

POST-COLONIALISM?

A Reflection by Anthony E. Stellaccio

The term “post-colonialism” can confuse with its depth and complexity just as easily as it can confound with the nearly fraudulent vagueness of its definition. Characteristic of much post-modern intellectual discourse, one can argue that post-colonialism finds its meaning somewhere between elitism and chicanery, on a middle ground favoring subjectivity over specificity and polyvocality over a singular, authoritarian narrative. But let us attempt to accelerate, to speed past the idea of post-colonialism as an abstract theoretical inquiry altogether and brace for a collision with how we see it, or fail to see it, lived by people around the world.

In passage from the conceptual to the concrete, one will traverse territory that is essential for understanding the impetus behind a recent symposium and exhibition entitled “Post-Colonialism?” Organized by the Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Center in Tel Aviv, Israel, Post-Colonialism? was an assemblage of artists from Taiwan, Argentina, the US, the UK, India, Serbia, Botswana, Israel, and Palestine—each parcel of land having its own history as a home to conflict, claims, colonizers, and colonized. However, the uniqueness of the nations or individuals brought together in Tel Aviv did not betray the universal features of the post-colonial condition, and this was a cornerstone of the project. Sadly, the similarities of the collected stories highlight the ubiquity of the global trade in oppression, domination, elimination, and injustice, and, on a broader level, call human nature itself into question.

The seven Israeli artists and sole Palestinian participating in the Post-Colonialism? project worked from their home studios, while important art schools and ateliers around Israel, working collaboratively for the first time, hosted the foreign artists for a three-

week work period. Executed by Shlomit Bauman, Yael Novak, and the staff of Benyamini, curated by Wendy Gers, and funded by a number of sponsors, the compound residency, symposium, exhibition, and conference was a major logistical undertaking for a local art center with grass-roots credibility, international reach, a liberal inclination, and progressive vision.

“Benyamini central command,” together with its satellite artists, forged the substance of Post-Colonialism? by conjoining structured intellectual discourse, time on the ground in Israel, and time in the studio: a mixing of the cerebral, emotional, and physical. Anything less was impossible for a fearless curatorial team and a carefully vetted selection of socially conscious artists working in one of the most contested and contentious parts of the world. However, variable factors permitting each artist a different level of engagement with the current conditions in Israel led to equally varied results. Limits on time and travel, for example, were remedied by executing ideas conceived at home with on-site adjustments of a mostly technical nature. Canada’s Corywn Lund fell into this category, ambitiously bringing a cumbersome plaster mold to Israel from his adoptive home at the Rhode Island School of Design in the US. With this, Lund continued a body of politically focused work using oratory podium “microphone bouquets” as a central motif. Although explicitly political in nature, Lund’s microphones, over-fired to be made flaccid in a way both complimentary and contradictory to their relevance, were not innately specific to or directly derived from the situation in Israel. I found myself on the other end of this spectrum.

Having had the opportunity to spend an entire month traveling through Israel and the West Bank before the start of the sym-





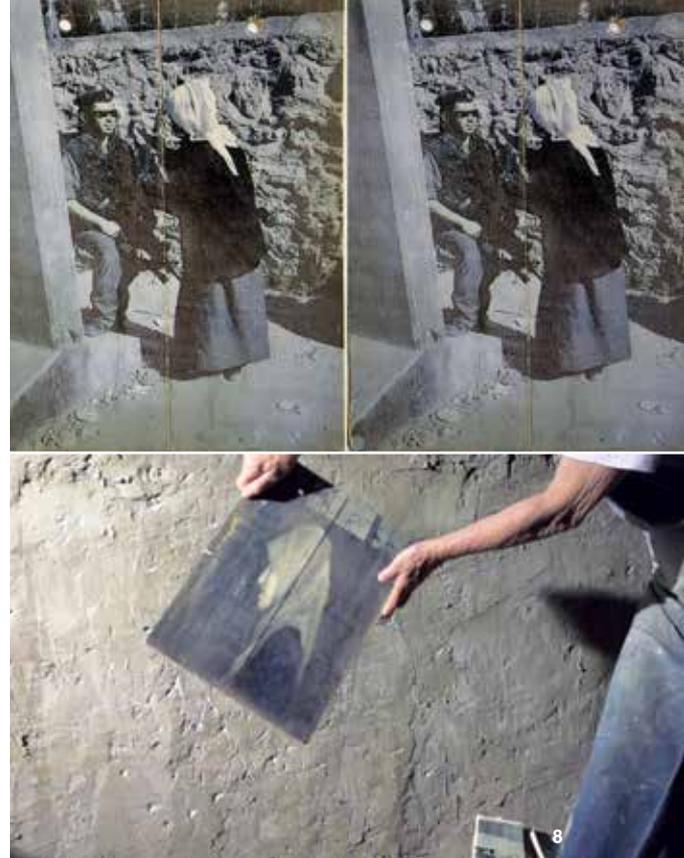
1 Corwyn Lund's *Decayed Microphone Bouquets for Israel*, 6 ft. 8 in. (2 m) in length, mixed media. 2 Modisa Motsomi's *Terra Incognita, Terra Nullius, Terra Pericolosa*, 5 ft. 7 in. (1.7 m) in height, clay, wood, vinyl, pencil drawing. 3 Anthony E. Stellaccio's *Lean*, 5 ft. 6 in. (1.2 m) in length, clay, glaze, cement, wood, sand, fragments of Bethlehem separation wall. 4 Katya Izabel Filmus' *First Generation–Last Generation*, 4 ft. (1.2 m) in length, glass, latex embroidery thread, olive tree root, sandblasted inscription, video (edited by Yoav Bezaleli). 5 Oren and Noam Tabenkin Arbel's *First Reduction*, 6 ft. 3 in. (1.9 m) in length, clay, wheel work, video.



posium, which I did together with Argentina's Pablo Ponce, my experience of Post-Colonialism? was charged with a local brand of intensity. To witness the conditions enforced and endured in some of Israel's most complex and contentious territories is to wreak havoc on the psyche, to undo preconceived notions of place, and to demand reflection and response under unusual strain. Perhaps most of this mental undoing was done by Hebron, which is physically segregated by armed security forces, barricades, barbed wire, checkpoints, international observers, and the lifeless strips of uninhabited city lying between Palestinian quarters and an

expanding Jewish settlement. Seeing such tragic losses of reason and compassion for the first time cannot but cause preconceived viewpoints and premeditated artistic visions to crumble.

Making art about Israel was not, however, the purpose of the project. Rather, it was precisely a range of experiences that the Benyamini organizational team wanted to be shared. It seems hard to fathom, after all, a project of this nature taking place, let alone being funded, within Israel's current and increasingly restrictive, far-right political environment. Although Post-colonialism? did come to fruition, in a way miraculous for any place other than



the Holy Land, it is even harder to imagine the project being realized with the explicit purpose of talking exclusively about Israel. Instead, the organizers created a safe environment for dialog by embedding Israel's occupation of Palestine within a set of contemporary experiences and perspectives from around the world. This was a discussion and not a referendum on any one country, with the creative team behind *Post-colonialism?* expertly and, if I am not mistaken, also subversively, framing a controversial topic in a broader and thus more palatable fashion, for lack of a better word.

Thanks in part, perhaps, to this aspect of its design, *Post-Colonialism?* proved to be an unprecedented achievement for Benyamini, with extensive national and international coverage as well as substantially increased gallery traffic. Yet I do not mean to infer that the triumph of the endeavor is to be measured by calculable numbers or aggrandizing press. Rather, it is the more intangible impact suggested by those statistics that defines success in this case. Indeed, the greatest commendation and contribution of the undertaking is that it was a socio-political art project that provoked thought and drew attention to a pertinent issue in a very real way despite very real risks. And if I may take this chance to chastise the field, there are too few of these efforts in the ceramic arts, even where the threat of suppression and retaliation are completely absent. There is plenty of socially and politically oriented ceramic art to be sure, but a baseline of apathy and self-indulgence also exists. In its place, more concerted efforts to create communities of dialog and committed protagonists in the face of pressing local and global problems would be most welcome.

As for the artworks themselves, these varied more in character and content than in quality. The latter is something I am unfit

to discuss in greater depth because I participated in the project. (Images are provided here so readers can fill in the gaps in my writing with their own judgments). What can be said is that the show ranged from large-scale, interactive installations to a handful of shelf-bound, intimate objects. Collectively, the artworks incorporated numerous media including performance, were created collaboratively as well as individually, and offered numerous interpretations of post-colonialism.

Taiwanese artist, designer, and musician, Rock Wang, made his unique contribution to the exhibition with a tile-mosaic made of dozens of individual QR codes. Each coded tile, in addition to helping create one master QR code, links to images and information relevant to Taiwan's colonial history. The work, entitled *U Need Code*, underscores the importance of technology in political and social movements but also reminds us of the potential for its misuse, control, and impotency.

While Wang's work set one aesthetic and technological boundary for the show, it also became a counterpoint for other works, those more conventional and those more classical, like Eva Avidar's figurative sculpture. More classical yes, but perhaps no artist illustrated the variety of interpretations of post-colonialism better than Avidar. Graphically depicting her struggle with cancer and the internal colonization of the body, *My Choice* is both personal and poignant, but not intentional as a metaphor for the occupation of land. Nonetheless, works like Avidar's highlight art's ability to seamlessly bridge the personal and political, the individual and the universal, and the artist and the viewer through an economy of interpretation and self-identification. What is this if not the timeless power of art? In turn, what is this project if not an attempt to focus that power for the betterment of humankind?



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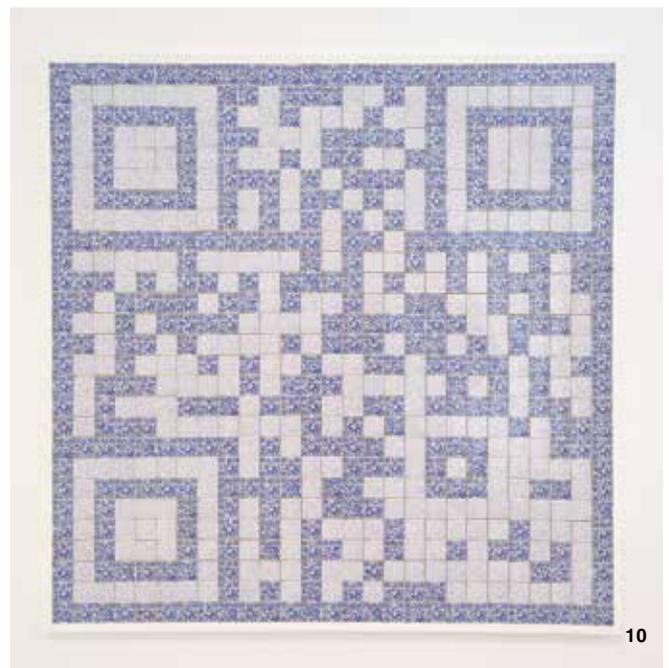
I am not uncomfortable with such grandiose assertions. Post-colonialism? was, without question, a landmark event, even if its impact was localized and the changes it may help spur are not yet visible. In no case shall I feel hopeless or misguided in my assessment. Rather, I walked away from the Benyamini Center with a compelling sense of solidarity, and a treatise to reject neutrality as a form of indifference and to both take and implore greater action on behalf of those in need. I am moved in this direction not only by life-changing and eye-opening experiences in Israel, but by the current, uncertain, and alarming course of politics in my own country, the US, and by the increasing appearance of far-right governments around the world.

I can no longer remain passive. No matter the challenge nor the scale of our response, our hope for a better world must endure and, more importantly, it must be put into action by individuals and communities of citizens with shared values and a commitment to moral justice. Make no mistake, I am no doomsayer or, in more contemporary parlance, a catastrophist. Problems such as ours have persisted through time, but this is, in part, because so many of us acquiesced to the seemingly unalterable arc of history. Resist.

Participating artists include Oren Arbel and Noam Tabenkin Arbel (Israel), Eva Avidar (Israel), Katya Izabel Filmus (England), Sharbani Das Gupta (US), Magdalena Hefetz (Israel), Johnathan Hopp (Israel), Neha Kudchadkar (India), Corwyn Lund (Canada), Hagar Mittelpunkt (Israel), Manal Morcos (Palestinian), Modisa Motsomi (Botswana), Danijela Pivašević-Tenner (Germany), Pablo Ponce (Holland), Anthony Stellaccio (US), Talia Tokatly (Israel), Rock Wang (Taiwan), Ayelet Zohar (Israel), and Ronit Zor (Israel).

More information on the Post-Colonialism? project can be found online at www.benyaminiceramics.org/postcolonialism.

the author *Anthony E. Stellaccio is a freelance artist and scholar trained in fine art and folklore. His participation in the Post-Colonialism? project was funded by the Association of Israel's Decorative Arts and the Lighton International Artists Exchange Program.*



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6 Sharbani Das Gupta's *Mind Maps*, 4 ft. (1.2 m) in length, plaster, clay, glass. **7** Eva Avidar's *My Choice Clay*, 5 ft. 6 in. (1.7 m) in height, handbuilt ceramic. **8** Magdalena Hefetz' *I broke her*, video, 2014. **9** Johnathan Hopp's *Inconclusive Conversations: 1. Garo and Sonia Sandrouni 2. Monologues*, 6 ft. 6 in. (2 m) in length, mixed media. **10** Rock Wang's *U Need Code*, 4 ft. 6 in. (1.4 m) in height, industrial ceramic tiles, ceramic decals.