

## 2 sides to every wall

An international multimedia project photographed in war-torn regions will turn the separation wall at Abu Dis to a two-sided movie screen depicting daily life on both sides of the wall. Artist Ruthe Zuntz is one of the initiators of the project: 'I believe we have the ability to connect between people'

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### Challenging Walls

["Challenging Walls"](#) is a multimedia art project exhibiting this week at the International Film Festival in Jerusalem. It hopes to turn 60 meters of the separation wall at Abu Dis into a two-sided movie screen that will use photographs and film to tell the story of people who live on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides of the wall. The project is a joint venture of Israeli artist Ruthe Zuntz, architect Anat Moshe and German artist Michael Reitz together with artists from Northern Ireland, Cyprus and the Palestinian Authority. The 20-minute multimedia presentation of 640 photographs will be simultaneously shown on both sides.

The photographs will portray the daily life on both sides of walls in four countries until the differences among the people are totally blurred. If we can tear down the mental walls on both sides, thought Zuntz, who has lived in Berlin for 20 years, we can overcome the fear and the despair that separates the two peoples like the wall does.

Participants in the initiative say there were a lot of doubts and questions. "It was hard to find a Palestinian partner who would agree to work with Israelis," said Zuntz who had a lot of doors close in her face while trying to get the project off the ground. "It raised questions about the kind of future that would be possible without dialogue. Of course it was a project that presented a challenge."



Photo: Ruthe Zuntz

Zuntz persisted despite the setbacks. “On one of my visits to Ramallah I was told that I am busy with art projects while they the Palestinians are suffering and I thought, that is true but what’s better: Standing on the side and doing nothing? Artists are not the ones who sign peace agreements but I do believe that we have the ability to make inroads and connect between peoples.”

She said she is tired of opening the newspaper and identifying the ‘other side’ solely through the images of war. “People on both sides live with the idea that there is an enemy not a neighbor on the other side. When you open the newspaper you identify with the child throwing rocks and the terrorist or the soldier with the tank, weapons and a uniform. Images create culture and we asked to develop a project that would show the less-known sides. We asked to find the similarities between the two sides people have no opportunity to see because they are too close to the situation. We asked to remove the mask of the enemy and the stigmas in order to reveal the human side.”

Zuntz worked for months with Palestinian artist Steve Sabella who divides his time between Jerusalem and London. “His photographs are full of optimism, color and glam. You just fall in love,” she said. The collaboration has resulted in a hodgepodge of photographs which together demand a fresh perspective on the situation.

The minute we begin to speak and listen to one another, we will understand more and fear less,” said Zuntz. “I know that it could take years but this project is sowing a seed.”

Steve Sabella is interested in memory and identity. The 32-year-old photographer admits he had many reservations about the project. “Besides the fact that I prefer to work alone, I find the idea of projects for peace basically repulsive.”



**Photo: Steve Sabella**

Sabella said, “I don’t enjoy being an element of someone’s thesis and in most cases I turn down offers to take part because for me this is a festival of occupation that is exploiting my identity (as a Palestinian) as a way of feeling better about themselves. This is the first time since my studies at the school of photography in Mousrara that I am working with an Israeli artist and I think that I agreed to take part because it’s a different kind of project. It speaks an international language that extends beyond the Israel Palestinian conflict. It tries to shatter stereotypes.

**What do you mean shatter stereotypes?**

“My photos portray Palestinians much differently than what one is accustomed to seeing,” Sabella said. “I take pictures of the beauty in the everyday life, what is aesthetically

pleasing. I plot the beauty that exists and the world chooses not to see. I show the unseen side of the Palestinians and it is important to me that Israelis see it.

"I'll give you an example. I have lived in Jerusalem's Old City for 32 years. It's supposed to be a unified city where Israelis and Palestinians live together. When I get into a taxi and the driver discovers I am a Palestinian he is shocked. Usually I am told I don't look like a Palestinian. Israelis don't believe there are normal Palestinians. The mental picture that is portrayed is of someone who looks like crap, doesn't speak anything but Arabic and is uneducated. This is the picture I live with and will remain so as long as the mental walls exist. Coexistence is an illusion in the meantime."



**Photo: Sibylle Bergeman**

#### **So what is Art's responsibility in all of this?**

"I cannot liberate Jerusalem or Palestine but I can work on the subconscious and try to move people a little bit. I don't believe that art changes the reality but it is important not just aesthetically but conceptually because it identifies social problems."

Sabella is well aware of the widespread opposition within Palestinian society to paintings on the wall or using any of it for artistic purposes. "There are those who believe that any kind of art on the wall glamorizes it," he said. "I don't see it that way. I hate it and through my art pose questions about it. For me the important thing is to talk about it and the suffering it causes. Even if the picture is artistically beautiful one can still see the pain."

#### **Palestinians - not just statistics**

Challenging Walls is financed by the European Commission and taking part are the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, Al Quds University, the German Embassy in Israel, Goethe Institute as well as many Israeli institutions such as the Cinemateque, Shenkar College and the Jerusalem Foundation.

The project's initiators were at first worried about the participation of Israeli institutions funded by the state in light of the Palestinian call for an academic and culture embargo of Israel.



**Photo: Christopher Heaney**

We thought that the more name artists we got to participate the more hope it would generate,” Zuntz said. Sabella emphasized that “I think the end result is the most important. If we touch the heart of the viewer and breakdown the mental walls then we have succeeded. It’s true that some Palestinian may find it painful that some of the funding for the project came from Israelis but since the objective is a good one and not destructive then what does it matter?

Sabella knows he is walking a tightrope but is confident. “I oppose academic and cultural embargoes. I won’t work with every Israeli who approaches me but on the other hand I have no problem to show my work in the heart of Tel Aviv as long as I remain true to myself. I won’t create art just for Palestinians. I won’t show my work in Ramallah only. I am looking to Paris and to London, to Berlin and yes, to Tel Aviv as well.”

**What do you want people to take away from the Abu Dis event?**

“I would want something inside them to be affected, something that will cause them to understand that there are people on the other side who are living in a totally different world, a world that you have had in your head for 60 years. I want it to make them think that people have forgotten how to think and how to feel. People have become desensitized to the killing of dozens. Palestinians are not statistics. They are people.”