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Staging Resistance in Bil'in

The Performance of Violence in a Palestinian Village

Rania Jawad



On 17 June 2011, young actors of the Freedom Theatre, based in the Jenin Refugee Camp, gathered together in the Palestinian village of Bil'in as if in celebration.¹ The rhythm of drums, horns, and traditional Palestinian dance set the scene. The actors staged a short sketch on the dirt road leading to the village's agricultural fields. The moment the act ended and the actors began to step away, the stage area of their performance was hit by tear gas canisters. The rhythmic sounds were replaced by an Israeli barrage of rubber bullets, tear gas, and sewage water; spectators came armed with hospital masks and cameras. The spectacle of celebration, performance, and violence are all part of a protest campaign enacted weekly in Bil'in since 2005.

The ways in which art and politics are represented contributes to how they are understood and practiced. By reading them together, or more specifically, by investigating the politics behind artistic stagings and framings of political actions, the role of spectatorship becomes key.

1. For a short video of the event, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDdtr_HQzFQ&feature=player_embedded (YouTube.com 2011).

A discourse of nonviolence and a highly visible theatricality have framed the Palestinian village of Bil'in and its residents' struggle against the Israeli confiscation of their lands. Analyzing two dominant ways of categorizing Bil'in's weekly protest actions— theatrical and discursive— reveals how *both* serve as underlying strategies in the villagers' performance of resistance. As warranted by the strategies employed, the politics of resistance in the Palestinian context, which has been enacted more recently in terms of locality, cannot be detached from the larger anti-colonial, national struggle. While navigating different audiences, such a politics of performance in the public sphere is one predicated on violence, whether through the use of violent methods in order to suppress dissent or the use of symbolic violence in order to expose and counter oppression. What becomes apparent is how spectatorship is mobilized in different ways, revealing the various politics behind the performance of both violence and resistance.

Located 12 kilometers west of the city of Ramallah and 4 kilometers outside of the Green Line (the 1949 armistice line that demarcates the state of Israel),² Bil'in is an agricultural village spanning around 4,000 dunams (980 acres) with a population of approximately 1,800 residents, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Since the 1980s, approximately 55 percent of Bil'in's agricultural land has been declared "state land" by Israel and confiscated for the construction of the Modi'in Illit settlement bloc. In early 2005, Israel began construction on a separation wall—or "Apartheid Wall," as it's known—on Bil'in's land, in effect cutting the village in half in order to put Modi'in Illit on the Israeli side of the Wall. The Wall, which Israel began building in 2002 in the West Bank, and in and around East Jerusalem, is planned to extend over 700 kilometers in length, less than 20 percent following the path of the Green Line—de facto annexing over 12 percent of the land in the West Bank and Jerusalem.³ If, in addition to the Wall, we also take into account the settlements and their settler road infrastructure, the Israeli land confiscation policy will effectively prevent Palestinians from gaining access to 46 percent of the West Bank (see Stop the Wall and Addameer 2009). I will not go into more detail about the Wall itself, however I should note that the devastating impact it has had on the Palestinian population, its lands, livelihood, mobility, infrastructure, and economy has been documented by numerous international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the International Court of Justice, which in its advisory ruling of July 2004 effectively declared the Wall's construction within occupied Palestinian territory illegal (see Stop the Wall and Addameer 2009; OCHA 2009; International Court of Justice 2004).⁴

2. Following the unilateral declaration of the Israeli state by Zionist leaders in May 1948 on the land of Palestine, the 1949 Armistice Line is referred to as the Green Line. It separates Israel from the surrounding Arab countries and the territories that were subsequently militarily occupied (currently including the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the Syrian Golan Heights).

3. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), approximately 62 percent of the Wall was completed as of July 2010, and the intended route is to be more than twice the length of the Green Line between Israel and the West Bank.

4. The International Court of Justice's ruling was endorsed by the UN General Assembly, which subsequently issued a resolution calling on Israel to comply with its findings.

Figure 1. (facing page) Actors of The Freedom Theatre, based in the Jenin refugee camp, participate in a Bil'in demonstration, 17 June 2011. (Photo by Anne Paq/activestills.org)

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In direct response to the illegal confiscation of their lands, residents of Bil'in began organizing daily direct actions in protest and formed what is now called the Bil'in Popular Committee Against the Wall and Settlements.⁵ More than six years later, the Popular Committee continues its protest campaign, now holding public action demonstrations every Friday. In a report over 100 pages long, jointly issued in July 2009 by the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign and Addameer (the Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association), these actions of Bil'in and other affected Palestinian villages are described as "one of the few forms of civil resistance to the occupation that is left in the occupied Palestinian territories" (2009:12).⁶ The report also notes that the popular protest movement was, from its beginning, not only directed towards obstructing further implementation of Israel's colonization policies, but was also a strong critic of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and its governing institutions for not supporting the popular resistance struggle.

As evidenced in general across the occupied Palestinian territories, every area threatened with demolitions or land confiscation becomes a point of confrontation where local Palestinian residents are resisting Israeli state actions. Spontaneous and organized protests in the West Bank specifically against construction of the Wall in 2002 and 2003 began in the northern villages of Qalqiliya and Jenin, emerging also in Jayyous and in villages in the Salfit district. Since then, protests including the strategy of weekly Friday demonstrations continue in a number of villages and in areas of East Jerusalem, such as Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, under threat of Israeli settlement expansion and demolition of Palestinian homes. In an article discussing Israeli "enclavization" of Palestinian territory as the new imposed status quo, Lisa Taraki notes the emergence of "more local manifestations of resistance, organizing, and activism" as a result of Israel's spatial or closure regime (2008:7). "The spatial dismemberment of Palestinian society," she writes, "has contributed to the fragmentation of political action," whereby nation-level politics of resistance have given way to more localized forms (2008:7). What I want to note, however, is that the localization of resistance strategies has not restricted either the goals or the actors of these campaigns to the localized Palestinian sphere. In other words, the goals of the demonstrations against the Wall are nearly always linked to the larger frame of defending Palestinian land and rights to self-determination, in effect protesting Israel's destructive policies against the Palestinian population at large. Additionally, the actors involved in the actions, while headed and mobilized by local villagers, are now joined by international and Israeli solidarity activists.

Discursive Framings

What tends to mark Bil'in in comparison to other affected villages is both the highly visible non-Palestinian presence that at times dominates the local presence in their Friday demonstrations, and their highly deliberate theatrical staging, which itself has captured both local and international media attention. In a 2009 article in the *New York Times*, for instance, Bil'in's Friday demonstrations are described as "one of the longest-running and best organized pro-

5. In areas impacted by the Wall, popular committees comprised of activists from the affected communities have been formed. Their actions are supported and sometimes coordinated by an umbrella organization, the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (Stop the Wall). According to the 2009 report co-authored by the Stop the Wall Campaign and Addameer, popular committees started to focus on Israeli settlement and settlement infrastructure, in addition to the construction of the Wall, "in recognition of the fact that the two colonial construction efforts are two sides of the same coin, which leaves Palestinians dispossessed and living in walled-in ghettos and enclaves" (2009:24).

6. The report is a 108-page research document that draws on a variety of sources to confirm its data, including UN and official governmental publications, nongovernmental research-based websites, journalistic and scholarly writing, in addition to personal interviews. For information on the Stop the Wall campaign, see <http://stopthewall.org/news/1.shtml>. For information on Addameer, see www.addameer.org/addameer/about.html.

test operations in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, [...turning] this once anonymous farming village into a symbol of Palestinian civil disobedience, a model that many supporters of the Palestinian cause would like to see spread and prosper” (Bronner 2009). This articulation, situated within a discourse of nonviolent resistance, is representative of how most internationals, whether individuals or organizations, categorize Bil’in’s weekly demonstrations. The author’s choice of the words “operation,” directly positing the protests against the violence of the suicide operation, and “civil disobedience” firmly locate this perspective. The actions are applauded for enabling supporters within the international community to describe the resistance under the rubric of “nonviolent,” and the protests are packaged as the “good” model of resistance that needs to spread.

Not only do international journalists and organizations such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), and Christian-affiliated organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee, praise and encourage the “nonviolent” nature of Bil’in’s resistance, but so do political figures such as Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, former US President Jimmy Carter, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In our contemporary context where mainstream media and mediations dominate how we perceive “other” cultures, the focus on what is articulated as “nonviolent” in Palestine ultimately, even if implicitly, directs the spectator to read the culture as predominantly violent. When situated historically in the Palestinian struggle, such a discourse functions not only to delegitimize other forms of Palestinian resistance against Israeli policies, but also serves to endorse an ideological perspective that tends to posit what is described as violent on the side of individuals engaged in resistance acts and not on the actions and institutions of the state. The larger frame of why various resistance strategies are used is elided. We can see this clearly in US President Obama’s 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt, where his usage of violence and extremism was nearly exclusively reserved for individuals, not states or institutions. “Palestinians must abandon violence,” he said, “resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed” (Whitehouse.gov 2009). In an article questioning why figures such as Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. are celebrated as modern-day icons whereas figures such as Malcolm X and Crazy Horse are kept underground, Ramzy Baroud redirects this discourse by asking, “where is the call for Israel to embrace non-violence?” Following the 2008–2009 massive and bloody onslaught on Gaza, he writes, “Would the media and the world community press the Israelis to embrace non-violence, had they endured such atrocities such as those witnessed in Gaza?” (2009).

An underlying basis of Bil’in’s resistance strategy is such appropriation and redirection of the other, or more specifically, the colonizer’s tools. A leaflet printed in July 2009 by the Bil’in Popular Committee and left near the Wall for the Israeli soldiers, reads:

We, the people of Bil’in, know that you have practiced all sorts of oppression against us and against our rights. [...] For several weeks now, you have let none of us sleep. [...] Intimidating children and sick people constitutes collective punishment on a civilian population. These kinds of actions have a name: terror. Why do you hide your faces? [...] Get rid of the masks [...] you cannot hide the truth [...] that by raiding the village and depriving the entire village from sleep for weeks, you are acting as terrorists. (Bilin-village .org 2009)

In their language, the Popular Committee redirects the categorization of terror and terrorist away from the Palestinian villagers and toward the Israeli soldiers, thus reversing a dominant discourse that is used against them. What they also do is redirect such common attendant signifiers of the Palestinian “terrorist” such as the mask and the individual actor as separate from a state apparatus—the soldiers are not named as hidden functionaries of the state but rather as individuals who knock down their doors at night.

In a similar fashion, the Bil’in Popular Committee has appropriated the discourse of non-violence to describe their struggle. In the information they distribute, whether in pamphlets,

listserv announcements and reports, or when they speak to the media or individual visitors, they name their struggle as “popular” and “nonviolent.” The first descriptor we can say is largely directed inward toward the Palestinian population — “popular” as representative of the people and not a corrupt or impotent leadership. The latter descriptor is largely directed outward toward an international audience — “nonviolent” as morally superior, not intended to cause pain or death to the other, and in contrast to armed resistance. We can understand the Popular Committee’s use of a discourse of nonviolence as an appropriation: first, because such terminology was not historically used at either the level of leadership or more popular level in Palestine; and second, because of the conscious and deliberate incorporation of such terminology as attractive to an international palate. What is categorized as “nonviolent” is in no way an end in and of itself for the villagers. While the emphasis from the international community is placed on the “nonviolent” tactics and not necessarily on the signification of the larger struggle itself (to free Palestine from colonial rule), the villagers’ eyes are intently focused on the larger goal. The appropriation of a discourse of nonviolence is thus clearly a strategy. There is no applause following a demonstration because it succeeded in its “nonviolence”; rather, participants do cheer when a young unarmed Palestinian villager succeeds in picking up a tear gas canister, one of many that are thrown each Friday at the demonstrators, and manages to throw it back at the fully armed Israeli soldiers.

Theatrical Strategies

The appropriation of the colonizer’s tools of suppression (whether literal, such as the tear gas canister, or more symbolic, such as the marking of the other as terrorist) is a recurring component of Bil’in’s theatrical staging. Each demonstration is intended to be unique in its confron-



Figure 2. Residents of Bil’in protesting Israeli confiscation of their lands in 2005. Bassem Abu Rahme (center, in yellow) was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers in 2009 when a high-velocity tear gas projectile was fired at his chest. (Photo by Friends of Freedom and Justice — Bil’in)

tation with the Israeli army, and is often based on the strategy of making visible Israeli violence on the Palestinian population as a whole. The typical version of the Friday demonstration consists of a protest march, following the midday prayer, from the mosque in the village to the Wall, a distance of a few kilometers. As the demonstrators near the Wall, they are met by Israeli soldiers lobbing high-velocity tear gas canisters, sound bombs, rubber-coated steel bullets, and at times firing 0.22 caliber live ammunition at them.⁷ The confrontation is a ritual played out with such consistency and deliberation that one cannot but note the performance on both sides—the spectacle of demonstrators not merely staging their protest but actively and effectively documenting themselves and the soldiers’ response, on one side, and what has been described as the “spectacular violence” of the Israeli soldiers’ response, on the other (Stop the Wall and Addameer 2009:5).

Groups of foreigners ranging from a Basque nationalist music group to the Peace Cycle, a group of 120 cyclists from around the world, to a radical Belgium choral group have been invited to participate in the demonstrations, mimicking the political tourism of the Israeli state. While such figures as UN officials and US President Obama are taken by Israeli state officials to Yad Vashem, the official Israeli memorial and educational center on the Holocaust, and Sderot, the Israeli town north of the Gaza Strip, the Bil’in Popular Committee invites and encourages internationals not only to physically witness the “spectacular” confrontation, but also to take part in the resistance performance.

Eyad Burnat, head of the Bil’in Popular Committee, describes the strategy of the Friday demonstrations largely within the context of a media war: the people of Bil’in are not only resisting the construction of the physical Wall on our lands, he argues, but are involved in a media war against the dominant discourse and circulation of the Zionist narrative, past and present (2009). In order to equip themselves for the media front of the struggle, distinct media strategies were pursued, with Committee members working intensively to develop international contacts and media coverage. The theatricality of Bil’in’s actions plays a vital role on this front.

In direct response to the first bulldozers arriving on their lands in February 2005, villagers chained themselves to their olive trees, declaring that the soldiers would have to uproot them along with the trees—uprooting the olive trees that have come to symbolize Palestine and its history with the land would mean also physically uprooting the Palestinians themselves. The simple symbolic act, in effect, embodied a root Zionist tactic, the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian population starting in 1948 and continuing until today. In another action, villagers locked themselves inside an iron cage, imprisoning themselves as a visible manifestation of what the Wall and Israel’s closure regime is doing to all of the occupied Palestinian territories. In the same way that their action forced the soldiers to unchain them from the olive trees,



Figure 3. Their faces covered against the tear gas, two foreign solidarity activists participate in a Friday demonstration in Bil’in in 2009. One woman wears goggles and holds pieces of onion to protect herself from the burn of the gas. (Photo by Rania Jawad)

7. On 17 April 2009, Bil’in resident Bassem Abu Rahme was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers when a high-velocity tear gas projectile was fired at his chest. On 31 December 2010, his sister Jawaher Abu Rahme was killed by tear gas inhalation leading to acute respiratory failure. In addition, numerous Palestinian villagers and a number of foreign activists have been injured during the weekly Friday protest demonstrations, some very seriously, causing long-term injuries.



Figure 4. Tear gas thrown by Israeli soldiers at protestors destroys the fertile lands of Bil'in, especially the olive trees, a source of livelihood for village residents. (Photo by Friends of Freedom and Justice — Bil'in)

this action forced the soldiers to release them from the prison cage. In a recent action marking the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, villagers carried a 12-meter polystyrene Wall at the head of the Friday demonstration, displaying the words “Berlin 1989, Palestine ?” Placing the construction directly at the foot of the Israeli-built Wall, the villagers indirectly forced the soldiers to tear down and destroy the polystyrene Wall. Each act, while symbolic, manifests itself literally as a micro-version of Israeli tactics of systematic violence against the Palestinian population, *and* as a

representation of the villagers' goal. The villagers have, in effect, directed the soldiers' actions toward that goal. They have written the script and staged the action, directing all the actors present, including those resisting the Wall as well as the Israeli soldiers.

Another action that mimicked Israeli colonization policies was the building of what the Popular Committee termed “the first Palestinian outpost,” modeled on Zionist and Israeli outposts that are built prior to the establishment of settlements on confiscated Palestinian lands. Constructed on the side of the Wall where the Israeli settlement extension Mattiyahu Mizrah is situated, the outpost was destroyed within hours by the Israeli army. Unable to argue the illegality of the Palestinian outpost without also admitting the illegality of the Mattiyahu Mizrah settlement, which at that time had not obtained approval from the Israeli military government in the West Bank for its construction, the soldier argued that the Palestinian outpost did not adhere to Israeli construction standards. The villagers quickly realized the unintended directive in the soldier's words and returned to build a more solid structure with a cement roof and windows. In adherence with Israeli construction standards, the room remains standing.

The ways in which both the politics of the colonizing state and the resistance of the colonized are performed during these actions is tied to violence, whether by the use of violent tactics to suppress dissent or by the representation of violence itself. The violence of the Israeli state toward the Palestinian population is described in the 2009 report on the Wall as “systematic and premeditated, [...] tactically intended to create a highly visible spectacle, rendering victims as examples” (Stop the Wall and Addameer 2009:5). The use of violence can therefore be understood as strategic, making visible the power and control of the Israeli state and occupation army, intended as both an immediate and potential threat. The construction of the Wall is a visible manifestation of the larger regime of Israeli state violence, including the enclavization of Palestinian communities, the destruction of agricultural land and livelihood, and the control and surveillance of Palestinian movement. The theatrical machinery behind such a regime has played a significant role in how Israeli state policies have been read by an international, and particularly Western, audience.

The early Zionist and later Israeli discourse and imaging of the land of Palestine that was predicated on the absence of any native inhabitants has been translated into Israeli state practice based on the physical displacement of the Palestinian indigenous population. Realized either by a continuous process of ethnic cleansing (marked by the 1948 *Nakba*, “catastrophe” in Arabic, and ongoing today), or enacted by a policy of separation and enclavization that quite literally places (or displaces) Palestinian communities out of sight, the strategy of absencing has been

complimented by the marking of the Palestinian as “Other,” and specifically as violent “Other” (see Said [1979] 1992; Sa’di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Pappé 2007). It is significant that the process of Othering Palestinians is not merely in reference to Jews but also to the land of Palestine and its history. Such marking of the Palestinian collective body serves as a “form of symbolic violence,” to use the words of Craig Owens, “in order both to assign it to a place and to keep it in place,” as well as a process that Ammiel Alcalay, borrowing from Erica Hunt (1990), describes as one that will “abbreviate the human” (Owens 1994:194; Alcalay 1993:20). The process of categorizing people, Alcalay writes, is employed “in order to dilute their impact on changing accepted structures of power [...] ultimately [...] diminish[ing] human potential and agency in the world” (1993:20). Such strategies of representation and framing what gets seen and what gets left out are mechanics of theatricality that are directed not only outward to an international audience, but also locally, largely targeting the Jewish-Israeli citizens of the state.

In the summer of 2009, a commercial for the Israeli mobile company Cellcom was aired showing the response of a group of Israeli soldiers upon encountering a soccer ball kicked over a long stretch of the Wall.⁸ What emerges is an improvised game of soccer where the armed occupation soldiers who are patrolling alongside the Wall in a military jeep are transformed into a playful team of competitors enlivened by a game of sport. The performance is complete with a musical soundtrack and an audience



Figure 5. Bil'in protestors build a "Palestinian outpost" (foreground) to show Israel's double standards toward its Jewish citizens and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. In the background is the Israeli settlement built on Bil'in's lands. (Photo by Friends of Freedom and Justice — Bil'in)

of cheering spectators comprised of female and male soldiers. What is absent from view is not merely the Palestinian “team” on the other side of the Wall, but the role of the Wall itself in the performance. While its role in the commercial is what enables the lively soccer match to ensue, implying a friendly match between two sides, the role of the Wall in actuality as constructed by the Israeli state performs a violent act of separation and displacement. The colonial context falls away and the Wall is transformed from a colonial signifier into a tool for sport, offering pleasure to both actors and spectators. The commercial recasts the props of military occupation—armed soldiers, military jeeps, and concrete Wall—in effect, recasting colonial violence into playful sport that is performed with the implicit willingness of the other side.

Just as the Bil'in villagers employ a strategy of recasting the Israeli occupation as violent, Israel has used diverse media strategies to re-present its colonial violence. The Wall has therefore become a site for staging the occupation for both Israelis and Palestinians, literally and symbolically. For Palestinians, the protest demonstrations against the Wall in villages such as Bil'in have become an event symbolizing Palestinian resistance for a number of different actors.

8. To view the original Cellcom commercial advertisement and a few parodies made in response, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH02uc1vB4k&feature=player_embedded# and www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=214301.

The performance of resistance at these sites takes on different meanings when enacted by local villagers, Palestinian political figures, international solidarity activists, and Jewish-Israeli activists. While local villagers are protesting the direct impact on their lives and the larger violence on the land and the Palestinian population as a whole, Palestinian political figures declare their support for the resistance by their physical presence at the demonstrations. These figures are often critiqued for appropriating the performance of the villagers for their own personal interests, paying lip service to resistance actions yet pursuing normalizing relations with the Israeli state. Foreign solidarity activists, while not a homogeneous group in either their intent or political vision, are markers in the demonstration of an international presence, not only witnessing the event but present in order to be seen. A reduced level of violence against the protestors has been documented when internationals are present, in effect, offering evidence of Israel's racial politics where a Palestinian body is worth less than a non-Palestinian body. For Jewish-Israeli activists, these villages become places to exercise their activism and critique their state's policies. Also targeted during the Israeli soldiers' confrontation with the demonstrators, Jewish-Israeli activists, however, can easily fall into the role of serving a discourse of Israeli democracy and free expression. One Jewish-Israeli activist, echoing others, comments that he "does not consider his actions unpatriotic. By demonstrating in Bil'in, he said, he was guarding Israeli

democracy" (in Guarnieri 2009). Diverse in their ideological beliefs, Jewish-Israeli activists and internationals in Bil'in complicate any single representation of solidarity.⁹

Being present at a Bil'in demonstration blurs any fine line between participant and witness. Anyone present at the demonstration becomes a participant and is seen as such by the Israeli soldiers. Not only has the act of witnessing the demonstration become a fundamental element of the protest action itself, but one's presence there becomes politicized. There is no outside from which to "objectively" observe the confrontation that ritually takes place. Spectatorship is further mobi-



Figure 6. An Associated Press journalist following a Friday demonstration in Bil'in in 2009. (Photo by Rania Jawad)

lized by the villagers as each resistance action is self-documented, circulated via media technologies such as YouTube clips and weekly email reports, and archived on the Bil'in website and in documentary film.¹⁰ Additionally, video footage and still photography serve as evidence in court trials to contradict Israeli charges against protestors and villagers. However, such archival evidence does not guarantee that it will either be read as proof or be accepted as evidence

9. Of the more radical political participants is the Israeli group Anarchists Against the Wall, a major supporter of the Palestinian villages' protests against the Wall, whose members participate in Bil'in's protest actions (www.awalls.org). Another example is Shministim, an Israeli organization of teenagers who refuse to serve in the army, whose members were invited to join Bil'in's Friday demonstration in October 2009.

10. For a visual documentary of many of Bil'in's theatrical protest actions, see the 2006 documentary film by Shai Carmeli Pollak titled *Bil'in Habibti*.

in favor of the accused. Israel has targeted participants in the demonstrations, whether protestors or media personnel, for contributing to a visual archive of the villagers' resistance and the army's response. The strategy of visually witnessing and archiving these confrontations is not limited to the demonstrators; it also serves as part of the infrastructure of the Israeli occupation. Palestinian villagers are subject to arrest, travel restrictions, destruction of property, and physical violence because of their visible participation in such resistance actions, while international and Israeli activists are penalized for their very presence in Bil'in.¹¹ The Israeli army, along with the solidarity activists and press media, form part of the media machinery of Bil'in, where the Israeli soldier, the Bil'in villager, the solidarity activist, and press personnel who are armed with video recorder or still camera play a similar role as participants in the actions. Each documents the grassroots public protest against Israeli policies and the tactics by the state used to suppress such resistance. For what purposes such documentation is used or not used reveals a politics behind the form of spectatorship enacted.

Re-staging Objects and Spectatorship

A central performance strategy of Bil'in's Friday demonstrations is thus making visible how the resistance to violence is continually met with violence. In addition to the media archive that is created, the production of objects formed out of or as part of the demonstrations themselves is another element that underscores the relationship between the visual and the political. Ibrahim Burnat, a resident of Bil'in, has built a collection of artworks to visualize and document this recurring dynamic. Constructed largely out of his collection of the ammunition Israeli soldiers fire at the Friday demonstrators (comprised of thousands of rubber-coated and live bullets, tear gas canisters, and sound grenades, among other forms of munitions), Burnat titles his art collection



Figure 7. An art piece by Bil'in resident Ibrahim Burnat (bornat_83@hotmail.com) constructed out of used ammunition fired by Israeli soldiers at protestors in Bil'in. (Photo by Rania Jawad)

11. In March 2010 the Israeli army raided the village, declaring it (and Ni'lin, another West Bank Palestinian village) a closed military zone for the next five months. According to the military order posted in the village, all international and Israeli activists found on Bil'in land between its residential area and the Wall between the hours of 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM any Friday are threatened with deportation or arrest.

An Exhibition of Palestinian Heritage: The Palestinian Exhibition for Documenting the Crimes of the Occupation. One art piece shows the map of Palestine outlined with rubber-coated bullets that are surrounded by an outer wall of light-gray, empty tear gas canisters. Inside the map, empty shells of ammunition uniformly litter the landscape. While inscribing the map of Palestine has itself been configured as a symbol of Palestinian national resistance to colonization, just as the exhibition of Palestinian heritage itself, the use of ammunition to create the map complicates the picture. The ammunition is not used to demarcate the various walls that Israel continues to build inside Palestine, but instead is used to draw the map itself while also constructing a wall that both circumscribes and protects the map. The outer wall of tear gas canisters lined upright next to each other subtly mimics the gray concrete slabs of the Apartheid Wall, raised high yet penetrable. By using the very tools that are intended to fight and wound him as the raw material of his artwork, Burnat's representational imagery comes to symbolize the violence that is directed toward the Palestinian nation, in effect visualizing the heritage Palestinians have been forced to live for more than 60 years.

The catastrophe of 1948, the Nakba for Palestinians, in which more than half of the Palestinian population (nearly 800,000 people) was dispossessed, over 500 villages destroyed, and the land either militarily occupied by Israel or placed under foreign jurisdiction, is a legacy that continues to be tangibly felt (see Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Pappé 2007; Smith 2007). Burnat's exhibition of Palestinian heritage thus offers one visual articulation of what the ongoing condition of the Nakba represents for Palestinians. Israel's violence against the Palestinians does not have an immediate end but remains a constant presence, just as the shells of the soldiers' ammunition fired at the village demonstrators becomes a constant residue on the village landscape. In one Friday demonstration in Bil'in in September 2009 during the olive harvest season, villagers, unable to access their land to pick their olives, distributed sacks for an alternative harvest. The shells of tear gas canisters were gathered, replacing the olive harvest's symbol of Palestinian livelihood and connection to the land with one of military occupation. Such visual representations of Israeli violence and Palestinian resistance, while serving as a form of documentation of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, are another theatrical element in Bil'in's performances.

The literal juxtaposition of art and violence in Burnat's exhibition breaks any strict dichotomy between the two in the same way that the performance of Bil'in's demonstrations defies the distinct separation between theatre and resistance action. How art, violence, and political struggle are represented emphasizes not only the intended aim of its producers, but also how they are read and interpreted. In March 2006, an exhibition titled *Fence Art*, curated by Oded Yedaya, opened in a Tel Aviv art gallery (see Roei 2007). The sculptural objects on show included rusted L-shaped pipes, a locked iron cage, and a large viper made of cloth. Each object was brought from Bil'in, a theatrical prop that had been used during the demonstrations against the Wall. While a small side space in the gallery offered a visual and written contextualization of the objects, the objects themselves were alienated in the white cube space of the gallery, stripped of their functional, symbolic, and political meanings. The title of the exhibition functioned in a similar manner, reconfiguring the political into the aesthetic, the Wall into a fence. The staging of these objects within the walls of an art gallery and under the title of an art exhibition where spectators are invited to examine them from a safe distance frames how the objects are to be read. While in both contexts the value of the objects is predicated on them being seen, the temporal and spatial displacement from the protest demonstration on Bil'in land to the static space of the Tel Aviv gallery disrupts any stability of meaning.

The Israeli soldiers' encounter with these objects differs on a number of levels from that of the Jewish-Israeli gallery visitor. The soldier's encounter is within a context of direct confrontation, while that of the gallery visitor is one of visual consumption. The removal of the Palestinians from the objects in the gallery space creates an alternate dynamic of power between object and Jewish-Israeli subject. Detached from their producers and housed within the controlled and contained space of the Israeli gallery, the objects are unarmed, the purpose of their

production deactivated. Cloaked as abstract, sculptural forms within the white walls of the gallery space, the objects are intended to provoke spectatorship and, according to the Israeli curator, discussions around “the notion of ‘political art’” (Roei 2007:18). While potentially attracting an audience otherwise disengaged from Palestinian protest actions, transfiguring Bil’in’s political struggle into “political art” ultimately functions to assure and situate the gallery spectator in a position of power. The objects are now under surveillance and judged according to the spectator’s criteria, no longer a weapon in a performance of resistance under the direction of Palestinian villagers.

The transformation and appropriation of Palestinian artifacts by discursive strategy or Israeli political policy is a recurring phenomenon. The reclassification of Palestinian local industries into Israeli products for distribution and the appropriation of Palestinian property for Jewish citizens following the 1948 Nakba are two early examples in Israel’s history. The Palestinian village of Ein Houd is another where “an aesthetic veneer” was employed to recast the remnants of the exiled Palestinian community into works of art, traces of an anonymous, primitive past (Slyomovics 1998:35). A colony of Jewish artists now stands in its place, the Palestinian stone architecture embedded into the Israeli residences. Stripping the Palestinian houses of their owners echoes the transference of Bil’in objects to Tel Aviv, highlighting not only a mobility largely denied the Bil’in villagers, but a space where the Jewish spectator gives meaning to the objects. The restaging of Bil’in objects of protest in the Tel Aviv gallery resonates with Burnat’s restaging of the Israeli army’s objects of attack. Burnat describes the appropriation of Israeli munitions into artwork as an ability to create life out of instruments of death (in Jamjoum 2008). The performance of Bil’in’s resistance thus challenges how meaning is ascribed to both objects and practices.

How spectatorship is mobilized in Bil’in is largely based on such a process of reassigning meaning to object and practice, how each is read and enacted. At the end of the 2009 report on the Wall is a call to various spectators of Bil’in’s struggle to take responsibility in supporting Palestinian grassroots resistance. Addressed to the United Nations, signatories to the Geneva Conventions, Palestinian and international NGOs working in the occupied Palestinian territories, international solidarity groups, and local and international media, the report connects the role of spectatorship with the act of holding Israel accountable for its violations of international law (see Stop the Wall and Addameer 2009; Falk 2002). Not taking such responsibility is not considered mere indifference but rather complicity in maintaining the status quo, thus contributing to Israeli human rights violations and denial of Palestinian self-determination. The presence of international solidarity activists in Bil’in’s demonstrations, while articulating a particular role for foreign nationals in the Palestinian resistance struggle, at the same time points to the role of international complicity and direct support of Israeli policies. The role of the international community, according to the recommendations, is therefore not ultimately based on a spectatorship defined by the witnessing and documentation of violations of international law, but rather on sustained and specific direct actions in the fields of law, governmental and economic politics, media, institutional, and grassroots activism. The performance of the Palestinian villagers resistance actions thus depends on a spectatorship that transforms itself into action. The spectator’s role is to continue the performance, whether by participating in and putting into circulation documentation of the protest event or by performing other resistance actions. These can take a variety of forms, ranging from sustained pressure against elected representatives and governmental bodies to targeted educational campaigns among local communities to actively supporting the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with its obligations under international law.¹²

12. For more information on the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions, see www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=868 and www.bdsmovement.net.

By not only representing but also performing the struggle, Bil'in's demonstrations are intended as a form of political mobilization. Local Palestinians, international and Israeli activists, political figures, local and international organizations, and various media networks are addressed. Among the villages protesting the construction of the Wall on their lands, Bil'in has been critiqued for the media attention it has attracted, which has marginalized the violence impacting other villages and their struggles. While Bil'in's resistance strategy consciously acknowledges other villages and other oppressions against the Palestinian people, media emphasis on Bil'in as a symbol of Palestinian resistance tends to remain focused on the symbol, occluding other sites, articulations, and strategies of both Israeli oppression and Palestinian resistance. Such media outlets are not limited to the international sphere, but are echoed by the Palestinian Authority and their media campaigns. The gradual focalization of the Palestinian struggle over the years has been facilitated by Israel and its allies, shifting the frame from the colonization and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, to the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip in 1967 (reassigning Palestine to less than 23 percent of its pre-1948 land), to a state-orientated project of limited autonomy (under the dictates of the 1993 Oslo Accords), to localized manifestations of Israel's policing regime, such as checkpoints, settlement expansion in the West Bank, and construction of the Wall (see Smith 2007; Beinun and Hajjar n.d.). Each new frame narrows the discourse, understanding, and reach of the Palestinian struggle, as it physically reduces the map of Palestine. Thus, the Palestinian anticolonial liberation struggle has been largely reconfigured into a humanitarian struggle of a people distributed over numerous enclaves, inside and outside the land of Palestine.

Palestinian strategies of resistance, in their various manifestations, have redefined themselves within the changing landscape of oppression against them. Within a context of increasingly globalized forms of oppression and resistance, Bil'in's protest demonstrations capitalize on international and media networks. Targeted campaigns against the companies building the Wall have been launched in a number of countries, emphasizing the international role that makes Israeli repression possible. A reason for the more recent heightened repression against Bil'in has been attributed to its successful media outreach, which has enabled the pursuance of legal challenges to Israeli policies, such as a current case against two Canadian companies filed in a Canadian court, in addition to actions in Israeli courts and the International Court of Justice's ruling.¹³ In accordance with such strategies, the fact that Israeli oppression against the Palestinians has only been made possible by international and institutional backing is brought back into the frame.

Role Reversals

In January 2009, during the violent Israeli onslaught on Gaza, Bil'in villagers and protestors wore clothes reminiscent of those worn by Jews in Nazi concentration camps, including yellow cut-outs in the shape of Gaza with the word "Gazan." Just as the villagers appropriated the words of the soldier regarding Israeli construction standards for Bil'in's Palestinian outpost, here the villagers embodied the words of Matan Vilnai, Israel's Deputy Defense Minister, who remarked in February 2008 that the Palestinians risked a "shoah," the Hebrew word used for Holocaust. In the specific context of Israel and Palestine, the protestors' performance cannot be read only as a resignification of the word "holocaust" mimicking Vilnai, but as also pointing to the fact that "victim," like "violence," cannot be read in any one way. Furthermore, the discomfort provoked by the visual referencing of such an atrocity is heightened because of those performing the roles. In such a performance, for instance, how do the Israeli soldiers respond to

13. The village of Bil'in has filed a court case against two Canadian companies, Green Park International Inc. and Green Mount International Inc. in the Quebec Superior Court in Montreal for violations of international law and Canadian domestic law. For more information on the case, see www.bilin-village.org/english/articles/press-and-independent-media/Press-Release-Bilin-announced-that-it-has-commenced-legal-proceedings-in-Canada.



Figure 8. The Israeli army lobbs tear gas at protestors in Bil'in, a scene that recurs every Friday. (Photo by Friends of Freedom and Justice—Bil'in)

Palestinian villagers playing the role of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust? At the same time, the performance can only be realized because of the protestors' recognition of the Nazi genocide of the Jews in Europe. Unlike the symbolic releasing of Palestinian prisoners from an iron cage or the destruction of the polystyrene Wall, how does one confront such a role reversal?¹⁴ While such a strategy has been enacted more on the discursive level, wherein the Israeli regime and its actors are termed "victims-turned-oppressors" or Palestinians termed "the victims' victims," the physical and visual embodiment of such a reversal forces a different type of confrontation (see Said [1979] 1992). Eyad Burnat describes these strategic performances as reversing the dynamic where Palestinians are made to respond to Zionist and Israeli colonization practices. Here, the Israeli soldiers must now figure out how to respond to the Palestinian villagers' actions (2009).

While such confrontations focus on the live event of the performance, its resonances direct us to both before and after the event itself: what happened before to give reason and meaning to such a performance, and what are potential responses to the performance action and its attendant significations. The protest actions of Bil'in village highlight the roles of its various actors, from the Palestinian villagers and Israeli soldiers to the international community, governmental bodies, and media networks. The performance of their resistance against the Wall is structured on destabilizing the dynamic of colonizer giving value to event, object, or text. Whether by the appropriation of a discourse of nonviolence or the theatricality of protest actions under the direction of the villagers, Bil'in's strategy of resistance is not about destabilizing our notions

14. The "role reversal" described is not read as a direct or literal reversal of roles. The complexity of such a performance must be analyzed within a network of factors, including but not limited to how the Nazi genocide of the Jews has been incorporated into the Zionist project, how the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust have largely been treated by Israel historically and discursively, and the percentage of Holocaust survivors in Israel in relation to the total number of Jewish citizens of the state.

of what art is, but rather drawing attention to and questioning our role in the ongoing spectacle of Israeli violence against the Palestinians. The performance is one predicated on a discursive strategy of categorizing Bil'in's struggle as "nonviolent," and a theatrical strategy of making visible not merely the oppression of the Other, but the mechanisms and policies that realize that oppression—land confiscation, the imprisonment of thousands of civilians, the implementation of a closure regime spatially dismembering the viability of any social, economic, or political infrastructure, and an ongoing policy of ethnic cleansing.

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