After 50 years of Israel’s military occupation in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem, there is no foreseeable political resolution in sight. The current ultra-right wing government supports the settler movement and passes anti-democratic laws and regulations on a daily basis. Despite this bleak outlook, public attention was more focused on the alleged corruption scandals surrounding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is supported by his close ally, the United States president, Donald J. Trump. In December, Trump announced that the US would officially recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Despite these 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’s quest to stifle voices that question the state’s Zionist and Jewish character is as strong as ever. She has, in the past, terminated official support for cultural institutions as a way to encourage self-censorship. Municipalities provide other sources of funding, though the hegemonic centers—mainly Tel Aviv and Jerusalem—get bigger pieces of the pie. Explicit displays of discrimination are evident, as Palestinian institutions within Israel’s borders receive less than their Israeli counterparts.

In Tel Aviv, the cultural heart of Israel, Tel Aviv Museum of Art continued its process of revitalization by appointing the outspoken artist and curator Doron Rabina as its chief curator. The museum’s more open curatorial agenda was evident in a series of live performances, “Preaching to the Choir” (1/26–7/6), organized by musician and performance artist Noam Inbar. The museum debut for young artist Tamir Zadok, “Art Undercover” (9/19–2/24/18), featured his new video work as well as past videos and photographs. “T’wosome” (9/7–2/17/18) was the first comprehensive overview of Louise Bourgeois’s work in Israel, and “Total Red: Photography” (10/26–2/10/18), an exhibition dedicated to early 20th-century Soviet photographers, commemorated the centennial of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Jerusalem, the second-largest center for art in Israel, is home to the national Israel Museum. After several months without a director, Ido Bruno, a professor from the industrial design department of Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, was appointed. The main exhibition this year was Ai Weiwei’s “Maybe, Maybe Not” (6/2–3/3/18). The museum also held a solo exhibition by the prominent artist Ilit Azoulay, “No Thing Dies” (6/3–12/2), for which she investigated the museum’s past objects and stories, as well as an exhibition of photography work by Micha Bar-Am, focusing on his documentation of the 1967 war (5/16–10/23).

Programs at local alternative spaces and festivals in Jerusalem earned the most attention and interest in 2017. The artist-run space Mamuta Art and Media Center exhibited graphic novels (in an exhibition format) about life in Tel Aviv in Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmeli’s dual show “Please Behave Naturally” (10/25–12/16). The gallery space at the Art Cube Artists’ Studios, which also runs a residency program, presented the second collaboration between Israeli artist Yael Frank and Polish artist Magdalena Franczak, “The Day When..."
Nothing Happened” (4/3–6/30), partly comprised of joint paintings and sculptural objects. The Mekudeshet festival expanded its engagement with contemporary art, and organized events in public spaces around the city including “Echoes,” a night of experimental music performances in a valley next to the Monastery of the Cross (8/31). Jerusalem’s contemporary art festival, Manofim, hosted the feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles as the keynote speaker of the Jerusalem Art Conference (10/24–25).

In Tel Aviv, the most prominent nonprofit art space, the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), appointed a new director and chief curator, Nicola Trezzini, formerly the head of Bezalel’s master of fine arts program, who replaced founding director Sergio Edelsstein. Noa Yafe’s “The Perfect Crime” featured an installation disguised as a photography exhibition (1/19–3/18), and Tali Keren invited the audience to read speeches of Israeli and American politicians in the exhibition space in “The Great Seal” (6/15–8/19). Michal Baror’s project “Looters,” featuring objects and photographs taken from the Israel Antiquities Authority, was held simultaneously with the new video work Behold These Glorious Times! (2017) by the acclaimed American artist Trevor Paglen (both 11/9–1/6/18).

There are roughly 50 active commercial galleries in Tel Aviv. In the city center, on Rothschild Boulevard, Sommer Contemporary Art exhibited one of the most notable works of 2017 in the show “Escape Artists” (12/15/16–3/4), by Guy Ben-Ner who created a video together with imprisoned African refugees at Holot detention center in the south of Israel.

Nearby Noga Gallery hosted Michael Halak’s solo show “Memories from the Future” (9/7–10/29), featuring his hyperrealistic paintings of drawers full of personal objects. At Hezi Cohen Gallery the group show “Manifest Destiny” (9/7–10/21) featured a few high-profile artists in the local scene, such as Alma Itzhaki, Ron Amir and the renowned sculptor Drora Dominey.

To the city’s south, Dvir Gallery staged one of the year’s outstanding exhibitions, “Hope House” (9/2–12/2), by British artist Simon Fujiwara, featuring a life-scale reconstruction of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. Elsewhere in the same neighborhood of Kiryat Hamelacha—which is now Tel Aviv’s gallery district—Raw Art Gallery’s curators Lea Abir and Tali Ben Nun brought together works by Israeli artists inspired by the late American artist Mike Kelley (5/13–7/10). Rosenfeld Gallery held “Ma’aseh Merkabah (The Act of Assembly)” (1/5–2/11), showing paper-based compositions of dramatic landscapes, as well as a site-specific installation by Shirley Wegner, followed by a solo show of artist Tal Shohat, “Lessons in Time” (10/26–12/2), featuring new photographs dealing with the artist’s family and the passage of time. The exhibition ran parallel to Shohat’s showing in “Other Days” (9/14–12/16) at the Pechat Tikva Museum of Art.

In northern Tel Aviv, Gordon Gallery hosted Michel Platnic’s video Genesis-deGenesis (2017) (4/27–6/3), as well as senior artist Asaf Ben Zvi’s new paintings in “There Was No Mountain” (3/2–4/15) and Philip Rantzer’s installations involving bicycles, drawings and architectural models (11/2–12/2). Artist Leor Grady had a notable exhibition at Ha’Kibbutz Israeli Art Gallery (12/22/16–2/4), in which he explored his interest in the role of the Yemenites within Zionism through videos, paintings and text works.

One of Tel Aviv’s most important nonprofit art spaces, Artport—a private initiative that offers annual residencies for local artists—closed its doors temporarily due to the demolishing of the industrial space for a high-rise. It plans to reopen in a different location in 2018. Before closing down, the space hosted its popular annual Art Book Fair (1/26–28) and the multi-event series, “Motions for the Agenda” (5/6–6/16), curated by Avi Feldman.

In November, the human-rights group B’Tselem held the exhibition “Fifty Years” (11/7–12/7) at the Jaffa Art Salon, featuring 50 portraits of Palestinians born in 1967 taken by more than 40 artists and curated by Maayan Shalevet.

A very different type of nonprofit is Minus I art space, which presents exhibitions of artworks from the sizable art collection assembled by the owner of liberal newspaper Haaretz. The main exhibition for 2017 was the group show “Bad Taste” (6/2–8/26), dedicated to painting, photographs and sculptures dealing with the Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery at Tel Aviv University has been the subject of controversy since 2013 when a private collector rented three-quarters of the exhibition space. After the deal ended, the whole space was dedicated to the exhibition “Migration” (3/14–6/30),

YIFAT BEZALEL. The Lovers, 2015, pencil drawing on paper, 220 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tel Aviv Museum of Art.
presenting collaborations between artists and scientists dealing with different forms of migration.

As its name suggests, the three-year-old **The Lobby** art space is situated in the entrance of a residential building, and features modest but compelling solo shows and small group exhibitions, such as “Simple Experiments in Physics” (1/5–2/18) by Relli De Vries, featuring objects that the artist collected from public spaces and then assembled, and Leoni Schén’s architectural-archives-based show “6902/30” (10/19–11/25).

Art institutions outside of major cities presented engaging shows. In the far south, near the Dead Sea, at the **Arad Contemporary Art Center**, its artistic director and head curator Hadas Kedar runs exhibitions dedicated to issues of landscape and politics such as “Sinkholes” (6/2–8/6) with Israeli and international artists.

South of Tel Aviv, the **Israel Center for Digital Art** in the city of Holon focuses on long-duration projects and cooperates with local residents after transforming its exhibition space into a multipurpose project rooms in 2016. One of these projects, a neighborhood museum, embarked on a new research project led by artist Gal Leshem. Another sub-institute initiated by the center, called the Institute for Public Presence, mounts small-scale exhibitions dedicated to the history of art in public space in Israel, such as “Instruction Manual” (4/29–8/15), an homage to works by prominent Israeli artists from the 1970s.

Just to the west of Holon, the **Museums of Bat Yam** launched the third and final part of the project “The Kids Want Communism” (6/22–11/11), curated by director Joshua Simon to mark the centenary of the Russian Revolution. The **Pethach Tikva Museum of Art**, east of Tel Aviv, featured the international group exhibition “Citizens” (4/6–8/5), looking at the role individuals play in today’s fragile democracies.

North of Tel Aviv, the **Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art** exhibited clusters of solo projects. The most captivating of these was “In Her Footsteps” (1/14–4/22), comprised of eight projects by female artists that are loosely based on real or fictitious narratives of female characters. Among them were AP – Artist Proof, Asylum (The Dress, 1855–2017) by established artist Michal Heiman; and Rethinking Broken Lines – A Tribute to Heda Oren by Hilla Ben Ari, the winner of the 2017 Ministry of Culture and Sport’s prize for video artists. At the nearby **Herzliya Artists’ Residence**, artist Orit Adar Bechar projected her impressive multichannel video installation **The Arnolfinis** (2017) (4/27–6/20).

In the northern city of Haifa, the nonprofit **Beit HaGefen**—an Arab-Jewish cultural center—has begun to build its own collection. Its new curator, Yael Messer, invited artists to submit works that reflect on the process of collectivization and later become part of it, through the exhibition “Self-Collecting” (12/14–4/7/18). The city has recently witnessed a flourishing of the Palestinian art scene, evident by the opening of artist-run spaces such as **Fattoush Gallery** and **Manjim Haifa Culture Lab**.

In the northeastern part of the country, at **Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod**, new chief director and curator Yaniv Shapira presented a group of female Russian-origin painters documenting everyday life in Israel, “The New Barbizon: Back to Life” (1/21–4/28). Later on, the museum exhibited a series of individual shows in “Euphoria Project” (5/30–10/1), to commemorate the 1967 war and mark the 50 years of occupation, and hosted solo exhibitions of artists such as Shuka Glotman, Danny Lavie and Guy Briller. Nearby, the **Beit Uri and Rami Nehostan Museum** appointed curator Smadar Keren, who has injected a contemporary flair into the museum with a show of disturbing paintings, “Cave of Multiplication” (9/16–12/23), by Elad Laron.

Two major controversies stood out in 2017. The Jerusalem municipality tried to close the artist-run gallery **Barbur** after it hosted an event for civil-rights organization Breaking the Silence, composed of Israeli army veterans who oppose the occupation. Pressure coming from the art scene and the persistence of the gallery crew led local officials to postpone the decision. The **Mediterranean Biennale**’s third edition, led by the Arab Museum of Contemporary Art in Israel, showed artworks borrowed from a French public collection without the permission of several Arab artists—leading artists to demand their removal, either because they are Lebanese citizens (Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad), and are thus forbidden by law to exhibit in Israel, or because they did not want to exhibit in Israel. Israeli artists were well represented abroad. Gal Rosenstein created an installation evoking the pervading violence and decay of Israeli society in the Israel Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (5/13–11/26). The multidisciplinary artist Roeen Rosen participated in Documenta 14 with three different works. The Benaki Museum in Athens showed his mixed-media project and in Kassel, Rosen premiered the newly commissioned video, **The Dust Channel** (2016). Mika Rottenberg exhibited her new video work **Cosmic Generator** (2017) at Skulpture Projekte Münster (6/10–10/1). Jaffa-based artist Dor Guez held his first solo show in Turkey at Istanbul’s Depo art space (9/15–10/29), featuring a video and photographs related to the life of a Turkish architect in the 1930s. Uzuem Art Center, Riga, hosted a survey of Israeli artists curated by philosopher Roy Brandt, “Dreams and Dramas” (10/7–11/6). The performance group Public Movement performed a new long-duration version of their choreography **Rescue** in Aarhus, Denmark, as part of European Cultural Capital events (8/18–19).

Looking ahead, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art will host a retrospective for the distinguished Israeli architect, Arieh Sharon. In June, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem will mount a retrospective of Christian Boltanski. One of the pioneers of digital art in Israel, Miri Segal, will have a solo show at Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, while the Oscar-nominated Palestinian filmmaker Scandar Copti will have his first solo exhibition at Beit HaGefen in Haifa.

GILAD REICH

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