



The Village They Live In, Smadar Sheffi, Haaretz, 20/1/12

The artists Lea Mauas and Diego Rotman – the sole members of Sala-manca group – are two of the most interesting artists working in Israel today. A series of actions they initiated since 2000 – including the publication of a magazine and a series of installation and performance nights at different sites in Jerusalem – have contributed to the emergence of a vibrant and independent art scene; independent, meaning one that is not dependent on the mainstream institutions, either as a source of authority and recognition or in the organizational and financial respect.

Since 2009 Sala-manca group, have been running Mamuta at the Daniela Passal art and media center in Ein Karem. The center is situated in an arab house at the heart of the most touristic area of Ein Karem, (and) its entrance is located by the steps leading to the church of visitation. the structure was considered absentee property the whitewashed term for houses whose owners escaped or were exiled in the turmoil of war and in the 1970s was purchased from the Amidar company (Israeli Social Housing Company) by the artist Daniela Passal. Before her death in 2005 she donated it to the foundation of an art center, and today it is operated by the Sala-manca group, offers workrooms for artists from different disciplines, hosts artists who reside in it for extended period's of time and functions as an alternative exhibition space (holds exhibitions).



photo by Guy Yitzhaki

The current exhibition is "The museum of the Contemporary" running parallel to an internet project. It is a distinctly post-modern action containing different thought provoking narratives and addressing the disappearance of local realities. in that sense, it is associated with the term simulacrum, the blurring between "real" and its representation.

Landscape segmented with blinds

Mamuta's previous actions – such as creating walking routes in Ein Karem; an audio guide, founding of an historical images archive of the site –representing the lives of the village prior to the independence war (1948), the flight of Palestinian residents in its course, the settlement of immigrants and holocaust refugees after the war including an agricultural youth village for children holocaust survivors in the center of the village. In the museum of the contemporary Mauas and Rotman related to the location of the center on the touristic route and put up signs announcing the museum. The two greet visitors wearing museum guards' uniform (blue jackets over light blue shirts) and like guards in institutions world-wide, also serve as voluntary guides of sort, according to the willingness of the visitors.

in the work "Urban Quote: The Skin I Live In" Mauas and Rotman have systematically numbered the stones of the building's facade in black paint, akin to the marking of old buildings designated for demolition. Such markings stood out, for instance, in the course of transforming Mamilla neighborhood in jerusalem into a glossy shopping mall. the connotations evoked by the marking of the stones range – from holocaust associations, through a fetishist–religious attitude towards building blocks to archaeologists' working methods and of course buildings conservation techniques.



photo by Guy Yitzhaki

Michal Rovner employed a similar method of marking stones in the series "Makom" – 2008. Rovner gathered stones from dismantled structures in Israel and the occupied territories and took on matching them to each other to create cubical structures, which were numbered and reassembled in different locations. the numbering comprised the externalization of the encrypted narrative as well as a proposal for a new narrative.

Sala-manca's work directly refers to real-estate threats looming over Ein Karem. The Mamuta center building overlooks an extensive fenced construction site, which at the moment has a giant pit, like a gash in the landscape. Adopting the title of pedro Almodóvar's film for the work charges it with apocalyptic meaning: if in real-estate projects, as well as in Rovner's work, the marking enables a re-construction, then the link to Almodóvar film promises no successful metamorphoses but rather a blood bath, revenge and calamity.

The "Church of Criticism", also by Sala-manca, is an impressive installation. an inner space in the building was designed as a northern-european protestant church, in which texts by fictive figures composed by Sala-manca in conjunction with texts by Hanna Arendt, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek are played.



photo by Hilla Gutrayman

The installation addresses the proximity of "The Museum of the Contemporary" to the Church of Visitation, a popular tourist attraction in Ein Karem, but mainly to the "Church of Fear", an installation of baroque scope by the german artist Christoph Schlingensief, exhib-

ited at the German pavilion in the last Venice Biennale (2011), which gained the national pavilion award.

The church-like installation is clustered with objects referring to post second world war Germany, like a hare reminiscent of the hare used by Josef Beuys, (as well as the hare in Dürer's famous drawing), documentation of Fluxus group, a figure of a wounded bandaged boy and horror films from the 1970s and 1980s. The recent past is tangled with a religious transcendental tone, thus generating doubt in the ability of the past to die, since it is resurrected over and over again.

In the "Church of Criticism" Mauas and Rotman touch upon questions of ownership of memory of the place in which they operate, the ability to hallow in it a "right" narrative, while pointing at the frequent invention of new religious sites in the service of political agendas. Since the church-like space is placed in an art center (currently assuming the guise of a museum), their work joins the ongoing Israeli discourse of the journeys of the secular pilgrim (a term coined by the author Yitshak Orpaz).

"Private Landscape" is a stroke of genius. Sala-manca has closed off a balcony in the central building with standard plastic blinds. In the middle of the space they have placed a box which brings to mind a candy or gum vending machine as well as the boxes placed below artworks, which with the insertion of a coin switch on the work's lighting for a short period of time, like in churches that attract tourists. Here, for three Israeli shekels that drop to the box with great noise, the blinds will open abruptly for ten seconds, and so, segmented by shades, the beautiful landscape stretches before the viewer. The preoccupation with the control of the gaze and the transformation of the landscape into a commodity could not have been clearer. The surprise in the work and the aesthetic debate embodied in it, linger in the viewers' memory.

An encounter that will not take place

In addition to Sala-manca's works, the exhibition also features Hadas Ophrat's sound installation, in which he recounts, in first person, the story of a former resident of Ein Karem prior to 1948 who is visiting the village; and a work by Wanja Schaub, who grows plants from local seeds in books placed under drippers at the center's library.

Beyond the individual works, one may think of "The Museum of the Contemporary" as an inclusive installation, which includes a souvenir shop that sells works by artists working at the center. The power of the entire exhibition lies in heightening awareness to each action and part of viewing art and in creating a renewed examination of the means that became set as the "correct" way for viewing it.

In a different political situation, that at the moment seems utopian, it would have been fascinating to bring together, or exhibit side by side, "The Museum of the Contemporary" and

"The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind", an important work by Khalil Rabah, a palestinian artist working in Ramallah and Jerusalem, which was exhibited for the first time in the Istanbul Biennial in 2005. The fictive, traveling museum exhibits palestinian history via fossils, plants and objects. A meeting of the fictive museums could have given an enriching perspective on the Israeli–Palestinean situation.

translated from Hebrew