

Being as knowing as making

Setting the scene

In July 2010 I spend my first two weeks ever in Israel & the Palestinian Territories. I arrived as a contemporary artist invited to do a residency. It was my first of three scheduled stays this year. My base is Ramallah and my local host is the International Art Academy Palestine¹. As in many other occasions in my life, I seem to only get a full understanding of a place when I am physically there. This text gives a brief idea of how an artist approached her work in a site.

An artist residency in Ramallah

The aim of the residencies within the project 'art-based research/ research-based art'² that involves 10 international artists and six host art organizations in six countries (Israel & the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Germany, Turkey, Portugal and Northern Ireland) is the exploration of the potential of artistic research in the context of the public sphere and the idea of art for social transformation. A key element of the residencies is bringing an outsider - an artist - into a site and situation to engage with this context.

The brief includes the production of a public art piece in the Palestinian Territories, an artistic work that might be exhibited in a European context and teaching (the International Art Academy Palestine has currently 32 art students) in my residency time; all of this to be seen as research, a process of knowledge gaining for the artist and the involved people over a situation versus a finalized statement or finished and hermetic piece.

Berlin-Belfast-Ramallah

The factor of being the Other is a familiar one for most artists and in my situation especially, since I moved in 2006 from Berlin to Belfast to live, work on and explore the role of (public) art in a (post conflict) society of transition³.

Full of curiosity and excitement I went to Israel & the Palestinian Territories on my first mission: To explore the situation – I had two weeks time. This travel was a long envisaged visit, as a number of Israeli and Palestinian peace activists invited me

¹ Available from www.artacademy.ps [accessed 28th September 2010]

² 'art-based research/ research-based art' is funded by Programme EU Culture 2007, Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, Heinrich Boell Foundation Berlin, Ramallah and Beirut, Goethe-Institute Beirut and Gulbenkian Foundation Lisbon. It is initiated by artist and organiser Anke Müffelmann from „radius of art“. The lead curator is Adrienne Goehler, Berlin. Available from www.radius-of-art.de [accessed 28th September 2010]

³ Available from <http://www.interfacebelfast.com> [accessed 28th September 2010]

continuously since 2004, when we attended together an international conflict transformation training⁴. Due to an intense four months period living and working together and looking at forms of conflict transformation, I had a deep emotional impression about this region of the world without ever having been there.

In the contemporary public art discourse as well as in the peace discourse one can find the position of the arts as potentially impacting on societal structures by offering aesthetic and participatory experiences; the individual as well as groups experience through art a form of self-empowerment, - consciousness, - esteem, awareness of ones own criticality and ways of expressing ideas and visions. This kind of socially engaged art practice can be found in the region, partly initiated and funded by international NGOs⁵ as well as artist initiated projects (e.g. Sala Manca group, based in Jerusalem⁶).

While the artistic approaches in Belfast often address the issue of tolerance towards diversity and otherness trying to include cross-community (the topic is a 'shared' future), this approach is rarely taken in the current situation of Israel & Palestine⁷. Being based in Ramallah, I decided to engage with the Palestinian realities as my first attempt to approximation.

One example how to approach Palestine

My general approach as public artist is to create a site and context-specific art work in public. The work often attracts a specific audience; I tend to invite the audience to participate and shape a work in negotiation with me. Having never been in the region and wanting to 'research' it first, I arrived with an open and curious mind, but without a set agenda. Yet I decided to pay attention to specific things: all humans share the need to survive as one of the basic human needs. How do people survive on a daily basis in the West Bank, in a society with a dysfunctional government, under Israeli occupation claiming this part of the earth "being a land without people for a people without land"⁸, with difficulties to import/ export goods? What can we learn from people who live their daily life under these conditions? How does work 'work' in detail? Do Palestinians pay taxes and to whom? Do they benefit from health insurances and labor rights? What is the economy based on? International aid? How is Palestine affected by the current global economical development? Does the recession in Western Countries affect Palestine? Is there a division between the

⁴ Available from <http://www.forumzfd-akademie.de> [accessed 24th September 2010]

⁵ Available from <http://www.willybrandtcenter.org> [accessed 24th September 2010]

⁶ Available from www.sala-manca.net [accessed 24th September 2010]

⁷ see some examples such as: <http://cfpeace.org/>, <http://www.seruv.org.il/defaulteng.asp>, available from http://www.shovrimshetka.org/index_e.asp [accessed 24th September 2010]

⁸ Said, Edward, The question of Palestine, New York, Times Books, 1979, p 9

Palestinians in urban Ramallah and the rural West Bank? What needs to be said about the GDP, per capita, of \$2,900 (in 2008), 19% unemployment and 46 % of the population below poverty line?⁹. I expected Ramallah to be a town with destroyed houses and people at the edge of survival. At this first ever visit, Ramallah turned my ideas of West Bank realities up-side-down: I was confronted with the 'Ramallah Syndrome'¹⁰: A booming city with lots of constructions sites, new big cars, a number of shopping malls, stylish cafes, bars, restaurants and a vibrant night life. The property prizes are close to London prizes, the banks give 120% mortgages to finance this life style and standard of living.

'Learning from Palestine'

My interest in work and survival in general is fueled by two things: one is having a profession that is hard to being valued in economic terms I sympathize with economically challenging realities and the other is the current recession as well as the climate chance which caused a wave of questioning consumption habits and values in the Western World as well as re-exploring ways of a sustainable, local, DIY ways of survival. Upon my return in November 2010 I will invite the local art students as experts to explore together with me the question of survival in the West Bank. The idea is to develop together a questionnaire around work, the conditions of work and income. The next step is the invite the students to identify people they would like to interview in their near environment. In groups of 3-4 they will conduct this investigation, using possibly video or audio as media. I will interview the internationals working onsite- as this is my peer group. After gathering the material, we will develop together a form which expresses the content best-. the process and outcome is open and will be developed in situ. This is a work probably for an audience outside of Palestine, an audience that might get to experience a different side of Palestine through the art piece addressing questions of coexistence and democracy.

For a site-specific public artwork in Israel & the Palestinian Territories, I am currently looking into the cultural, social, historical and political conditions of Ramallah. The work of RIWAQ¹¹ and 'decolonizing architecture'¹² caught my attention as much as site specific work done in the recent exhibition 'Ramallah - the fairest of them all?'¹³.

⁹ Thomas, Amelia, Kohn, Michael, Raphael, Miriam, Raz, Dan (eds), Israel & the Palestinian Territories, Lonely Planet, edition 2008, p 56

¹⁰ Available from <http://ramallahsyndrome.blogspot.com/> [accessed 24th September 2010]

¹¹ Available from www.riwaq.org [accessed 24th September 2010]

¹² Available from www.decolonizing.ps [accessed 24th September 2010]

¹³ Available from <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2010/ramallah> [accessed 24th September 2010]

Being a tourist in zones of conflict

Living and working in Belfast, I am highly aware that it takes time, investigation, commitment, patience, social relationship and trust to get past the tourist stage of gazing, immediate emotional reactions and speculation. Such a residency can only be seen as a starting point of a long-term relationship with the people and the location. The first artworks need to be seen under these conditions of a newcomer on the scene - with the quality of a newcomer: open, naïve, spontaneous, un-impressed (or extremely impressed), working on the inner pictures maybe more than on the outer images. If art wants to serve as transformative medium onsite, it demands the transformation of the Other- the artist - in the first place. I am looking forward to be challenged and eve-opened by the experience and the people.

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