

daring to dream

Post-colonialism? International Residency & Exhibition Project

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No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the "other echoes [that] inhabit the garden." It is more rewarding - and more difficult - to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about "us." But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how "our" culture or country is number one (or not number one, for that matter).

— Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, 1993.

This essay is a reflection on the international cross-cultural residency and exhibition project, Post-colonialism?, held by the Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Centre, Tel Aviv (hereafter Benyamini) from November 2016 to January 2017. While centuries of global imperial conquests have contributed to an age of racial and cultural pluralism, this has not resulted in the elimination of prejudices or national projects based on domination and supremacy, as noted by the Palestinian-American theorist Said. The pertinence of the focus on post-colonialism within contemporary Israel, a nation engaged in maintaining a relation of domination along ethno-national lines, is evaluated via a consideration of the diverse responses of the 19 participating artists. This essay also presents an overview of the local cultural context, characterised by an international cultural boycott, and contextualises my experience of the South African cultural and economic boycott from the 1970s to the early 1990s, and how this informed the structure of this profoundly human undertaking.

Part 1

We live in a world that is increasingly considered to be post-colonial, as the chapter associated with the historical scramble by western powers for foreign territory and resources seems closed. Yet, many contemporary examples of neo-colonial projects exist, as access to territory and resources is still highly polemical within many regions. Consider for example China's status as Africa's largest trading partner, investing billions of dollars into African governments and infrastructure in return for the petroleum and minerals that fuel the Chinese economy.

The Israeli situation far more complex than the previously mentioned example of contemporary economic exploitation of Africa by China, as it involves the violent occupation of a contested territory as a legitimate homeland for Jews, and a solution for two millennia of Antisemitism. Israel's failure to accept that Palestine was an inhabited territory, has resulted in a long-term internal conflict that remains unresolved.

The decolonization of Israel and Palestine, the intrinsic corollary to the ongoing Settler Colonial project, is fraught because it involves unravelling many knotted strands that include social justice, cultural equality and land rights. Any hypothetical future cartographic project would need to untangle issues of occupation, the fragmented patchwork of Palestinian concessions, and the repatriation of vast numbers of Palestinian refugees and exiles living outside Israel's formal borders. Any dialogue about decolonisation would necessarily foreground human rights abuses, international geo-political strategy in the Middle East, indigenisation, autonomy, and new practical ways of pursuing reconciliation, justice, and peace. But these questions are mute in the current Trump-Netanyahu era, and the decolonization project remains a nebulous 'elsewhere', that is too far-fetched to merit serious consideration.

While the residency and exhibition project purported to explore the meaning and relevance of Post-colonialism within contemporary Israel, it soon became abundantly clear that any potential local iterations of post-colonialism was intimately entangled with, and dominated by Settler Colonialism (Veracini 2013). This is clearly expressed in the Post-Colonialism? film by the Palestinian artist, Manal Morcos, who laments, 'which Post-colonialism? We're in the Colonialism itself...' (17:16-18). Premised on occupation and the elimination of indigenous populations, Settler Colonialist studies focus on authority, and how invasive settler societies, over time, develop distinctive identities, narratives of self-determination and sovereignty.

The bulk of artists in the Post-colonialism? residency and exhibition project explored aspects of historic and contemporary Settler Colonialism and its links with transnational capitalism. These include:

- histories of conquest and trophies of war - Ronit Zor and Modisa Tim Motsomi
- liberty of movement - Pablo Ponce
- access to basic resources including water and blood - Manal Morcos
- global movements of people and commodities - Hagar Mitelpunkt

- the role of language, literature, history, commerce, popular culture (particularly souvenir dolls) and ‘the illusion of restoration’ (*Ibid* 6:36) in the settler project – Talia Tokatly
- the central presence of the military and the phallus as a symbol of this testosterone-infused environment - Anthony Stellaccio
- the role of press conferences as propagandistic sites of collective loss and tragedy – Cory Lund¹
- perverse and insidious mechanisms of state control over inhabitants - Oren Arbel and Noam Tabenkin Arbel
- a subtly nihilistic state of permanent transnational migration responded to heroic notions of Jewish conquest, self-determination and sovereignty - Katya Izabel Filmus
- tensions regarding the lack of a nuanced, multi-cultural local design history - Johnathan Hopp in collaboration with Garo and Sonia Sandrouni.
- complex and contradictory relationships with land, including occupation, no-man’s land, borders and crossings in Neha Kudchadkar’s photographic triptych.
- For Rock Wang, the successive colonial and neo-colonial occupations of Taiwan have resulted in a ‘pixelated’ hybrid material culture, that may be expressed across language and cultural divides via QR codes.

What is interesting in this rather crude analysis, is the centrality of land and notions of occupation in the works. The intrinsic corollary to this ongoing colonial project, the decolonization of Israel, is not imaginable under the current regime. Any future hypothetical decolonial project would be fraught because settlements and internal colonies have no real spatial separations. Furthermore, vast numbers of Palestinian refugees and exiles are living outside Israel’s formal borders. Relations between Arab Palestinians and Jewish Israelis are charged with racial tensions, religious and identity politics. What is essentially a carefully crafted land-grab by the Israeli state has become a paradoxically global dialogue about displaced peoples, human rights abuses, and geo-political strategy in the Middle East. In the same way that the decolonization project may be argued to be a nebulous ‘elsewhere’ – a series of open-ended discussions on indigenisation, autonomy, anti-state and anti-capitalist politics.

In the context of this ongoing struggle for justice in the region, it is useful to consider the writings of Gilles Deleuze who explored ideas of movement in thought and becoming. Over many years he considered individual and collective struggles to come to terms with history, and defy intolerable conditions. He argued that in becoming, individuals can achieve an ultimate existential stage in which life is simply immanent and open to new relations, friendship and opportunities. He wrote: “History amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is, to create something new” (1995:171).

Notions of transcending the past, evolving states of becoming, possibilities of a nebulous ‘elsewhere’ were expressed by Manal Morcos in the *Post-Colonialism?* film, who explained that she does not want to express anger at her situation as a Palestinian in her art, and mused that this international

¹ Lund’s use of a floor covering that simulated the popular Israeli ‘Sesame’ tiles from the 1950s and 1960s clearly locates the work within the Israeli built environment.

exhibition project involved ‘daring to dream, or daring to hope [of a post-colonial state] ...’ The artist further emphasised that ‘daring is everything’ (17:52-58).

Works on the exhibition that explored aspects of the dream of a transition towards a post-colonial state, or an infinitely nebulous state of becoming, include:

- Ayelet Zohar’s ‘Efraim is becoming a Quagga’ and ‘Museum of (Un)Natural History’ that highlighted the issue of perpetual transformation, simulation, simulacrum and dissimilation.
- The possibilities of cartographic revisions and borders in flux were explored by both Sharbani Das Gupta and Danijela Pivašević-Tenner.
- Eva Avidar celebrates the (female) bodies’ vibrant creative agency in defiance of disease.
- Neha Kudchadkar’s installation of diverse ceramic objects and accompanying sound-piece signified complex negotiations and responses to the ‘others’ within periods of extreme systemic violence associated with social transformation.
- Magdalena Hefetz’s video performance of destruction and burial symbolically exposed the political regime, as she safe-guards this precious evidence for a future ‘judgement day’.

Decolonisation or a state of potential transition was also expressed in some remarkably profound off-hand remarks by Ayelet Zohar and Anthony Stellaccio in the *Post-colonialism?* documentary film. Zohar responds to Stellaccio’s accidentally shattered sculpture by noting that, ‘We’re all traumatized, but it is an opportunity to think out of the box.’ (20:50-52). Stellaccio, discussing the possible restoration of his destroyed work notes that,

I think that the question about whether it could be put back together again is one that is very appropriate for Post-colonialism? Like you have all this fragmented land. Is there some process by which we can put it all back together again? I didn’t. I just made something new. Maybe that’s the answer (31:38-50).

Part 2

Questions of engaging (or not) with the contemporary Israeli cultural scene due to the political context is central to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). Initiated in 2005, the BDS movement aims to raise awareness about the Israeli occupation and Israeli violations of human rights. BDS and PACBI lobby against the “normalization” of the asymmetrical condition of Israeli-Palestinian relations, insisting on the recognition of an oppressor and a victim, or the invisibility of the latter in mainstream Israeli society. Their wide-ranging guidelines include the refusal of Arab and Palestinian artists to participate in local exhibitions in Israeli art institutions, and international exhibitions that include the works of Israeli artists or are sponsored by the Israeli state. The BDS discourages foreign artists from collaborating with ‘complicit’ Israeli institutions, and independently-funded projects that present Israelis and Palestinians together, even when addressing the Occupation. The notion of what constitutes a ‘complicit’ institution is obviously contentious. Technically all public Israeli universities, museums, art institutions as well as private institutions that receive state grants, are considered to be complicit. As this results in a blanket discretization of

institutions with oppositional agendas, PACBI devised a compromise. If an Israeli institution wishes to not be boycotted, it must publicly denounce Israel's violations of international law, accept the full and equal rights of Palestinians, Israeli Arabs, and recognize the Palestinian right of return. But this outright denunciation of the state is currently impossible. Cultural workers fear violent reprisals from state agents, and self-censorship is rife (Bauman 2016, Tamir 2015).

PACBI does not prohibit foreigners from visiting Israel. Rather, they encourage visitors to educate themselves about the occupation, and participate in a proactive anti-occupation activity, such as an Arab-led tour of the occupied territories. Udi Edelman, a curator at the Israeli Center for Digital Art, reflects on the question of inviting international artists to Israel.

Going all the way with it means deciding that we will no longer invite international artists, but that is a very difficult think and it isn't necessarily the right decision. On the other hand, it would be interesting to have international artists consider these questions more deeply (cited in Littman 2015).

Political factors conjugate with separate education programs for Palestinians, Jews and Israeli Arabs, and a lack of teaching the Arabic language and culture within Jewish schools, resulting in separate parallel cultural scenes. Within Israeli art and culture institutions, one of the key issues associated with developing a multi-cultural audience is that of bilingual Arab-Hebrew programs and materials. Institutions that aim to be democratic and non-complicit, ensure that they employ both languages, even if Israeli Arab and Palestinian artists are not part of their programming, this is a matter of principle. Furthermore, many cultural institutions hope to develop mixed audiences in the longer term.

But what if Israeli Arab, Palestinian, Israeli and foreign artists could be convinced to investigate questions of power, land, abuse, colony, and history... within Israel? Is it possible to create spaces for dialogue among local and international artists? The Benyamini's Chief Curator, Shlomit Bauman posed this provocative question. In May 2014 Bauman initiated discussions with me to curate a project concerning Post-colonialism in Israel. Her choice of a South African curator was opportune, as both countries have histories of state orchestrated racially and culturally engineered division. Indeed, the term Apartheid is frequently applied to Israel, including in a recent UN report (presented to the UN on 15 March 2017), which argues that Israel is guilty of policies and practices that constitute the crime of apartheid based on 'key instruments of international law' (cited in Gladstone 2017).²

² These Apartheid crimes include the enforced 'fragmentation of the Palestinian population, Israeli restrictions on Palestinians' movements and other limits imposed on Palestinians but not on Israelis in Israel'. The report concluded that the Israeli apartheid regime 'oppresses and dominates the Palestinian people as a whole' and is a 'crime against humanity under customary international law and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court' (Gladstone 2017, White 2017)

Part 3

I grew up in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of Apartheid. From the 1960s until democratic elections in 1994, South Africa was the subject of international economic sanctions and a cultural boycott. During this period, the UN established a Special Committee against Apartheid, and the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid was operational from 1976 to 1991. The international cultural and economic boycott of South Africa by international governments and corporations alike, decimated foreign investment, crushed cultural dialogue, and was unquestionably too much for the apartheid regime to bear.

South African diplomatic relations with Israel evolved after the first multiracial elections in 1994, and diplomatic relations were established with the State of Palestine in 1995. Former South African President Nelson Mandela had close relations with Yasser Arafat, and visited both Israel and Palestine, calling for peace. Prominent South African civil society leaders continue to engage with the Israeli-Palestinian cause, including the 2010 Nobel Prize winner, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, a loyal supporter of the BDS.

As a child and adolescent, I recall visiting municipal and national art galleries and museums in most major cities (including Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and Cape Town), and being painfully aware of the lack of diversity of works on display. Black artists were absent from art exhibitions, but abundantly present on craft shows. This was in stark contrast to the small commercial art gallery scene in major cities, which was vibrant and socially engaged, particularly after the Soweto uprisings of 1976. I recall there were (infrequent) occasions to consider South Africa's artistic scene on a somewhat warped international stage. For example, the participation of South African artists in Chile's Valparaiso Biennial in 1987 during the Pinochet regime, caused an out roar locally. Issues of national diplomacy between pariah states, as well as censorship, privilege, merit, class, race, and visibility came under the spot-light (Butcher 2015:53).³

As the winds of change started blowing, from the late 1980s, there were increasingly lively civil society debates about the role of arts in society by outspoken figures such as Nadine Gordimer, Mongane Walle Serote, Njabulo S. Ndebele, and Albie Sachs (Campschreuer and Divendal 1989, Sachs 1990) and Sue Williamson's 1987 publication of *Resistance Art in South Africa* somehow officialised this genre of expression. It is important to note that during this epoch many South African artists were forced to reconcile issues of political engagement and personal censorship as a consequence of the possibility of violent reprisals by security apparatus. While there were obviously exceptions to this generalisation,⁴ my personal sense of the 1970s and 1980s was that of a period of muffled dissidence and a paucity of engagement with contemporary realities by the majority of cultural institutions, especially public art museums.

³ A similarly controversial situation developed in the 2014 São Paulo Biennale with regards to Israeli government sponsorship (Cervetto 2015).

⁴ I especially recall Jane Alexander's trio of 'Butcher Boys' seated menacingly directly in front of the entrance of the South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

Part 4

When I signed an agreement with the Benyamini in August 2015, the political situation in Israel was significantly more stable than it currently is. World leadership was far less overtly dominated by the right wing. Brexit had not occurred, and neither had Trump been elected. While from September 2015 to June 2016 there were severe security issues within Israel, and the possibility of a ‘Third Intifada’ loomed large with a spate of stabbings. Known as the ‘Wave of Terror’ by Israelis or ‘Habba’ (an outburst) by Palestinians, this violence related in part to tensions between Palestinians and Israelis regarding the status of the Temple Mount. Fortunately, a fragile state of relative peace ultimately returned and the Post-Colonialism? residency and exhibition project planning was finalised.

Sixteen Israeli applications and 59 international applicants responded to the Benyamini’s international call. In terms of a breakdown by nationality, European artists accounted for 25 percent of total applicants,⁵ 21 percent of the total applications came from Israel, 17 percent the USA, followed by 12 percent from the United Kingdom,⁶ 5 percent from South Africa, and 4 percent respectively from Australia and India. In addition, applications were received from Botswana, Turkey, Indonesia, Japan, Georgia, Canada and Peru. **The truly global diversity of the applicants reflects the pertinence of the questions raised by the project, and underscores the international relevance of these questions for contemporary art, craft and design practitioners.**

A recognition of the fundamental importance of socially engaged *international* platforms characterised by respectful dialogue informed the unique structure of the project. The residency and exhibition project thus included an online reading group, *in situ* lecture series, demonstrations and a research tour. These additional components enabled participants to learn more about post-colonialism in general (from a literary, and philosophical perspective) as well as explore a diversity of local colonial and neo-colonial relationships. This voluntary reading group attempted to ensure that we all shared the same conceptual and analytical tools, and could discuss works with an appropriately nuanced lexis.

The research tour included a series of lectures and visits to relevant sites. For example, we had a guided visit of the Dead Sea, the world’s saltiest water body, that is also the lowest place on earth, 421,5 m below sea level. Our visit commenced with a lecture by the geologist, Dr Carmit Ish Shalom. She focused on the over-exploitation of this natural resource resulting from uncoordinated competition between the mineral industry (salt and potassium), tourism and agriculture. This ruthless exploitation is causing the sea’s rapid exsiccation, and extensive, hazardous sink-holes around its rim. We also visited a Bedouin non-profit organization, Desert Embroidery: The Association for the Improvement of Women’s Status, in Lakia, southern Israel. This pioneering embroidery program generates income for Bedouin women and preserves traditional handicrafts.

⁵ Applicants were received from residents of Sweden, Italy, France, Denmark, Northern Ireland, Croatia, Germany, Slovenia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Finland and Portugal. The most numerous were from Italy, with 4 applicants.

⁶ Applicants were received from residents of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

They operate a mobile library serving over 1 500 children, as well as educational programs for women and youth.

Conclusion

The nineteen selected artists explored complex and contradictory epistemologies of post-colonialism, settler colonialism and decolonialisation in a nation that is ‘becoming’ and that is characterised by polyphonic, and chaotic negotiations, opinions and ideologies. They wrangled with local politics and power structures including the state and multinational corporations; the constantly evolving built landscape and material culture. Works and installations explored forms of artistic and intellectual resistance via the creation of counter narratives, strategies of subversion, mimicry, parody, simulation and simulacra and hybridity. Moving beyond binary social relations, the exhibition ‘spoke out’⁷ against occupation, human rights violations, abusive state and exploitative capitalist programs operating in the region.

The Post-colonialism? residency and exhibition project consolidates the Benyamini’s achievements, and celebrates its fifth anniversary. It demonstrates a desire to challenge the status quo within Israeli ceramics, design and visual arts. The exhibition’s trilingual labels and signage defied current norms in the cultural sector. The courage of the Benyamini organising committee is noteworthy, as there was a lot of uncertainty as to how international and local artists would respond to the project, particularly in the light of a constantly degenerating political context. Furthermore, it is worth noting that from 2011, the Israeli government has engaged in civil lawsuits against BDS activists and cultural workers perceived to be disloyal to the Israeli state.⁸ Despite preliminary fears, the residency and exhibition project has facilitated the building of professional networks between Israeli, international artists and the sole Palestinian artist. It also permitted international artists to develop nuanced understandings of the political situation within Israel. Inclusive and engaged with local realities, Post-colonialism? is a truly audacious project that demonstrates the courage and vision of the Benyamini’s leadership.

⁷ An understated yet clearly critical introductory statement was displayed in the entrance foyer. It set the tone for the exhibition, noting that it ‘spoke out respectfully’ against occupation and human rights violations. The wording of the introductory statement was carefully determined, and I deliberately toned down the rhetoric. I chose not to use words like ‘resistance’ in the introductory statement although I believe that the exhibition was an act of resistance. The Benyamini Centre as an institutional entity, as well as its staff may be persecuted and suffer the consequences of showing an exhibition of this nature. Furthermore, the engagement of the artists and work speaks for itself. I didn’t need to underline and highlight the obvious in my introduction! Is this self-censorship? No. I see it as a sign of political maturity. My stance ensures that the art works and installations have centre-stage, and the Benyamini continues to undertake its excellent work.

⁸ In early 2017, the Israeli government’s ‘boycott bill’ was updated to include an entry ban to any person “who knowingly issues a public call for boycotting Israel...” The ban also applies to people who call for boycotts of any Israeli institution or any “area under its control” i.e. the settlements (Lis 2017).

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