

# Art in America

MAY 2000



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**"MODERN STARTS"    REPORT FROM ISRAEL**

\$5.00 USA

\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK



# REPORT FROM ISRAEL

## Wider Focus

*No longer restricted to regional art, Israel's Art Focus biennial—seen in its third version last fall in Jerusalem—helped to clarify the nation's emerging global art-world status.*

BY RICHARD VINE

In its third incarnation last fall, Israel's Art Focus biennial continued a somewhat hesitant evolution toward global art-world status. Founded in 1994 by Yona Fischer, who at various times has been a senior curator at both the Israel Museum and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the erratically scheduled project was originally a showcase for Israeli work displayed, critics alleged, with rather indiscriminate zeal at venues throughout the country. Greater selectivity and a smattering of international participants marked the 1996 version, restricted primarily to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In 1999, Art Focus 3, confined to five locations in Jerusalem, mingled work by 95 Israeli artists with pieces by 25 international practitioners, with the express goal of presenting Israeli art in an international context.

The organizers—including a five-member committee of top museum personnel and a six-member group of government and private foundation figures—clearly intended the show to help counteract the perceived neglect of Israeli art on the worldwide scene. Yet a certain ambivalence, both popular and



Huang Yong-Ping's multilingual "Jerusalem" signs strapped on camels; at the Sultan's Pool.

*Opposite page and above, all works from the 1999 Art Focus 3 biennial in Jerusalem.*

*Top row left, Yehudit Sasportas's The Balloon, 1999, a "damaged" hot-air balloon with dual baskets; at the Sultan's Pool.*

*Top row right, Steven Pippin: Executive Toy: Non-Interactive Globe, 1999, geodesic dome housing a rotatable flat-screen computer monitor mounted in a Plexiglas sphere; at the Sultan's Pool.*

*Second row left, Tsibi Geva's Notes on the Days of Awe II (detail), 1999, a floor-to-ceiling installation incorporating paint and tires; at Teddy Kollek Stadium.*

*Second row right, Daniel Milohnic and Dirk Paschke's "waterfall" of blue and white plastic jugs; at the Sultan's Pool.*

*Third row left, Noa Zait: Untitled, 1999, color photograph, 20% by 31 1/2 inches; in the "Not To Be Looked At" exhibition at the Israel Museum.*

*Third row right, Efrat Shvily: Untitled, 1995, black-and-white photograph; in "Not To Be Looked At."*

*Bottom row left, Nahum Tevet's installation Arrangement of Six Units, painted and unpainted wood, 1974/99; in "Not To Be Looked At." Photo Antman Oded.*

*Bottom row right, Carole Chabat's Sarah, 1997, a clothed, life-size figure of a woman which "cries" artificial tears; at Teddy Kollek Stadium.*

official, seemed to prevail. The budget for the entire month-long event, though considered hefty by Israeli standards, was a mere \$1.6 million—compared to \$12 million for São Paulo's two-month exposition in 1996 and \$8 million for Venice's five-month run in 1999. Moreover, only 10,000 paying visitors attended Art Focus, in contrast to São Paulo's recent average of 400,000, Documenta X's 631,000 in 1997 or a claimed 900,000 at the 1997 Kwangju Biennial in South Korea. Some pundits even noted that the \$60,000 advertising cost, though a pittance in the business, nevertheless translated to a \$6 expenditure for every viewer actually enticed to show up and pay the \$5 entrance fee.

Numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. For outside curators and critics (including this writer) invited to Jerusalem as observers last October, the fundamental questions are qualitative: How good was the art, and how well did the 15 Art Focus curators (only four of whom live and work outside Israel) present it? Is there anything distinctly Israeli about work made in Israel? Is Art Focus ready to take its place among the 25 or 30 biennials presently on the international docket? How does the contemporary scene in Israel compare to other current-art milieus?

### The Sultan's Pool

At the Sultan's Pool, a multilevel outdoor site just below the walls of Old Jerusalem, German curator Kasper König brought together the work of 15 international artists and teams, chosen to give Art Focus its largest single dose of cosmopolitan cachet. Although each foreign participant was invited to visit Israel

twice for research purposes, König expressed a hope in his catalogue essay that their site-specific installations would "not illustrate, narrate or symbolize." As might be expected, the artists pretty much ignored this caveat—how could they do otherwise in an environment so rife with history and politics? But the work thus produced was judged by the local press to be culturally boorish (riddled with too many Middle Eastern clichés) and esthetically disappointing (too many second-rate pieces by otherwise first-rate senior artists, too little substance from the insouciant young). This con-tretemps may have resulted, in part, from a simple paucity of means: only \$500,000 was allotted for the whole undertaking. It may also, some suggest, derive from inflated expectations regarding imported "world class" expertise (or even a lingering post-Holocaust suspicion of German cultural authority).

Still, a number of artists strove to engage the overwhelming amphitheaterlike locale. Germany's Georg Herold designed a huge artificial reflecting pool whose surface occasionally mirrored the Danish artist Per Kirkeby's nearly 200-foot-long cybermechanically enlarged drawing of clifflike configurations, strategically hung on a stone embankment above. Tadashi Kawamata (Japan) integrated several of his signature scrap-lumber constructions into the terrain, suggesting the tiered walkways used at archeological digs. Mixing the timeless need for shelter with an awareness of contemporary distractions, Roman Signer, from Switzerland, erected a small tent containing a basin of water intermittently rippled by air from a hose affected by traffic passing on a nearby street. A pair of young artists from Frankfurt, Daniel Milohnic and Dirk Paschke, created a "waterfall" of blue and white plastic jugs, spilling down a brushy rock face in the colors of the Israeli flag.

More preoccupied with the area's sociopolitical heritage were artists such as Israel's own Yehudit Sasportas, whose "damaged" hot-air balloon, grounded between the long-separated East and West Jerusalem, evoked the city's deep-seated Judeo-Christian/Muslim factionalism. The German-born Eva Meyer and Israeli-born Eran Schaerf, who now divide their time between Brussels and Berlin, produced an oblique documentary-style video dealing with Israeli-Arab housing problems, from camps to city neighborhoods, shown (as if to mimic the country's position on the world political stage) in a wooden, one-room "house" on a platform. Israeli Micha Ullman set up a lensless telescope that





Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's wire sculpture (left foreground), Yigal Nizri and Michal Helfman's Ice Cream Van (left), and Ayse Erkman's orange plastic spheres. Works this page at the Sultan's Pool.

directed viewers' attention to a distant cable once used to ferry supplies into isolated sectors of the Old City during the 1948 War of Liberation. The Chinese art star Huang Yong-Ping, now resident in Paris, made the most audacious use of cultural stereotypes by loading up several camels with train-station signs reading "Jerusalem" in English, Hebrew and Arabic, and then having the animals roam the grounds under the care of Arab handlers—a wry parody of the city's tense multi-cultural mix.

"Global" concerns were literalized in two separate installations. In a dark wooden shed, Britain's Mark Wallinger projected four views of a globe onto round 86-inch-in-diameter canvases to demonstrate the relativism and bias of any given geophysical (and hence political or cultural) perspective. Another Londoner, Steven Pippin, made much the same point by stationing a high-tech monitor, encased in a clear plastic sphere, within a white geodesic hut. As one rotated the sphere, the computerized earth image on the flat screen shifted accordingly, as though one were flying over the earth's surface, or spinning an old-fashioned globe.

Despite all the historic suggestiveness of the site, a few artists managed to remain personal—indeed, in some cases, even self-indulgent—in expression. Ilya Kabakov, the Russian émigré known for his politically and philosophically rich installations, here offered, in collaboration with his wife, Emilia, a single object commemorating the death of his father. An oversized "bottle" made of rusted metal latticework lay on its side, mysteriously dripping water onto a stone: a perpetual source of nourishment despite its ghostly state. The almost-not-thereness of this phantom vessel contrasted strikingly with the vivid presence of several giant orange beach balls scattered about the grounds by Turkey's Ayse Erkmen and a garish karaoke-and-ice-cream van customized for interactive neighborhood stops by Israeli artists Yigal Nizri and Michal Helfman.

## The Teddy Kollek Stadium

Named for a former Jerusalem mayor, this enormous outdoor sports arena provides cavernous concrete-walled spaces under its stands. The gloomy, slightly menacing expanses lent an air of edginess to the work of 60 mostly Israeli artists and groups, selected and installed in a balkanized fashion by a dozen mostly Israeli curators (some, like the Tel Aviv Museum's Varda Steinlauf, with strong institutional affiliations; others, like Tami Katz-Freiman, independent). Though festiveness reigned at the sprawling opening-night party, subsequent visits to the sparsely attended, 22,000-square-foot exhibition made one haptically aware of the isolation in which art professionals must labor in this still-new, much embattled state—where cultural spending still amounts to only \$1.50 per \$1,000 in the national budget.

Indeed, the oft-repeated mot that "Israel has more curators than artists" points to a serious quandary. In a country of only five million inhabitants, artists tend to know each other—and the wielders of institutional power—all too well. Every esthetic move is, therefore, highly self-conscious and freighted with "familial" ramifications. Stultification, like critical obscurity and a dearth of government funding for individual artists, is most frequently remedied by leaving for Europe or the U.S. Within Israel, moreover, there is

**In a \$1.6-million effort to position Israeli art in a worldwide context, Art Focus 3 mingled work by 95 Israeli and 25 international artists, utilizing five diverse venues in Jerusalem.**

a generational split. Older artists tend either to preserve memories of lost continental homelands and venerable Jewish traditions, or to revel in their status as sabras (literally, "prickly pears")—militant Israeli-born nation builders with a soft core of socialist compassion. Younger artists, by and large, prefer to forgo (or satirize) the kibbutznik mentality—universal military service at the age of 18 is enough already—in order to make work that addresses the privatized, consumption-driven global monoculture.

Perhaps the most salient example of old-school work in this show (where only two artists were over 54 and the vast majority were in their 30s) was Philip Rantzer's *Confession Cell*. The artist, one of Israel's two representatives at the 1999 Venice Biennale, assembled old toys and other attic memorabilia within a wooden palisade inscribed with Yiddish phrases. Flashing lights were coordinated with a tape recording on which Rantzer's father

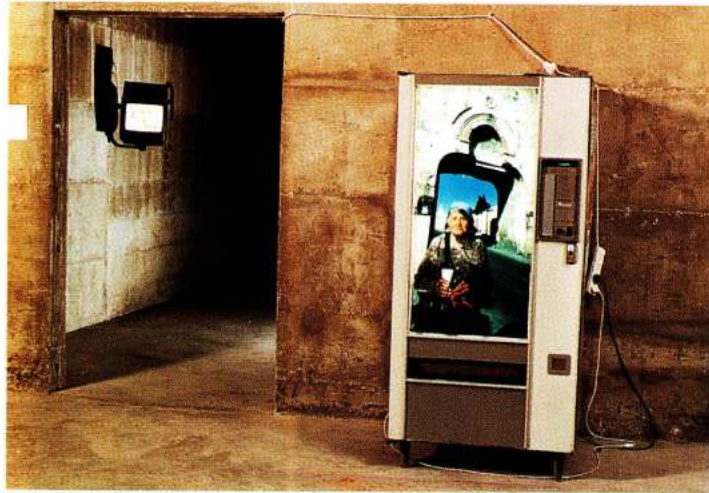


Tadashi Kawamata: The Site of Archeology, 1999, wooden walkway.

Georg Herold's Herold's Pool (in foreground), 1999, mylar-covered reflecting pool and illuminated wooden shack, shown with Per Kirkeby's computer-generated drawing on plastic, approx. 6 by 197 feet.

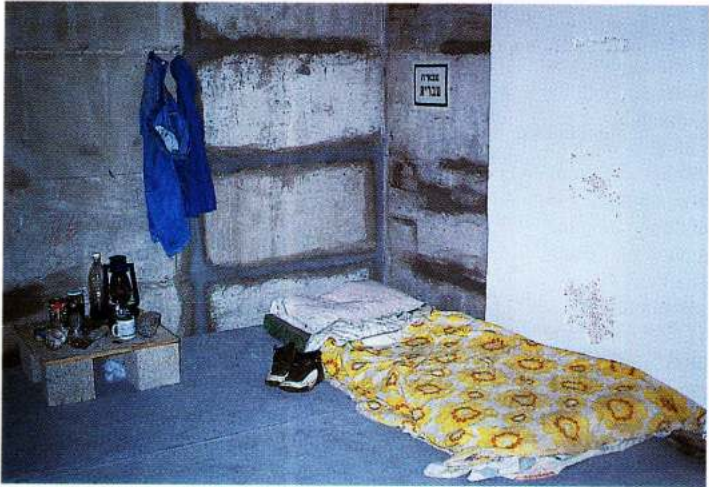






Shuji Ariyoshi: *Begging Machine*, 1996, color photograph mounted in a vending machine with audio. Works this page at Teddy Kollek Stadium.

Gideon Gechtman's Hebrew Work installation, 1975/2000, domestic items typical of an impoverished Arab day-laborer's living quarters.



sang in the family's native Romanian. The ensemble thus evoked a triple nostalgia: for childhood, for European lives and languages, and for the rich, melancholy Jewishness repressed by sabra swagger.

At the other extreme were works such as *4 Men*, Gal Weinstein's zigzag composite of altered foosball tables, topped with bright green plastic and incorporating nearly 200 player figures, emblematic of a youthful gamesmanship now so pervasive—and so maniacal—as to be socially debilitating. Dan Back offered a technically primitive video in which, by turns, four “artistic” characters (an accordionist, a cook, a pianist and a poet) solicit the viewer's admiration for their nonconformist ways. *Domus*, by three Haifa-based architectural designers (and sometime street performers) known as the Tav Group, celebrated New Age nomadism: its openwork dome was woven with household goods—a TV, musical instruments, kitchen appliances—which conflated interior and exterior, and thus negated any meaningful sense of permanence or place. Uri Tzai's *Crystal* consisted of a video and a related wall-sized printout of round color images showing the interactions of two sets of twins (one pair male, the other female) on an excursion to the Dead Sea,

a major resort destination. On the floor were stacks of similar multiple-image posters, free for the taking.

The mildly uncomfortable resemblance of *Domus* to Chen Zhen's *Prayer Wheel*, installed in the basement of New York's P.S. 1 for its 1997 reopening, or of *Crystal* to various works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres indicates that Israel is not, as yet, a center of startling formal innovation. Indeed, the importation and—through an infusion of local content—effective naturalization of styles from abroad has been the dominant local pattern since advanced French and German art was first introduced into Palestine in the early years of the 20th century.

However, many artists at the stadium revealed a social conscience that, while predictably in keeping with liberal consensus elsewhere, had a piquancy specific to Israel's political complexities and almost daily moral dilemmas. Most pointed was an installation first created by Gideon Gechtman in 1975, when he worked construction under conditions routinely imposed on Arab laborers. He then displayed the accoutrements of this semi-homeless servitude—an old mattress on the floor, a Primus stove, canned food, a few bowls and cooking utensils on an improvised plank “table” a few inches high—in major art venues under a sign reading “Hebrew work,” a twist on a colloquial Israeli expression, “Arab work,” signifying menial labor.

Putatively about relations between the art object and the viewer, Gil Shachar's veiled mystery items and wax half-figures with eyes closed or head hooded also inevitably suggest censorship, punishment or political apathy, voluntary or imposed. Tsibi Geva's multiple-wall installation included a grid of tires (reminiscent of those burned in the Intifada) surrounded by interlocking painted patterns based on the *keffiyeh* (a traditional, and now politically charged, Palestinian headdress) and on terrazzo tile (associated with the kind of tedious manual jobs Arabs are often hired to do). These vexed regional motifs were offset by large, children's-book images of birds, evocative of the region's ever-fleeting innocence and peace. **Meanwhile, more than real-estate speculation and touristic gullibility was addressed by Ariane Littman-Cohen's tiny sacks of Holy Land for Sale and multiple cannisters of Holy Air, both, with a tip of the hat to Duchamp's ampule of Paris air, parodying the conflation of sacred intangibles with territorial control.**

Israel's newest social problem is the influx of

roughly 200,000 foreign workers (10 percent of the current work force) primarily from Asia and Africa, about half of them illegal. This subject was movingly treated in Amit Goren's *Your Nigger Talking*, a video documenting a black father's efforts to home school a group of infectiously charming, but non-registered, immigrant children. One entire section of the show, curated by former *A.I.A.* correspondent Sarit Shapira, attempted to generalize this displacement theme into a meditation on modern-day homelessness, as epitomized in Carole Chabat's weeping statue of a lady alone on a park bench or Shuji Ariyoshi's vending machine featuring the light-box image of a female beggar who says a Hebrew “thank you” when money is deposited—both works by non-Israeli artists.

Even the Gallery on Wheels—a flatbed truck container set up as a mobile kunsthalle by artist-curators Michael Kessus Gedalyovich and Galit Eilat—could be seen as a form of cultural outreach, though it's a bit hard to imagine how the hipsterish work (videos, installations, photos and comics, many with sharp sociopolitical messages) by artists like Haim Ben-Shitrit, Brigitte Zieger, and Adi Rosenblum and Marcus Muntean would be received in the hinterlands. Public resistance to certain types of material was evident in a passing threat of boycott that greeted Moshe Gershuni and Zohar Kaniel's collaboration in the main show—a series of large color photographs depicting the 63-year-old Gershuni and the 32-year-old Kaniel in classically homoerotic grappling poses in a bathroom mirror. (Months earlier, Gershuni caused an uproar and the near-cancellation of a show he was invited to curate out of the Israel Museum's collection and supplement with a work of his own, when he chose instead to exhibit eight sexually suggestive Cibachromes by Kaniel.)

## Other Art Focus Venues

Cautious scrutiny, a subliminal spying upon one's self and one's surroundings, informed much Art Focus work but became explicit—through denial—in “Not To Be Looked At,” an exhibition that Sarit Shapira organized at the Israel Museum, where she

Amit Goren: *Still from Your Nigger Talking*, 1999, dual-screen video.

