An audible voice, which at first sounds annoying but later evokes identification, expresses the pain engendered in the artist's generation by tragic reality saturated with violence and war, a reality lacking in security and hope. From Misgav the journey leads viewers to the cities of Sakhnin and Arraba and ends in the village of Deir Hanna overlooking the open Galilean landscape. Each venue offers a display of a variety of art works with an emphasis on video and photography works that could give a viewer stomach cramps. These are artworks that do not beautify or flatter. They are exhibited in alternative and rough spaces, making the whole biennale an installation in itself.

Avital Bar-Shay Co-Director: "The event seeks to break the conventional curatorial rules. One of the main questions that a visit to the Mediterranean Biennale poses is that of exhibition spaces and the process of integration of contemporary artworks that were created for gallery and museum spaces into the varied spaces that represent their opposites. When we enter a butcher's shop, a garage, or a mosque, in order to view the artwork exhibited within their walls, the space concerns us no less than the artwork itself. The artwork connects with various elements that are already in the place such as smell, movement, furniture, signage and various ornaments, while the connection could appear natural, integrative or grating. The difficulty we have in getting used to and accepting this mode of exhibition is related to the concept of the 'white cube', which represents the modern perception of art. The difficulty in accepting an alternative exhibition space and the reservations about it testify to the entrenchment of the trend and internalization of the white and neutral space to the extent that it is taken for granted as the only possible choice."

"Choosing alternative spaces in the Mediterranean Biennale not only puts the "white cube" in question, but also blurs the boundaries between art and everyday life and examines the art works themselves without the protection of declarative captions. The choice of another different "platform"

exposes the art works to other audiences and undermines the elitist autonomy of art and its preoccupation with itself. What nevertheless connects the various spaces in the exhibition and what is their common denominator? The first basis is the structure that includes the geographical area, the rural and urban fabric and the mixing of communities. The second basis is the subject of the framework of the Biennale. The varied public spaces represent different aspects of daily life. These spaces were not designed or modified to fit the exhibits; the curatorial challenge was to adapt and integrate the artworks in the appropriate existing space and to enable the continuation of its proper activity while concurrently preserving the works of art".

The artworks in the Mediterranean Biennale were integrated into existing places in the urban space with its images and objects that create new relationships, which in turn impart new meaningfulness to the artworks as, for שאר Xexample, installing the art works of the artist Moshe Gershuni from Israel on the walls of a garage alongside a traditional Arabic blessing belonging to the place; or hanging the work of Damien Hirst from England inside a Muslim mosque in the heart of the village Deir Hanna. The connection that is created is natural, neither glorifying nor diminishing, and presents Gershuni and Hirst alongside a long-standing Islamic tradition while attempting to create an ideal equality. In the mosque, the local Imam himself chose the art works together with the curators. He requested that they should be abstract art works or landscapes. The visitors are expected to remove their shoes before entering the mosque to view the works of art. Another example is the butcher's shop where the owners chose a series of portraits of the artist Tomasz Wendland, from Poland, in which Putin, Arafat and Qaddafi appear with their eyes shut. The placement of the works of art in this case creates a connection between the blind leaders and the bloody chunks of meat in the shop.

Fainaru explains: "The local people who own the exhibition spaces are secondary curators in the Biennale. We proposed art works and they agreed or refused to exhibit them. In this case there were some reservations with regard to the photographs of these leaders among both Jewish and Arab sectors and the exhibited artworks are there because the owners of the shop were the only ones who agreed to show them."

The sculpted heads by the artist Yigal Tumarkin from Israel were also exhibited in the butcher's shop hanging on hooks originally designed for hanging cuts of meat; they are reminiscent of the beheading feats of Daesh/ISIS in the tragic reality of the Middle East. The blind eyes of the leaders speak for themselves. Facing us in the same place is a portrait of the artist Olivia Mihălţianu from Romania, who is engaged in role exchanges in art and society. She appears dressed as a Red Indian leader. Her portrait appears beneath a bull's horns on a wall in the butcher's shop.

In the industrial area of Sakhnin, the Fahem Garage hosts the works of the artist Nathalie Mba Bikoro from Gabon; These are art works from the series "Future. Monuments". Here the artist uses a Star of David made of African woven cloth. It thus links the Holocaust of the Jews to genocide in African countries. These powerful works of art, of African portraits that have experienced racist-based oppression and violence in Europe and Africa, hang alongside tools, work stations, lifting facilities and cars being repaired. Also in the garage are art works, by the artist Kai Wiedenhöfer from Germany, which focus on documentary photographs of conflict and war zones. His series "Forty Out of One Million" is dedicated to the Syrian civil war. In the photographs, the artist exposes only forty wounded bearing signs of war and suffering engraved on their bodies. They are just a reflection of the great tragedy taking place in Syria. It is impossible to ignore the parallel between the photographs in which wounded people with artificial limbs and other organs appear and the spare parts of cars being replaced in the garage. These photographs illustrate the tragedy of war in large parts of the Middle East. The importance of exhibiting these artworks in the garage in Sakhnin lies in the fact that some of the workers and customers there have relatives living in Syria and in Lebanon. The war is connected to them personally and directly. The people who enter the garage and observe the silent figures in the photographs see the disaster, the distress and the hopelessness; and the war's purposelessness, too. The encounter with the subject, not through any television news broadcast or local newspaper, turns the situation into a present and permanent one. It is a driving force that stimulates identification and a strong desire for change.

The work "Gucci", by Daniele Buetti of Switzerland, from the series "Looking For Love" criticizes the fashion world that enters, literally, under everyone's skin and refers critically to the image of woman in the advertising world. The works are displayed at the Albatuf marble factory in Arraba, where the installation includes marble slabs, cutting machines, forklift trucks and employees at work. A law firm in Sakhnin displays works by the artist Angelika Sher of Israel from the series "Orantelism", in which soldiers appear in situations inspired by the New Testament and in this case from the "Last Supper". In the photographs, the artist presents a woman's angle of vision and touches upon the questions of victimhood from her own point of view as the mother of a daughter enlisted in the army. In a traditional Bedouin tent – the tent of Abu Salah, which serves as a community meeting place built in order to preserve tradition – Lela Ahmadzai from Afghanistan presents a video art project from the series "The Undaunted Women of Kabul". This project follows four exceptional women in Afghan society aspiring for change. The encounter with and discussion on the works succeed in connecting the subject of art to Bedouin culture and gender reality. Thus the tent represents a safe cultural space open to any discourse. "One of the more important components of art," says Fainaru, "is the viewer's experience and stimulation of the senses. We consciously aimed to provide a powerful experience in the everyday routine, to awaken people's interest and curiosity."

In the Mediterranean Biennale the art works are exhibited to the unusual attention of new and critical audiences who query and examine them. Beyond the questions about art the Biennale creates new possibilities of meeting between communities and in consequence art becomes the encounter space connecting people and drawing them closer to each other. In its special form of exhibition, the Mediterranean Biennale enables us to motivate processes that influence and impart diverse artistic meanings where the space enriches and adds to the artworks exhibited in it while the artworks enable the spaces to become a meeting place for dialogue and discussion.

"Political forces cannot be separated from art", Fainaru says. "They are part of its messages. But this is a discussion that has no winners or losers".

In the video work of the Portuguese artist Rui Xavier, "Surface" exhibited in the Nargileh house in Sakhnin, a white man is seen drowning in the sea and black refugees reach out to rescue him. In Xavier's global humanist eye one can easily be on the other side as well. The exhibition reminds us that the current refugee crisis is developing in a way that is not independent of us: we are part of the crisis, and we are also part of a possible solution.

Bar-Shay: "Our ambition is that the Mediterranean Biennale will create an opportunity for change that will serve as a model for multi-cultural cooperation on the basis of common will and interest through an in-depth discussion of different perceptions and opinions while taking into account the uniqueness and individual strengths of each culture." The exhibition in the mosque illustrates the possibility of change. The Imam invites the audience to visit his mosque and view the exhibited works of Israeli, Palestinian and international artists. The process we went through together – each of the participating parties in a process of learning and acknowledgement – is what enabled putting the artworks on display. The winds of change that the Mediterranean Biennale hopes to motivate can also be seen in gestures as small and as large as the Sakhnin municipality's consent to give names to previously nameless streets, in order to place the exhibition venues in a cellular application that enabled the audience to navigate easily."

It therefore seems that the Mediterranean Biennale opens the door to the rapprochement between people through art while creating opportunities for a common space. The works of art serve as an initial attraction for dialogue and discussion, which in turn lead to a discussion of social, local and regional issues. The spread of the exhibition along the Sakhnin Valley encourages people to tour the places, to gaze and wander around and create opportunities for change while understanding the human complexity and the various possibilities of existence through a common perception that we are all people who want to live under the same sun.