

INTERVIEW FOR A GERMAN MAGAZINE

Settlement – Six Israelis & One Palestinian

In terms of numbers 6:1, what do they signify?

The work is highly coded. One of the obvious symbols is the number which might remind people of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. As a ratio, 6/1 is also the ratio of Jews to Palestinians who live in the State of Israel.

More complicated though is the question of survival that haunts Israelis and Palestinians. The installation, as a reminder entails the printing of life size images of six Israelis on one side and the image of the Palestinian directly opposite and facing them. One of the participating Israelis indicated that people might perceive the work as a shooting range. The installation will create a visual unresolved tension (especially because of the uneven number) that questions survival aspects between Palestinians and Israelis.

The numbers might also trigger the concept of the collective that shapes the region, where nations are treated collectively rather than taking into account the individuality of people.

How did you have the idea to do the project?

My artworks since 1994 have been mainly dealing with the concept of alienation and exile in different ways and forms. Ironically, my first artwork, which was called Search, was consciously shifting away from all labels and categorizations. It was questioning the loss of identity. In this new project, ironically, it emphasizes identity but does so in a critical and provocative way. As somebody who has lived in Jerusalem all his life, I have come to understand that it is 'Paranoia' that acts as the main obstacle which is forbidding Israelis and Palestinians from reaching peace. *The writer Tami Freiman, who is the daughter of Holocaust survivors, writes how Israel's anxiety was transformed into an ideological instrument justifying the oppression of others. How the nation has the Holocaust breathing down on its necks, in fear that it might happen again. Hence, victory for Israel against Arabs was always crucial.* In everyday use, 'paranoia' means a feeling of persecution unjustified in reality. Israel is a very strong state, yet it lives in fear. Does this one Palestinian pose a threat? Any solution between Israelis and Palestinians should also involve a psychological solution. Both nations require mental healing. Hence, I wanted to tackle this paranoia artistically, only to discover that during the making of the project how multilayered and complex it has become.

How did you find people on the Israeli side to take part in the project?

Finding the Israelis was not simple, especially because none of them was my friend. The stories of talking to them could be material for a book. I spread the word, and started meeting Israelis. However, as you can imagine, it was not simple to explain to them the need to strip. Most of the Israelis I ended up photographing are in fact highly educated people.

What did convince the Israelis to participate?

When I first thought of the project, I knew my challenge was to find Israelis who would accept to participate. I was very clear when I spoke to each one of them that my intentions were to create an art that engages the mind and not the emotions. I wanted to create an artwork that was 'emotionally dry', but thought provocative. I guess, when they felt that my intentions were primarily to create an art of engagement that critically tackles the conflict, and that I am not using them or abusing their images, they felt secure enough to go for it. I have to admit, that it does require courage to go for such a sensitive project. Also, probably we are all fed up with Israelis and Palestinians who have been 'promoting' the struggle in constant expectations that people would generate emotional responses.

And why are they not fully dressed?

I wanted an artwork that engages first and foremost the mind of the viewer. I wanted to get rid of nostalgic layers that have shaped many artworks originating from Israel and Palestine. Getting rid of the clothes signals the need to go back to the essence and to get rid of what is currently shaping us, in hope to reconsider a different way of dressing.

Also, such work might remind people how we entered a war of emotions and representation, where each side wants to show the world the might of the Other. The real solution lies in going back to the basics, and the origin of the Palestinian and Israeli dilemma. This is done by taking the viewer or the visual reader through many important aspects that have shaped the conflict, such as the Holocaust, the stripping of Palestinians in search of suicide bombers, demography and settlement, borders, the Separation Wall and the restriction of either side to cross to the other side, control, security, among other issues.

Is the wall background of the people important for the work?

As the wall segments in the art installation unite together to form another massive wall, psychological reactions are perhaps unavoidable. For decades we live on the same land, yet, ironically we are ignorant of each other. It is as if, we live on foreign lands. Israelis manage to disregard the millions of Palestinians living on the other side, especially by the construction of the Separation Wall. Artificial hills are built to hide it, and sometimes it is painted in the color of the land to disguise it. But can one really ignore who lives behind that Wall? One of the Israelis I spoke to expressed how it was easier

for him to talk and find Palestinians in London, rather than Tel Aviv! This is insane in a region where over 1 million Palestinians live in Israel and 4.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and Gaza.

The image of the concrete wall acts as a metaphor of separation and indistinct difference. It will act as a psychological barrier.

Why is your image "fragmented" in six images, whereas the Israelis are not fragmented and "mirrored" in just one Palestinian?

The work could be read, and since we are all wearing underwear as if we are ‘adult infants’—people who suddenly realized the existence of the Other. The fragments of six Israelis form one body (me), and my image is fragmented into six bodies. Hence, such an installation creates a problematic concept, which is unsettling. This mirrors the state of tension and identification conflict Palestinians and Israelis live in. We are all searching for the ideal self. The question is how to locate it. Is it possible that at the end of the day we are inseparable?

What does this work tell you about the identity of the two parties?

This installation, which could also be considered an act of introspection and interrogation, will create a clash between the two words ‘Identity’ and ‘Identification’. Israelis might see the images of Jews as a form of a national Identity stripped bare. Palestinians might consider ‘my cooperation’ with Israelis as a sign of defeat, or possibly even as another form of settling accounts. By creating this visual and opposite imbalance this work will trigger many questions and inevitably reactions. Remember that the viewer who will stand in the middle of the installation cannot see both sides at the same time. The viewer must make a critical choice.

In what kind of way does your work have a current importance in regard to the recent destruction of Gaza? What does your work say about the Israel-Palestinian conflict?

I believe solving the Palestinian Israeli conflict is very far because the parties no more discuss the essence of the problem. There is more focus on the side effects of it. I can give you an example about the side effects if I take the recent war on Gaza. Israelis think the war would end when Hamas stops firing rockets at Israel and stops the arms smuggling. Hamas wants all border crossing to remain unconditionally open. Though this might sustain a temporary cease fire, the real solution lies in the existence of the occupation, which seems to be forgotten, especially in Israeli and Western discourses. This is the real problem. Also notice, that both sides claimed victory. This is a major question in my work, as there is no clear indication of who the winner is in this visual tension or settlement—just like the recent war on Gaza.

The title settlement seems ambiguous?

The name of the project “Settlement”, in the English language has many connotations. Settlement could mean to settle accounts, or to reach a resolution, or to settle on the ground.