

ArtTLV

Universal Circus Ltd.



MUSHON ZER-AVIV & LAILAH EL-HADDAD, *You Are Not Here (Gaza, Tel Aviv)*, 2007/09, an excursion map from Youarenotthere.org, a fictional agency offering tours of Gaza through the streets of Tel Aviv.

Nine months after Israel's military assault on the Gaza Strip in late December 2008, the effects, particularly the opprobrium from international leftist circles, were still evident in the second edition of the fledgling biennial ArtTLV. The two original curators had resigned in early 2009 to protest the organizers' decision to accept Israeli government funds, and the Istanbul Biennial canceled their partnership. Yet the replacement team, led by former Tel Aviv Museum of Art senior curator Edna Moshenson, did not shy from contentious topics, a notable achievement considering ArtTLV was held in conjunction with Tel Aviv's centennial celebrations.

Even before visitors entered the sites of ArtTLV, Gaza was the explicit subject of Mushon Zer-Aviv and Lailah el-Haddad's cell-phone walking tour *You Are Not Here* (2007/09), part of ArtTLV's "Side Show" program of works integrated into public space. The work included a two-sided, semitransparent map that, when held up to the light, showed Gaza City transposed onto the streets of Tel Aviv. It led visitors to 20 sites in the Israeli metropolis where, after dialing a posted cell-phone number, they heard audio recordings and English-language descriptions of Gaza's cafés, markets, prisons and the bombed-out soccer stadium. A moving testimony to a place that, though just 45 miles south of Tel Aviv, remains largely off limits to the outside world, *You Are Not Here* emphasized both the estrangement and interconnectedness of the two cities.

ArtTLV's main exhibition was situated in two historical homes and a warehouse, originally built by German Lutherans, which today sit at the base of a luxury high-rise in the Neve Tzedek neighborhood. Straddling the ancient and traditionally Arab city of Jaffa (Yafo) and modern Tel Aviv, the location embodies the country's long-standing conflict between an Arab-Palestinian population and Zionist Jews. It was a fertile and fraught place for a show

that explored the founding myths of the city.

White structures, with the mixed, contradictory overtones of utopia, international modernism and racial supremacy, connected many of the works in "Universal Circus Ltd.," the overarching curatorial narrative that connected the three main exhibition spaces. White spheres were featured in Aharon Ozery's *Endless Project (Egg Project)* (2008), an elaborate contraption of long mechanical arms that delicately lifts football-sized objects from one elevated glass plinth to another, an action that is metaphorically both insular (the eggs are moved around the plinths continuously) and precarious. Fragility, along with a sense of fatalism, is mixed with images of the Tel Aviv cityscape in Nira Pereg's three-minute video *And Melancholy* (2009). Pereg visited the rooftops of her six former dwellings in Tel Aviv, and, after a short pan of the horizon, dropped the video camera to the ground below as it was recording. The resulting videos capture the camera's fall to earth and its wreckage after impact, viscerally conveying the visual—if not emotional—passage of jumping to one's death.

While irony is not often a component of earnest political struggle, Shelly Federman's installation of foam chaise-lounge chairs provided perhaps the most lasting symbol of Israel's current situation. Installed on the plaza between the curated pavilions to resemble a pool-side lounge, the chairs were painted gray to look like the concrete separation barrier being erected by the Israeli government between Israel and the occupied West Bank. Videos playing on monitors showed the chairs floating in the waters off Tel Aviv. Federman's *Aberstein* (2009) was a bitter reminder that even the most politically conscious artistic and intellectual projects in Tel Aviv, such as ArtTLV—not to mention the carefree recreation enjoyed on the city's Mediterranean beachfront—are enabled by contentious and drastic solutions (such as the security barrier) imposed just 40 miles to the east in Jerusalem. It is a daily contradiction about cultural development in Israel that ArtTLV, even in its compromised political position as the city's official biennial, did not whitewash. ● **HG Masters**

JAN TICHY, *Installation No. 6 (Tubes)* (detail), 2009, digital video on analog television monitor with 200 paper objects, dimensions variable.

