

Up Against the Wall: Public Art, Precarity, and Witness

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“Steadfastness (*Sumud*) and resistance against the physical, and even more so the systemic, institutionalized violence, is the core sentence in the inner syntax of Palestinians in this land. . . . [The] levels of distress, suffocation, bitterness, anxiety, and wrath are continually on the rise, as is the astonishment at Israelis’ blindness in believing that their violence can remain in control forever.” — Amira Hass, *Haaretz*, 2015

1989: Before the Wall

In 1989, I visited Palestine for the first time and lived in a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank for three months.¹ There were few foreigners at that time, and I was an obvious tourist. People would often stop me in the street, sometimes weeping, and beseech me to take their story back to my people.

2003: Up Against the Wall

On March 24, 2003, Israel began to extend the “Wall”—with names ranging from “apartheid wall” to “security fence,” depending on one’s location—through Mas’ha village in the West Bank.² The Wall would have a severe impact on life in Mas’ha, significantly disrupting movement, commerce, and all other forms of access, including

¹ For more information on this project: <http://bit.ly/2uDQgjD>

² For more information on the Wall: <https://www.stopthewall.org>

access to health care. Ninety percent of Mas'ha's farmland would be confiscated by the Wall.

The Aamer family³—refugees who have lived at the edge of Mas'ha since 1948⁴—and other farmers organized a demonstration that became known as the Mas'ha Peace Camp.⁵ For the following four months, Palestinians, Jewish Israelis, and international activists lived together on land that Israel was confiscating to build the Wall. The Palestinian organizers said, “We knew that we could not stop the Wall. . . . We wanted to show that the Israeli people are not our enemies . . . and that the Wall is not for security but about confiscating land.”

The Mas'ha Peace Camp followed the Israeli bulldozers, ending up at Hani Aamer's house. Hani reports that the Israelis offered him a blank check to move, telling him that the route of the Wall would be exactly where his house stood. The Aamers refused the offer, saying: “We fled our land in 1948. We will never leave again.” Ever since, the family has lived surrounded by the Wall on four sides, their home essentially incorporated into the Jewish-only settlement called Elkana, which the back of their house faces. The Aamers' home is separated from Elkana by a 10-foot-high cyclone fence with closed-circuit cameras, electric sensors, and razor wire. The cyclone fence extends to the two sides of the Aamer property. A 24-foot-high section of the Wall was built right in

³ To learn more about the Aamer Family: <http://bit.ly/2tC9hTv>

⁴ For historical context regarding the 1948 refugees: <http://bit.ly/2u1uM25>

⁵ Tanya Reinhart (2004) provides additional information: <http://bit.ly/2tZhOlq>

front of the Aamer house, filling the family's field of vision with concrete. A Jewish-settler-only road cuts through what is left of their property. Hanı stated, "The soldiers and settlers told us that as long as we live in our house, we are considered enemies. I feel threatened and in danger all the time..." Hanı Aamer recalls when his three-year-old son managed to slip under the fence into Elkana, and the soldiers refused to bring him back to the family, despite Munira Aamer's pleas: "We were scared that he would be kidnapped and taken away from us by the Israelis." Palestinian workers in the settlement, who had taken care of the young boy, brought him back that evening.

2004–2005: On the Wall

In July 2004, the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS),⁶ an organization that reports on human rights violations in occupied Palestine, invited Art Forces⁷—an organization I founded and direct—and artist Eric Drooker⁸ to meet the Aamer family. Hanı and Munira Aamer were very excited by the idea of painting a community mural on the Wall; they felt it might help their children by giving them an opportunity to transform their prison-like environment. The Aamers had no hesitation, despite a sign posted on the wall in three languages that says: "Anyone who passes or damages the fence endangers his life."

⁶ For more information on the IWPS: iwps.info

⁷ To learn more about Art Forces: www.artforces.org

⁸ For samples of Drooker's work: www.drooker.com

We met with Hani and Munira Aamer to plan the mural and hear more about their lives. They told us how their children were depressed and afraid to play outside. It was summer and they wanted the children to have fun. We brought two large suitcases of paint and, after convincing the Israeli soldiers to let us proceed through the gate, the Aamers and their five children, their community, local grassroots Palestinian and Israeli organizations,⁹ US-based somatic therapists,¹⁰ and Jewish-American and international activists and artists¹¹ covered two-thirds of the Wall with rolling hills full of giant flowers, several bright yellow suns, animals, people, and houses. The mural was bookended by a 10-foot bird with a snake in its mouth and an enormous golden phoenix taking flight against a brilliant blue sky. Munira Aamer, who never leaves the property because she is afraid the settlers will try to occupy her house, explained, “I wish I could open this cage and fly with my children—like the bird in the mural.”¹²

Off the Wall: Tangled Up in Blue

Each day, we painted until early afternoon, when the Israeli army would force us to leave. On our last day in 2005, the soldiers made us leave earlier than usual. Hani Aamer stated, “They are telling me that the visitors should leave. But they are my guests . . . I cannot

⁹ See the following organizations:

Flowers Against the Occupation – <http://bit.ly/2tXBU05> and <https://www.afsc.org/story/fatima-khaldi>

Black Laundry – <http://bit.ly/1Ud1sMt>

Anarchists Against the Wall – <http://www.awalls.org> and <http://bit.ly/2u78dtF>

¹⁰ Discover somatic therapy:

Generative Somatics – <http://www.generativesomatics.org>

International Trauma Treatment Program – <http://www.ittp.org/>

¹¹ See John Halaka’s work at www.johnhalaka.org

¹² For more information on resistance to the Wall: <http://bit.ly/2sEbEUs> and <http://bit.ly/2tC9hTv>

throw them out.” Nevertheless he had to ask us to leave, in part because the Israelis were threatening to take back his hard-won key to the enclosure.¹³

We left the remaining paint and returned the next day to interview Hani Aamer outside the large gate.¹⁴ Someone excitedly said that Munira Aamer wanted to see me. I ran back to the small gate and Munira let me in. As I stood in the front room, my peripheral vision took in both the blue from the mural outside to my left and the blue of the newly painted walls and ceiling in the bedroom to my right. The morning light was strong, and I was tangled up in luminous blues. Munira had refused to stop painting; her shoes were covered in blue paint and she was beaming. The solidarity project of resignifying the Wall had moved from outside to inside the house. I had never seen her look so happy.

Through the Wall: Solidarity and Witnessing

All of the participants in the Aamer Mural project—the occupied and the occupiers—suffer significant losses and are trying to maintain their humanity in the face of the occupation. For Hani Aamer, seeing others witness Israel’s cruel disregard was very meaningful. He explained, “When the Israeli government started building the Wall, many people from all over the world came to support us. The government arrested or deported all of them. They said, ‘You are now alone. You should give up. Who is going to help you?’ But our allies, including our Israeli allies, came back to help us again. It lifted my

¹³ For a year the Aamers did not have a key to their enclosure. Only after intervention by the UN and media exposure did the Israeli army relent.

¹⁴ See portions of this interview in “Confronting the Wall” by Alan Greig: <https://vimeo.com/14074606>

spirits when our allies came back to paint on the Wall.” Hani Aamer went on to say that after his children painted the mural, they played outside for the first time in a year.

For Munira Aamer, the mural gave her a sense of connection to the world beyond the Wall. She explained, “We remember who painted each section and how it felt to paint together. The mural is like opening a window to the world.”

The mural transformed the Wall by marking it with joyful defiance. It acknowledged the Aamers’ experience of abandonment and supported their resilience to the deadly circumstances of occupation as well as, for a time, engendering in them a sense of hope and possibility.

The invitation from the Palestinians to join their resistance helped the American and Jewish-Israeli participants in their struggle to face their role as occupiers. They felt their loss of a moral existence witnessed and, in turn, they had an opportunity to witness the occupation in a way that reinstated a sense of morality.¹⁵ Nazeeh Sha’alabi, a Palestinian farmer from Mas’ha, said, “We wanted to provide an opportunity for Israelis to support

¹⁵ Jessica Benjamin, “Beyond Doer and Done to: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2004): 546.

As Jessica Benjamin writes elsewhere:

“The moral third refers to those values, rules, and principles of interaction that we rely upon in our efforts to create and restore the space for each partner in the dyad to engage in thinking, feeling, acting, or responding rather than merely reacting.”

Jessica Benjamin, “A Relational Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Necessity of Acknowledging Failure in Order to Restore the Facilitating and Containing Features of the Intersubjective Relation (the Shared Third),” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 90, no. 3 (2009): 441.

Jessica Benjamin is a founder of relational psychoanalysis.

our struggle.” Dalit Baum, a Jewish-Israeli member of Black Laundry¹⁶ and Anarchists Against the Wall,¹⁷ said: “I need something from them [the Aamer family]. What I get is strength—strength in courage and persistence.” Ivy Sichel added, “I am grateful for the opportunity to participate. It is not a given.” Staci Haines, somatic therapist from the United States, observed, “The beauty [of the mural project] amidst devastation allowed me to come home empowered enough to continue solidarity work.”

2011: Back to the Wall

In 2011, I returned to occupied Palestine with eleven artists, activists, and therapists from Maia Mural Brigade.¹⁸ Hani and Munira refused my offer to restore the currently faded mural, saying they now see it as an attempt to beautify something horrible. The Aamers elected to whitewash the mural and invite people to write poetry instead. The only image they kept was the phoenix, knowing it will someday rise from the ashes of the Wall.

This project was supported by Left Tilt Foundation, the Palestinian American Research Center, and the Middle East Children’s Alliance.

¹⁶ To learn more about Black Laundry: <http://bit.ly/1Ud1sMt>

¹⁷ For more information on Anarchists Against the Wall: <http://www.awalls.org>

¹⁸ Check out the participating organizations:

Maia Mural Brigade – <http://maiamuralproject.org/>

Middle East Children’s Alliance – www.mecaforpeace.org

Estria Foundation – <http://www.estria.org/water-writes/>

