

The Form of Resistance In a Military Zone

The present unravels in deterioration without end, and the future appears as marching towards catastrophe. The Israeli army, its politicians and with the full support of Israeli society, accelerate the bloodbath by committing war crimes that further aggravate the conflict with Arab countries, which will last for generations and pit the Palestinians as hopeless enemies.

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Giorgio Agamben writes that the willed creation of a state of exception is part of contemporary democratic practice and that it creates a no-man's-land between politics and law. The state of emergency, or the state of exception, is not chaotic or anarchist since it is under juridical control, even when that control is illegal. The indefinite confinement of Palestinians under prolonged blockade is part of the state of emergency – an extraordinary and indefinite situation. However, this blockade is not the result of extraordinary circumstances. It is a means through which the extraordinary is deemed the norm.

In a country which has not yet been, and perhaps never will be, freed from the policies of emergency, military zones are fluid and can be created within minutes; whomever demonstrates or operates on the margins knows that military zones are created with the same swiftness in which emergency laws are constituted. A continuous state of emergency reigns in Israel. The country has inherited marshal law from the British Mandate and with their support continued the anomaly of “legal suspension of law.” Emergency rule allows the martial government to take on the security mission of militarily governing Palestinians, who are Israeli citizens.

The way in which the I.D.F. prevents demonstrations or civil disobedience is by declaring a civilian area a closed military zone. A closed military zone can be any place within Israeli occupied territory to which the army wants to deny access to civilians. Thus groups of activists are arrested on their way to demonstrations or dialogues with Palestinians. Demonstrations are diffused prematurely, nipped in the bud, due to the army or the boarder police's use of anti-demonstration tactics. The relationship between art and war, art and violence, has always been more than ambivalent. Modern art discourse uses military terms such as: avant-garde, art strategies, or artists' tactics within artistic institutions. The avant-garde has viewed itself for generations as shattering traditional art and its conventions, which dictated themes appropriate for artistic pursuit. A new generation of artists has ensued that fights for social justice and believes art is not simply a mirror for society but that it can elicit social change. Such artists or artist collectives operate beyond the field of representation, in a more radical space where law is suspended and where art can operate between the metaphorical (or allegorical) and the concrete and thus disrupt the state of emergency's enforcement.

“Artists Without Walls” is a forum comprised of Palestinian and Israeli artists from various fields who meet in East Jerusalem or Ramallah. The purpose of the forum is to protest against the separation walls and lines and to create discourse between Palestinians and Israelis through artistic means. The forum was established as a result of the realization that demonstrations breed more violence and remove separation opponents from operating within Israeli society. “April 1st” was the group’s most successful event wherein they created a virtual window on both sides of the wall, in the Abu Dis neighborhood of Jerusalem. Two closed-circuit video cameras were placed at the same point on both sides of the wall. The cameras were connected to projectors that screened, in real time, the view from the other side. Thus a virtual window allowed people on both sides to see each other. The cameras operated one meter from one another, turning surveillance and control technology into a spectacle geared towards getting the attention of the media and the Israeli public to focus on human rights abuse.

Other forms of resistance to the occupation that adopt artistic practice are found in the village of Bilin.* Leftist Israeli activists (anarchists, pacifists, and human rights activists), international and local Palestinians all take part in the struggle against occupation. This is expressed through demonstrations held every Friday. Demonstrators march towards the separation wall route in an effort to prevent the continuation of its construction, and even try to dismantle parts that have already been built. The army usually diffuses the demonstrations, preemptively declaring the area a “closed military zone” and using anti-demonstration means. The village demonstrators are decidedly non-violent and instead of reacting violently they create performance-installations in which they take part.

Every demonstration results in an event that represents the convictions of the villagers in physical form. In one event, the villagers made metal armor from petroleum barrels for the demonstrators to wear. The barrels reference the way in which Palestinian workers infiltrate Israel, on petroleum transport trucks, in order to find employment. Another project that was made in the village comprises a large mirror on which “I oppose the wall” or “Stop the occupation” is written on it in backward mirror writing. Demonstrators carry the mirror at the head of their procession. Approaching soldiers are reflected in the mirror and see themselves facing an army. The demonstrators face an army that has anti-occupation slogans written all over them. Thus the demonstrators transform into an army while the soldiers are transformed into freedom fighters.

* Bilin is a Palestinian village located west of Ramallah, and east of the “Modi’in Elite” settlement, in “Area B,” that is under the civilian control of the Palestinian Authority.