

In the In Between: a Conversation with Galit Eilat and Chen Tamir about the Mobile Archive

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On the evening of September 15th, 2009 I attended a talk by Galit Eilat and Reem Fadda at New School University's Vera List Center about the Israeli Center for Digital Art's Mobile Archive. The Mobile Archive is an archive of approximately 1000 DVDs permanently housed in Holo, Israel currently traveling throughout Europe and the United States. With each new destination it travels to, it grows by as many as twenty-five DVDs depending on the choices of the local curators and artists involved in the collaborative project. Currently, the Mobile Archive is being exhibited at Art in General in SOHO, New York, guest curated by the Israeli-Canadian curator, Chen Tamir, as well as curators Regine Basha and Adina Popescu.

During Eilat's and Fadda's presentations at the New School, I was struck by the curators' many insights about the geopolitical situation in the Middle-East, and the specific ways that native artists are addressing the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Fadda's description of Israel/Palestine as a "laboratory for mobility" was especially interesting, and something which I wanted to discuss further with Eilat and Fadda when the panel concluded. I was also very struck by a video Eilat showed from her [Liminal Spaces](#) project, which brings Israeli and Palestinian artists, intellectuals, activists, and scholars into dialogue with one another in order to think about and enact interventions into the bureaucracy that governs Israel/Palestine. This video showed Palestinians and Israelis speaking through the wall separating Israel from Palestine with one another via a two-way video conference. During this conference, to the surprise of the artists responsible for setting up the conference, Israeli soldiers policing the wall did not stop the conference and instead looked on with curiosity and amusement.

One of the issues foregrounded in the following interview, which took place on Friday September 18th between myself, Chen Tamir and Galit Eilat at Art in General, is the extent to which The Mobile Archive and Liminal Spaces are both creating genuinely new spaces for artworks to exist in cross-culturally. The Mobile Archive produces spaces for artists to show work that is in between private and public distribution, inclusivity and exclusivity, and which also challenge art's value as commodity insofar as the Archive prioritizes art's "symbolic" values—the ways that artworks can transmit ideas across cultures and create spaces for cultural dialogue. In the case of Liminal Spaces, artists and fellow travelers come together to find the loopholes in a bureaucratic structure. Much like the work of Eastern European artists such as the Slovenian [IRWIN](#) group, Liminal Spaces studies the situation in Israel/Palestine in order to intervene and act in ways that affect people's lives in the region on a day-to-day basis. Whereas the IRWIN group [issues civilians passports](#), Liminal Spaces provides information about the Israeli military's use of checkpoints to police Palestinians and Israel's own civilian population.



At the risk of giving away what happens in the interview (the following is a spoiler I suppose), there is a point I consider rather wonderful in which Eilat reveals my own ignorance of the situation on the ground in Israel/Palestine. This instance occurs around Reem Fadda's statement during her talk with Eilat at The New School: Israel/Palestine is a "laboratory for mobility." Associating the Liminal Spaces' video where Palestinians and Israelis can see through the wall separating them, I mistook this seeing through walls for the actual practice of walking through walls of Israeli soldiers in the Palestinian territory. Such a slight misunderstanding leads to a huge irony currently in Israel/Palestine: that Israel's military is systematically studying canonical texts by post-May '68 "Post-Structuralist" French theorists in order to train their soldiers for guerilla conflict. In short, in preparation for raids on Palestinian homes, Israeli soldiers are drilling holes in

consecutive Palestinian dwellings so that they do not have to exit through the front door, and thus risk exposure to possible sniper fire and other guerilla tactics by Palestinian insurgents. This revelation and others were profound to me (profoundly interesting and disappointing) admiring French intellectual discourse post-May '68 and not anticipating the violent purposes to which these inspiring texts could be put.

I think the value of this interview, for those who have experienced the conflict in the Middle-East first hand, will be one of realizing how artists are responding in practical and insightful ways to a conflict that does not cease to haunt a global conscience. For those familiar with the ongoing geopolitical conflict in the Middle-East, or who have little awareness of the response to it by contemporary artists, I think this interview will illuminate some particulars about the conflict, as well as the high stakes of aesthetic response.

Thom Donovan: What is the Mobile Archive?

Galit Eilat: It's an archive of around 1000 video works by different artists that travels from one place to another, from one institute to another. It started about three years ago in collaboration with the Kunstverein in Hamburg. The director asked us to prepare a show and one of the ideas was to bring the archive. So we set up a framework by which we could copy our archive and deliver it to another institute. Today each new institute with whom we work adds up to twenty-five new works to the existing archive. The mobile archive therefore is growing all the time.

TD: Do you see an evolution to the archive based on the different places it's traveled to? Where has the archive traveled so far?

GE: It was in Germany. It was in Italy twice. It was in Venice and Milan. It was in Zagreb [Croatia]. Glasgow. It was in Ljubljana [Slovenia].

CT: It's always changing because each institution adds up to 25 DVDs. By definition it changes each time because it has to with each stop.

GE: But the viewer's perception of the archive also depends on which institution is curating it and making decisions about how to deal with it, how to present it. So it's not just the content, but also the form. Discussion can arise around different issues related to the archive. So we are not only talking about the video works themselves, but how they become articulated.

TD: So each different institute articulates the meaning of the archive in its unique way?

GE: It's a different context. Different curators choose to show different works to a particular audience.



Elodie Pong, "Je Suis Une Bombe" 2006.

TD: Why are archives that cross international boundaries important?

CT: I think it's about facilitating dialogue and cross-cultural exposure. The work that's in the archive is coming from very personal perspectives, but together they create evidence of certain mind-frames within cultures, certain issues important to particular cultures. The more these videos are watched the more understanding we gain. For example, a lot of the works in the archive are from Israel or Palestine, the Middle-East and Eastern Europe, and for them to come to New York right now while

the US is at war with Iraq and Afghanistan and in an economic war with the entire world makes it extremely urgent that we establish dialogue between cultural producers from those parts of the world.

GE: For me, the traveling archive grew out of a desire to share with other places and also out of the idea that other institutes would contribute something we were not aware of or we don't have the possibility to communicate with because it is from another country. All of this was especially important given the geopolitical context where I come from, where there is not much dialogue between countries. By having the archive travel it is easier to engage in dialogue. Already the archive has contributed quite a bit in this way.

CT: It's also interesting to think about the economy of these archives. A lot of artists don't upload their videos online because this is not a framework they'd like their work shown in—they would prefer exclusivity for their work, for it to be presented in a gallery—but they do want the exposure that a traveling, exhibited archive provides for. And the archive is more like a library since none of the works were purchased, but given to the archive by artists for distribution. You could think of it as a library of viewing copies of these works which otherwise would have market value but do not because they are not editioned. But they do have value. They are physical things, and we have them. Someone may have paid \$5,000 for them and it's in their house, or a museum may have purchased them. It's sort of a parallel economy.

TD: So it's somewhere between the YouTube model and the exclusivity of a private collection?

GE: The archive foregrounds the symbolic value of art works. In fact, we may distinguish a collection from an archive in terms of an archive's symbolic value. The former is dealing more with market value, the later with symbolic values. This is one way to imagine a different economy. What if we distribute works without instruction, without a manual? The value of works of art become determined more and more by how they are shared.

TD: Something interesting you said the other night during your presentation at Parsons' Vera List Center for Art and Politics was that the archive's quality grows throughout time. So the time-sense of

the archive, and the archive's overall evolution, are critical to any value it has or will have.

CT: The archive used to be open, that any artist could mail in their work, and it would be processed for the archive. This submission policy has been temporarily stopped because it was too much work. Now the works coming into the archive are works that Galit's brought in. It's actually turned from a very open archive to a fairly closed one.

GE: But it's still very open. It's not everything...

CT: It's not the Internet...

GE: ...but it's a lot. The question of what is related to our work takes precedence over the question "Is it good or is it bad?" Of course it's also a question of taste. I won't say that we've gotten beyond that but I think questions of "good" and "bad" are less relevant when one is trying to have a dialogue. There aren't good or bad comments within a dialogue. In cultural exchange what happens, happens.



Shooting Back Project, B'Tselem Israeli Information Center

TD: The selection process is also mediated by the institutions with which you choose to work.

GE: Correct. I choose the institutions with whom I'd like to work and they become responsible for the process of selecting specific artists' videos.

CT: [to Galit] What institutions would you *not* want the archive in. The MoMA, for instance?

GE: The MoMA is not an institute, it's a mall.

CT: [laughs] Who would you say no to?

GE: For example, a Canadian institution that wanted to work with us has a problem with censorship. We told them "no thank you." If you look at the institutions with which we have worked in the past they all have a certain character. Not the same character, but we have common understandings, and a shared vision for the future of the work.

TD: Would you say you're choosing them based on their ethical character?

GE: Not ethical. Let's say it depends on the vision they have for the future and the responsibility they have towards the present.

TD: The geopolitical context for this work you are doing is obviously extremely important to the project. The other night at Parsons your co-presenter, the Ramallah-based art historian and curator Reem Fadda, spoke of Israel/Palestine as a "laboratory for situations of mobility." How does this relate to your Liminal Spaces project?

GE: The Liminal Spaces project is based on three main events that we call "traveling seminars." These seminars consist of three separate meetings, each for three to four days. The first was in Ramallah, the second in Germany, the third in Israel where we looked specifically at the occupation inside Israel. The last of these meetings took place between Jews and Arabs, but also between Muslims and Christians within the Palestinian community. So liminality is about crossing borders, but is also about all the different relations that are sometimes undefined by the law.

My specific approach coming from the Israeli Center for Digital Art is to create liminal spaces within the bureaucracy. How, for instance, to provide Palestinian citizens with permits to come to Ramallah? I would not say that we are working so much against the system, as we are trying to find holes in the system we can use for our own needs. Working in the three different areas of the Occupied Territories--areas A, B, and C--has been extremely educative for us.

Area A is a place where Palestinians are allowed to be; it is controlled by Palestinian authorities. Area B is a Palestinian Area controlled by Israeli authorities. Area C is a mixed area, but it is owned by Israel completely. What you must understand is you can never know where Area B is. Area B changes all the time. In the morning there can be a checkpoint, hours later there can be nothing there where the checkpoint was.

This is where we started the project from: by wanting to analyze how we can travel, what we can do, how we can demarcate Area B. You have a map, but the map is changing all the time. The areas have been in a constant state of transformation since Israel began to build the wall. It's constant transformation: building, destroying, building again. So the purpose of our project is not only to cross borders mentally, but also physically.



TD: These projects also hold a historical value for you. In the case of the Mobile Archive you are preserving videos of cultural value for posterity. The other night at Parsons I also asked you about the trend of reenactment, and you said that the reenactment, for you, was a return to the 'scene of the crime'—to a place where cultural violence had been committed. This articulation of reenactment seems a unique way of thinking about the uses of reenactment as a contemporary art format.

GE: Something I find strange in the United States talking about the Israeli/Palestinian issue, is that there are no similar issues here. There is no Iraq, no border of USA/Mexico, no question of liminality.

Israel/Palestine is very visible worldwide. It is a playground for experiments; not just weapons, but other kinds of experiments—psychological, etc. It is strange to me that more people aren't paying attention to similarities here in the US. Israel/Palestine seems exotic here, but I don't find it exotic. I'm not sure if it has to do with the US media...

CT: You're right. It's not something that's felt here on a daily basis. It's not something that's acknowledged. The first headline in the news is not Iraq; it's very much suppressed. For myself, being an Israeli/Canadian-American person, it's a very different feel. In Israel you can't escape. People try in Israel, but forces inevitably distract you. Here you could live in a bubble—even in New York.

TD: The militant '60s slogan comes to mind: *Bring the war home*. The problem seems that there are not enough people bringing the war home; the situation abroad, the wars, the plight of others are just not in your face everyday. Not through media coverage, nor through the mainstream art world or the popular mainstream.

CT: I've been reading a lot about the Israeli marketplace, and how successfully Israel has co-opted war and security as their principle commodities. It used to be that war was really bad for Israel because it meant people wouldn't do business with us. But now it's actually good—people do more business with us as we've gotten better at being at war.

TD: And the United States has obviously contributed a lot to that transformation.

GE: This is why I have called the Middle East a "laboratory." The Israeli economy is largely built on tracking civilians, surveillance equipment...

TD: So when you say Israel/Palestine is a "laboratory for mobility" you mean that also in the sense of ways that the government is studying how people actually move.

GE: Of course.

TD: Because I was thinking of the Mobile Archive as the laboratory....



GE: There is a very interesting article by Eyal Weizman for example, "Art of War," about how the army moves inside the refugee camps. The army walks through walls.

TD: Hence the video you showed the other night in which an artist produced a teleconference between the wall separating Israel from Palestine...

GE: Not seeing through walls. *The soldiers walk through walls.*

CT: Galit is referring to a popular practice among the Israeli military, which is instead of going outside a house you demolish a wall and go to the next house. You literally

walk through walls.

GE: They drill a hole to protect themselves from being attacked because in the refugee camps houses are attached one to the other.

CT: They're like Brownstones in Brooklyn.

GE: You can go through the whole block. You know De Certeau, Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari... all those beautiful texts.

TD: They've become textbooks for the military. Post-structuralism has been absorbed by state military strategy.

GE: Yes.

TD: The other night at Parsons, Fadda spoke of "liberation curating." Would you call yourselves liberation curators?

CT: [laughs] I wouldn't call myself a liberation curator.

GE: [laughs] No, but I think it is something that people expect a curator to be, like a conductor. I think it's also happening because of all of this fuss about curators. Ten years ago the curator position depended on which artists were being curated, now the curator position is very strong. So this was what she was getting at.

CT: She was talking about it more in terms of wanting to liberate the curator from the exhibition

structure and instead think about how cultural products and social experiences are created.

TD: Outside the context of the gallery or the institution, the thing that came to mind for me was 'liberation theology' [movement of radical Catholic religious leaders against Authoritarianism primarily in Latin America], which refers to religious/theological discourses that are politically directed towards empowering the dispossessed. Can we consider the Mobile Archive liberating in this sense?

CT: After the Parsons talk, one of the artists I had invited to participate in the archive became apprehensive. She said to me, "Oh, so the videos don't matter."

GE: But they do matter.

CT: I can understand why she thought that because we didn't really focus on any one artwork. I think it was because she was looking at the content rather than the form of the archive, and you obviously can't have one without the other. I think people need to see the show to understand this. And of course it's a very specific context for someone's art work. Someone also mentioned that I'm now curating curators, because I chose two guest curators to curate out of the archive. You're curating the Mobile Archive by deciding where it goes, and this becomes its own curatorial issue.

GE: And yet we provide a service to the artist. The artist doesn't have to distribute the work; to send it; to copy it; to push it. There is someone else to do this.

TD: The work will be cared for and shown to audiences who will be invested in the material...

CT: And it's in good company.

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