

Dangerous and Warm Israel

“What did you do in Israel?”

“I participated in performance workshop. We made performances in the Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv...”

“What is performance?”

“It is like a play but at the same time it is not at all like a play. It is expressing some higher idea than yourself with your body language...,” I am trying to explain to the passport control, being very sleepy. I am in Tel Aviv’s airport at 01.30 a.m. It is 6th of May and the Israeli state will become 60-years old the next day. I want to fly home, but before that I must show the content of my backpack several times and my passport is being viewed at least five times.

“Did someone give you presents in Israel?” the official asks. “Very good,” she answers when I shake my head, “because if you are being given presents by someone in this country, it can easily be a bomb.” I picture all these friendly people we met and can’t imagine any of them giving me a bomb.

How did I get into Israel? It goes back to August 2006 when I participated in the Port Performance workshop in Gdansk, Poland (Sirp 8. IX 2006). These workshops are founded by international performance artists BBB Johannes Deimling and Angelika Fojtuch. The idea of the workshops is to learn about another culture and create a performance based on the impressions and experiences. In addition to Gdansk, Port Performance has taken place in Estonia and Berlin before. Goods, people and ideas are exchanged in ports and that’s why the workshops take place mostly in port cities. Berlin was the only exception. The participants of the workshop vary. Due to visa and security issues there were only four participants in Israel’s workshop: the author of this article and Katrin Tees from Estonia, Dionys Damman from Switzerland and Mara Maglione from Italy. Israel’s workshop had the following itinerary: Tel Aviv- Mezoque Deragot- Jerusalem- Tel Aviv.

It is not easy to get an Israeli visa. That’s why a Nigerian artist never made it to Israel. The fact that the workshop was postponed from autumn to spring shows the instability of the political situation in Israel. We arrived in Israel by the Passover. Eating leavened bread was forbidden and we could find bread shelves covered with the textile in the shops. In this melting pot of religions and nationalities numerous holidays are the source of conflicts.

We saw a demonstration in Tel Aviv where armed police chased peaceful people around the beach. The demonstration was against the state’s decision to leave Arabs without a home. These Arabs live in Tel Aviv’s old part, called Yafo. A long time ago the Jews were said to have made the Arabs leave Yafo: people told us that 38 years ago Yafo was freed for Jews. Then some Arabs returned home as time passed by. Now the state plans to replace old houses with new business centers. Inhabitants receive a letter telling them to move out within a week. The state’s financial support is too little to pay for the rent of a flat. People carried posters with the text “Arabs, go home!” We were told it was a good message telling the Arabs to stay at their homes in Yafo. The possibility that the state changes its mind, is small, especially when watching the police’s behaviour.

Locals emphasized that Israel is a military state. "If you see one ambulance car with a siren, it is dealing with an ordinary heart attack but if you see a 6-7 ambulance- and police cars with sirens, it is a terrorism act," explained a curator, Yifat Laist. Serving in the army is compulsory for men for three years and for women for two years. There were many female soldiers in the streets. Jewish women look very fit. They are certainly not made of sugar and strawberries. Armed policemen and soldiers walked everywhere. They were polite when communicating to people.

Learning about the local art scene is a part of the Port Performance programme. We visited several art groups and artists. We spent an evening with a performance group "Public Movement". Founded in 2006, the group gets their ideas from the army. A soldier's moving and acting is very practical and economic. The group also finds inspiration from folk dances, accidents and street fights. We saw a rehearsal where they imitated a car accident. One has to pass certain tests if wishing to join the group and competition is quite tough. Most of the group members are dancers or sportsmen. Their outfit is white and the belt is black. To our surprise the artists' group had a blue-black-white flag. They were aware of this being the Estonian flag. "We love Estonia! We have a similarly hard history," they explained.

We made physical exercises in order to keep fit for our upcoming performance. Fojtuch and Deimling gave us tasks and we created short pieces. In addition we discussed religious problems and analyzed each other's art.

We visited young artist Roy Mordechai who performed a few years ago in a public space with his friend Meir Tati. Roy was a Plumberman and Meir a Yellowman. I asked if they knew the Yellow Wolfman. Let alone they didn't know him, the existence of Estonia struck some of the locals as news as well. Roy works with water colors in the moment and Meir is planning performances in the most dangerous streets of Tel Aviv, where suicide bombers have exploded themselves. He will ask his mother to attach a bomb belt on him, but instead of bombs are the paint tubes - and the street becomes brightly coloured. Contemporary artists in Israel work mainly on the following topics: suicide bombers, borders, militarism and Arabs. Meir said it was good that Israel's economic situation has risen to a level when they have started to buy contemporary art. In addition to paintings the videos are bought. Many glamorous persons visit exhibition openings.

Conflict between the intellect and power is in the air in Israel. We visited an artist called Eden, who has been forcibly put in a psychiatric hospital and in prison. He made performance in public space: walked, gas mask on and carrying a huge philosophy book towards a top secret military base. Police suspected him being connected with Saddam Hussein. He was arrested again when dancing on streets on the Passover night. 38-year old Eden has been arrested countless times since 2000. Contacting friends is forbidden in mental hospital. Eden looked bitterly back on the situation where the Israeli state allowed him to make three (think of it: three!) phone calls from the hospital. The medicines were given forcibly.

We walked between Bauhaus-styled houses of 100-years old Tel Aviv and climbed on the roof to visit an artist, Chana Ashuri. Having lived in the kibbutz until she was 17, keys and money seemed totally absurd for her at first. The Kibbutz system is based on socialism and Zionism. When Chana came to the capitalistic world, she entered the college to study computer

technology. Now she is making animations, videos, performances, adornments and many more things. She makes adornments of the glue and prints pictures on the dish-washing sponges. Her creation has a hint of the absurd and resembles that of Hieronymus Bosch. In addition she sews skirts out of blouses and makes shoes out of pullover sleeves.

People who are passionate about film classics come together in the private flat every Friday. That is why we bumped into them. We noticed many different nationalities and races. The film “Out of the Past” from year 1947 was screened. An installation was hanging from the ceiling. It contained toy soldiers. “I mean with that installation that mobiles (moving art pieces) aren’t always cute,” explained the home cinema organizer. Militarism is everywhere.

Deimling thought that we should spend three nights in the desert for a change so we drove to the tourist village Mezoque Deragot near the Dead Sea. We slept in huge Bedouin tent. The stormy wind made the tent to flap and men had to secure this over and over again. We decided it was better to forget about the noble ideas of feminism. “One of the tasks of this workshop is to go through all this,” explained Deimling. Sand, chased by the strong wind, went everywhere: into mattresses, water bottles, photo cameras, clothes, hair. Since we didn’t have dishes, we ate from the cabbage leaves. We cooked by ourselves. Deimling made us to drink two litres of water every day in the desert.

The most important experience during the desert experience was walking down the rocks to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is situated 420 meters below the sea level and is so salty that it contains no living organisms. The salty water is so thick that one can’t sink underwater unless bumping into the whirlpool. We visited the unofficial beach. Armed border guards showed us where to go. They were watching Jordanians did not cross the border. Jordan’s mountains were seen on the other side of the Dead Sea. We took the mud from the sea and put it on us. We soaked in the thick salty soup. Later we learned that the beach contains lots of sinking sand which means that a person can literally sink underground, leaving no tracks behind.

The time we spent in the desert was certainly not the time for reflecting and finding ourselves like our tutors expected but the constant fight with the wild forces of nature. I fell ill and on our arrival in Jerusalem I had a cold, sore throat, stomach disease, fever and I had lost my voice. Deimling said I was making a funny voice of the desert bird but I wasn’t in a funny mood so I stayed in bed for a while.

We concentrated on exploring religion in Jerusalem but we also visited an art museum. We were invited to opening of an exhibition in the Israel Museum. Music was playing, snacks and drinks were offered and long speeches were held. The large exhibition “Real Time: Art in Israel 1998–2008” was being opened. An exhibition “Short Memory” was in the Center for Contemporary Arts in Tel Aviv at the same time. All the exhibitions at that time were dedicated Israel’s 60th anniversary.

Naturally we visited the famous Wailing Wall. The women’s and men’s sides are separated and the men’s side is at least twice as big as women’s. Religious people come here from all over the world. They write letters to their God Jahveh and put these into the holes of the wall, hoping the God will discover the letters and fulfill their wishes. The doves, who live in the wall holes,

observe this with the expression of someone who has accepted the inevitable processes. Arabs have built a mosque on the other side of the wall. One can see mosques and minarets in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. Minarets are towers from where beautiful male voices call Arabs to make their daily prayers. The voices answer to each other, singing like the Billy goats during the mating time.

One of the most exciting experiences was visiting the ultra orthodox village in Jerusalem. It is the most conservative form of Judaism where the Torah is followed precisely. An ultra orthodox Jew is referred to as haredi (Haredim in the plural). Haredi is derived from *charada*, meaning fear or anxiety, which in this context is interpreted as "one who trembles in awe of God". One can recognize male haredim by their hair style. Most of the hair is short, but long curls hang down from both sides of the head. Married women cover the hair. Before our great adventure we got the following instructions from the tourist information: women have to dress modestly. It means they must wear a long skirt or if they wear trousers, the place where the legs meet must be covered. It is not customary to talk to the opposite sex and if you do that, you will be ignored.

Many haredi rabbis forbid television and films, the internet and secular newspapers. Mobile phones have got restricted functions. Instead of newspapers posters are placed on the walls. These contain only the news haredim need to know. What they need to know and what to do, it is for rabbis to decide. One must ask a rabbi's permission to get married, for conceiving a baby, travelling and so on.

Haredi Jews of all ages wearing black and grey were walking in the streets. We passed by the schoolhouse. Boys study in boys' schools, *yeshivas*, where the studying of the Torah is the central activity. Maths, English and other basic subjects are not taught. Girls study in girls' schools.

Recent statistics show that number of ultra orthodox Jews is increasing. They now make up 10 per cent of the population. Already 50% of Israeli schoolchildren are haredim. Even though more than half of them are living under the poverty line and receive support from the state (men study the Torah instead of working), they are still a strong political force, which is going to influence life in Israel more and more. Many haredim are said to be revolutionary. They think that only religious Jews have right to live in that piece of land and they try to convince all Jews to live like haredim.

The Haredim believe in God unconditionally. Recently the ultra orthodox Shlomo Benizri announced that the earthquakes are the fault of homosexuals. The man claims in a radio interview that he simply quoted the holy text. God says that he sends earthquakes as a punishment for homosexuality and everything God says is true. If God should change his mind in the future, so will Benizri.

Having lots of impressions, we turned back to Tel Aviv. The final presentation took place in the Center for Contemporary Arts (CCA). We showed endurance performances where physical force and stamina were needed. Katrin Tees threw paper aeroplanes from the balcony. "God" was written on them. I rolled a big stone on the asphalt, making the shape of a hexagram. This has many meanings but it is well known as a symbol of Jews. I drew a line on top of each corner of

the hexagram. I drew a line over them when I had drawn six lines. They symbolized six working days. The Resting Day is called the Sabbath in Israel. I symbolized the Sabbath with the outline of my body in the center of the hexagram. The final result reminded me of Leonardo da Vinci's man. I used the blue, black and white colors, referring to the similarities between Estonia and Israel.

Dionys Damman carried a big bag of soil upstairs and came downstairs with the elevator. Mara Maglione symbolized a home with eggs, attached to her hair. BBB Johannes Deimling worked on the co-existence of different religions. Angelika Fojtuch had experienced an unkind attitude towards the Polish by Jews, probably because Auschwitz is in Poland. That's why she tied a white bandage over her head and face and wrote on this: I am from Poland.

The presentation went well and we had a warm feeling in heart when our friends from home cinema who were watching our presentation invited us to join the next screening.