Sixty-eight years since the founding of the state of Israel, the country remains torn

by violence and is highly segregated between diverse Jewish and Palestinian communities. The vast majority of Jewish Israeli citizens continue to deny their colonialist status, and there is no foreseeable political resolution to the 49-year military occupation of the West Bank. The current ultra-right-wing government wields its increasingly anti-democratic powers daily, including the constant threat of censorship of the media, regulation of which is directly controlled by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Despite the adverse conditions, there are established museums, commercial galleries and alternative artist-run spaces throughout the country. The Ministry of Culture provides funding for the arts, though its minister Miri Regev has attempted to stifle voices of cultural resistance with threats of terminating official support, stating that these artists tarnish the image and reputation of the Zionist state. The municipalities provide other sources of funding, though the hegemonic centers—mainly Tel Aviv and Jerusalem—get bigger pieces of the pie. Discrimination comes into play too, since Palestinian institutions within Israel’s borders receive even less than their Israeli counterparts. Private parties pick up the slack by subsidizing artist grants and cultural institutions.

Recent years have been rough for Tel Aviv, the cultural heart of Israel, though the art scene manages to stumble forward. Under the direction of chief curator Suzanne Landau, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art hosted a number of significant exhibitions, including “Rooe Rosen – A Group Exhibition” (1/15–4/30), a comprehensive survey exhibition of one of the country’s most outstanding multidisciplinary artists. Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset made their Israeli debut in “Powerless Structures” (4/1–8/27). “David Taratakov: The Exhibition” (6/3–10/24) showcased posters and artifacts from the private collection of the politically inclined graphic designer. The Zik Group’s 25-meter architectural structure of mixed-referents, Minaret of Defense (2016), rose through the atrium of the museum’s newly constructed Herta and Paul Amir Building (5/12–11/5). In February, there was controversy when the museum canceled an already postponed exhibition of AI Weiwei and Miki Kratsman about their respective experiences in Gaza. The museum blamed it on scheduling conflicts, but some in the local art scene suspected self-censorship.

Tel Aviv’s most prominent nonprofit art space, the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), kicked off the year with the first solo show of composer Maya Dunietz (12/31/15–2/27), which received rave reviews. The central piece at the show was a site-specific, room-wide installation comprising 10,000 intertwined earbuds. CCA later presented “The Eye of The Sea” (3/1–5/14) by up-and-comer Yael Efrati, and later Gaston Zvi Ickowicz’s “Nesting” (8/18–10/15), which featured a five-channel video about the construction of the new Palestinian city of Rawabi, north of Ramallah.

There are roughly 50 active commercial galleries in Tel Aviv. In the city center, on Rothschild Boulevard, Sommer Contemporary Art exhibited paintings by Lihl Turjeman of places in Israel-Palestine with national or religious historic significance, such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, in “Center of Gravity”

One of the most memorable exhibitions of 2016 took place at Dvir Gallery, "The Guide for the Perplexed, Homonyms" (5/14–6/25) by photographer Yossi Breger, a precise and thoughtful show of text-based works by a beloved artist and teacher who suddenly died a week after the show opened. Later in the year, the gallery featured new works by Shilpa Gupta (7/23–9/10) and Naama Tsabar’s sonic installations in "Translations #2" (10/29–12/3).

Elsewhere in the same neighborhood of Kiryat Hamelacha, which is now Tel Aviv’s gallery district, Rosenfeld Gallery held the elegant show of new paintings by Zamir Shatz, "Drift" (4/21–6/11). At Hezi Cohen Gallery, the show "P N Possibly Next" (2/18–4/2) consisted of new installations about the often-tragic effects of the city’s construction boom by the renowned sculptor Drora Dominey. The artist-run nonprofit Indie Photography Group Gallery mounted an exhibition of one of its members, Ronit Porat, her second exhibition in the gallery, "The Hunter of Time" (7/21–8/13). Further east, Braverman Gallery featured a solo exhibition by Yonatan Vinitsky, "After 12 Comes 1" (2/4–3/17), in which the artist continued with his preoccupation with the notion of scale and features in sculpture.

In northern Tel Aviv, Gordon Gallery, the older sister of Gordon Gallery 2, ended the year with Gal Weinstein’s carpet installations, some resembling either camouflage patterns or quiet fields seen through the eyes of a bird in flight (10/27–12/3). Givon Art Gallery hosted Maya Atoum’s “Half Full” (11/26/15–1/16), an impressive installation of drawing, objects and sound that explored the meaning of hypertextualization. Givon’s neighbor, Ha’Kibbutz Israeli Art Gallery, presented Tchelet Ram’s "Bat Bait" (4/1–5/7), in which the artist redefined the gallery’s exhibition space by hanging large sheets of plastic as new walls.

Tel Aviv has several important nonprofit art spaces. The stalwart Artport is a private nonprofit that offers annual residencies for six local artists. It organized a wide range of public events, including the ongoing Art Magazine Reading Group and the Artport Art Book Fair (1/28–30). The alternative space Zochrot runs educational and cultural events that promote acknowledgment and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the Nakba that began in 1948 when Palestinians were expelled from their land on a massive scale. Its second annual "Houses Beyond the Hyphen" project (5/12–14) showed works by artists such as film director Kamal al-Ja’far and Samah Shehade. The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery at Tel Aviv University has been the subject of controversy in recent years because the private collection of Igal Ahouvi occupies three-quarters of the exhibition space. Nevertheless, Vered Nisim’s first major solo show, "Reverie" (3/4–6/10), which took place in the remaining area, was one of the year’s highlights. As its name suggests, the two-year-old Lobby art space is situated in the entrance of a residential building, and featured “The Face Was Abstraction” (5/26–7/16) by Dana Darvish, about Constantin Brancusi’s 1910 sculpture Sleeping Muse.

South of Tel Aviv, the Israeli Center for Digital Art, in the city of Holon, embarked on a new direction, transforming its two-story exhibition space into multiple project rooms. Some focused on durational process with the neighborhood’s residents, such as artist duo Eli and Amir’s research exhibition “The Complete Jessy Cohen Museum” (9/27–12/9), which was the result of their six-month residency at the center. Also in Holon, the Institute for Public Presence serves as a platform for research, scholarship and discussion of art and action. In the city just to the west, the Museums of Bat Yam launched a two-part project, “The Kids Want Communism” (2/25–6/25; 7/28–11/19), curated by director Joshua Simon, marking 99 years since the Communist Revolution with group exhibitions and artist talks.

Another institution just east of Tel Aviv is the Petach Tikva Museum of Art, which showed the group exhibition “Bi-ble-o-logia: The Book as Body” (11/26/15–3/26) about connections, associations and interactions that bind together the human body and books. Established artist Larry Abramson curated the contemporary survey of abstraction, “Take Painting” (9/15–12/24), which featured works by Alon Kedem Sagie Azoulay and six others including the curator.
Annexed Jerusalem, the second-largest center for art in Israel, is home to the national Israel Museum. Its 2016 program included the comprehensive and impressive exhibition “Whitewash and Tar” (4/20–10/29) by artist Efrat Natan, as well as the architectural exhibition “Social Construction: Modern Architecture in British Mandate Palestine” (7/7–2/17/17).

The artist-run space Mamuta Art and Media Center continued to be a pivotal alternative arena in the city’s art scene; among their projects was the photo and video exhibition “Broken Kayfabe” (7/12–8/20) by mixed-media artist Keren Shavit. Elsewhere in the city, the 51-year-old Jerusalem Artists’ House rounded off the year with the sixth Biennial for Drawing (11/26–2/11) featuring works by 83 local artists. The gallery space at the Art Cube Artists’ Studios, in Talpiot, holds regular exhibitions such as the photographs of strange sites around the Dead Sea by resident-artist Yaakov Israel (4/8–7/1). Directed by Raphie Etgar, the sociopolitically focused Museum on the Seam lost its funding from the von Holtzbrinck Family Foundation in Germany at the end of 2015, but has so far remained open with support from other sources.

In other parts of the country, the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art featured several solo projects by local and international artists. Among them were Orly Sever’s wood and tar constructions in “Wall Run” (5/28–9/3), Leigh Orpaz’s visions through security technologies and archival recordings in “The Present Continuous” (1/16–4/30) and Beijing-based installation artist Zhong Ning’s “The Call of Utopia” (9/29–12/24). In 2016, the Herzliya Artists’ Residence opened its renovated space, with a promising program under the new direction of Ran Kasmy Ilan, including the group show “What’s Too Painful to Remember We Simply Choose to Forget” (5/21–7/2).

Further north, the Museum of Art, Ein Harod showcased “A New Horizon for New Horizons” (2/27–7/31), which examined the historical and contemporary perspectives on the Ofakim Hadashim group, an important movement in Israeli Art. The Umm el-Fahem Gallery in the Palestinian-Arab city of the same name, inaugurated its spacious, newly renovated exhibition hall with the exhibition of large paintings by Gershon Kispel created for São Paulo’s Resistance Memorial Museum about 20th-century injustice, “When the Cannons Roar” (11/12–11/12).

Internationally, at the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo (9/7–12/11), artist Michal Helfman presented a video installation entitled Running out of History (2015–16). In Europe, Zvi Goldstein’s biggest show to date, “Distance and Differences” (6/25–10/23) was held at SKAM in Gent, Belgium. Across the border in the Netherlands, Tamar Harpaz concluded her two-year residency at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam. Elsewhere in Europe, photographer Ilit Azoulay participated in several exhibitions, among them the 6th cycle of the prestigious PRIX Pictet (2/3–12/17) and “Photography Today: Distant Realities” (9/30–12/29) at Munich’s Pinakothek der Moderne. Also in Germany, Jan Tichy’s “Installation No. 29 (Neues Rathaus)” (11/18–1/8) was mounted in Kunsthalle Osnabrück. Einat Amir took her participatory performance, Enough About You (10/15–16), to Rome’s MAXXI. Omer Fast’s film works were surveyed at the BALTIK Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, England (3/18–6/26). Mika Rottenberg held shows in Paris at Palais de Tokyo (6/23–9/11) and Galerie Laurent Godin (8/30–9/24).

In the United States, performative group Public Movement organized “Choreographies of Power” (9/24–25) and the recurring weekend meeting series “Debriefing Session II” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, as part of the show “But a Storm Is Blowing From Paradise” (4/29–10/5). Michal Rovner’s photographs of animals at night were shown at Pace Gallery in New York (9/16–10/22).

The traveling exhibition tracing the development of contemporary video practice in Israel, “Staring Back at the Sun: Video Art from Israel, 1972–2012,” had stops at the New Museum in New York (2/20–21), and Hauser Wirth & Schimmel gallery in Los Angeles (11/19). In Canada, Ana Paula Cohen curated an exhibition at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity of three recent video projects by Yael Bartana (6/22–9/18). Elad Lassry’s photography was featured at LUMA Arles, in France (7/4–10/24).

In October, Israel lost one of its esteemed art critics, Gaila Yahav, who died of cancer at the age of 48. Yahav was a devoted, harsh and uncompromising voice whose weekly reviews appeared in the Haaretz newspaper. A better note was the launch of independent online outlet Toha Magazine, which provides critical discourse on significant trends in contemporary art, emphasizing their local expressions.

Looking ahead to 2017, CCA Tel Aviv will host two exhibitions by alumni of Columbia University’s MFA program, first for Tall Keren and then Trevor Paglen. Jaffa-based Dor Guez will present the third segment of his military history project, “The Sick Man of Europe” (2015–), at the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem in January 2017, and then at Depo Istanbul eight months later. Southward, the Arad Art & Architecture art space is developing a residency program for local and international artists and designers. The Ashdod Museum of Art will open a group show concerning Mizrahi music. Composer and musician Noam Inbar will stage his event-based project at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art between January and July. Gal Weinstein will represent the country in the Israel Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale in May. Roe Rosen will participate in Documenta 14 in both locations, Athens in April and Kassel beginning in June.

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