Dana Yahalomi: Art, Politics, and Affairs of the State

In partnership with 18th Street Arts Center
18th Street Arts Center is an artists' residency program that provokes public dialogue through contemporary art-making.

By Yael Lipschutz

Public Movement is a Tel Aviv-based 'performative research body' that aims to use the infrastructure of the art world to create social impact and new politicized civic bodies. Through large-scale performances in the public realm that respond to site-specific histories and politics they build alternative frameworks for considering communal identities - national, religious and cultural - thereby provoking the public to re-examine the distribution of power by the state. Ranging in focus from the orchestration of national days of mourning in Israel to the conflict around Islam in Europe, Public Movement has initiated projects around the world at the New Museum, Performa 11, Van Abbemuseum, the Israeli Center for Digital Art and most recently, at the Fourth Asian Art Biennial in Taipei, Taiwan.

18th Street's Curator-in-Residence Yael Lipschutz sat down with Public Movement's leader, Dana Yahalomi, currently at 18th Street as an artist-in-resident, and discussed their history and ongoing political interventions.

Can you talk about how Public Movement got started and what prompted you to begin thinking this way?

Dana Yahalomi: Public Movement formed on December 29, 2006 with an action called "Accident," an event in which two simultaneous and synchronic car accidents took place at a central crossroads in Tel Aviv. "Accident" featured two cars and two human beings. At this point we didn't have a group, just the concept, the passion, the questions. "Accident" provoked the group of participants to ask ethical and political questions about things like whether art can and should function so close to reality. Aside from the violent beauty of the mirrored car accidents and the spontaneous
frame created by people standing around it, "Accident" looked and acted like a real event in public space, pausing traffic for a minute long silence and thus also relating itself to the minute long siren in which the whole country pauses during memorial days in Israel. On that day we got help from friends and "Accident" became the impetus for Public Movement, encouraging us to form a real group. My collaborator Omer Kreiger and I understood that we wanted to do art that creates reality, that we are intrigued by the possibility of art and politics acting as one, abandoning the position of art as an opposition or a reaction to politics and embracing instead the notion of art instigating a political fact. Out of that first project, Omer Kreiger and I formed Public Movement, with ten members and two leaders (Omer and me). From the start Public Movement was a hierarchical group, not an egalitarian collective, interested in investigating the role of the leader and the member. After four years of working in this format, I took over the leadership and changed the structure of the movement. We are no longer a group that meets three times a week but rather a methodology, an entity that provides public service, political consultancy and diplomatic operations using the means of art. I am leading this entity, we have few agents around the world, members who participate when needed, and a larger circle of collaborators.

What broad issues in Israel brought you to think this way with your art?

DY: At the very beginning we studied the staging of national days, state rituals and formal ceremonies, and the way they shape our relationship to the
state. For example: our Independence Day and our Memorial Day. Every year Israeli Memorial Day is celebrated with twenty-four hours of media focused upon one of the saddest days in our national history, "The Day of the Fallen Soldiers," who died in Israel during its first War for Independence, which according to the national narrative occurred in 1948 just a few hours after Ben Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel following the UN vote. At the end of those twenty-four hours of commemoration for Memorial Day, the Israeli state and the media immediately shifts from the saddest day of the year, to celebrating Israeli Independence Day, the most joyous of national holidays.

Public Movement was fascinated by the orchestration of these national holidays and how in history it was actually vice-versa. First, the UN declared the State of Israel as a sovereign nation, and then the war broke. There is an obvious strategic use of emotions in the decision to stage the two days of holiday in this order, in that first the public experiences sorrow, which is then covered or even "explained" by the joy that follows it. The fact that every citizen in Israel celebrates this forty-eight hours in this order, every year from childhood shapes our political identification, understanding of history and social consciousness.

In response to this in 2007 Public Movement created a new ceremony called "Also Thus!" which is meant to substitute the two separate days of ceremony and offer a new national ceremony that challenges the traditional narrative. We have performed "Also Thus!" more than forty times in Israel and around the world, as well as an official event on Independence Day. When you start to map your education, your physical experiences with the state, from regular security checks in shopping malls, to national rituals, you feel that this very long physical hand of the state designs you as political agent.

"Rebranding Europen Muslims," steirischer herbst Festival, Graz Austria 2012. | Photo: JJ Kucek

Could you talk about how your recent project "Rebranding European Muslims" came about?

DY: This came out of my work with the New Museum in New York, where I realized a project in conjunction with the museum's trienial The "Ungovernables" called "SALONS: Birthright Palestine?,” a series of 'performative public debates' staged as congressional sessions, summit meetings, visioning sessions, diplomatic consultations, secret gatherings and demonstrations, which culminated in a public vote on whether to initiate a Birthright Palestine program, this without predefining the form of the program and who exactly it would be addressed to. I was supported at the New Museum by Artis, a non profit organization supporting Israeli artist abroad, who is also supporting me here at 18th Street.

While working on "SALONS: Birthright Palestine?" I became fascinated by the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque," as it demonstrates the uses and abuses of Fear. I went to meet the owner of the building, Sherrif El Gamal and learned that he had never called it Ground Zero Mosque, but rather the "The Cordoba House," which refers to the southern Spanish city of Cordoba, which during medieval times was a center where Jews, Arabs and Christians lived in peace with each other, flourishing together. Sherrif El Gamal is a real estate man and his idea was to build a cultural center along the lines of a Jewish Community Center or the 92nd Street Ymca, where all cultures and religious backgrounds gather for cultural performances, sports, children activities and more. His vision was a fifteen-floor structure devoted to education, art, sports, restaurants, etc. Two floors were to be devoted to prayer rooms, but it was never intended to be a mosque with minarets.

Story Continues Below
Very few know that the name of this Muslim center was The Cordoba House and what I discovered through my research is that a woman named Pamella Geller, a far right wing political voice, was behind the name "The Ground Zero Mosque." Following a meeting with Pamela I learned that she had hired a branding company, who came up with the title the Ground Zero Mosque in order to demolish any chance for this building to be erected. Branding as well as Nation Branding has become one of the strongest tools for the manipulation of public opinion and the creation of social and political consciousness. This is not new news but it impressed me greatly to contemplate the extent that branding strategists are involved in designing and shaping political conflicts. One can learn of the beginning of this history in the excellent BBC documentary called "The Century of the Self," which portrays the history of branding from its beginning, when psychological discoveries of Sigmund Freud were used by his cousin Edward Bernays to influence corporate advertising, marketing and government control of people. Understanding that branding is a creative tool to be used, I suggested to Sharrif that he join me for a project in which we would invite branding strategists to propose a new strategy for his cultural center, staging this process as directed public gathering at the museum. I never executed this project as planned, but we were able to devote one evening to it at the New Museum in which we hired three branding strategists to a Salon event that was staged as a board meeting. The museum visitors became board members for this Salon. Everyone who came to the New Museum got an information kit and saw three branding pitches. By the end of the evening they had to vote on one new approach for rebranding the "Ground Zero Mosque." Sharrif was present with all his staff members, and it was significant for us to make this a public political process because decisions such as this are usually made behind closed doors. Our intervention created a new form of knowledge sharing and exchange.

"Also Thus!" Festival of four cultures, Lodz Poland 2008. | Photo: Krzysztof Bielinsk

**How did the audience react?**

**DY:** The audience took it extremely seriously and asked many questions. Public Movement invents new form of discursive gathering in which the public feels as a stakeholder, that they have agency to effect national and civic events. This evening at the New Museum with Sharrif was in fact the inspiration for Public Movement's recent action "Rebranding European Muslims." Here, as part of the 2012 Berlin Biennial and Steirscher Herbst Festival Public Movement went to Austria. In conjunction with Austria's yearlong celebration of its 100th year anniversary of recognizing Islam as an official religion, Public Movement orchestrated a large performance of a gala in which we invited three branding strategists to propose a new approach of "rebranding European Muslims," as the Muslim populations have risen sharply across Europe the population has become more and more the focus of right-wing and xenophobic politics. The gala performance that Public Movement organized was one of many events celebrating the anniversary of Austria officially recognizing Islam. Politicians came, it was widely covered in the media.

**Could you talk about your recent project "Honor Guard," which is currently up at the Fourth Asian Art Biennial in Taipei, Taiwan?**

**DY:** Public Movement rarely performs existing projects, simply because it is impossible. All our projects are time and state specific. We create
actions for a specific discourse and in relation to a social and political current concern. Therefore when we were invited to create a new action for Taiwan it started from the very first step with research and on-site visits. We were naturally interested in the complicated history of Taiwan, a state that operates in a sort of liminal space and liminal time. Taiwan is not recognized as a sovereign nation, it has no representation in the UN and is in a disagreement with China, who doesn't recognize it as a separate, independent entity from China, and yet which functions more or less independently. This not-yet-crystallized national identity fascinates us. We observe it as a moment of opportunity and hope for the creation of a new form of identification. At the same time Taiwan has mandatory military service for all men, who must serve one year.

While in Taipei doing research and thinking about the position of Taiwanese identity, Public Movement began to look at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, which sits in Democracy Square in Taipei and is "protected"/ "honored" by the performances of armed soldiers. Every hour there is change of guards/soldiers, which entails an incredibly elaborate choreography that is orchestrated by the state. The soldiers, called Honor Guards, do a twelve-minute performance that changes every three months. The choreography is done in a very decorative style. The Honor Guards learn things like how not to blink during the entire hour, which causes them to have tears in their eyes for the course of the performance. The performance sets up to give an atmosphere of honor and respect.

Observing this ritual, Public Movement suggested creating a new choreography for the honor guards. Our proposal was accepted and we began working with veteran honor guards. A veteran honor guard choreographer even came to Israel to work with us. Together we thought about subverting the more official choreography, inventing new parts that don't use guns; that deal with male unity; a sense of fragility; disorientation. The new choreography that we came up with is being performed once a week for the duration of the Biennale (October 4, 2013- January 5, 2014) in front of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, the identical site where the traditional honor guards perform. The Public Movement performance is happening as we speak.

What is the response of the crowds to this intervention and have you spoken with the veteran honor guards about their experience as actors/performers of this intervention?

DY: There were artists and curators at the opening, but most everyone in Democracy Square on a daily basis does not know that they are witnessing an artistic intervention. For Public Movement this is a crucial moment, the fact that the "art" is perceived as a fact in reality is a way to penetrate the structure and have real influence on how the state performs itself and how it is perceived. As for the veteran honor guards who are participating, they have told me that this is an empowering experience. There is something so stiff and rigid about the traditional performances, but by providing an avenue for individuals to be agents in the creation of this ritual, the act transforms into something that is more about becoming. When you see that you can affect large-scale performances of the state, it enables people to become part of the political process. It was also very interesting to work with the veteran honor guards on this project in that there are no women in the military, and so suddenly all these male soldiers were subjected to my thinking and orders. So there was a shift in terms of one's conception of who can do this; who can embody honor, pride. They don't speak English and we don't speak Chinese so communication for this project used a lot of body language. Public Movement recently received an email from the guards describing how it touched their hearts to get the opportunity to embody more than a single concept (honor/ respect), and that through their
performances with Public Movement they are accessing a much broader range of emotions and history. Words and actions were no longer empty.

**What are you working on here in Los Angeles at 18th Street and what is the next project that Public Movement is undertaking?**

DY: I am mainly teaching in Otis in the Public Practice program and working on a new "performative" book for Sternberg Press, which will come out next year. Public Movement's next project will take place at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and will be the first exhibition in Israel to focus solely on performances and actions that involve only moving bodies, no objects.

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*Top Image: Also Thus! Tel Aviv Museum, Israel 2011. / Photo: Kfir Bolotin.*

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Created by Toronto-based artists Allyson Mitchell and Deidre Logue, and sponsored by the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, "Killjoy's Kastle" is a lesbian feminist haunted house where herstory and Halloween collide.

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Night Shots: John Brian King's Photos of 1980s Los Angeles
As a teen, photographer and filmmaker, John Brian King roamed the terminals of LAX -- and adjacent neighborhoods -- with a camera, snapping away at the people and landmarks he briefly encountered. His upcoming book "LAX: Photographs of Los Angeles 1980-84" is comprised of never-before-seen images that lived inside a storage box for 30 years.

Liz Goldner
Orange + Multi-Disciplinary
The Roots of Radical Art at the University of California, Irvine
Exhibition "A Perforative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine" shone a light on the cutting-edge performance and conceptual art created by UC Irvine students in the 1960s and '70s.

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Born Walter Apatowitz, composer Walter Arlen left Nazi-occupied Austria in 1939 for the United States at age 18. In Los Angeles, Arlen traveled along the coast. The joint effort has been made to make his songs public.

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