

# Moulding Resistance: Aesthetics and Politics in the Struggle of Bil'in Against the Wall

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In March 2006, several huge sculpture-like objects filled the *Minshar for Art* Gallery in Tel Aviv. Among the objects displayed in the exhibition, titled “Fence Art,” one could find, for instance, a large locked iron cage, a huge metal scale, a fragile scaffold, a tin fence covered with graffiti in Arabic, mirrors with inscriptions in red paint, segments of rusty pipes, cavalier armour made of barrels, and an enormous black viper made of cloth. The sculptures, processed and worn-out found objects, conjured up a hallucinatory narrative. Walking between them felt like walking within a riddle. The riddle was only solved in a small side niche in the gallery, where one could view a series of photographs spread out on a wall. The photographs documented the objects in action in their original context: people sitting in the large cage, carrying the black snake or the coffins, standing inside the barrels. Together with the accompanying explanatory captions, what unfolded materially as well as visually was the story of the Bil'in demonstrations.

Bil'in is a small Palestinian village of 1,700 residents located in the West Bank, west of Ramallah, and east of the

Modi'in Elite settlement. Bil'in is under civilian control of the Palestinian authority, but under military control of the Israeli security forces (both army and border police). As many other Palestinian villages, Bil'in has been suffering from the loss of land to Israeli settlements throughout the last four decades, and is now facing dire impoverishment as most of its agricultural lands are located west of the newly erected separation wall on their lands.<sup>1</sup> The wall, a combination of barbed wire and concrete, includes locked gates, and, officially, the villagers that can prove land ownership are allowed to cross it and reach their lands. In practice, this proves to be almost impossible. As a result, the villagers of Bil'in have turned into a special type of migrants, distanced from their lands without leaving their homes.<sup>2</sup>

During the last four years, the residents of Bil'in have been fighting against the imposition of the wall on various fronts. Under the leadership of the *Bil'in Popular Committee Against the Wall*, the villagers filed numerous appeals with the Israeli Supreme Court, some of which are still deliberated in court at present. Additionally, since February 2005 the village organizes weekly demonstrations, which proved to be quite successful, and have led to two international conferences, hosted in Bil'in, on the subject of popular resistance. The

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<sup>1</sup> "Separation wall" is not the official name for the construction. It is officially called "Security Fence" by Israeli parties and "Apartheid Wall" by Palestinian parties. My choice to use "Separation Wall" or simply "Wall" throughout this paper is based on a web research by Richard Rogers and Anat Ben David from the University of Amsterdam, who studied the distribution of the different appellations of the construction on grassroots and official web communities. See (Rogers and Ben David, 2005) at [http://www.govcom.org/publications/full\\_list/ben-david\\_rogers\\_coming\\_to\\_terms\\_2oct.pdf](http://www.govcom.org/publications/full_list/ben-david_rogers_coming_to_terms_2oct.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See section "Cases, Advisory Proceedings" on <http://www.icj-cij.org> for information about the International Criminal Court ruling on the illegality of the route of the wall. The Bil'in village website ([www.bilin-village.org](http://www.bilin-village.org)) offers a large collection of articles regarding Israeli court hearings and rulings on the topic.

weekly demonstrations include villagers as well as Israeli and international supporters, and consist of a march from the village houses to the trajectory of the wall. The demonstrations are decidedly non-violent, but Israeli security forces repeatedly use violent means to stop or pre-empt the demonstrations.<sup>3</sup>

Each weekly demonstration has a specific theme, and the various themes so far can be divided into three groups. The first type of demonstration is thematic with regard to its participants: children demonstration, women demonstration, handicapped demonstration, and so forth. The second type of demonstration is dedicated to relevant historical or contemporary events, such as the 2006 FIFA world cup, the worker's day on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the fights between militants in Gaza, and the memorial day for Jasser Arafat. The theme of the third type of demonstrations is aimed at emphasizing the dire consequences of the construction of the separation wall for the village of Bil'in. In these demonstrations, demonstrators chained themselves to olive trees, or locked themselves inside an iron cage, as a way to impede the construction of the wall. Other demonstrations of this sort are more conceptual, such as those in which demonstrators wore black viper dolls around their neck to symbolize the suffocation that the wall causes. The sculptures that were presented in the "Fence Art" exhibition at the *Minshar for Art* gallery in March 2006 were all part of these weekly demonstrations.

In this paper, I will examine the role of the sculptures, both in their original context, as material parts of a

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<sup>3</sup> The army uses excessive force to break down the demonstrations, including tear gas, grenades, rubber bullets and noise ammunition, as well as collective punishments such as curfews, night arrests and the denial of permits to work in Israel. At times, village youth throw stones at the soldiers. Nevertheless, the demonstrators focus on non-violent resistance as a major component of their approach.

performance of resistance at the border as well as against that border, and in their secondary context, displayed in a white cube gallery in Tel Aviv. For this purpose, I will draw on the work of Jacques Rancière, specifically on his unorthodox definition of aesthetics and politics. Rancière's theory will help me to outline two central issues that are at stake. Firstly, I will analyse how Bil'in's creative popular resistance against a fenced "inner" migration allows for a new form of political subjectivity to emerge. Second, I will show how the sculptures operate as aesthetic objects and political arguments both at home, on Bil'in ground, and away, in the space of the gallery. An additional goal of this paper, especially in the context of this *Migratory Politics Encuentro*, is to raise awareness to the struggle of Bil'in and its neighbouring villages, which have not received full attention in international Western media.<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> See the village website, at [www.bilin-village.org](http://www.bilin-village.org), for a large compilation of images and texts on the subject.

### **Politics on the move I: Redistributing Visibilities**

The weekly demonstrations of Bil'in receive an unusual amount of media attention within Israel, when compared to the many other villages that suffer similar circumstances, such as Biddu, Beit Surik, Beit Ulla, and Kufar Kadum. Brief reports about the demonstrations often appear in the mainstream media. These reports usually focus on how many demonstrators and soldiers were injured or detained, emphasizing the violent aspect of the demonstrations. Other reports in mainstream newspapers and TV channels are concerned with the related legal trials, which have to do with either the demonstrations (such as two cases in which claims of soldiers against the supposedly violent protestors were found to be untrue) or, more importantly, with the villagers' court cases against the trajectory of the wall through their agricultural lands. At alternative news websites, the village receives special attention as well: the village's mode of peaceful protest and the army's aggressive response are described time and again by eye witnesses. The Bil'in demonstrations also take up an extensive part of the village's Wikipedia entry, and are debated constantly by bloggers who either approve of or reject the villagers' actions (Asheri 2007). This goes to show that the village has been successful in attracting attention from all sides of the political spectrum in Israel.

Those involved with organizing the demonstrations agree that their success has much to do with the creative aspect of the weekly events. Abdullah Abu Rahmeh, coordinator of the Popular Committee of Bil'in, focuses on two aspects of this creativity: innovation and non-violence (Abu Rahmeh 2007; Daraghmeh 2005). Mohammed Khatib, also a member of the Popular Committee and the mind behind many of the sculptures, emphasizes their function within the demonstrations. In addition to delaying the construction of the

wall and getting a political message across, the artifacts attract people, he says:

even from the village people started asking what we are planning for the next demonstrations. Israelis are also coming for this reason... Every time there is something new that attracts the media. It is much more interesting to publish a photograph of a coffin than another group of people walking and holding signs. We also managed to show the world that we are not violent. The only violence that comes through the photographs is that of the soldiers (quoted in Gilerman 2006; translation mine).

The demonstrations' creative aspect attracts a large amount of supporters as well as media coverage. The sculptures used in the demonstrations help to reduce the elements that would minimize interest – violence and repetitiveness – to a minimum. The sculptures have an effect in three directions: inwardly, to keep demonstrators motivated and to direct the energy of the youth away from violence; forwardly, towards the soldiers and constructors who face the demonstrators, so as to change their conception of the demonstrations and to keep their use of force minimal, and the disruption of the construction works maximal; and outwardly, to the media, to maintain their interest in the case of Bil'in. Mass demonstrations are so common that they have become obsolete, worn-out of context; hence, adding *entertainment* to the equation seems to be the key to media success.

But, above all, the sculptures of the Bil'in demonstrations have brought about a new generic definition of what political resistance means in the Palestinian context. This, I believe, is the deeper cause for the demonstrations' media success. The common image of Palestinians as an occupied people is that of fighters and/or victims. Palestinians appear in the media either in the shape of a great mass of young men filling up the streets in demonstrations and funerals, shooting guns in the air or shouting slogans, or as individual women, children or old men, telling helpless stories

of suffering and loss. The first type of image brings home the potential of violence to the viewer; the second bears witness to a victimhood that may bring about a sense of guilt or indifference. Both do not involve or affect the viewer within their world; whether they raise outrage, pity or indignation, such media reports emphasize the distance between the fates of the ones who are either in or out of the occupation narrative.<sup>5</sup>

The sculptures distance the villagers of Bil'in from these repeated notions and from their conventional roles. The demonstrators become a part of the art world as well as part of the larger Palestinian community, and by way of appropriating the art world, their political claims acquire a different tone. This conceptual shift in the politics of resistance can best be explained thorough Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of aesthetics and politics. Rancière focuses on French history, but his theory proves to be most relevant for comprehending the politics at play in the Bil'in demonstrations.

For Rancière, "politics" is first of all a battle about perceptible or sensible material. It aims for the rearrangement of the existing "distribution of the sensible," that is, the laws that prescribe what can be heard and seen in a specific political and social constellation. A politics of recognition is central to Rancière's theory, but not in the sense that identity politics gives this term; his is a more radical approach. For politics, Rancière tells us, "does not simply presuppose the rupture of the 'normal' distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions 'proper' to such classifications" (2001:4). In other words, For Rancière the

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<sup>5</sup> The demonstrations that are thematized according to their participants (women only, children only, and so forth) also aim to break with the common media images of Palestinian struggle, but they will not be discussed in detail in the scope of this paper.

essence of political struggle does not consist of gathering people into communities and fighting for the rights of these communities. Rather, it consists of exposing subjectivities that challenge existing social delineations and hierarchies.

Rancière contrasts *politics* [*la politique*] with *police* [*la police*]. He defines the police not as a strong-arm repressive force, but as “a form of intervention which prescribes what can be seen and what cannot be seen, what can be said and what cannot be said” (1998:28). In his “Ten Theses on Politics” (2001), Rancière suggests that the manner in which the police interferes with public space does not lie in interpellation (“hey! You there!”) but rather in the regulation of what will and will not be seen (“Move along! There is nothing to see here!”).<sup>6</sup> Political action is defined in opposition to this prescription of the police, and consists of “transforming this space of ‘moving-along’ into a space for the appearance of a subject” (2001:9). For Rancière, politics and police are thus in constant struggle:

The essence of the police is to be a partition of the sensible characterized by the absence of a void or a supplement: society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this fittingness of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for a void. It is this exclusion of what “there is not” that is the police-principle at the heart of statist practices. The essence of politics, then, is to disturb this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole... *Politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable* (2001:9; emphasis mine).

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<sup>6</sup> Interpellation is a concept developed by Louis Althusser as part of his theory of ideological state apparatuses. Althusser exemplifies his concept with the example where, by responding to the police hail “hey, you there!” an individual is turned into a subject of the state. Rancière’s “move along, there’s nothing to see here!” responds to Althusser’s well-known illustration and offers an alternative version of the function of the police in the state apparatus.

Politics, by definition, must break with the social order, by way of creating subjects and scenes of dialogue that did not exist beforehand. But how does this take place, and how can the policed “distribution of the sensible” be remobilized, redistributed? Rancière uses the rebellion of the workers in nineteenth-century France as his prime example. In many of his writings, primarily in *Nights of Labour* (1989), Rancière suggests that whenever workers (or other minority groups) achieve a wider recognition for their social rights and contributions, they simultaneously receive a reaffirmation of the existing power structure, and a retrenchment of their position in its terms (Deranty 2003:152). However, the nineteenth-century workers transgressed and subverted this “order of things” by claiming the right to be *something other* than workers: to be recognized as poets. While their social status demanded that they work in the day and sleep in the night, these workers distributed their time differently and transgressed the type of their accepted and expected labour. This, according to Rancière, rather than the more heroic tales of the time, was the means through which workers claimed the right to a meaningful voice beyond the constraints of their social destiny (Deranty 2003: 152).

The worker emancipation movement disrupted the organizational principle of society and made workers visible as social partners, through their appropriation of the tools of the bourgeois (Deranty 2003:151). The unsettling effect that the Bil’in popular resistance movement has caused can be understood in the same light. “The particular feature of political dissensus”, Rancière tells us, “is... the ones making visible the fact that they belong to a shared world the other does not see” (Rancière 2001:10). By writing poetry, the French workers made visible the fact that they belong to a shared world with others – the upper social classes – with whom the art of poetry was more readily matched. The Bil’in inhabitants mould sculptures in part as a means to reach a similar goal.

The space that the workers opened up in their poetry writing is a space that created situations for speech and dialogue that did not exist previously (Deranty 2003: 146). Rancière names this space *le politique*: the space where two principles of visibility, *la police* (policing the distribution of the sensible) and *la politique* (contesting and transforming the existing distribution) confront each other. This confrontation can lead to a recognition of dominated individuals as speaking subjects (in a different world, previously unseen), rather than as mere rebels (against the world as seen and known), and to a shift in the accepted positions of power of the parties involved. Rancière summarizes this aspect in "Ten Theses on Politics" when he writes,

If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths... And the politics of these categories has always consisted in re-qualifying these places... of getting themselves to be seen or heard as speaking subjects... It has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech; in demonstrating to be a feeling of shared "good" or "evil" what had appeared merely as an expression of pleasure or pain. (2001:10)

When the case of Bil'in is examined from Rancière's perspective, the demonstrators' use of artistic form becomes more than a media attention-grabber. The sculpture-objects become the tools through which the clear "division of labour" between the oppressors and the oppressed collapse, and the existing "distribution of the sensible" is reconceived. The demonstrators break through the boundaries of their social identities, as they manifest themselves as occupied people and as free artists at the same time. They assert their right to belong to a world that includes leisure time for contemplation; they assert their right to voice their claims not only as occupied people but also as men and women of the world.

They assert their right not only to suffer, but also to have fun. Their appeal to the basic right of keeping their land is thus empowered by a political move that asserts their right to appeal on as equals in the first place. In this respect, too, the sculptures effectively work in three directions: inwards to the demonstrators, forwards to the soldiers and construction workers, and outwards to the media and to us viewers watching from home. In all directions, they rupture and “redistribute” what is visible and sayable in the confrontations between Palestinians inhabitants and Israeli security forces, as they bring into view notions that are not connected with the policed version of Palestinians under occupation: leisure, creativity, artistic vision, modernity, universality and freedom. According to Rancière,

Political argument is at one and the same time the *demonstration* of a possible world where the argument could count as argument, addressed by a subject qualified to argue, upon an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he or she “normally” has no reason to either see or hear. (2001:11)

The Bil’in sculpture-objects are a political argument in this vein. They overturn a denial of recognition, and create, every week, a possible world where the colonizing parties are required to see the colonized in a light that they normally would have no reason to see. By way of reconfiguring the sensibilities of this overexposed struggle, the sculptures demonstrate the equality of the subjects that made them with the subjects that view them on the other side of the wall, an equality that is anything but taken for granted in the context of Israel and Palestine.

### **Politics on the move II: From Bil’in to Tel Aviv**

During the demonstrations, the sculptures and the demonstrators merge. At times, that is as simple as people carrying the constructions in their hands or around their necks. At other times, the event is more theatrical: a good

example is one demonstration, in which several protestors were covered with white cloth, their necks surrounded with hanging ropes that were attached to a metal frame held up by their peers. There are also cases in which flesh, iron and earth interact more intimately. These result in happenings that involve the active participation of every body. On one occasion, for instance, demonstrators chained themselves to olive trees that were marked for uprooting because they are in the way of the route of the wall. On another, demonstrators locked themselves in an iron cage that was firmly attached to the ground, blocking the road that leads the bulldozers to the trajectory of the wall. One of the most creative demonstrations involved demonstrators that were tethered to the ground by the metal foundations of a barbed wire fence. While the soldiers were busy taking the fence apart, breaking the metal cage open, or cutting the chains loose from the trees, they found themselves involved in a bizarre happening, related to the situation but at the same time extraneous to it because of its theatricality of which they were not part. These were performances of displacement, where the disputed borderland turned into a game site, and the opposing parties had their identities disturbed.

All this, clearly, did not repeat itself in the *Minshar for Art* gallery in Tel Aviv. There, the sculptures were detached from the people who built them, from the event of the demonstration, from the ground and the flesh that were an integral part of their performance in Bil'in. Gallery visitors that came, willingly, to see "Fence Art" took the place of the border police, and they experienced the sculptures in the sterilized white cubic space of the gallery, as static "enigmatic sculptural objects" (Tzur 2006). While the primary performance of the sculptures was documented in a side space in the gallery, the sculptures themselves were presented as stripped from their symbolic, practical, and most importantly political functions. The textured surfaces of the sculptures, ragged from the

confrontations on the field, received the audience's complete attention.

The sculptures' relocation – their "migration" to the gallery space – clearly affected their performance. In the space of the gallery, the sculptures did not move, they did not disobey the law, nor did they merge and clash with the living bodies that walked around them. They remained alien, essentially differentiated from their surroundings. Museums and galleries are framed as spaces where life holds still, and so the sculptures' new and somewhat subdued performance suited their new environment. Nevertheless, while the dissentient quality of the sculptures was tamed, their poignant political character was not entirely lost, either. It was simply redirected to the artistic sphere. The gallery space called for a conceptual discussion on the significance of the sculptures, and brought their volatile identity to the fore. If, in the field, the Bil'in villagers transgressed the order of things by being something other than workers, in the gallery, I contend, the Bil'in sculptures subverted this order by being something other than art. Once more, Rancière's theorization of aesthetics and politics may help to clarify this proposition.

Similarly to his definition of politics, Rancière's definition of aesthetics is atypical. Rancière uses the term in two different senses. The first, broader sense refers to the aesthetic dimension of the political experience (Guénoun and Kavanagh 2000:11). Far removed from Walter Benjamin's discussion of the aestheticisation of politics in the age of the masses, for Rancière the political is aesthetic in principle. He describes the aesthetic as "the attempt of reconfiguring the partitions of time and space" to bring new forms into vision (Rancière 2005:13). Consequently, his notion of the political has an inherent aesthetic dimension to it, as it creates a renewed perception of the relationships between the sayable, the see-able and the doable in a social reality (Guénoun and Kavanagh 2000:17). The French workers' revolution was an aesthetic revolution in this sense; the politics of the Bil'in

demonstrations, too, are intrinsically aesthetic, as they involve a re-organization of the visible within the terms of Israeli-Palestinian politics.

The second, more narrow sense of the term "aesthetics" in Rancière's writing refers to "a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts" (2004,10). This implies not a theory of art; nor is it an equivalent term to the domain of art. Rather, aesthetics is a regime of visibility that regards the arts, a specific configuration of the art domain based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. However, while "[t]he word aesthetics... strictly refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art," (2004:22) an art object can only be an aesthetic object when it is "something else than art," posing as what Rancière describes as a "form of life" (2002:137). Evidently, this definition is contradictory and somewhat abstract, and as Rancière himself admits, it eliminates any pragmatic criterion for distinguishing art from non-art. It results instead in a focus on the thought that art contains and engenders.

Aesthetics in the broad sense (relating to the distribution of the sensible) and aesthetic in the narrow sense (referring to a specific regime of art) are very much related. In fact, Rancière juxtaposes the French workers' revolution – an aesthetic revolution in his terms – with a wider aesthetic revolution that "overthrew the representational regime of the arts" (2005:14). The representational regime of art, according to Rancière, is a system that distinguishes art from life, and differentiates between artworks according to forms, genres, mediums, and so forth. It defines proper ways for making and judging art (2004: 91). This regime of the arts is pragmatic in nature, and privileges substance over essence. It is the frame through which many art theories and histories function. The aesthetic regime, on the other hand, approaches art objects from a conceptual point of view and relates to their *mode of being*, extricated from their ordinary connections (2004:22).

The way in which the “distribution of the sensible” takes place within the representative regime of art – including the distinction between various types of art, as well as between art and non-art – is essentially the same as the policing of the social order that takes place in the larger world. Consequently, the way in which the aesthetic regime opposes this configuration – by freeing it from specific rules and hierarchies – is equivalent to the rearrangement of the sensible that occurs through a political struggle. Aesthetics, both in its narrow and in its broad sense, has an inherent political aspect to it, as it refers to “a specific sphere of experience which invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory experience” (Rancière 2005:14).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, within the prism of the aesthetic regime of art, aesthetic art objects accomplish the same task as political actions, that is, reorganize the accepted perceptions of reality (Deranty 2003:137).

During the demonstrations, the sculptures took part in an event that suits Rancière’s broad definition of aesthetics. But they also fit with his narrower definition of the term, to the extent that they can be interpreted as aesthetic art that belongs to a regime of the sensible “that is extricated from its ordinary connection and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power foreign to itself” (Rancière 2004:23). But while the distinction between art and non-art (or, if you will, between aesthetics and politics in the more common use of these terms) is irrelevant to the aesthetic regime as such, I would argue that this distinction – or at least, the questioning of this distinction – remains at the

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<sup>7</sup> This definition may clarify how, in the aesthetic regime of art, “art is art to the extent that it is something else than art” (Rancière 2002: 137): the aesthetic experience has to do not solely with the art object, but with its *thought*. Rancière bases this view of aesthetics on Kant, for whom “the aesthetic idea is the *supplement* to the concept, that *aura* of associated and indistinct representations that allows the consciously elaborated artistic form to transform itself into a widely appreciated aesthetic form...” (Rancière quoted in Guénoun and Kavanagh 2000:21)

core of the aesthetics and politics of the "Fence Art" exhibition. In Tel Aviv, the sculptures were seemingly staged as unambiguous art objects, in a classic modernist constellation that emphasized their form. They were displayed to an art-educated audience, and invited that audience to examine them through that frame. In spite of this, the exhibition left the audience with no clear answers, because it could only separate, cordon-off but not remove, the sculptures' preceding functional aspect. The sculptures brought to the fore their aesthetic quality, their "mode of existence as 'free' objects, not the projects of will" (quoted in Guénoun and Kavanagh 2000:22) and at the same time manifested their functional non-artistic aspects. The volatility of the sculptures' definition, as well as the incessant (and constantly failing) need to define them as art objects or as artefacts of a political struggle, turned into the "thinking" that inhabited the sculptures in the gallery space.

The instability that informs the sculptures' aesthetic performance can also be seen in the fundamental disagreements that took place during the curatorial process that led to the exhibition. In an interview with art critic Dana Gilerman (2006), the curator, Oded Yedaya, asserted that the sculptures were first and foremost artworks, and that Muhammad Khatib (the maker of most sculptors) is an artist in this respect. However, Khatib himself was opposed to these definitions. He would have preferred the sculptures to appear in close connection with the explanatory material found in the next room, in a sort of a documentary exhibition, rather than separately, and hence aesthetically. Curator and creator also differed with regard to their respective reasons for mounting the exhibition. While Khatib's sole objective was to get further exposure for Bil'in in the Israeli media, Yedaya also wanted to create an intellectual discussion that would explore the possibilities of the terms "drafted art" and "drafted gallery". In her article, Gilerman finds the curator's choice infuriating, "as if the art world found a new toy to adorn itself with," but

only until, having interviewed Khatib, she too came to the conclusion that he works “as a true artist” (2006). The attempt to define the different actors and objects takes up most of Gilerman’s article.

At first, Khatib’s refusal to be labelled as an artist seems to contradict the analysis that I have conducted in the previous section of this text, where I suggested that the demonstrators were empowered by the fact that, through the sculptures, their identity oscillated between that of villagers and that of artists. However, Khatib’s rejection of the title “artist” was uttered in the context of the exhibition, not in the context of the demonstrations. As Khatib tells Gilerman: “The power and the beauty of the tools that I made manifest themselves in the demonstration itself. As far as I’m concerned, only there are they art” (quoted in Gilerman 2006; translation mine). This statement is significant, if we take into account that political action is always specific and context-bound. By denying the sculptures’ artistic aspect in the gallery space, Khatib emphasized their – and his – political character. This move is the mirror image of how the sculptures operate in the politically-framed space of Bil’in, where their artistic aspect is frequently emphasized. What Khatib accentuated is the sculptures’ adherence to two regimes of the sensible, as artefacts (engaged and functional) and as art (disengaged and formal) at one and the same time, but never completely one or the other. In the vein of Rancière, precisely that pinpoints their political potential.

Yedaya approaches the issue from a different perspective. As artworks, the sculptures allow Yedaya – an artist on his own accord and an active participant in the Bil’in demonstrations – to question his own role as curator-activist, as well as the potential political role of an art gallery space. In the introductory text to the exhibition, Yedaya outlines a mutual process of stimulation between the sculptures and the gallery (2006). On the one hand, the gallery is able, by means of classical curatorial tactics such as the isolation of objects and

their aesthetic placement in space, to serve the cause of Bil'in and, as he writes, to "exploit all of art's shrewdness to create a political provocation," and so to alert the public to the village's dire circumstances. On the other, the Bil'in sculptures allow him as curator to exhibit something that is different from what is usually labelled as political art: either high art that *comments on* the political situation, or documentary art that *records* it. Yedaya writes:

Documentary art remains documentary art even when it is displayed in a gallery, and high art remains high art that talks to a closed circle even when it makes an effort to take a stand and make a difference. The fence-art from Bil'in offers us a different possibility; completely authentic products, made by locals and not by onlookers, that are displaced to the "art" environment, an environment of citations, appropriations and post-modern simulacrum, and thus examines them from various levels, and maybe examines anew the notion of "political art." (Yedaya 2006; translation mine)

The novelty of this exhibition's concept can be disputed, as it is partially based on the historical precedence of the readymade.<sup>8</sup> The text's assertion, that categories such as "documentary art" or "high art" are not challenged when certain objects are displayed outside of their "home base," can also be debated. Nevertheless, I would argue that the aesthetics of the Bil'in sculptures did in fact allow "Fence Art" to examine anew the notion of "political art," but in a way that differs somewhat from the curator's approach. Once more, I turn to Rancière. He writes:

It should be clear... that that there is politics when there is a disagreement about what is politics, when the boundary separating the political from the social or the public from the domestic is put into question. Politics is a way of re-

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<sup>8</sup> Yedaya contends that "Fence Art" breaks away from the idea of the readymade because its "found objects" were initially made for creative use (Yedaya 2007). This argument deserves a serious debate that, unfortunately, will not fit within the scope of this paper.

partitioning the political from the non-political. This is why it generally occurs “out of place,” in a place which was not supposed to be political (Rancière 2003).

The sculptures confuse and disturb the powers that are at play within the art discipline, to the level of fury, and with no agreement in sight: Gilerman disagreed with Yedaya’s choice to appropriate the sculptures from the political sphere and to label them as art contrary to their maker’s will, but at the same time, she disagreed with Khatib when she found him to be a “true” artist. This contradiction cannot be solved, and is not meant to be solved, but it can lead to question the axioms of the art discipline. The sculptures are simultaneously already engaged and contemplative, and this is a contradiction only as long as we continue to separate aesthetics from politics. This is what makes the sculptures political in the sense that Rancière gives this word. They do not only, I quote again, “presuppose the rupture of the ‘normal’ distribution of positions”, but also require “a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions ‘proper’ to such classifications” (Rancière 2001:4). Thus, the sculptures seem to be able to take with them the ability to challenge the imposition of naturalized divisions and hierarchies between social identities, whether these relate to national subjectivities or to artistic categories, and whether these are kept apart by the separation wall crossing through Israel and Palestine, or by the walls of the gallery that separated and connected formal objects with political causes.

### **Afterword**

The struggle of Bil’in against the trajectory of the wall has not ended and, at this point, its outcome remains uncertain. On the ground, the part of the wall that crosses through Bil’in ground has by now been completed and the illegal settlements on its other side are continuously growing. Even when court cases rule in favour of Bil’in, these rulings are not always executed by the state. The Bil’in demonstrations have a pragmatic goal, that is, to push the wall back to the 1967

border and allow villagers to work on their land. That goal is yet to be achieved. However, within given circumstances, what Bil'in has achieved to this day is already an enormous success. A village of 1,700 inhabitants has become an international symbol of resistance, and managed to sustain its struggle (and the media's interest in it) for many months. This is by no means a small feat. In this paper, I argued that the sculptures used in the demonstrations have something to do with the village's success. The choice to employ art in the demonstrations managed to rupture the accepted "distribution of the sensible" in relation to Palestinian popular struggle. It also succeeded, in another context, to disturb another paradigm and rupture the customary classifications of the art world. I showed how, in Rancière's vein, both events are related, inasmuch as the same objects bring about political occurrences that involve a reorganization of the senses. Reading the Bil'in case through Rancière, I was able to propose that the separation of politics from aesthetics is a futile attempt as the two notions are bound together from the outset.

What remains in the background of my argument is its relation to the concept of migration and the migratory. To end this paper, I will shortly mention three related aspects that hopefully have already become clear to the reader. First, while the Bil'in villagers are not literally migrants, they are as distanced from their land as any migrant may be. The separation wall not only blocks villagers from their land, but works in effect to create forced migration as a result of the loss of livelihood. Second, the performance of the demonstrations occurs at the border, between groups of people that experience it in different ways. It thus inhabits a migratory space where dramatically different modes of sensing reality collide. Third, the move of the sculptures from the field to the gallery can be examined as a form of migration between different worlds. The sculptures brought the plight of Bil'in across the wall to an audience that is only fifteen minutes, but also a lifetime (and a conceptual universe) away. Their move proved to affect their

performance but not their politics. These three aspects – involving people, spaces and objects – may lead to particular formulations of “migratory aesthetics” and “migratory politics”, where the migratory has as much to do with moving bodies as with moving mind frames. I leave this formulation in this current preliminary state, open for further consideration during our discussions in the coming *Encuentro*.



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