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In a Relationship With: The War in the Gaza Strip

Facebook's immediacy is a boon to some Israeli artists, especially now, but others say it's too soon to share reactions.

Shany Littman |  Send me email alerts

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Boaz Aharonovitch. **Distorting the news images.** Credit: Boaz Aharonovitch

“Don’t say it’s impossible, say it’s an island, and it’s possible!” announces the narrator in “Gaza Canal,” artist Tamir Zadok’s 2010 film depicting the [Gaza Strip](#)’s transformation into a prosperous pastoral island and tourist destination. The video, ostensibly from the visitors’ center for the new island — itself the result of a canal

and a lethal but beneficial earthquake that together pushed the coastal territory into the Mediterranean Sea — has been shown in a number of exhibitions and was purchased by the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

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“Gaza Canal” has gained new life of late, from an unexpected direction: After one of Zadok’s friends posted it on Facebook, in connection to the current war, it was soon forwarded by a right-wing activist. So far the post has collected 2,000 shares, 400 likes and about 90 comments, most of them favorable.

But Zadok didn’t intend to offer a practical solution for the problem of Gaza, he wanted to create a satire. He says that the work offers “a look at an absurd present, at ridiculous magic solutions they’re trying to sell us. I tried to use familiar tools to create an unrealistic solution, and I have no utopian intentions in the film.”

But art has its own processes. Zadok’s work is making its way through the byways of Facebook, and as far as he’s concerned things have gotten somewhat out of control. “The insane response the film has been getting in recent days is exciting and depressing,” he says. “It’s exciting that art is able to emerge from the museum or the gallery, that tens of thousands of people have seen it and that it’s creating a discourse. On the other hand, the insane number of viewings is bringing a wave of harsh reactions along with it.”

Although Zadok claims that he usually doesn’t use Facebook to expose his works, many Israeli artists today do use social media for that purpose. Social media are exposed, yet they give an illusion of being a relatively protected space. As opposed to what happened to Zadok, their art usually stays with the captive audience and doesn’t go viral.



Anat Betzer. "Youths," 2010. Art is always political. Photo by ded Löbl

On July 12 Boaz Arad began using Facebook to display his paintings and illustrations, which are direct responses to the [rockets being fired into Israel](#). The first collection of paintings was humorous, for example a donkey and a rocket flying side by side. After Israeli ground forces entered Gaza, the pictures changed. "Before the ground operation, Iron Dome made a mockery of the rockets, and I could draw all kinds of cartoons. Now it's no longer funny."

The ground operation, the soldiers who are being killed and the threat that has become more complex due to the use of tunnels, recently led Arad to draw rabbits. He says that it isn't a protest. Despite the change in mood, he decided not to remove the pictures of missiles and donkeys from his page.

Facebook as an exhibition space enables an immediate encounter with the audience's reactions, as well as an exposure of work processes and moods, which suits a certain type of artist. Arad, who has 4,336 Facebook friends, began using Facebook this way before the war. "Facebook is a place where I can talk. It's a seductive space. There's no chance that I'll have an exhibition in a gallery and 4,000 people will come to see it." His next project is not destined for Facebook, because he says it demands distance rather than an immediate response. The subject will be the racism and chauvinism that erupted during the war.



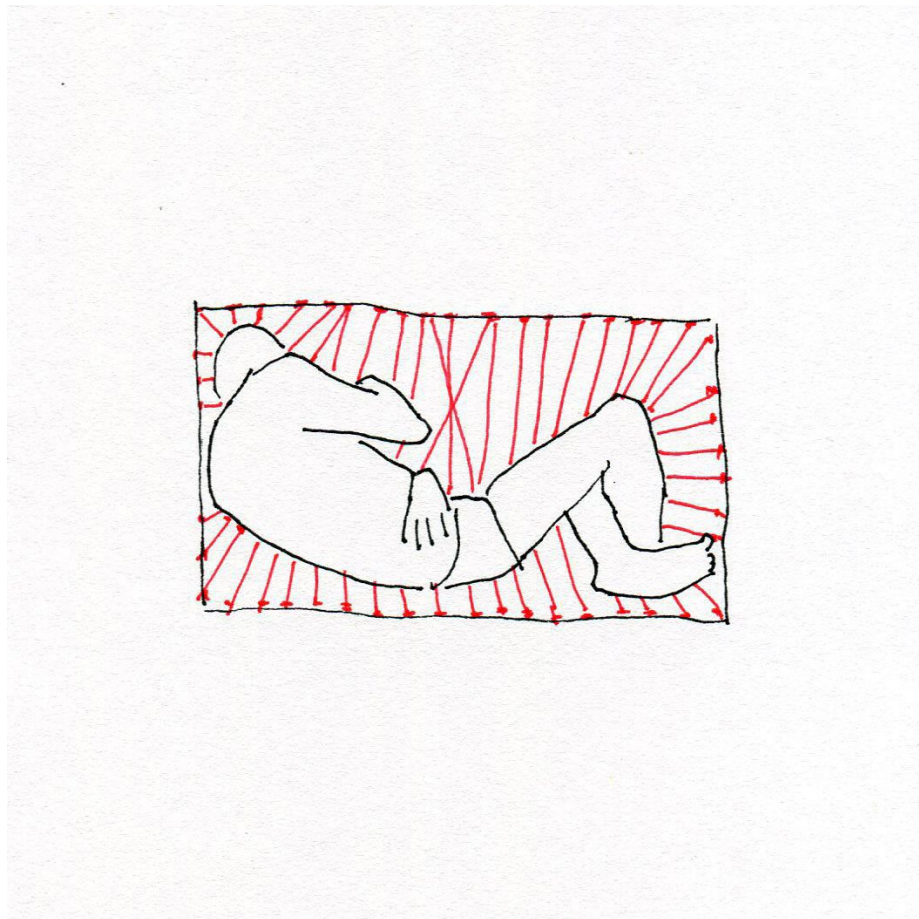
***Yoram Kupermintz. Images from
Gaza, 2014. Photo by oram Kupermintz***

Boaz Aharonovitch, who uses Facebook as an artistic stage during ordinary times, became engaged with the war. “I watched television and the picture started to become distorted, so I helped it, I distorted it even further and filmed the distorted news screen. Every day I choose which of the pictures to post on Facebook.”

Aharonovitch has 3,012 Facebook friends at the moment, and he isn't sure the project has a future outside the social network. “At the moment it's a daily activity, and the duration of the project will be dictated by the duration of the war. Facebook functions as a place where the process is exposed. Something about the daily definition suits that, it's thinking while in motion. The immediacy is part of it. If I have to transfer the work to another space, different rules will apply to it.”

Yoram Kupermintz, who even before the war was interested in webcams around the world, has become focused on what the cameras are recording in the Gaza Strip. He takes screen grabs from foreign news broadcasts, processes them and posts them on Facebook. “I deal only with Gaza, not with the Israeli media. It’s related to my works about wars that will be exhibited in September. I’ve been involved with webcams for a long time, due to my posttraumatic stress from the Yom Kippur War, because at the time I was a signal operator and I didn’t see a thing. I have to observe, to see this horror, I can’t allow anything to surprise me.”

Anat Betzer usually avoids using Facebook to expose new works, but during the war that changed. “At a time like this something interesting is happening, when things are at some kind of emotional extreme. The main emotion that I’ve been experiencing lately is anger. And all kinds of values that were reflected in the past in my choices of what and when to expose on Facebook suddenly seem irrelevant. Here it’s also possible to talk about political art, and to think about art as always being political.”



Merav Shinn Ben Alon .Shelter 2014.

Photo by Merav Shinn Ben Alon

Merav Shinn Ben-Alon combines old works that are charged with a new meaning in light of events with works that were specially created now. “At the moment I’m going through something of a crisis, Facebook has become an unprotected space for me, although previously it was an exhibition space. It’s a space that exposes real time. The war erupted into this space. The first thing I showed was the night they announced that they had burned the Arab boy,” she says, referring to the July 2 abduction and murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir by Jewish extremists, “and I posted a drawing with the text ‘Stop.’ That elicited a strong burst of likes and comments.”

For the purpose of the article I contacted another artist, who recently showed works related to the war on Facebook. When I went back to his page in order to send him a message, I encountered a picture and a new and horrifying post that told about his nephew who had been killed in Gaza the day before.

Artists such as Zoya Cherkassky, Oz Malul and Zamir Shatz, who are usually very active on Facebook, are not addressing the war these days. Lior Waterman, who usually posts frequently and tends to be biting and political, has decided to remain silent, and at most shares posts by others. “I think that at the moment political activity is preferable,” explains Waterman. “That’s my instinct, to react politically rather than metaphorically. Not to deal with images. It’s not an ideological thing, I’m somewhat jealous of people who are inspired by this situation to create images.”

Curator Naomi Siman-Tov, who says she is addicted to Facebook, is also opposed to immediate artistic expressions. “I don’t think that art should react to things in real time, ever. Art has a connection to historical events in all periods. Goya’s ‘The Third of May, 1808’ or Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ are two outstanding examples. But I don’t think that any response was immediate, but more on the level of principle. Art is connected to a type of enjoyment, and during wartime you don’t really have time for that. You’re anxious, concerned. There are very political artists, like David Reeb or Arnon Ben David, who aren’t on Facebook at all.”

Does Facebook already have a unique aesthetic?

“I still don’t see such a thing,” Siman-Tov says. “Facebook is more radical today than art, and maybe that’s the future revolution. Art is in crisis after being taken over by market forces, so perhaps Facebook is the alternative. But I don’t see the redemption at the

moment. Meanwhile I haven't found the artistic avant-garde on Facebook. Nor do I think that those artists are working within the cyber culture. It remains flat, it's art on the surface, for the eye. I want to think that art has more than that to offer, that it addresses the entire body, that it's a different physical and sensual experience."



Shany Littman

Haaretz Contributor

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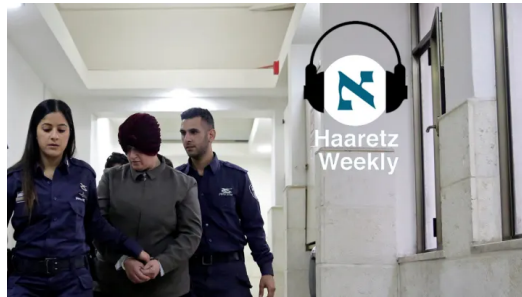
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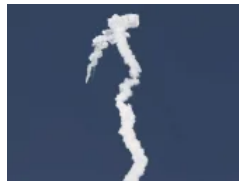
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