

israel

OFFICIAL COUNTRY NAME

STATE OF ISRAEL

LANGUAGES

HEBREW, ARABIC

POPULATION

7,112,359

MEDIAN AGE

28.9 YEARS OLD

GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT PER CAPITA

US \$26,600

The statistical figures are from the CIA World Factbook.



TOTAL VALUE OF ART EXPORTED	US \$70,318,000
ARTS FUNDING	US \$13,900,000
ART PROGRAMS (UNIVERSITY-LEVEL)	8
STUDENTS ENROLLED	4,500
MUSEUMS EXHIBITING CONTEMPORARY ART (PUBLIC + PRIVATE)	20
CONTEMPORARY ART SPACES (NON-PROFIT)	200
COMMERCIAL CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERIES	300
FOUNDATIONS (NGO + PRIVATE)	7

The statistical figures are 2008 estimates. The figures are taken from the most recent censuses and information.

Sources and Acknowledgments: Art Exported – United Nations Comtrade Database; The Israel Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport; Yael Bartana, Guy Ben-Ner, Hadas Ophrat, Rivka Saker, Smadar Sheffi.



Installation view of ART TLV 08, Helena Rubinstein Pavilion, Tel Aviv. Courtesy ART TLV, Tel Aviv.

Sixty years after its establishment in 1948, Israel boasts a

world-class software and pharmaceutical industries. The democratic nation, isolated by its contentious and often violent relationship with its neighbors, has built a sophisticated arts infrastructure that receives heavy subsidies from the government and private patrons in Israel and overseas. State-sponsored museums are plentiful throughout Israel but the main contemporary-arts center is Tel Aviv, home to blue-chip galleries and cutting-edge artists.

High points in 2008 were the launch of Art TLV (SEE AAP 61), Tel Aviv’s first international contemporary art festival, and the much-anticipated return of Jerusalem’s contemporary art mega-exhibition Art Focus (SEE ART FESTIVALS). These events were complemented by a nationwide museum collaboration celebrating 60 years of Israeli art and a full schedule of exhibitions in galleries and alternative art spaces.

The inaugural **Art TLV** (9/27-10/18) was launched by a commercially-minded group comprised of the owners of Dvir and Sommer galleries, the auction house **Sotheby’s Israel** and the New York-based Israeli art organization, **artis**, with the aim of promoting Tel Aviv’s art scene to the international art market. The festival’s primary component was the thematic exhibition “Open Plan Living,” which addressed the city’s modernist heritage, on view in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art’s branch dedicated to contemporary art, the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion, and the adjacent Yaacob Gardens. Curated by **Andrew Renton**, head of the curatorial studies department at London’s Goldsmiths college, the show brought together leading international names such as Berlin-based Israeli video artist **Yael Bartana**,

provocative British artist Sarah Lucas and former Turner Prize-nominee Mark Titchner.

The same week in Jerusalem, the fifth installment of the government-funded large-scale exhibition **Art Focus**, “Can Art Do More?” (9/23-10/23)—inspired by French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard’s famous statement, “What does art want? Everything. What can art do? Nothing. What does art do? Something.”—was curated by **Ami Barak** and **Bernard Blistene** and examined art’s socio-political role in Israel. Taking place at the Talpiot Beit Benit Congress Center, the exhibition tied in with national anniversary celebrations and consisted of 66 international artists including Indian conceptual sculptor Subodh Gupta (SEE ALMANAC 1, 3 & AAP 41, 48) and Israel-born, Berlin-based filmmaker **Keren Cytter**, whose *Der Spiegel* (*The Mirror*) (2007) fuses an array of deconstructed narratives about friends and



BOAZ ARAD, *Untitled*, 2008, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.



thriving economy driven by

family members into a documentary-style video. Also of note was the inclusion of prominent Israeli filmmaker Uri Zohar's pioneering film, *A Hole in the Moon* (1964), about early Jewish settlers from Eastern Europe and North Africa. The exhibition failed to include any Palestinian artists despite its international and political bent. In the published curators' text, Blistène bemoans that all of the invited Palestinian artists—unnamed—refused to participate.

Organized by the **60's Headquarters**, an office linking the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport, the Cultural Administration and the Department of Museums, nation-wide celebrations of Israel's anniversary included "**Six Decades, Six Museums**," for which six public art museums collaborated to survey defining trends in Israeli art in each decade from the 1940s to the present.

Starting with the **Museum of Art, Ein Harod**, built in the 1930s in the northeastern Jezreel Valley, "The First Decade: Hegemony and Plurality" (8/2-12/28) examined the many strains of art in the 1948-58 period, including the Israeli modernist collective **New Horizons**, founded in 1948 by painter Yosef Zaritsky with Marcel Janco, Arie Aroch and Moshe Castel. The upheaval of modernist values in the 1960s, led by artist Raffi Lavie's American Pop art-influenced **10+ group**, was the subject of "The Birth of 'Now': Art in Israel in the 1960s" (7/26-12/15) at the **Ashdod Museum of Art's** Monart Center. Prominent Israeli art historian **Mordechai Omer** traced the beginnings of post-modernism in Israel in the **Tel Aviv Museum of Art's** "My Own Body: Art in Israel in the 1970s" (7/31-9/13). The **Haifa Museum of Art's**

"Check-Post: Art in Israel in the 1980s" (7/12-12/28), organized in-house by curator Ilana Tenebaum, concentrated on artists who came of age in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, such as photographer **Barry Frydlander** and political filmmaker Amos Gitai. Artist-curator Doron Rabina's "Eventually We'll Die: Young Art in Israel of the 1990s" (5/3-8/9), at the **Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art**, offered a political view on the violence that has plagued Israel, with works by artists such as Israel's representative at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Yehudit Sasportas (SEE AAP 53), and video artist **Guy Ben-Ner** (SEE AAP 49, 51, 61). Rounding out the six-part project, Jerusalem's **Israel Museum** hosted "Real Time: Art in Israel 1998-2008" (4/29-8/15), organized by the museum's curator of Israeli art, Amitai Mendelsohn, and guest curator Natan Efrat, with contributions from video artist Yael Bartana, photographer **Adi Nes** and Israeli-Arab artist **Sharif Waked**, known for satirical videos that explore Arab masculinity.

On the commercial front, Tel Aviv's blue-chip galleries were emboldened by the festival atmosphere and the attention from Art TLV to showcase their top artists in concurrent exhibitions. Israel's leading contemporary art gallery, **Sommer Contemporary**, hosted satirical videomaker Doron Solomons (2/14-3/21) and German installation artist and Art TLV participant Thomas Zipp (9/5-10/18). **Noga Gallery** presented Tel Aviv-born Ori Gersht's recent series of films and photographs depicting classical still-lives—lifted from Dutch and French paintings—in mid-explosion (9/4-10/24). **Rosenfeld Gallery** mounted Boaz Arad's sculptures and paintings of famous individuals' faces subtly transposed onto modernist-style backdrops (9/11-10/25). **Dvir Gallery** focused on political matters with a mid-career



YOSEF ZARITSKY, *Yehiam*, 1951. Courtesy MoA, Ein Harod.

retrospective of photographer Pavel Wolberg (2/21-3/29), with 100 unflinching portrayals of the social disparities in Israel.

Chelouche Gallery, known for political art, exhibited **Gideon Gechtman's** full-scale models of the crude Qassam rockets produced by Hamas militants to bombard Israeli border towns (9/18-11/1). Only weeks after the completion of his exhibition, Gechtman, who was born in 1942 in Alexandria, Egypt, died of heart failure (11/27). Gechtman represented Israel at the 2001 Venice Biennale and frequently addressed themes of death in his work, as in his 2002 installation *Yotam*, a reconstructed hospital environment named after his dead son.

The ranks of Tel Aviv's big-name galleries are growing. **Alon Segev Gallery**, which is moving to a new location in the city in late 2008, hosted a solo show by young artist Gideon Rubin of faceless family portraits, "Family Album" (9/2-10/3). Another gallery in transition, **Julie M**, which is preparing to launch a second gallery space in Toronto, Canada, mounted young artist Shai Kremer's photographs of bombed-out Syrian mosques in the Golan Heights (9/18-10/31). **Dollinger Projects** focuses on emerging artists and invited young Israeli curator Liav



GIDEON GECHTMAN, *Launching Apparatus*, 2008, painted Qassam missiles, launchers, aluminum casing, iron, wood, dimensions variable. Installation view at Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv. Photo by Lior Chervinsky. Courtesy Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv.

Rivka Saker

is a co-founder of Art TLV, an international art initiative that debuted in Tel Aviv in 2008, and created the nonprofit Artis – Contemporary Israeli Art Fund in 2004 to promote and support Israeli contemporary art projects in the US, Europe and Israel. Saker founded Sotheby's Israel in 1984, where she is currently chairwoman, and is a senior director of Sotheby's Europe. She is a trustee and board member of numerous institutions in Israel including the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Center for Contemporary Art.

I start this piece with a debate between two great Israeli philosophers, Avi Ravitsky and Yeshiyahu Leibowitz, about intellectuals and artists in our society:

“An intellectual is defined as such not because of his profession or the functions he fulfills in society, but because of his special virtue to think about the same things other people know. This process of thinking and dealing with the known but showing us new options of interpretation—albeit sometimes utopian—gives society an alternative to the reality we live in. Intellectuals and artists have the social and political responsibility to act towards change and progress.”

Unfortunately, most of today's politicians lack these virtues. But artists' special observations, identifications with injustice and cries for needed change are what led me in 2004 to found Artis – Contemporary Israeli Art Fund. In an age of war, human rights abuses and environmental disasters, artists encourage us to think differently, acknowledge important issues and engage in collective dialogue. Israeli art today expresses our society's openness, our courage to face self-criticism and the power of freedom of expression.

Artis is a nonprofit organization that supports and promotes Israeli contemporary art internationally. Based in Tel Aviv and New York, Artis aims to further Israel's cultural development by providing a portal to the best exhibitions, performances, projects and events by Israeli artists living and working anywhere in the world. With the financial and organizational help of Artis, three Israeli artists held the first Israeli solo shows at New York's Museum of Modern Art and PS1 Contemporary Art Center in the past two years: Barry Frydlander (May 2007), Sigalit Landau (March 2008) and Yael Bartana (October 2008).

September 2008 saw another benchmark with the inauguration of Art TLV '08 in Tel Aviv (SEE ISRAEL, ART FESTIVALS & AAP 61). Founded by Irit Fine Sommer, Shifra Shalit Interator, Yehudit Shapira Haviv and myself, this event launches a tradition that not only reveals artistic junctions between East and West, but encourages artistic experiments to initiate exchange between local and international communities. Art TLV '09 will be timed to coincide with biennials in Istanbul and Athens, establishing a powerful draw for art lovers to travel to this part of the world.

Israeli art has only recently been met with international approval and interest. Over the course of its 60-year history, Israel has emerged as an artistic platform in one of the world's most highly contested crossroads, and has positioned its contemporary art to examine boundaries of place, self and time. Reflecting the country's melting pot of religion, culture and identity, Israeli art has moved away from its founding Zionist and European homogeneous roots towards a narrative that in fact celebrates difference and diversity within its own borders.



Courtesy Rivka Saker



KEREN CYTTER, video still of *Der Spiegel*, 2007, video, 4 min 50 sec. Courtesy ArtFocus 5, Jerusalem.

Mizrachi to show German and Israeli artists in “Movement In Flexibility” (7/30-9/5) and later took part in Berlin’s new fringe art fair, Preview Berlin (10/30-11/2).

Israel also boasts a strong community of nonprofit spaces. Tel Aviv’s **Center for Contemporary Art (CCA)**, run by Sergio Edelzstein and Diana Shoef, maintains an independent curatorial program devoted to new-media art. This year CCA mounted a major solo exhibition by globe-trotting Yael Bartana, “Short Memory” (4/10-6/12), that included her new video *Mary Koszmary* (2007), showing the left-wing Polish literary critic Slawomir Sierakowski standing in an empty Warsaw stadium proposing that Poland invite Jews back to the country. CCA followed up with a touring group show, “From and About Place: Art from Los Angeles” (9/18-11/18), guest-curated by Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art curator Alma Ruiz, and capped the year with its fourth annual video festival Videozone (11/25-12/1).

Departing from the mainstream Israeli art scene are independent organizations such as the **Museum on the Seam** in Jerusalem and the **Israeli Center for Digital Art** in the industrial town of Holon. The Museum on the Seam’s group show “HeartQuake” (7/18-12/28) examined the strained relationship between society and the environment and featured Armenian Vahram Aghasyan’s photographs of the earthquake-devastated city of Gyumri and Chile-born artist Alfredo Jaar’s silent film, *Epilogue* (2008), depicting the atrocities of the 1990s genocide in Rwanda. The **Israeli Center for Digital Art** presented “Twisted Reality” (4/24-6/28), in which Palestinian artist Shadi Habib Allah’s film *On-going Tale* (2007) was featured alongside Cao Fei’s video of China Tracy, Cao’s Second-Life avatar, navigating a virtual city-state, part of the artist’s ongoing project *RMB City* (2007-, [SEE ASP 57, 61](#)).

The Arab-Israeli community—who hold Israeli citizenship but whose political and cultural sentiments lean towards the Palestinians, and who largely exhibit with

their peers in Palestine, the Arab world and internationally—broke ground for the first time at Israel’s **LA Mayer Museum for Islamic Art** in Jerusalem. “Correspondence: 13 Arabic Artists Investigating Reality” (8/1-1/31/09), with black-and-white landscape photographs by London-based Walid Abu-Shakra, childhood-themed paintings by Asad Azi and others, was the first group exhibition of local Arab artists at an Israeli museum. The show’s curator, artist Farid Abu Shakra, is brother of Said Abu Shakra, a gallery owner in the northern city of Umm el-Fahim who is working to build Israel’s first museum dedicated to Arab contemporary art.

Internationally, the 2008 festivities extended to museums devoted to Jewish culture and heritage. In Europe, the Jewish

History Museum in Amsterdam organized “Art of the State: Contemporary Photography and Video Art from Israel” (6/27-11/30). In Frankfurt, the Jewish Museum surveyed Israeli contemporary art in a two-part show, “Access to Israel 1 & 2” (5/14-8/30 and 9/12-11/16). In the US, the Katzen Museum in Washington, DC, mounted the group show “Personal Landscapes: Contemporary Art from Israel” (4/1-5/18).

2008 was also a significant year internationally for artists Guy Ben-Ner, **Sigalit Landau** and Yael Bartana. Ben-Ner had a solo show at New York’s Postmasters Gallery (1/5-2/16) and was also commissioned to make a new work for the Liverpool Biennial (9/10-11/30, [SEE ART FESTIVALS](#)), for which he used a fox and a crow trained for Hollywood films to make a video riffing on the Aesop fable about how to outwit others through flattery, as well as Samuel Beckett’s classic existentialist play, *Waiting for Godot*. At New York’s Museum of Modern Art, media curator Klaus Biesenbach presented Landau’s barbed-wire sculptures coated in Dead Sea salt alongside video works (3/19-7/28) and then brought more Israeli video to MoMA-affiliate PS 1 Contemporary Art Center with the first US survey of work by Bartana (10/19-1/9/09).

In 2009, watch for the second edition of **Herzliya Contemporary Art Biennale**. Internationally, Israel will return to the Venice Biennale and Art TLV has teamed up with next year’s Istanbul Biennial and Athens Biennale to form the coordinated Istanbul-Athens-Tel Aviv – Triangle Arts TLV. **SR**

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