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Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions

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Cover Page



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Introduction

Demonstrating the *Guava Platform: Follow the scented walking road*

A process in an ongoing re-search

“To demonstrate” is to give a practical exhibition and explanation of how something is performed, and also to take part in a public political march or gathering that expresses views on a certain issue or stands in opposition.¹ I have been taking part in demonstrations, in the second sense of the word, since I was a teenager. When I arrived as a child in Israel in the mid-1980s, the area was already involved in one of the longest ongoing violent conflicts of the time in the area east of the Mediterranean. My thirty years of living in Israel included four major military operations, three intifadas, two wars, and an ongoing daily occupation of millions of people, in all of which thousands of Palestinians and hundreds of Israelis were killed. For me demonstrating was a way to react and to express my resistance to the socio-political surrounding of which I am a part and to convey my insistence for change.

I still find myself on the streets demonstrating from time to time, but as the years went by I decided to stand less in front of tanks, and instead to find alternative ways to incorporate resistance within my daily routine as an artist. I wanted to look for ways to react to the increasing racism, violence, injustice and fear that exist in the area where I live. My quest joined ongoing² matters and concerns of the possible connections and affects between society, politics, art and artists, and the society these are part of. There is an inherent conflict, curator and writer Will Bradley claims, “...between the construction and maintenance of the sphere of art by the dominant social and economic forces, and artists’ pursuit of the possibility of social change.”³ Motivated by the aim to become part of this search, I began to look for possible courses of *art-actions* – a term I constructed

¹ Based on the Oxford Learners English dictionary. (2020). Retrieved: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>.

² The relation between society, politics and art can be found already in Plato’s writings. In this website/thesis some of Plato’s standpoints on these relations are discussed in the chapter: **Feeding/Eating the Other**. Since, artists attempted to refer and reflect upon these relations, but only from the middle of the 20th century the art field has coined terms that relate to socio-political—engaged art practices. These, more recent reflections are discussed thoroughly in the chapter: **Behind Sham**.

³ Bradley, Will. 2007. 23.

that replaces the prefix 're' in 'reaction' with the word 'art,' and thereby suggests that an art practice can be a reaction to the socio-political surrounding.⁴ The *Guava Platform*, which is at the centre of this PhD thesis, was initiated in 2014 as a conceptual framework of these art-actions and research. My aim to search for possible courses of art-actions on the *Guava Platform* therefore also becomes part of my quest to continue to live here, in this conflicted landscape as an artist.

The activeness of the art-actions are regarded on the *Guava Platform* as verbs and not nouns: actions that someone takes, does, puts into effect. The characters, tactics and qualities of these art-actions are what is inquired by means of the platform through the practice and in the various ways each chapter of the dissertation suggests.

The thesis/website assembles a series of three short films, an online radio station, two performances, a geotagging website, a scent collection, eatable fermented food items and four chapters, all of which are part of the platform. The leading questions of the thesis are: Can time-based art-actions in a conflicted landscape induce and take part in an embodiment of constructive political imagination? If both physical and conceptual 'movement' are the impetus of these actions, could these actions adjust the socio-political impasse of the landscape, and if so, how? And how might they contribute to a socio-political discussion of the landscape I live in?

This text characterizes the thesis's conceptual framework, the particular elements it assembles and the interrelations between them. It is both an essential part of the thesis body, and a *paratext*. *Paratext* is a borrowed concept from the field of literary studies, where it is used to indicate surrounding materials of a text as offered by the authors of the text, editors and publishers. It is basically everything (annotations, comments, publishing data) except the body of the text itself, everything that is beside the body of the work. Here this concept is borrowed to establish this text as one that wishes to weave a thread between the chapters and art-actions of the *Guava* PhD thesis and expand on concepts and modes of expression used throughout the writing. Literary theorist Gerard Genette describes the term *paratext* as an "'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside"

⁴ This term is further elaborated upon on in this text of the dissertation.

of a text.⁵ Genette's zone puts the paratext as part of the text itself and at the same time as part of the discourse around it. Likewise, I place this text in an *undefined zone* where it holds multiple roles that have traditionally been separated. It is an entrance and exit route to the thesis/website, as well as a cornerstone for the visitor to the website to come back to throughout reading, watching and listening to *Guava*. It simultaneously performs acts of interpretation and specification of the various elements that conduct the thesis, and also presents the dynamic interactions between them. This text includes an elaboration on the central concepts used in the thesis, referring to the discursive fields these concepts address or are inspired by. It also gives justification to the particular shape of the thesis as a non-linear website, and brings forward the research methodologies, and the means of the particular demonstration of this thesis/website. Finally, it will address the platforms' main questions by unfolding how the art-actions add to the current socio-political discussion of the conflicted landscape.

⁵ Genette, Gerard. 1997. 2.

Living in a conflicted landscape filled with racism, violence, injustice, anger and fear is terribly unsettling. It is especially concerning when the conflict emerges as part of a nation that claims and fights to be in charge of the surroundings I live in. For me, as an artist, this disturbance increases because of two contradicting notions I find in practicing art: art feels powerless against the suffering and pain, or it feels absurd and even offensive to spend time with while people are dying on your behalf; at the same time art is the most playful and flexible field I know to explore my concerns with the people and landscape around me, allowing the clearest or most precise recording of these concerns to appear. The conceptual framework of the *Guava Platform* aims to unfold the tension of this contradiction in an ongoing process. It does not try to solve or find solutions for the continuing harming frictions occurring in this landscape.

The *Guava Platform* therefore is a conceptual framework for conducting this search through art practice and writing. In other words this research and thesis are part of the platform, meaning the platform was not initiated to be part of this thesis. The research is conducted through my art practices and my writings and it is demonstrated on this thesis/website. In it, the practice and the writings are equally part of the platform. The platform therefore is a scheme, a plain on which all the elements participate. One is invited to look into a single particle on the platform, but in order to grasp the whole of it, visitors to the website need to explore the connections and interrelations between the different elements. The form of research suggested on the platform is one of a re-search: an attempt to search again and again for artistic opportunities of political embodiment, aiming to re-feel and re-think the conflicted landscape I live in. The prefix **re** implies something that one does once more, anew, with frequent or intensive force.⁶ The *Guava Platform* re-search does not attempt to resolve the ongoing conflict to which it re-acts; instead the prefix stands for a pursuit, a constant search of alternative ways to act here as an artist. It is a continuing inquiry that acts through the specific relations between the different searches, each time further enriching the process and creating something anew.

The writings and art-actions on the platform are part of the same process of re-search in this thesis/website. Each of the art-actions re-searches different structures of time-based-

⁶ Based on the Oxford Learners English dictionary. (2020). Retrieved: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>.

art forms and studies the artistic and socio-political possibilities of it, the making process and realization of the actions. All of the four **chapters** in the thesis/website are correlated to one of the art-actions on the platform in content and form. Every chapter explores a different art-action and brings together the context, motivations and structure the action proposes, and the theoretical concepts and ideas that took part in manifesting it. Each of the chapters are written in a different writing format that has developed in correlation with the structure and tactics of the art-action and the content they address. An example of this is the correlation between the film **A Day Becomes** and the chapter **Back to present**. The film is structured from more than twenty recordings of the same few minutes of dawn that are edited together into one abundant moment. In the layout of the chapter, the filmmaking text is set in the centre of the page, while the contextual and reflectional parts of the text lay around it, as though they push themselves in and spread over the layout of the page. In this case the chapter and the film correlate in their structure, both are arranged and constructed as layers of different conversations that take place in the same place and time.

Both the theory and artistic developments of each art-action work together to identify which components of the conflicted landscape it can address and how. They interact in what philosophers Brian Massumi and Erin Manning call a mutual process, where both academic research and artistic creation are “...experimental, emergent effects of an ongoing process.”⁷ Both, they claim, intersect in technique, which is an engagement with modalities of expression. Technique is a process that “reinvents itself in the evolution of a practice”.⁸ This thesis/website offers a technique of re-search, a continuing inquiry that converges both theoretical ideas and time-based-art-actions.

The conceptual terms that are revisited in the thesis/website all took part in the thinking processes that formed the art-actions. The theoretical concepts are central components of how each of the actions approaches and configures its challenges. These concepts refer to varied fields of my interest that demonstrate and configure how I experience the conflicted landscape around me, how I understand my way of living on it, and how I react

⁷ Manning, Erin. and Massumi, Brian. 2014. 89.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

as an artist to these challenges. Accordingly, to approach questions of first-hand experience and understanding of the landscape around me, I refer to the field of philosophy and especially to phenomenology. To address the conflicted landscape, I turn to political theory and cultural history, and to connect to former artists and understandings within the field of art, I look into socio-politically engaged art theory. These transdisciplinary theoretical thoughts and terms are discussed throughout the thesis/website and act as anchors of the tactical scheme of each art-action, in order to refine how the action operates as a reaction to the conflicted landscape.

A single form of action did not feel like enough resistance when considering the amount of violence, racism and fear. Therefore, as the re-search went on and developed, there was a constant need to continue the search and open more tactics of action. Each component of the platform is another endeavor from a different level or through another approach. However, on the platform, the elements also unfold through their connections, oppositions and interactions. The ongoing re-search of the platform acts similar to the circularity of interpretation, what is known as a Hermeneutical Circle. Since the 19th century, the circle has been a recurring topic of investigation and understanding in the field of hermeneutics.⁹ The circular movement in hermeneutics signifies a process of interpretation that moves between smaller and larger units of meaning that contribute to the understanding of a certain thing. It points out that the whole is understood in reference to the individual elements, and vice versa: the individual elements can only be understood in reference to the whole. The interpretation of the individual components is constantly influenced by a rotation between larger and smaller units.

A demonstration of this can be found in the sense of scent that spreads around the platform. The guava fruit scent triggers a memory for one of the main characters of the first film of the series called **Guava**.¹⁰ In this film, a Palestinian and a Jew who were driven out of Jaffa-Tel-Aviv. As they walk from what used to be their home towards Beirut, they discuss love, memory, trust and forgetfulness. They try to determine whether it would be better for them to continue their journey carrying their memories along with them, or not:

⁹ This has been a main topic to philosophers Hans Georg Gadamer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger and many others.

¹⁰ Guava, short film, 12 min. (2014).

he remembers the place and what happened, and believes their journey would benefit from forgetting; whereas she has forgotten it all, but believes the only way to go on is to remember. The character's argument in the film resolves because of the power of scent to arouse memory. The scent of a guava reminds her of their first encounter: when they understood that they had to flee from their home. Memories of scent are also part of the conversations around the platform's **scent collection**, which in itself is nothing but smells, extracted and waiting to be sniffed.¹¹ The chapter written around the scent collection discusses how scent, a formless entity, can be exhibited. The chapter also explores traditionally negative perspectives in Western philosophy on the sense of smell, and how these perspectives actually contribute to the discussion around locality and land ownership in the area east of the Mediterranean – a topic that the scent collection approaches through smelling. An understanding of the use of scent on the platform can be gained through each one of the elements above: the film, the collection or the text around the collection. However, the understanding will broaden when considering the relation between all the elements that address to scent and smelling, or when understanding interaction of odors on the platform as a whole.

The technique of re-search practiced on the platform is demonstrated also in the thesis/website through its layout as a layered flat-form.¹² Placing all the art-actions and writings on one website enables an exploration that potentially could convey numerous opportunities of movement between the assembled elements of the platform. Presented on a website, the conceptual platform acts as a flat-form where all elements are not the same, but on the same level of appearance. The website is a flat form that combines them and enables all the parts to become players on the same surface. Philosopher Alva Noë suggests to “Think of art and philosophy as long conversations in which participants come and go, some joining in at the end, others at the beginning, others coming late but insisting on learning what was said earlier, while others intervene without a good sense of what is going on.”¹³ Noë suggests philosophy and art are practices of shared traditions

¹¹ עטר א A Guava Scent Collection, Installation and Performance, 2017-ongoing.

¹² Flat form is the original French meaning of the word *plateforme*.

¹³ Noë, Alva. 2015. 232.

and concerns, and states that art is a philosophical practice and philosophy an aesthetic practice. In the re-search forms of this thesis/website, I do not agree that these different practices are interchangeable (art as philosophy and philosophy as art), as Noë proposes. However, the website enables these different practices (art-actions and explorations of philosophical concepts and ideas) to be experienced by the viewer together in the same space. This potentially suggests that aesthetic practices and theoretical, philosophical explorations can be in conversation with each other: they are both working to explore and develop tactics of the platform's art-actions. Instead of separating the thesis into printed written texts and exhibited art-works, here on the website both can *live* together and have the possibility to interact in multiple ways. The platform as a flat-form stretches the elements' ability to interact with each other. Thus, the components are not to be bound to a hierarchical relationship between theory and practice that might have restricted their forms of inter-action.

The website enables one to navigate between the elements in a nonlinear way, opening innumerable opportunities of directions to go through. If each element conducting the platform is another search, then every possible path creates a different course of the re-search, where other interactions and interrelations between the elements can occur. As such the thesis/website is also a recording of all the possible routs of inquiry, a *place* where all the different possible interpretations and understandings from these inquiries are collected together. By not providing the visitors of this thesis/website a certain starting point (which leads to the next step and so on), *Guava* emphasizes the investigative and conversational notions on the platform as a process. Instead visitors are invited to navigate through the website as they feel and think. From this text one can pursue any of the suggested links that include eight art-actions and four chapters.

Guava Platform art-actions interact and intervene with the actual socio-political surrounding of my life and with the people who are living here. However, the conceptual platform of *Guava* is exhibited and performed mainly in the artistic contexts of galleries and museums, and in academic contexts, such as conferences, lectures and workshops. Therefore, the platform distinguishes itself from the surface: It acts within the surroundings it takes part in it, but also disconnects itself from them in order to reflect, re-

think and re-feel the conditions of living here. Dealing with my socio-political surroundings on the platform is an ongoing process. I am not aiming to find results or solutions to the severe emergencies around me, but instead allowing myself, participants and viewers¹⁴ an opportunity to re-articulate, in thought and body our state of living here.

¹⁴ There are different ways to interact on the platform. As participants, people are invited to take part in the various actions, always as themselves: like the performers in the films or in the conversations on the radio. Another way to engage on the platform is as viewers of the films or performances or listeners to the radio station. In addition, some of the art-actions encourage people who begin as viewers to become participants as in the case of the conversations around the scent collection or at the end of the performance Entrails, where people ate the performers' leftovers.