

# Performing Solidarity: Jewish/Palestinian alliance-building, street art interventions, and the power of symbolic encounters

*Devora Neumark*

I remember clearly the flight to Montreal from Ben Gurion International Airport in the fall of 1984: seated to my right was a Jewish man wearing a crocheted *kippa*, and on my left, a Palestinian from East Jerusalem. I was leaving Israel because of the profound deception I had experienced relative to the idealism of Zionism that had been inculcated in me by my family of origin and the elementary and secondary Yeshivas I attended in Queens, New York.

The history I was taught growing up drew a clear and untroubled line between the Holocaust and the necessity to establish a Jewish state in the Biblical homeland of the ancient Hebrews. Even today, this link is underscored in the rhetoric of US foreign policy. President Barack Obama's speech in Egypt earlier this week included the following statement: "America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied."

Unlike Obama's reminder immediately following his affirmation of unfailing US support for Israel about the suffering the Palestinian people, the narrative I was taught left out any mention of the majority non-Jewish inhabitants of this land; the villages that were destroyed in order to make room for Jewish immigration; and the

systemic inequalities in almost every sector of social, cultural, economic, and political life between Jews and Palestinians.

Back in the 1980s, after more than two years of living and working in Jerusalem trying to make sense of what I had begun to find out in my conversations with Arabs of Christian and Muslim heritage about their experiences of living under Israeli occupation, I gave up. The gap between what I had learned and what I experienced on the ground was simply too great. I quit my job and relinquished the lease on my apartment: I was returning to Quebec (itself a place marked by a history of two solitudes) with a suitcase and a heart full of sorrow and questions.

Taking advantage of the situation on the plane to see if I could glean any understanding that had hitherto escaped me, I addressed both men in my row and simultaneously asked them the following question: "Could you please tell me what you learned while you were growing up at home and in school about the

way in which Israel as a State was formed and why it came to be?" To be clear: I was asking for what they knew to be factual information, not their opinions or interpretations of what happened or why.

For the remainder of the flight, as we

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passed from land over ocean to land again, I listened as my fellow passengers recounted in turn the histories they were taught. To say that the three of us were confounded by the differences in the factual details would be a gross understatement! It became obvious as we went over events from the past how differently the Truth had been constructed and how in these different truths were lodged a host of biases of one kind and another.

As each of the men recounted their versions of what they had been taught, the inevitability of the clash between the two peoples became increasingly apparent as did the likelihood of things getting a whole lot worse before they would get better. I could feel a mounting dread as I envisioned the future impact of these vastly

different narratives. It was evident to me even then that the demonization of the other would necessarily increase, and the systemic inequalities proliferate.

Ever since that conversation I've dedicated my life to inviting dialogue (however difficult) and encouraging deliberate imaginative explorations about home(land). As a performance artist and community activist, the symbolic process has provided me with a means to make sense of my lived experience and connect to others concerned with the individual and collective impact of displacement and domicile—the willful destruction of habitation that has been and continues to function as a major weapon in the arsenal of cultural, political and economic oppression.

### *And How Shall Our Hands Meet?*



Artists: Devora Neumark and Tali Goodfriend  
Photographer: Louise Lachapelle  
Title: *And how shall our hands meet?*  
Date: August 2006  
Location: Downtown Montreal in front of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel Place Ville Marie

Below I will describe two relatively recent performance art collaborations with artist/educator Tali Goodfriend and reflect on what the art frame can sometimes provide in the form of a state of potentiality, an imaginary *as if* possibility. I think that this creative risk-taking resonates on a deeply emotional level and therefore can surprise us into thinking in new ways. I believe these interlocutory performative experimentations can have tangible effect in the corporeal world, nurture the emergence of new schemas for co-existence, and expand the range of political dissent and activism.

Feeling compelled to respond to the invasion of Lebanon by Israeli forces during the summer of 2006, Tali and I, wearing white and continuously bathing each other's hand in olive oil, stood bare-foot across the street from an anti-war demonstration and activist protest marking Colin Powell's visit to Montreal in support of the Jewish National Fund's Gala<sup>1</sup>. The subject of Powell's speech announced in advance was the need to build a stronger Israel.

Like me, Tali has been creatively exploring the process of mourning and the affirmation of wellness in the face of cultural oppressions and related traumas. The shared healing gesture during the three-hour protest organized by Tadamon! and other Palestinian solidarity grassroots collectives connected our involvements with peace efforts in the Middle East. Nearing the end of the demonstration, we filled up ten small glass bottles with the oil that we warmed and energized through our continuous contact and offered these freely to people who had been part of the demonstration in one way or another. We explained that though the oil—a product of Lebanon gifted to us by a Lebanese shopkeeper on St. Laurence Boulevard—was of edible grade, it should not be used for cooking given our handling of it during the performance.

The passersby clearly took note of our gesture and our appearance: they also encountered our designated photographer and spokesperson Louise Lachapelle who fielded questions and documented the intervention, bearing witness to the gesture as well as to the people who interacted with it. As I have written about elsewhere (e.g. in my essay "Im/possible Representations" commissioned for the September 2000

issue of *Liberté* entitled *Cette photo que je n'ai pas faite*), the choice to invite photographic documentation is a complex one. As any anthropologist will attest, the relational dynamic—and even the event itself—is changed as soon as there is a witness present. When the witness is

armed with a camera the changes that inevitably occur (that may make it more or less likely for people to interact depending on their personal comfort level with being photographed) have to be weighed against what having a photographer around can make possible.

Tali and I opted to have the performance documented for three reasons: Firstly, we recognized the legitimacy inscribed in the act of public photography that offered us a sense of protection and agency—especially in relation to the spectacle of the street demonstration. Secondly, as this project was explicitly and implicitly an exploration of the power of dialogue, Louise's participation permitted Tali and me to be present to each other, the gesture, the situation, the energy of the crowd and ourselves, without having to constantly explain what we were doing. And finally, the photographs when integrated into a text such as this, extend the act of performing solidarity.

People's reactions fell into one of several categories: many were troubled and seemed to try to make sense of what they were seeing without attempting to make contact verbally; some spoke with Louise who was able to give

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## *Uprooted*



Artists: Devora Neumark and Tali Goodfriend  
Photographer: Louise Lachapelle  
Title: *Uprooted*  
Date: June 2007  
Location: Downtown Montreal

a sense of the context and intention motivating this work; still others looked away or didn't appear to notice what was happening. As we had carefully negotiated our position with the security force of Place Ville Marie as soon as we arrived, we didn't have to deal with the threat of being asked to leave.

Of the people who ended up connecting with Louise, the majority expressed how in seeing this they were able to experience a sense of calm and peace, especially in the larger context of the hectic street activity and ongoing turbulent demonstration. What was particularly noticeable was the curiosity that children expressed toward what we did. This is not to diminish the importance of the individuals who expressed their discomfort and confusion about

the intervention. One woman for example, was quite upset that she could not tell from our gesture "what side we were on."

One year later, Tali and I once again took to the streets, this time in association with a coalition of protestors denouncing Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land and its practice of apartheid. For several hours, walking in front of a crowd of about 1000 people all marching for peace, Tali Goodfriend and I carried an uprooted olive tree symbolizing the ongoing cycles of displacement and related destruction of nature. Dislocated individuals, the communities they leave behind, and those into which they subsequently integrate, are part of an increasingly fragile ecological balance. As Dr. Vandana Shiva points out in her introduc-

tion to *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide*: “Ethnic conflict, xenophobia, fundamentalism, and the rise of narrow nationalism are tearing apart the social fabric just as ecological destruction is tearing apart the web of life in nature.” However large the current human deracination problem, to truly understand the scope of the Nakba, one has to also take into consideration the environmental context including the uprooting of centuries-old olive trees by the Israeli Defense Force.

Unlike the zealous rants and passionate speeches that were proclaimed through the loudspeakers at Dorchester Square (across the street from where the Israeli consulate was at the time), along St. Catherine Street and in front of the Federal offices in the Complexe Guy-Favreau, people told us that our intervention moved them to tears. Many individuals made a point of thanking us for the haunting beauty of the gesture. Some even helped us carry the tree.

As we walked through downtown Montreal the tree’s roots were drying out and the intensity of the flower-scent grew almost overwhelming. It was heart-wrenching to us both to be part of what could have been the tree’s demise, and equally heart-wrenching to know that the acts of other Jews were participating as decidedly, if not more so, in the deracination of the Palestinian people.

After the march, Tali and I (along with help from friends and strangers who happened to pass by) planted the tree in a downtown park. Despite an initial period of shock, the tree has taken well to its new home. Someone has even placed a tree stake support system to help it grow straight.

The ethical dilemmas still continue to trouble me: In our performance *And How Shall Our Hands Meet?*, Tali and I transformed what was once high quality edible oil into an object of (only) denotative importance; and if the tree had not survived, would the *Uprooted* performance

have been justified? As art invites and supports the potential for as if scenarios it has the potential to alter cultural constructions. However, unlike the almost certain reactive clarity of political rhetoric, the symbolic realm is challenging and nuanced—one that has no prescriptive or predictive certainty, except perhaps in its capacity for inviting critical reflection and opening creative dialogue.

## Reference

1. The Jewish National Fund or JNF was founded in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel with the intent of buying and developing land in Palestine (later Israel) for the purpose of Jewish settlement. This forestation and reclaiming of land is part of the historical and ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Canada Park, located in the West Bank, was established by the Canadian branch of the JNF and intended to serve as a picnic area for Israelis coming from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It was built on top of three Palestinian villages: Amwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba whose residents were forcibly expelled during the 1967 war.

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