The personal and the political, accompanied by a few drinks.

Public Movement is a research and action body spearheaded by Dana Yalahomi. The Israel-based group investigates the creation of national, social, and political identities through public choreographies and the way they are performed in public space. The group, usually in uniform, began by reenacting commemorative ceremonies, formal exercises from the youth scouts, or emergency procedures (life saving exercises, such as rescue from a pile of debris) in public space, in order to illustrate the choreography of collective civilian life and how it is ingrained in the cultural fabric. Not shying away from conflict, Public Movement tailors its works—or actions, as they call them—to specific social and geographic contexts, creating temporary zones of discomfort, arenas in which viewers are meant to feel ill at ease and react to a catalyst.

Public Movement came to international attention with their participation in the 2012 New Museum Triennial that showcased SALONS: Birthright Palestine?, a series of performative public debates staged as congressional sessions, summit meetings, visioning sessions, diplomatic consultations, secret gatherings, and demonstrations. The salons focused on Birthright Israel, the sponsored trips to Israel for Jewish youth, as a model through which to explore Israel’s relationship to the American Jewish diaspora and the right of return, and, by extension, to consider Palestinian diaspora and nationhood by asking what a Birthright Palestine could be. Similar tactics of choreographed public debates were deployed for Rebranding European Muslims at the 7th Berlin Biennial, and at the Steirischer Herbst festival, in Austria, for which marketing firms pitched campaigns to improve the public image of Muslims in Europe.

I met Yalahomi at a Tel Aviv bar and got her a little drunk while probing about her service in the Israeli army as a psychological profiler; her reorganization of Public Movement, after the co-founder of the group left; the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel; and her recent and upcoming projects.

Chen Tamir What’s your poison?

Dana Yalahomi Vodka tonic. That’s my drink.

CT Drink quickly so we can order you another one.

I’ve told you this before, but I’m your self-appointed biggest fan. I’ve seen all your major work
to date.

DY That’s the nicest thing I’ve heard all year.

CT I feel like I can truly understand your work since I’m Israeli, but I grew up in Canada and lived in New York before moving back to Israel.

DY Yeah, the dilemma of conflicting identities.

CT And, looking at how identity and belonging are choreographed. For me, the best artists are the ones who make the personal political and the political personal.

DY That’s a good statement. There is a point where it’s hard to tell the difference between the personal and the political. The way Public Movement presents itself is something I personally address in how I view social, political, and historical situations. So, it’s very much about conflict and the way I view my own identity. When I did SALONS: Birthright Palestine? I had to interview Birthright alumni, people who had come back from Israel five weeks earlier. At some point, I realized that the way I interviewed them, and what I expected from them, was influenced by what I was trained for in my military service as a psychological profiler. Psychological profilers in the army interview each recruit to reveal their psychological background and mental condition. Most of the interview is focused on trying to discover what kind of relationships they partake in and have with their surroundings, what their fears, anxieties, addictions, and defaults are. There is, on one hand, the practical viewpoint, which is that we need to identify the soldiers who cannot serve in combat units, or have to serve closer to home, or have severe psychological problems. On the other hand, the result of those interviews is the creation of a personal file on every young Israeli citizen, making up an archive of psychological profiles outlining what it means to be a citizen, and how you identify with the state, or with a community at the age of eighteen.


CT How long are these interviews?

DY The shortest would be about half an hour, and the longest could take up to five or even six hours. You don’t write things down, so the interviewer has to remember everything. The trick to being a good profiler is to, within three minutes, make the interviewee forget he is being interviewed. After six minutes, they have to forget you are wearing a uniform. And, after ten minutes, they should feel like you are their best friend, or, even better, that they don’t have to ever see you again. There is an aspect of manipulation in it, of course. A good interviewer is someone who can play a role.

CT So, it’s a performance?

DY It’s definitely a performance.
CT Tell me about how Public Movement got started, and about your first big international project, **SALONS: Birthright Palestine**?

DY **SALONS: Birthright Palestine** was the first project I worked on without my colleagues from Public Movement. I co-founded Public Movement with artist and curator Omer Krieger at the end of 2006. For the first three years, Public Movement was led by both of us, and we had a group of ten members who met three times a week. It was full of enthusiasm, and youth, and sexuality, happiness, and disagreements. After three years, there was a period when Omer and I worked on projects without the rest of the members, and in summer 2011 Omer left, and I became the sole director of the group.

CT But, you still consider yourselves a group?

DY The definition of Public Movement changes constantly. Public Movement is a methodology. It has its own language and strategies for action. It’s never static. There is a group of people who think, talk, and work as Public Movement. For example for the Future Generation Art Prize in Kiev this year, we were four directors: Saar Szekely, Gail Libraider, Amit Drori, and myself. Two of us, me and Alhena Katsof, worked on the book by Sternberg Press on Public Movement’s **Debriefing Session**, which we created together.

CT How did the group form?

*Also Thus!, five-year-anniversary of Public Movement, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel. Photo by Kfir Boilotin. Image courtesy of Public Movement.*

DY It started with the desire to stage an action in a crossroad in Tel Aviv, and Omer Krieger and I had the idea of creating a symmetric and synchronized car accident, between two cars and two pedestrians. At this point, we barely had the name Public Movement, and we hadn’t formed the group yet. The realness of **Accident** evoked a disagreement among the friends who helped us, and started a small uprising.

I want another drink.

CT I want you to have another drink, too. This is a completely normal interview. You’re not drunk at all! You’re probably so used to talking about this stuff that it’s already pre-programmed in your brain.

DY If you wake me up in the middle of the night I could do this.

There was an internal argument whether we should frame it as art or not. They thought that if art was going to take place in public, it should always declare itself as art. It would have been enough had we only one video camera on the ground (we only filmed it from one location above, so nobody could see if it was real or not real). But, it was the reality: there are cars, there is flesh, and they are bumping into each other. On one hand, there is a real meeting of human flesh and hot metal, but it produces a perfectly framed mirrored image. It’s very
aesthetic. It’s timed. It’s exactly one minute of silence and someone counts the seconds. You can see that it’s totally symmetrical. Every detail is carefully orchestrated. The aesthetic is clear.

This is the second drink, just for the record. If the nature of my answers shifts...

CT Maybe it’s because of the alcohol that you’re telling me a story you don’t often tell...

DY I also don’t usually talk about my military service during interviews. Anyway, we didn’t do the third accident. Omer and I understood that we actually wanted to take the questions posed to us and create a group that can experiment with those questions.

CT Bottoms up.

Can you describe your takeover of the group from Omer?

DY Omer and I worked extremely well together for almost four years. Public Movement was really a product of our synergy—a symbiosis of his knowledge and mine. There was no takeover. The structure of the group changed. What is important for both of us is the entity of Public Movement, and that it stands alone. On the one hand, the nature of Public Movement is collaborative. I did not produce any project that was not borne of intellectual, or artistic, collaboration. But, the nature of collaboration is that things shift and evolve in different directions. Omer decided he wanted to move on, and I felt Public Movement hadn’t exhausted its potential. It hadn’t explored a tenth of what it could be.

CT Drink up.

Can you share any official plans for your Tel Aviv show?

DY I’ve been working intensively for the past year on a show that will open at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, in autumn 2015, called National Collection. This will be the first time we actually create a durational exhibition. There will be walks through seven new works with different sets, and choreographies. Our departure point was the history of the Tel Aviv Museum, which was established by the city’s first mayor in the 1930s and was dedicated to his wife. We discovered in his diary that he asked, “What does a European city consist of? A boulevard, a square, and a museum of art.” I find it fascinating because it still resonates today. There is a clear co-dependency between the museum and the state. The Tel Aviv Museum of Art was where the State of Israel was declared. This proximity between art and politics suits Public Movement’s agenda perfectly.

We want to recreate this juxtaposition by rejoining the art exhibition, and the stage from which the deceleration was announced. The mere fact that this significant political performance was made in the gallery of an art museum sparks the imagination and opens it to infinite interpretations. Alongside the exhibition will be six projects that negotiate the ongoing relationship between the state and the museum. We want to manifest this relationship through underground tunnels connecting the museum storage areas, the bomb shelter below them, and the secret offices of one of the largest military bases in Israel, which is just across the road from the museum.

CT It’s a good idea to have drunk interviews, but I don’t think I have it in me to get somebody completely hammered anymore.

DY At our age... I used to get pretty drunk, but I would always be able to answer questions about Public Movement.

CT So, being somewhat tipsy, can you tell me about your recent projects?
DY In November 2014, I was invited by a Finnish festival, called Baltic Circle, to create Make Art Policy! Summit, which was an evening of choreographed debates between politicians, artists, cultural producers, and policy makers. It continues a similar practice to the one I developed in New York with the salons, and, afterward, with the Rebranding European Muslims gala event. This time, representatives of ten Finnish political parties disclosed their proposed art policy for the 2015 elections. Their presentations followed the rules of the performance set by Public Movement, who also conducted the evening. We will soon release a booklet based on this performative event that will help the Finnish citizens with their choices during the elections.

CT This might open up a can of worms, but I think it’s important to talk about—especially considering SALONS: Birthright Palestine? and Rebranding European Muslims—your own subjectivity as an Israeli with outsider status. You jumped into a loaded space with issues of European Muslim identity and conflict.

DY You were at both of these events, weren’t you?

CT Yes, and I work for Artis, the nonprofit organization that commissioned SALONS: Birthright Palestine? So, I’ve seen your work from many different angles.

DY Most of my sleepless nights in 2011 and 2012 were the result of these difficult questions. The two projects are similar, and I think you’re right to put them under the same umbrella, since they also represent a development in Public Movement’s practice. I decided to challenge my tendency to participate in obvious left-wing discourse governed by identity politics that dictates who can ask what questions, who is eligible to talk, and in whose name.

SALONS: Birthright Palestine? didn’t propose a birthright for Palestinians. Nor was Rebranding European Muslims a suggestion for how one could “rebrand” European Muslims. They both examined existing phenomena. SALONS: Birthright Palestine? used Birthright Israel to think about heritage, nationalism, lobbying, and donations from diaspora communities—their influence on the political reality in Israel. Rebranding European Muslims questioned the now common practice of nation branding as a tool that serves the gamut of the political spectrum. The project tried to reveal an inherent failure in the practice of branding, which is similar to the failure of language—the distance between signifier and signified. We staged a branding competition for which we, with the research of sociologists, local politicians, and activists, wrote a creative brief that was the basis for the three invited marketing strategists to pitch a branding campaign.

Naturally, these two projects were more sensitive than other Public Movement actions. I felt an urgent need to take Public Movement out of its comfort zone, and get messy—to meddle in real politics. Not simply to say, “Everything is corrupt,” but to understand where things are
impossible, and why, and how we can manipulate narrative, so we can move beyond the conflict.

**CT** What do you think about the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement?

**DY** The BDS movement is a strategy to raise awareness of the injustice happening in Palestine and Israel. There are different paths political activists are taking, and one of them is PACBI (Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel). Political and social boycotts are an acceptable way of protest, and, therefore, it is only logical that they will not leave the art arena in a vacuum. It is something that should strengthen those of us who are busy with the production of culture as well. We need to understand that art has the power to make a difference.

I’m not for the boycott or against it. The question is how you work with it. How do you continue to produce art that analyzes and questions the political situation here, and show it abroad, despite the BDS? Artists should see themselves as the carriers of a political gospel, and they should incorporate this tactic into their practice.

**CT** It’s such a challenge. It’s exhausting. I wonder if we’re still going to have to have these discussions in twenty years, when we’re in our early fifties.

**DY** Do you think you’ll still be in art?

**CT** Yea. I’ll be running the MoMA. You don’t think you’ll still be an artist?

**DY** I doubt that continuing to only create projects will keep satisfying me in the long run. Public Movement will surely grow, as will I, but I can imagine myself running an art institution, or maybe founding one in the future. The most important thing is that it will be a place of education, discussions, and art!

**CT** I’ll drink to that!

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*Chen Tamir is Curator at the Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv and Program Associate at Artis, Israel. She occasionally interviews artists while giving them massages or getting them drunk.*

Tags: performance art, Israeli art, Palestine, politics
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