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Cover image: **Fig. 5** *Foreign activists document agricultural work by Palestinian cave dwellers in the South Hebron Hills. The caves and residential dwellings are regularly destroyed by Israeli forces claiming they do not have permits to live there. Palestinian and foreign activists provide help by building houses out of breezeblocks, which are also quickly knocked down from the series Negotiating Representation in Israel and Palestine*, by Huw Wahl. 2012. (Courtesy the artist).

# Finding shades of grey

by Nisa Ari • 28.04.2021

The moments when interrogating the Israel-Palestine conflict – a narrative hardened by rigid binaries (oppressors-oppressed, occupiers-occupied, us-them) and well-worn symbolic keywords (homeland, return, memory) – transform into a supple space of discovery are few and far between.<sup>1</sup> The first time the present reviewer witnessed this shift was in the presence of a work of art: an early screening of Jumana Manna's *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* (2016) at the Al Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre, Jerusalem. The hour-long video is inspired by Robert Lachmann, a Jewish-German ethnomusicologist and émigré to 1930s Palestine, who sought to archive the musical traditions of the exceptionally diverse population he found living there. Manna's work excavates histories of the socio-political tumult that occurred during the British Mandate in Palestine (1920–48) and exposes a lingering feeling of loss over the flattening of Palestine's cultural complexity into today's reductive, binodal 'Israel-Palestine conflict'.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the film in the Q&A session that followed, a Palestinian curator remarked that until seeing Manna's video she had never considered how difficult it must have been for Sephardic Jews to be stripped of their cultural traditions in the face of a Zionist national culture that favoured Ashkenazi, Eastern European customs and a national system that aggressively divorced them from their North African and West Asian Muslim neighbours. Zionist culture, she reflected, after experiencing Manna's work, did not only repress Palestinians, but also Jews.

This moment of recognition – when the boundaries separating 'us' from 'them' fall away and empathy, nuance and questioning take its place – is what the book under review seeks to generate for its readers. Through essays that investigate how works of art can encourage new pathways of thinking for viewers, *Visioning Israel-Palestine* opens up a 'nonconformist space with the intention of forming a common alternative position to the culture of exclusion that has dominated Israeli and Palestinian national and social politics' (p.2). This culture of exclusion, outlined in the introduction by the book's editor Gil Pasternak, extends not only to the siphoning of Israeli from Palestinian spaces of cultural production and display in, for example, Jerusalem, Haifa and Jaffa, but also to the tendency among scholars to treat visual culture and strategies of making between Israeli and Palestinian creators as fully independent of one another.

The refreshing premise of this volume is the recognition that there

exists an interculturality within Israeli and Palestinian works of art based on the conflict they share. Pasternak asks 'how might we go about unpacking the cultural products of the conflict without assuming that each speaks for one nation or against another?' (p.13). The volume's authors answer this call in nine essays on particular works of art, exhibitions and public displays, as well as visual and oral 'memories of the conflict' that range from amateur photographs taken by Israeli tourists in the West Bank after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War to cross-generational Palestinian oral narratives of the 1948 Nakba. Collectively, these accounts challenge the notion that Israeli and Palestinian cultural production are irreconcilable entities. The essays are divided into two sections, titled *Products of Conflict* and *Products in Conflict*. The first considers works of art that primarily centre on direct, everyday experiences of the conflict itself. The second investigates how the conflict appears in both public and private cultural forums, such as exhibitions, newspapers, street displays of activist photographs and family photo albums, and assesses how these spaces tangibly affect peoples' memories, representations and experiences of the conflict.

*Products of Conflict* includes four essays that focus on works of art made in the long shadow of the 1993–95 Oslo Accords.<sup>3</sup> The promises made in Oslo were, for Palestinians, less a beacon of hope than a punch line to a decades-long 'tragic joke', as described by Chrisoula Lionis in her welcome essay on laughter in Palestinian art (p.66). The establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 – an authority without authority – shifted Palestinian political conversation from the rights-based discourse trumpeted by the Palestine Liberation Organization since the late-1960s (advocating for the Palestinian right of return to their homeland) and the promotion of a one-state solution to a politics based on negotiations and the idea of a two-state solution. According to contributing author Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh, through this process 'Palestine itself became a metaphor' in the minds of many Palestinians (p.49). Both Lionis and Al-Shaikh consider this conceptual recasting through the 'Kafkaesque absurdity' (p.36) and dark humour in the work of such artists as Larissa Sansour and Sobhi al-Zobaidi. In Sansour's film *Nation Estate*, a futuristic 'Palestine' is confined to a skyscraper in which holy sites like the Haram Al-Sharif are sandwiched between floors of bureaucratic 'junkspace' **FIG. 1**. In al-Zobaidi's video installation *Part-ition*, seventy-two memory-game-style flashcards of Palestine's partitioned geography flicker across a grid in a video projection **FIG. 2**, while physical versions are displayed on a brown Formica table. A rule sheet for the game, written by al-Zobaidi, encourages viewers to play: 'if you don't know Arabic [...] let colours, lines, shapes or God, guide you' and 'if you are desperate to win, you can cheat, steal or get rid of the other player and take their cards' (p.35).

Anna Ball and Griselda Pollock focus on how artists conjure

sensations and produce alternative spaces with the potential to reform how audiences engage with the realities of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In Ball's essay on Simone Bitton's documentary film *Wall* and Mona Hatoum's sculpture *Grater Divide* (2002), she borrows the term 'haptic visuality' from the media studies scholar Laura Marks to describe the artists' uncanny ability to make visuality function like a 'sense of touch'.<sup>4</sup> Hatoum's giant steel sculpture of a grater evokes the 'grating presence of the Wall in the everyday lives of Palestinians' as viewers imagine their bodies being forced into contact with its razor-sharp holes (p.84). A similar process of visual-tactical substitution is in effect too, Ball contends, in Bitton's intimate capture of Palestinian men, women and children as they climb over barriers, encountering the rough and unwelcoming border wall between Israel and the West Bank **FIG. 3**. Convincingly, Ball argues that the 'visual intimacy' (p.94) of these works of art manages to produce an occurrence where 'politics is rendered tangible and personal' (p.95), especially for those who may have previously thought about the Israel-Palestine conflict in abstract terms. Borders in these works are experienced, not described, and therefore may have the effect of stimulating empathy and even political action among those who consider themselves uninvolved in the conflict.

Pollock illuminates Yael Bartana's complex film trilogy *And Europe Will be Stunned*, which traces the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland **FIG. 4**. This political movement was initiated by Bartana in collaboration with the Polish intellectual Sławomir Sierakowski to 'heal' Poland through a return of Jews as well as 'all those for whom there is no place in their homelands' (p.105). Pollock parses Bartana's trilogy as an effort to 'imagine political alternatives' and 'thus build other futures' for both Israel and Palestine (p.104) by 'triangulating the imaginative and real spaces held between the slash Israel/Palestine with a third space, a partner in another slashed pair she places on screen: Poland/Israel, which cannot be excluded from the imaginative foundation of the place of [Israel-Palestine]' (p.106). Pollock approaches Bartana's film through the idea of 'artworking' – a Freudian-inspired term proposed by the Israeli-French artist Bracha Ettinger to indicate how art constitutes a transformative space of encounter for artist and viewer if both are willing to approach it with an emotional and spiritual openness. In addition to this somewhat opaque concept, Pollock's analysis could have found productive connection with anthropologist Chiara De Cesari's notion of 'anticipatory representation' at play in the work of contemporary Palestinian artists, such as Khalil Rabah.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, Pollock and De Cesari recognise a practice of calling into being institutions and politics that do not yet exist – in the works of both Israeli and Palestinian artists – as a method of 'real make-believe' to summon radical futures for the Israel slash, dash, and, or Palestine they desire.

The second section of the book, *Products in Conflict*, tempers the

first section's near-optimism about art's capacity to make room for reflection with the thorny aspects of seeing or making cultural products in spaces of conflict. It includes curatorial reflections by Rhoda Rosen and Sander L. Gilman on the *Imaginary Coordinates* exhibition, which sought to question the connection between territoriality and national identity in Israel and Palestine at the museum of the Spertus Institute of Jewish Learning and Leadership, Chicago, in 2007, and was shuttered by criticism from funders that works of art in the exhibition expressed anti-Israeli rhetoric (p.152). In his essay 'Showcasing conflict: notes and observations on photographic representation in Israel and Palestine', Huw Wahl **FIG. 5** examines how professional photographer-activists, like the ActiveStills photography collective explored by Simon Faulkner in a subsequent essay, have become additional parties to the Israel-Palestine conflict, yet produce photographs that render them conspicuously unseen and absent as agents in the spaces of the conflict they haunt.

Pasternak's contribution to the book explores a particular type of photograph found in many Israeli family albums: relics of a time when Israeli citizens flocked to the Palestinian enclaves of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula following the Israel Defense Force's victory in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 **FIG. 6**. Pasternak describes how these informal snapshots produced by amateur photographers, in tandem with their makers' recollections, produce a portal to the complex intermingling of Israel's national aspirations with Israelis' personal attitudes towards the country's continued occupation of Palestine. Pasternak discovers that although Israelis may have originally taken these photographs to represent the promise of 'sociocultural cohesion' between them and Palestinians after 1967, they no longer carry this resonance for many. One family Pasternak interviewed, for example, stores these photographs apart from other family snapshots, marking a line 'between their moral values and those articulated by the Israeli state's [current] treatment of the Palestinian people in the West Bank' (p.236). Personal reflections on the conflict, also described in the book's final essay by Ihab Saloul about Palestinian oral accounts of al-Nakba, are equally as emotional, personal and real memories of the past as they are indexes of what it is like to live in a multi-temporal present – a present conditioned by the conflicts of the past, present and (most likely) future.

There is a seductive if perhaps perilous allure to portals, which allow one to experience shades of grey in a conflict that is typically, and often by necessity, portrayed as black and white. While books, such as the one under review, and the cultural products examined therein have the ability to conjure nonconformist 'elsewheres' of non-exclusionary politics, Palestine and Palestinians are still 'here' and the politics of exclusion and dominance are staggeringly real. The power imbalance between Israel and Palestine remains sharply

defined, as witnessed in the recent normalisation agreements signed between Israel, Bahrain, Sudan, the UAE and Morocco – initiated during the final months of the Trump administration in the United States – which brought to the surface pre-existing, if tacit, arrangements and further cemented the isolation of Palestinians. While a collection of essays, penned by experts for an academic audience, will (at least to this reviewer’s mind) never quite match art’s capacity to transport and transform reality, *Visioning Israel-Palestine* succeeds in making clear that art and culture will remain central in chipping away at the ossified dash that has bound ‘Israel’ and ‘Palestine’ in conflict for over half a century.

## About this book



Visioning Israel-Palestine: Encounters at the Cultural Boundaries of Conflict  
Edited by Gil Pasternak  
Bloomsbury, London, 2020  
ISBN 978-1-5013-6462-4

## Footnotes

- 1 It is worth mentioning here, as do several authors in the book under review, that the terminology ‘the Israel-Palestine conflict’, as well as the relationship between the two entities – alternately written as ‘Israel-Palestine’, ‘Israel/Palestine’ or ‘Israel and Palestine’, and these same constructions in reverse – are all forms of reference that reveal an author’s priorities, values and practices of resistance and power. The present reviewer has adopted the construction ‘Israel-Palestine’ in line with the volume’s title.
- 2 Although the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine was not formally ratified until 1923, the present reviewer uses these dates to reflect the moment when a British civilian administration replaced its military administration in Palestine following the San Remo conference in April 1920.

- 3** The Oslo Accord of 1993 and the subsequent Oslo II Agreement of 1995 are agreements signed between the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The major outcomes were an exchange of letters of mutual recognition and the creation of a Palestinian Authority, which was tasked with limited self-governance in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Oslo process did not address the building of Israeli settlements, Palestinian land confiscation or the right of return. The creation of the Palestinian Authority ultimately served to further divide Palestinian land (known today as Areas A, B and C). The so-called peace process of Oslo forever removed from the negotiating table the nearly eighty per cent of Palestine that Israel had occupied since 1948 and, as both Chrisoula Lionis and Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh describe in their essays, represented a major setback for Palestinians who had been striving toward the vision of a secular democratic state.
- 4** See L. Marks: *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Durham, North Carolina, 2000.
- 5** See C. De Cesari: 'Anticipatory representation: building the Palestinian nation(-state) through artistic performance', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12, no.1 (2012), pp.82-100.



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