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All Is Not *Well*: Contemporary Israeli Artistic Practices de-Assembling Dominant Narratives of Warfare and Water

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Abstract: *Well* (2020) is an installation by Israeli artists Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin. It investigates the story of an underground passage in Tel Aviv designed by a British Mandate-era Jewish architect. Starting from this building, the artists' archival research leads them to the story of a water source which does not figure in the architect's plan. While the story of the well is unearthed, so is one about the tense relations between the Jewish architect and the Palestinian orange merchant who inhabited the site before 1948. By restaging a hypothetical archive, *Well* reminds us of the problems inherent in narrative formation and erasure in the context of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Noga Or Yam also examined space and water in an earlier work, *Black Soldier*, *White Soldier* (2018): with the background sound of water drilling in southern Israel, urban photographic landscapes of Palestinian rooftops covered with water tanks are projected onto the walls. Water, either concealed or lacking, emerges in both works as a vehicle for unearthing a historical narrative that counters the official one. This research article reflects on contemporary art's engagement with the formation of history, and how such engagement shapes the identity of present-day art in postcolonial realities.

Keywords: Palestine; water; hydro-hegemony; *Nakba*; Tel Aviv; Noga Or Yam; Faina Feigin; BUSH collective; Israeli contemporary art; contemporary art; postmodernism; postcolonialism; artist-as-historian; archive; historiography; photography

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Citation: Foresti, Margherita. 2023. All Is Not *Well*: Contemporary Israeli Artistic Practices de-Assembling Dominant Narratives of Warfare and Water. *Arts* 12: 150. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12040150

Academic Editor: Michelle Facos

Received: 28 November 2022
Revised: 3 June 2023
Accepted: 5 July 2023
Published: 11 July 2023

1. Prologue

The story goes like this: on 94 Allenby Street in Tel Aviv, there is a passage that leads nowhere. It is one of those underground walkways that were built in Israel in the 1950s because of their capacity to maintain a cool temperature below ground level. These constructions have been outdone in more recent years by modern shopping malls equipped with air conditioning. Today, the underground walkways appear in contrast as sites from times remote. The peculiarity of the passage on Allenby Street is that its entrance and exit coincide, since, contrary to what one might expect from such architectures, its function is not to connect two liminal places.

Allenby Street, one of the main roads in Tel Aviv, carries the name of a British Marshal, Edmund Allenby, who led the conquest of Palestine between 1917 and 1918. It recalls the land's colonial history and the eve of British Mandate Palestine. Nowadays, the passage at 94 Allenby Street houses all sorts of unconventional businesses, from a Polish bookstore to a clockmaker and a shop selling postal stamps. It is a curious building in which time appears to hesitate in moving forward. Upon entering the passage at 94 Allenby Street, one feels caught in an unclear past. Closed on all but one side, its walls hinder any access to deeper layers of history that would lead us to the other side, that is, back to the surface of the present. This passage is a dead end.

In the early days of the BUSH collective[1]—a queer, feminist art collective established in Tel Aviv in 2015—two of its founding members, Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin, started investigating the building's history. The architecture's genesis became, metonymically, an instance of a larger historical context, namely the 1948 Palestinian–Israeli war. The margin

between those truthful and imagined details of the story is willfully left vague to reflect the unsettledness of the history of 1948[2]; indeed, the perspectival nature of all history. Overlapping archival research, collective memory, and fiction, the artists unearthed the name of the architect, Issac Rapoport, a Jew who had arrived in Ottoman Palestine during the second Aliyah, i.e., the second migration wave of Eastern European Jews at the start of the 20th century. Young Rapoport went on to study at the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium, the so-called sand palace, the first Hebrew school founded under the Ottoman Empire in Jaffa, in what was later to become the heart of Tel Aviv. He later formed as an architect in Europe between the two wars. The building on 94 Allenby Street is one of the projects he realized upon returning to Israel.

The artists' inquiry into the origins of the building led them to another thread of the story, albeit one dimmed by forgetfulness and a lack of significant documentation. The name of Abu Hassan recurs in connection to that of the Jewish architect. Abu Hassan was the Palestinian owner of an orange-selling business located where the passage was later built. Abu Hassan was quite an esteemed figure in Jaffa; his oranges used to reach the city's port in wooden crates and were then delivered to his shop. At this point, the story loses detail, as its coordinates blur between natural and wishful forgetting. Close to 94 Allenby Street, both artists note, is a street named *Simtat Bet Hashoava* (in Hebrew, בית סמטת השואבה) whose meaning seems to allude to a site for pumping water. Yet, as stated above, the passage at 94 Allenby Street is a dead end.

2. *Well* (2020)

The present article focuses on two artworks by artist Noga Or Yam: *Black Soldier, White Soldier* (2018) and *Well* (2020). The prologue refers to the plotting and genesis of latter as a collaboration with Faina Feigin. Both installations touch on the issue of the water shortage in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and on Israel's political instrumentalization of water, which has been referred to by scholars as "hydro-hegemony" (Messerschmid 2007, pp. 347–64).

Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin conceived the installation *Well* as an image of an archive. Steel shelves are arranged in the corner of the room, enclosing the viewer who steps within its space (Figure 1). The aesthetics evokes an archival stock, in which ordinary bookshelves are arranged in rows, conveying a sense of both anonymity and order. The documents exhibited are rather unusual for an archive as they reflect contemporary art's predilection for new technologies. They are rotoscope animated videos displayed on small screens that recount episodes of the well's history. Diapositives arranged on a larger light box, as well as on an old diapositive viewer, show the inside of the well and the act of pumping water. A planimetric sketch placed under two magnifying glasses (Figure 2) hints at the architectural plan for the passageway in 94 Allenby Street. Lastly, two desiccated fruit peels preserved in frames with a round photo mount remind the viewer of reliquiae or material of pseudo-scientific interest collected in 17th century cabinets of curiosities (Figure 3).[3]. All these objects convey a fragmentary narrative of the story of the passage at 94 Allenby Street, Tel Aviv.

The artists' research in Tel Aviv Municipality's archives led them to the figures of the Jewish architect Issac Rapoport and the Palestinian orange trader, Abu Hassan. Though their relationship remains unclear, the artwork points to a conflict over territory—the space now occupied by the passage—but also, and more importantly, over water. In fact, the story narrated in the animated videos is partly told in the first person by the well that supposedly runs deep underground. Concealed under the weight of the building, the well was an object of dispute between the two men:

> From time immemorial, stories have passed through me. People chased after me and sat down around me. Groundwater collected from me, rose against the will of gravity, from the underground spaces, to the surface to the longing man (*Well* 2020).

Figure 1. Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin, *Well*, 2020, multimedia installation at the Edmond de Rothschild Center, Tel Aviv (June–August 2020). Photo courtesy of the artists.

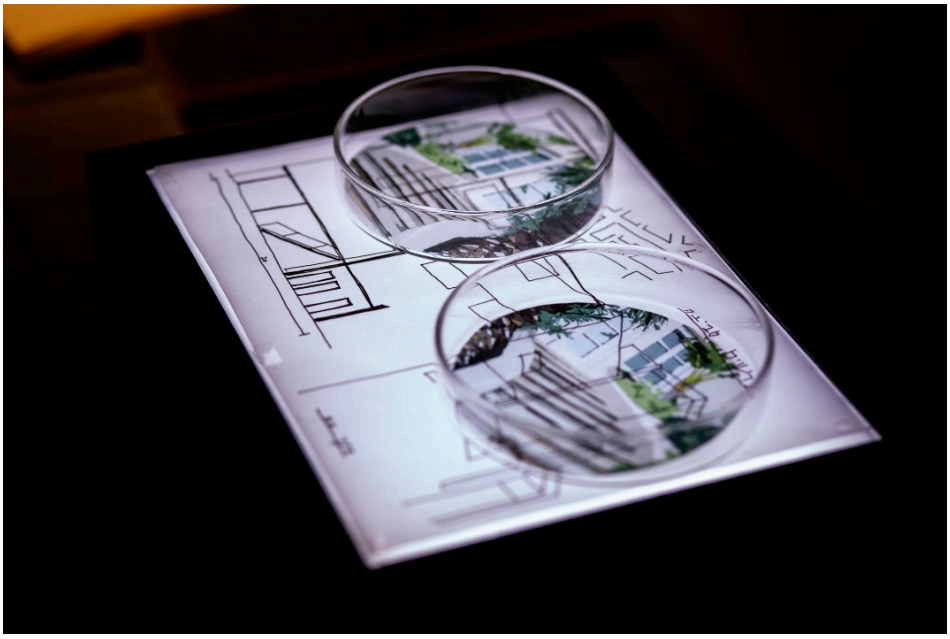

Figure 2. Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin, *Well*, 2020, detail. Photo courtesy of the artists.

The natural resource of water is given a voice to tell the story of a conflict of far greater dimensions than the one that may have existed between Rapoport and Abu Hassan. In *Well*, Rapoport and Hassan's dispute over land and water, leading to the latter's migration to the West, acts as a synecdoche for the war waged between Israel and Palestine. The artists articulate the story through the "mouth" of the well with these words:

> Rapoport and Abu Hassan used to meet at the opening. They'd ask about how to collect the water, ignorant of the moment when a crack will form between the palms. [. . .] They used to argue about the question of my belonging, demanding me and them. That war was theirs (*Well* 2020).

Figure 3. Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin, *Well*, 2020, detail. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Through this tale, the artists remember the actual history of the Arab–Israeli war of 1948, of the failure of the attempts at peace, of the subsequent Six-Day war of 1967—all events responsible for the majority of the Palestinian diaspora. Their investigation of the building and the existence of a well underneath it, to which the name of a nearby street would seem to point, spotlight the urgency and deep relevance of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. *Well* reflects on a chapter that finds no place in the official history of the foundation of the state of Israel. It is the tragic history of the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestinians known as the *Nakba*, which translates as "catastrophe".[4] Since then, international peace actors and Israel have sidelined the issue of the *Nakba* in all peace negotiations (Pappé 2006, pp. 233–47). The official narrative of *Nakba* denial classifies the 1948 events as simple side effects of war rather than a systematic operation of ethnic cleansing. As one of the representatives of the Israeli "New Historians", Ilan Pappé writes that recognizing the *Nakba* "means facing up to the historical injustice in which Israel is incriminated through the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948, it calls into question the very foundational myths of the State of Israel, and it raises a host of ethical questions that have inescapable implications for the future of the state" (Pappé 2006, p. 245).

The emergence of the new building projected by Rapaport in place of Abu Hassan's house, and indeed, on the well itself, symbolically reproduces the act of erasure of a people by covering up the traces of a de facto colonial act.

Well underscores the use of history in state-sponsored oblivion. It critically refers to the narratives about the foundation of the state of Israel with which the artists grew up (Foresti and Or Yam 2022). Speaking about his own upbringing in Israel, Pappé describes a practice of consensual indoctrination that uses school education as its vehicle (Barat and Pappé 2015, pp. 119–21). Further, by focusing on the topography of Tel Aviv as a starting point for their critical inquiry into Israel's official historical narrative, the artists also address the colonial practice of renaming colonized geography, which was part of a strategy of erasure. In Palestine, this practice goes back to the 1920s, when groups of archaeologists and Bible experts were appointed to find Hebrew names for land newly purchased by Jews. In 1949, an official naming committee was institutionalized by Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, and made into a subdivision of the Jewish National Fund. This committee did not work from a blank map, of course, and in its attempt to reestablish the locations of ancient Biblical places, it erased the names of Palestinian villages. As Pappé writes, "their motive for Hebraizing the names of the evicted villages was ideological and not scholarly. [. . .] The archaeological zeal to reproduce the map of 'Ancient' Israel was in essence none other than a systematic, scholarly, political and military attempt

to de-Arabize the terrain—its names and geography, but above all its history" (Pappé 2006, p. 226). From the end of the 19th century, Hebrew archaeology had already developed as a legitimate field with a national agenda, its aim being to uncover the traces of Jewish existence on the land, and thus revive Jewish national and spiritual history in Palestine. The interest in archaeology, and, indeed, its symbolic potential, increased after the foundation of the state of Israel. Archaeological sites became objects of religious as well as secular national pilgrimages (Shavit 1997, pp. 49–50). As Yaacov Shavit writes, these monuments "constituted a new mandatory touring itinerary, tantamount to a remapping of the land, both symbolic and real. This new map was conveniently stretched over the pre-1948 map of non-Jewish settlement in Palestine" (Shavit 1997, p. 50). Further, he points to the role of archaeology in *visualizing* the past, that is, in creating new pictures to support and validate a given historical narrative (Shavit 1997, p. 51).

Well points to the operations of overwriting history, such as those of refiguring space through architecture, or of instrumentalizing a discipline such as archaeology by means of a Biblical hijacking of historical inquiry. To make these operations visible, the artists symbolically reverse this use of archaeology and restore the geography predating 1948. In fact, the artifacts arranged on the steel shelves are contemporary objects, and not factual proof of Abu Hassan and Issac Rapoport's story. The arrangement includes rotoscope animated videos, in which a layer drawn in black, grey, and white tones is overlaid on each frame of a preexisting video (Figure 4). The viewer is given no information about the nature of the original footage. This is, in fact, a superfluous detail, since the intention behind these short videos is that of reenacting a collective narrative of displacement, not a single event. A voiceover narrator speaks from the perspective of the well to tell a story super partes.

Figure 4. Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin, *Well*, 2020, multimedia installation, film still. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Jane Blocker highlights the use of reenactment in contemporary art as form of historiography, which she compares to a prosthesis: "A prosthesis is, simply put, something we craft to stand in place of something else that is lost, a history, for example, measured, shaped, carved, and polished like a wooden leg and put in place of an amputated past" (Blocker 2015, pp. 15–16). I argue, however, that the objective of these prostheses is not that of supplying a new format of history, but rather to comment on and respond to dominant narratives. In so doing, art functions figuratively, envisioning matters of current social and historical relevance through fiction. For its part, fiction is not simply the counter-concept of fact, but rather holds a tight grip on reality.

Well alludes to the fragmentary nature of sources on pre-1948 Palestine, be they factual or only part of the perception that a national and international public may have of this historical moment. The layer drawn on the animated images appears vague, the faces of the people shown are unidentifiable. The thread between each "document" has apparently been broken, and the viewer senses, at last, the impossibility of forming a coherent narrative without those tiles that have been erased. As the title suggests, a well remains hidden under the surface, metaphorically alluding to the muting of historical sources. But besides its metaphorical meaning, the well also refers concretely to the issue of water, not only as a natural resource, but also as a political instrument. *Well* directs the viewer's attention to a past and present struggle over land and water between Israel and the Occupied Territories. This was also the subject matter of a previous work by Noga Or Yam titled *Black Soldier, White Soldier* (2018).

3. *Black Soldier, White Soldier* (2018)

Seven unsettling images reproduce an urban landscape seen from an elevated point of view, with the rooftops of buildings scattered at different levels. In these photographs, the colors have been inverted to imitate the aesthetics of analog negatives (Figure 5). Their bichrome appearance in shades of white and blue seems to etch the shapes of things out of the image, ironically making them visible by subtracting them from the field of view. In this unnatural scenery, the sky has turned black and the buildings light blue. In contrast with this darkened substructure, the sharp white tanks emerge in the foreground from the rooftops of the buildings. These seven images are enlarged, given a slightly grainy texture, and projected onto the walls of an exhibition room (Figure 6).[5] The latter is also filled by the recorded sound of what seem to be objects bouncing as they fall into a deep cavity. It is the sound of the drilling of a hole by Israel in the Negev desert during the search for groundwater, which was abandoned for reasons unknown to the artist (Foresti and Or Yam 2022).

Figure 5. Noga Or Yam, *Black Soldier, White Soldier*, 2018, digital photograph. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Figure 6. Noga Or Yam, *Black Soldier, White Soldier*, 2018, exhibition at Artists Residence Herzliya in 2018. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The photographs are of views of East Jerusalem and of a few Palestinian villages in Northern Israel, which Noga Or Yam found online. Turned into negatives through editing, their bichrome appearance is echoed in the title of the work: *Black Soldier, White Soldier*. The artist's intention was to evoke the kind of view an Israeli soldier might have when looking through binoculars, inspecting the "other side" of the land. Through these glasses, the artist suggests, the soldier sees the typically black water tanks mounted on Palestinian buildings turned white. As such, this revelation inverts the nature of the soldier's ordinary gaze, since white is associated in Israel with the water heaters placed on their buildings, black water tanks being absent from this landscape (Foresti and Or Yam 2022).

The artwork confronts the viewer with the issue of the conflict over water, and indeed over land, between Israel and Palestine[6]. In particular, it places its focus on the problem of the water shortage in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Sharif Elmusa wrote,

> Whatever the locus of the Arab-Israeli conflict was yesterday or is today—immigration, Jerusalem, settlements, history, or metaphysics—control over land has always been at the core of arguments and actions. Control over land is also a salient issue in the water dispute between the two sides. The two issues, land and water, are interlocked: While water plays a role in Israeli territorial claims, the alienation of land has an impact on Palestinian access to water (a point seldom recognized) (Elmusa 1996, p. 69).

Looking at the land–water nexus from a historical perspective, Elmusa traces the origins of the water conflict back to pre-1948 Zionist settlements, where water was perceived as an indispensable economic resource that could enable large-scale irrigation, and thus create the preconditions for a massive Jewish migration to Palestine. From the beginning of the 20th century, water played a significant role in the definition of the boundaries that the Zionist Organization envisioned for Israel, as well as those established by the British Mandate in 1923 (Elmusa 1996, pp. 70–71).

After the 1967 war, when Israel had expanded its territory to the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai desert, the main water sources were brought under the state's control. These included "the West Bank aquifer system, the Banyas, the full eastern shore of Lake Tiberias, and a longer stretch of the Yarmuk than it had before. Israel took advantage of its new hydrostrategic position to enhance its supply and to veto increases in

the water supplies of the Arab parties, especially the Palestinians and Jordanians (. . .)".[7] (Elmusa 1996, p. 71).

Israel's territorial ambitions were and are, if not driven by, at least marked by hydrological arguments, which depend, however, on the party in question[8]. For instance, an advertisement placed by the Ministry of Agriculture in *The Jerusalem Post* in 1990 conveyed Likud's water argument, namely a concern that groundwater sources might be mismanaged if they came under Palestinian control (Elmusa 1996, p. 74). Elmusa's emphasis on the land–water nexus in the Arab–Israeli conflict touches, in fact, on the "security paradox"—be it the security of borders or of natural resources such as water—which testifies to "a mindset nurtured in the colonial era and inimical to coexistence" (Elmusa 1996, p. 77). The issue of security is one frequently adopted in arguments on the Israeli side to excuse the discriminatory management of water sources. As journalist Amira Hass has pointed out, the unevenness of this order has its roots in the unresolved outcome of the Oslo Accords (1993–1995), which in effect created a "reality of disjointed Palestinian enclaves" which are "limited in the amount of water they are permitted to independently extract from these sources and in the improvements they can make in the water infrastructure" (Hass 2014).

To this day, water shortages add to the grim reality of life under occupation with which the Palestinians must come to terms. Palestinian water authorities are still denied the necessary licenses to drill for water or to install booster pumps. "Black-and-white water tanks are ubiquitous on the roofs of Palestinian homes across West Bank cities and towns, to be filled when their water taps literally run dry for weeks at a time" (Najib 2021).

This stark landscape is reproduced in Noga Or Yam's installation of bichrome projections. The sound of objects falling into the hole drilled in the Negev, later abandoned, informs us of the disparity between those who have access to water and those who do not. On the other hand, the echo of the objects bouncing from one side to the other evokes an idea of emptiness, scarcity—lastly, of thirst. The black water tanks on the rooftops of the Palestinian buildings become highly visible through the contrast with the darkness of the sky. However, the positive–negative inversion is not only an instrument for visualizing a narrative and raising awareness among the Israeli public. The artist implies such a reversal of colors, and thus of values, in the title itself: *Black soldier, white soldier* refers to the conflict between a narrative that sees the foundation of the State of Israel as a moment of salvation and the termination of a diaspora on the one side, and a story of oppression and colonization on the other. It is a conflict harbored within the identity of at least some among the generations of Israelis that came the decades after 1948. Noga Or Yam perceives this work as autobiographical to the extent that it resonates with the personal history of her family's arrival in Israel after fleeing from Germany. The chromatic reversal shows, simply put, how the soldier has turned from a good into a bad one (Foresti and Or Yam 2022).

4. The Representation of History in Contemporary Art

From an art historical perspective, *Black Soldier, White Soldier* and *Well* reflect the contemporary state of the arts, in which the past often emerges as the privileged object of artistic inquiry. The past is sought for retrieval, either in the form of personal, intimate biographies, which are aided by memory, or in the form of official historical narratives, which are placed under scrutiny. The two works analyzed so far belong to the latter strand, and thus enable some considerations about the interconnection between contemporary art and history.

Reflections on the meaning of the category "contemporary art" often start from the term's allusion to a state of ever present-ness. The temporality of the contemporary seems to represent a challenge to historicization. This view is reflected, for instance, in Blocker's words on the task of the contemporary art historian: "Connected and separated at once, looking forward while turning back, gliding into the future while standing awkwardly in the past, the historian of the contemporary fails about and falters" (Blocker 2015, p. 4). While Blocker's *Becoming Past History in Contemporary Art* highlights some essential features of the contemporary—such as an excess of memory at the expense of history, and

artistic strategies for reenacting the past—it appears overall that the temporality of the contemporary is taken too literally[9]. It is as if it were impossible to historicize the contemporary on the basis of an indelible relation between sign and meaning; contemporary art is tied to a transient present-ness[10].

Elsewhere the contemporary has gained a more concrete signposting, such as in Octavian Esanu's *What Was the Contemporary?*, in which he regards it as a periodizing category for those artistic practices that have arisen in "the latest phase of global capitalism" (Esanu 2012, p. 7). Because one of the defining aspects of contemporary art is its global dimension, Esanu stresses the need to look at practices that were engendered at the margins of capitalism, for instance in postcolonial realities. He writes,

> [. . .] in its global reach, "contemporary art" (as idea, emblem, or label) has already undergone significant construction and reconstruction by powerful historical forces: the rise and spread of global capital and the fall of socialism and the welfare state; transitions to the market and to democracy; the impact of Western developmental industry on former Second- and Third-world art and culture; and many other processes associated with liberalization, deregulation, privatization, marketization, and neoliberalism. [. . .] its major contradictions are especially visible at the peripheries of the Western art world (Esanu 2020, p. 2).

It is at such peripheries that a concern with the past and with historiography has made itself more visible. Yet, within a center–periphery world order, Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories bear an idiosyncratic position. Israel's claim for national sovereignty derives its legitimacy from a network of power anchored in the West. At the same time, Israel is geographically inscribed in the Middle East, which largely rejects its existence. History becomes on both sides, Palestinian and Israeli, part of a strategy for national survival. It is in this sense that Esanu's periodization of contemporary art within the latest phase of global capitalism becomes pertinent, as it describes a historical moment marked by a North American world order, produced by the end of the Cold War and the process of decolonization. Israel owes its existence to this order, as does Palestine's concern with its own erasure.

Contemporary art appears to have a twofold problem with time. On the one hand, its allusions to a prolonged present have generated a state of impasse among some scholars; on the other, the interest of artists in retrieving lost or silenced narratives has produced critiques of history, both as dominant narrative, and as personal biographies harbored within individual and collective memories.

The subject matter of the present article relates to the first of these groups of artists concerned with history, namely those artists that act to recuperate the narratives of the oppressed. Both works by Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin, in fact, shed light on the living conditions of the extant Palestinian population residing in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip that have resulted from the *Nakba*, the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians which led to the foundation of the state of Israel[11]. From the perspective of a new generation of Israeli artists, the retrieval of the Palestinian narrative also serves the project of reformulating their own history and identity by revising the extant Zionist-approved official narrative.

The erased Palestinian narrative is today searched for and contested by many contemporary artists within and outside Israel. In this almost archaeological endeavor, Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin turn to the archives as well as to their own family histories in search of microhistories which nonetheless shed light on collective, national narratives. The fragmentary or untold nature of these histories is metaphorically signposted through the recourse to fiction, used to fill in the missing parts of a given story.

A well-known case of this contemporary art practice is Walid Raad's institution of a fictive archive named "The Atlas Group",[12] by which the artist tells of the years of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) through edited documents and photographs, often in the form of collages. While there is no doubt about the historical fact—the Lebanese Civil war—the "episodes" that Raad visually narrates are filled with curious and absurd details

that give the viewer hints at their fictionality. The aim is to underline the representational nature of history and question the validity of objective facts, as well as the notion of a unilinear history. In fact, it was with the process of decolonization, starting roughly in the mid- 20th century, that a multiplicity of regional narratives came to the surface against the backdrop of dissolving colonial empires.

It was in the period of modernity that historians became aware of the subjectivity of historical perspectives, and thus of history's nature as representation. Among the defining criteria of modernity, Reinhart Koselleck identifies the recognition of "the *nonsimultaneity* of diverse but, in a chronological sense *simultaneous histories*" (Koselleck 2002, p. 166). The increased contact between culturally, economically, and socially different areas of the world in the 18th century evidenced the difference in levels of development. "World history became for the first time empirically redeemable", (Koselleck 2002, p. 166) meaning that in the Enlightenment Project, such difference was "classified" according to a clear common denominator, namely Europe. At the same time, however, the experience of "multifarious temporal rhythms" resulted in the realization of the fact that historical representation strongly depended upon "the conscious selection that authors make and have to make because they are always moving within pregiven social, religious, and political bounds" (Koselleck 2002, p. 167).

In other words, history's nature as representation has been a given since the 18th century. But some scholars and artists today define the artist as historian based on a similar recognition.[13] Blocker, for instance, asks "what it would mean to take these artists' work seriously *as* history rather than simply art" (Blocker 2015, p. 20). While these sorts of reflections are surely symptomatic of an increased artistic engagement with the past, a counter-argument can be made, according to which the equivalence between history-as-representation and fiction leads to rather ahistorical conclusions. Moreover, conflating the tasks of artist and historian obliviates the possibility that artists might simply be adopting fiction (i.e., representation) to *comment* on the past and respond to its legacy from a present-day perspective. In addition, artistic re-creations of archives betray a cynicism toward the idea of historical truth. In this sense, I believe that, rather than become "complicit" in history, artists such as Noga Or Yam and Feigin intend to question history-as-single-tale as they invite the viewer to look at all the different narratives that can emerge from multiple, fragmentary sources.

Further, the identification of a branch of contemporary art with history creates a divide between art concerned with time and art that ignores time. Scholars who confer upon an artist the title of historian merely confirm a binarism between facts and fictions, and thus neglect the reality that art, being the product of a given culture and society, has always spoken, either directly or indirectly, about its own time.

The works examined in this study do not advance *per se* new historical evidence. They emphasize, however, the uneven nature of the competition between narratives and their repercussions on the present for Palestinians. In *Well*, heterogeneous material—architectural plans, animated videos, recorded voices, old diapositives, and other objects—is arranged to form a narrative about the past. The result is a fragmentary narrative that evokes the likewise fragmentary state of the documents available in order to reconstruct the event in question. According to another possible interpretation, the audience's own perception of the history in question is read as fragmentary: while documents and witnesses of the *Nakba* exist, and a reconstruction of the history of the Palestinian diaspora is already underway, the gaps and interpretive uncertainties rather belong to the public's perception of this long standing conflict, which has been shaped by a dominant narrative. The images of the water tanks on Palestinian rooftops surely convey visual proof of the unequal distribution of water resources. The artistic strategy does not reside in producing such proof (since these images were retrieved from the internet), but in the inversion of colors, and thus of values and roles, which unsettles the perception of a landscape familiar to Israelis. In the case of *Well*, water appears either to acquire the status of an impartial truth, or to allude to the unattended voice which is unretrievable because access to it has been obstructed. The lat-

ter reading seems more plausible, since the well works as the source of more than simply the natural resource water; it testifies to the story of Abu Hassan and his family's flight from Palestine.

More than of history itself, I argue, these works speak about what precedes and subtends historical representation, that is, the constitution and assembly of its sources. At the same time, they speak about the survival of historical narratives in the face of the disparity between the economic and political powers that they represent.

Lastly, it is perhaps in the ways that these works engage with the past that contemporary art's "ever present-ness" is confirmed. The past is summoned from the locus of the present. There is no interest in rewriting history as such, but rather in regaining the past for the purpose of reformulating identity in the present.

5. Conclusions

In the words of art historian Itzhak Goldberg,

> It is an understatement to say that Israeli artists are preoccupied, even obsessed, with their relationship to the past. There are few countries where the impact of history is so inseparable from artistic practice. [. . .] Nevertheless, the critical, sometimes militant, position of Israeli art goes beyond the "simple" dialogue with history and, more profoundly, focuses on the constitutive components of the nation, on the intertwining of the Palestinian and the Jewish question[14] (Goldberg 2012, p. 65).

History is a highly contested terrain, especially where the impact of colonization unsettles claims to nationhood. As Goldberg's words express, for Israeli contemporary artists dealing with the establishment of their state, it is not a matter of seeking a dialogue with history, but rather of questioning what has been made of those events ex post facto. The objective of these artists is to dissect the national narrative with which they were raised and redefine their identity.

While parts of Israeli society may still be divided on the Palestinian question, Goldberg (2012, p. 68), Avi Shlaim (1995, p. 290), and Pappé[15] agree on the significance of a specific event in changing the general public consensus concerning the country's government: in June 1982, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) invaded South Lebanon, where the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the representative authority of the Palestinian people since 1964, resided together with a population of displaced Palestinian refugees. This was the first war waged by Israel without a public consensus, and it sparked great indignation for its extreme violence, one case of which being the Sabra and Shatila massacre of Palestinians and Lebanese Shias by the Phalangist militia, in which the IDF played a direct role.

Artists like Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin grew up in the aftermath of these events. Looking at their work from a global art historical perspective, it appears to reconnect with the contemporary art practices that emerged in the wake of the decolonization process, and which opened the world stage to narratives from regions that have been torn apart by colonial domination, state repression, and warfare.[16]

Noga Or Yam's work aims to disassemble and reassemble narratives, especially dominant national narratives. The criticism she directs at the discriminatory management of such a vital resource as water, and her metaphorical allusions to the act of covering up the material evidence of history, indicate the presence of concerns common to artists dealing with colonial pasts. Their engagement with history, as Blocker noted, often involves the practice of reenactment, whereby surrogates of the original thing are arranged in the form of an installation to create a narrative. Yet this narrative, rather than being a rewriting of history, is about the writing and very constitution of the historical narrative under scrutiny. Through the staging of a hypothetical archive, or the chromatic inversion of apparently objective photographic proof, the artist is not presenting the viewer with a solid, logical narration of the history of the Palestinians' displacement. On the contrary, Noga Or Yam tells us that in history, too, only the fittest survive, and that the vanquished attain at best

a fragmented story riddled with gaps and uncertainties. Its essence is what Edward Said has termed the "permission to narrate" in his homonymous essay, in which he referred to Hayden White's recognition that a narrative needs legitimation through an authority to exist (Said 1984, p. 34). Said's essay is about the struggle to assert internationally the existence of a Palestinian subject, this being the precondition for a national narrative to justify a claim to return.

That power and history are linked is an essential message of the artworks described so far. Whether it is the financial and cultural capital behind Rapoport's construction on the site previously presided over by a Palestinian trader, or the military superiority of a soldier who imposes his or her gaze on the other from above, the power relation is neatly defined in both cases. The role chosen by the artists for themselves is to sabotage this power in the field of artistic representation in order to make such power dynamics visible. To read the artists' intentions as historiographic would be both rhetorical and reductive. Rhetorical, since it is self-evident that artistically manipulated documents cannot serve as the basis for historical writing; reductive, because it strips art, representation, and fiction of their potential to elaborate, critically or not, on the time which produced them.

In closing, the figure of water in both artworks deserves a final consideration. In *Black Soldier, White Soldier*, water—and its scarcity—is at the center of the visual field, emphasized as an object of contention, and above all as an instrument of indirect aggression. In this work, water does not so much act on a figurative level, alluding more broadly to the Arab–Israeli conflict; rather, it refers explicitly to the issue of the water shortage in the Occupied Territories.

The link between water and land is at the heart of the installation *Well*, as its protagonists' fight over both unfolds throughout the artwork's narrative. Significantly, this narrative is at times told from the perspective of the well itself, which is humanized in order to voice an unbiased account of the microhistory of the conflict. The recourse to a natural metaphor, in all its naivety, perhaps reveals the exhaustion with the idea of nationhood felt by some Israeli artists of the new generation. In fact, these artists' consciousness is marked on the one hand by a globalized world order in which the idea of the nation appears to deteriorate, and on the other by a strong rhetoric of nationalism. This tension surely defines the identity of 21st-century Israeli artists.

As Said wrote in 1984, "But in a situation like that of the Palestinians and Israelis, hardly anyone can be expected to drop the quest for national identity and go straight to a history-transcending universal rationalism. Each of the two communities, mislead though both may be, is interested in its origins, its history of suffering, its need to survive. To recognize these imperatives, as components of national identity, and to try to reconcile them, rather than dismiss as so much non-factual ideology, strikes me as the task in hand" (Said 1984, p. 47).

Is water then the figure of a "history-transcending universal rationalism" which the new generation of Israeli artists still hopes for? As mentioned above, it might seem that, from the well's perspective, both nationalisms, Rapoport's and Abu Hassan's, are relativized as two simple contenders for land rights. Yet the well's impartiality in this story is rather unplausible, since its main function is the witnessing and retelling of the story of the Palestinian trader's displacement. The well itself speaks but is nowhere to be found. It is perhaps a hint that the truth of history lies somewhere below ground level. Notwithstanding the heaviness of what has been put in its place, it still reminds us of the need for perspectival distance for the sake of mutual recognition.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Noga Or Yam and Faina Feigin for their contributions throughout the research for and writing of this article. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback. I am very grateful to Paul and Wieland Hoban for their reading of and remarks on the present text. Lastly, I would like to thank Amit Meir for translating the conversations between artist and author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The website of the BUSH collective: https://en.bushfanzine.com/about-us (accessed on 5 October 2022).

2 Hereby, I refer to the multiple, conflicting accounts of the history of the 1948 war. Moreover, the term "unsettled" also points to the lack of sufficient studies on the successive conflicts that took place between 1948 and 1982 which built the so-called "Arab–Israeli conflict". David Tal writes, "Yet 1948, too, was but one event in a long history of confrontation dating from the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the Zionist movement penetrated Palestine. The research on these themes is far from exhausted. Not only has the Arab–Israeli conflict and the wars that have punctuated it not been examined from the broader perspectives of social, economic and cultural history, much remains to be done even as regards military–diplomatic history. This is perhaps most true of the 1948 war, even though it has recently been scrutinized in various academic and public forums within the context of the debate over the 'New Historians'. Although that controversy has had wide reverberations, the number of studies dealing with the 1948 war itself is extraordinarily meager; despite the war's centrality in the modern history of the Middle East, research into it is still in its infancy" See Tal (2004). Conscious of this shortage on the one hand, as well as of the conflictual nature of existing studies, the present article relies on research published by representatives of the so-called "New Historiography". It is beyond the scope of this study to provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of the debate among historians on the war of 1948 and its wider consequences on the Arab–Israeli conflict. For an overview of this debate, see Avi Shlaim (1995).

3 *Well* was first exhibited at the Edmond de Rothschild Center in Tel Aviv as part of the *Expansion* exhibition curated by Nohar Ben Asher (18 June to 27 August 2020). The website of the *Expansion* exhibition at the Edmond de Rotschild Center, Tel Aviv: https://edrcenter.com/en/exhibitions/419/ (accessed on 9 October 2022).

4 The term was coined by Constantin Zureiq in his 1948 work *The Meaning of Disaster* (*Macnā an-Nakba*). It has been used since then to refer to the state of dispossession, displacement, and statelessness of the Palestinians.

5 *Black Soldier, White Soldier* was first presented at the Artists Residence Herzliya, Israel in 2018.

6 The issue of Israeli hydro-hegemony was also the subject of the documentary *The Fading Valley* (54 min, 2013) by filmmaker Irit Gal, which premiered at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2013. The film documents the disappearance of agriculture in the Jordan Valley—which was annexed together with the rest of the West Bank in 1967—where a group of Palestinian farmers were forced to leave because water supplies were redirected toward nearby Israeli settlements. Palestinians in the area were not allowed to drill more than 150 m deep.

7 Nevertheless, Elmusa argues that water was not a strong factor behind the 1967 war, arguing against the view that a "hydraulic" imperative lies behind Israel's wars (Elmusa 1996, p. 71).

8 In fact, while Likud and other right-wing parties argue in favor of total annexation, Labor is associated with the partial annexation of the remaining 23 percent of Palestine.

9 Blocker writes, "This kind of self-awareness is common in scholarship on the contemporary, which is obliged to talk about the present moment while at the same time analyzing why that moment makes talking about it so difficult" (Blocker 2015, p. 5).

10 In the words of Octavian Esanu, "Today special issues and books dedicated to questioning the nature of contemporary art tend to remain on the surface of the ever-present contemporary, as if they were themselves entangled in the ahistorical logic that they try to unravel" (Esanu 2012, p. 7).

11 For a description of the events related to the Palestinian diaspora of 1948, see Ilan Pappé (2006).

12 See the website of The Atlas Group: https://theatlasgroup1989.org (accessed on 7 October 2022).

13 Examples include Mark Godfrey's "The Artist as Historian", *October* no. 120, 2007; Hal Foster's "An Archival Impulse", *October* no. 110, 2004; and key exhibitions such as *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2014), *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History* (Mass MoCA, 2007), and *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Reenactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance* (Dortmund 2005; Blocker 2015, pp. 19–20).

14 Author's translation from the French, "C'est peu dire que les artistes israéliens sont préoccupés, voire obsédés par leur rapport au passé. Rares sont, en effet, les pays où l'impact de l'histoire est à ce point inséparable de l'évolution artistique. (. . .) Il n'en reste pas moins que la position critique, parfois militante, de l'art israélien dépasse le «simple »dialogue avec l'histoire et, plus profondément, se concentre sur les composantes constitutives de la nation, sur l'imbrication de la question palestinienne et de la question juive".

15 In an interview with Frank Barat recorded on 20 October 2013, Ilan Pappé spoke about the events that led him to develop a critical position against Zionism: "If I had to choose a formative event that really changed my point of view in a dramatic way,

it would be the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 1982. For us who grew up in Israel, it was the first non-consensus war, the first war that obviously was a war of choice: Israel was not attacked, Israel attacked. Then the first Intifada happened. These events were eye-openers in many ways for people like myself who already had some doubts about Zionism, about the historical version we learned at school" (Barat and Pappé 2015, pp. 119–20).

16 Examples of these artistic practices can be found in past collective exhibitions, such as *The Third Bienal de la Habana* (Centro de Arte Contempor àneo Wifredo Lam, Havana, 1989) and Okwui Enwezor's *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, 2004).

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