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**DANA LEVY**, *Treehouse*, 2005, video still. Courtesy Art TLV, Tel Aviv.

## AUSPICIOUS START FOR NEW FESTIVAL IN ISRAEL

NEWS BY SIMON CASTETS FROM NOV/DEC 2008

ISRAEL

As Israel celebrates its 60th anniversary with year-long, nationwide commemorations, on September 24, the first edition of the art festival Art TLV was launched in Tel Aviv, Israel's nonstop-city and major artistic hub. On the eve of the city's own 100th anniversary, this year's festival was billed as the prologue for next year's edition to coincide with the Athens and Istanbul biennials. Art TLV 08 was conceived as a warm-up, but judging by the quality of the projects and by the stellar attendance, it exceeded all expectations.

Art TLV is a non-profit initiative led by the managing director of Sotheby's Israel, Rivka Saker, the director of the Artis organization Yehudit Shapira-Haviv, Irit Mayer Sommer of Sommer Contemporary Art and Shifra Shalit-Intrator of Dvir Gallery—two of Israel's top galleries.

Planned as a "series of journeys," Art TLV took place in five locations. A central hub called Mekomon, located on the Bauhaus architecture-rich Rothschild Boulevard, served as a video lounge, information center and late-night club.

The main exhibition, "Open Plan Living," held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, was curated by Andrew Renton, who aimed to "reactivate the pre-existing dynamics" of the city's socialist-inspired architecture.

The roster of over 30 artists included video artists Yael Bartana and Keren Cyttter and a handful of international heavyweights such as Polish architect-artist Monika Sosnowska, British artist Sarah Lucas and Swiss sculptor Urs Fischer. Emerging artists included local installationist Manal Mahamid and new-media artist Dana Levy, who won the Israeli Young Artist Award 2008 in August. Several emerging international artists whose sculptural work shares a heady, conceptual bent—including Albanian Adrian Paci, Los Angeles-based assemblage-maker Aaron Curry and British neo-expressionist sculptor Daniel Silver—were chosen by Renton for their reflections on the thwarted ambitions of modernism.

Further along Tel Aviv's main Bauhaus-designed Nachalat Binyamin Street, a series of artist-curated projects provided a welcome counterpoint to the seductive slickness of the central ensemble. Among them, the "Engelman Project" by Doron Rabina, Nimrod Matan and Shmuel Ben Shalom recreated architectural elements invented by the late, eponymous collaborator of the philosopher Wittgenstein. The artists installed a barber shop that offered free haircuts to migrant workers and three video works which responded to Rabina's puzzling curatorial demand: "Bring Me a Black Man."

In late September in Jerusalem, Ami Barak and Bernard Blistène opened ArtFocus 5, "Can Art Do More?" a large exhibition with a political orientation described by Renton as "almost the opposite" of his gathering of works that were "formally self-explanatory." Held in at the Pavilion Conference & Events in Banit Center, ArtFocus 5's lineup of artists includes Israel-born Haim Steinbach—known for his ironic sculptures of readymade objects on custom shelves—who contributed a photomontage of a train car in the Negev desert, a proposal that the artist hopes to later realize. Sharon Ya'ari's photographs depict the demolition of a three-story residence in Tel Aviv; the haunting images of the dust-covered

streets and pedestrians are immediately evocative of a far more traumatic event.

Far from competing against each other, the two events each mirrored the conflicting forces at stake in contemporary Israel, from millenary Jerusalem to relatively new-born Tel Aviv. As Renton concluded, "People think art doesn't matter, therefore it remains under the radar. Making it visible through these exhibitions is a way of commenting with very few restrictions. Works change when placed in a context. That is even more true here." Art TLV ran through October 18 and ArtFocus 5 through October 23.

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