Trauma and Memory in the Context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The works of Sigalit Landau and Emily Jacir

In my paper the focus is on the artistic approach and visualisation of individual and collective trauma and memory in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the example of two artworks: “The Country” (2002) by the Israeli artist Sigalit Landau, and “Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948” (2001) by the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir. Whereas Sigalit Landau deals with concepts such as body, identity, terror and devastation as well as the construction and deconstruction of national myths and utopias such as Zionisms, and individual and collective Israeli memory and trauma such as the Holocaust and the Second Intifada, Emily Jacir is concerned with the topic of displacement and deterritorialisation as well as cross-border and cross-cultural national identity, and the nomadic condition of the Palestinian people as a consequence of Al-Nakba, one of the most important components of Palestinian collective trauma and memory. In my study I would like to emphasise and discuss the connection and interference of various layers of material, history, narratives and theoretical concepts that link time and space, past and present, trauma and memory with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict zone.

The outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 served for both artists as a traumatic event to consider artistically and to reflect upon their country’s current state of emergency, its history and their personal disposition in this conflict zone. In their installations the artists show an autobiographical approach from a post memorial, second generation perspective, a relationship between the personal and public spheres as well as an interweaving of the personal and political spheres.

Sigalit Landau’s installation “The Country”, which was exhibited in 2002 at the Alon Segev Gallery, Tel Aviv, has the character of a mind map of time and space that is associative, personal, collective, socially and culturally political, making implicit and explicit visual references to special events in the past and present. Furthermore, the strong physical engagement of the artist’s body in the creation of the work can be read as a symbolic enactment of trauma.

The apocalyptic scenery of the installation shows a rooftop terrace against the backdrop of the greyish black, panoramic skyline of Tel Aviv. Three skinless figures, their muscles and veins exposed, are engaged in activities such as the harvesting and lugging of fruit. Both the fruit and the...
figures have been constructed after the model of the artist’s body from papier-mâché made out of the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz (The Country), showing pictures and headlines as well as the corresponding dates of Second Intifada events. Visually, the work refers implicitly and explicitly to Zionist myths and utopias by deconstructing them. One example is the myth of Tel Aviv as the White City, a symbol of the new beginning in the new Jewish homeland, which now appears as a greyish black background within the apocalyptic scenery, only enlivened by ghost-like creatures harvesting the fruits of devastation and terror as a result of misdirected ideologies and utopias. The skinless figures can be read as a deconstruction of the Zionist topos of the “New Jew”. In Zionist ideology the pioneer, the “Muscle Jew” should have emerged in the New Jewish homeland and ought to be a physically strong Jew, who builds up the new country, as opposed to the weak Jew of the Diaspora. A visual comparison can be made to Reuven Rubin’s triptych “First Fruits” (1923), which became a Zionist icon in Israeli art. Alluding to this Zionist icon, Landau intended to call her installation “Last Fruits”. This painting shows, in an idyllic landscape, a physically strong pioneer carrying a watermelon, a symbol for labour, and a woman sitting with a basket full of fruit, symbolising the fruitfulness of the country. In contrast to the physical strength of the pioneer, the Yemeni Jewish family can be regarded as a symbol for the spiritual religious values of the Jewish project. In an orientalist notion, the side panels show relaxation and music making and, in contrast to the physically and spiritually active Jews, lazy Arabs. As opposed to Reuven Rubin’s pioneers, 80 years later these inhabitants of the land are harvesting the fruits of Zionism, which, in Landau’s installation, are terror and devastation, their bodies marked with the experiences of the past and receiving new wounds from the present. Taking up the ideas of “The Return of the Real” in the context of trauma, the almost lifeless figures could also be read as the returning ghosts of Holocaust victims, who came to the country as refugees and were excluded from the Zionist narrative. Furthermore, reading the body as a symbol for the country, these exposed bodies seem vulnerable, unprotected and borderless, like the borders of the country, uncertain and permeable. Considering the body as a receptacle of memory, these bodies function as an archive, storing experiences that are inscribed in the body and the collective memory, in the personal and the social body and, thus, in the country.

Emily Jacir’s work “Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948” (2001) is conceptual, almost minimalistic. Her installation was

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4 In my visual essay I refer to the following publications on Emily Jacir's installation “Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948”: Demos, T.J.: The Art of Emily Jacir.
intended to be a commemoration project for Al Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe from the war of 1948, which led to the expulsion of 780,000 Palestinians, becoming one of the most important aspects in Palestinian collective memory. An important point of reference is Walid Khalidis publication “All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948”, an historical and photographic survey of the depopulated Palestinian villages and the events of the Nakba. Emily Jacir has translated the historical, written and visual documentary sources into an artwork. The installation shows a refugee tent, onto which the names of the lost Palestinian villages have been embroidered with the help of people from all cultural backgrounds, who followed Jacir’s call. The collective act of embroidering and sharing experiences can be read as an enactment of trauma.

In 2002, the tent was exhibited at the Queens Museum in New York, an important place regarding the history and fate of Israel and Palestine. In the 1940s, the building was used by the United Nations where, on November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted on Resolution 181 and the partition of Palestine. Furthermore, in 1964/65 the World Fair took place in this building. In the Jordanian pavilion a mural with a poem referring to the events of 1948 and the Nakba of the Palestinian people was shown and also distributed to the visitors as a brochure, causing enormous political controversy and demonstrations against the Jordanian pavilion at that time. The picture in the mural depicts a refugee Palestinian mother and her child against the background of a sketchy view of Jerusalem with the dome of the rock at its centre, a symbol for Palestinian national identity and collective memory, alluding to the idea of a portable homeland. The poem refers to Zionist immigration and the subsequent expulsion of the Palestinian people from their country, implicitly alluding to the Holocaust by declaring that former victims became offenders.5

For the installation of the tent, Emily Jacir used the different historical layers of the place and the exhibition space, which are deeply connected to Palestinian history and fate, as well as the controversial political debate of the past. Furthermore, organised discussion events gave Palestinians and Israelis a platform on which to talk about the historical incidents and how they affected the lives of their families.

Emily Jacir’s work does not show any visual reference to the events of Al Nakba, which is only named in the title of the artwork, and remains abstract. Following the ideas of the relation of the aesthetic of absence and the non-representable, Jacir’s work “allows for a counter-process in which additive meanings can be built through the viewer's own memory, imagination and knowledge of

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social and cultural history”. Nevertheless, by using the medium of the tent, which implies the consistent and current refugee status of the Palestinian people, as well as the embroidered names of the lost villages, on a semiotic and abstract level the work alludes to the events that are to be commemorated. Furthermore, the idea of shared memory work through collective physical interaction is central to her work. Jacir’s contextualisation of other historical events is temporarily limited and dependent on the exhibition space, thus touching on the mobile character and nomadic status of Palestine and the Palestinian people.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise that both artists work with similar visual elements and ideas. First of all, the two depicted cities, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, build the background for the installations and are closely linked with the narrative in both contexts: the White Zionist city and the portable homeland. Furthermore, in both artworks the idea of a synthesis of past and present that functions as a form of memory “not only to recall, reconstitute or reconcile the past but also to construct and represent the present” is central. Thus, in both installations the bearer of meaning, the body and the tent, serves as a symbol for the country, into which personal and collective history, experiences and narratives are inscribed, functioning as an archive where individual and collective trauma and the memory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are stored.

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7 Gibbons 2007, p. 16.