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Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions

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Citation

Hoffman, T. K. (2020, October 13). *Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/137748>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions

Issue date: 2020-10-13



Video Still from the film *Sham (There)*, 2016

Behind Sham¹⁵

The following chapter is written in the format of a stream of consciousness, following part of my thoughts, fears, and experiences in the context of making the film **Sham**¹⁶ and the events related to it. The chapter is composed of five different ‘voices’ that relate to:

1. Excerpts from the film script.¹⁷
2. Personal remarks.
3. Behind the scenes of the film making and the *Guava* platform, of which the film is a part.
4. Theoretical discussions concerning the relationship of socio-politically-engaged art with its sociopolitical surroundings.
5. Violent events regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that occurred before, during and after the film making.

Acting as a politically-engaged artist during an ongoing violent conflict, in a place which is becoming more and more extreme in its ‘rightwing’ policies, makes me constantly question and weigh every decision I take in the process of practicing art. Being constantly confronted with severe violence and expressions of racism raises doubts about and urges re-estimations of the affect and the purpose of creating socio-politically engaged art. The multi-voiced text follows the making of a new film, the artistic context it was made in, and the political environment around its making, in an attempt to give the reader a sense of how this way of practicing art feels. Through the filmmaking, I question the place art and artists have in society in general and especially in violently conflicted areas. The chapter begins with discussing art practice as representing feelings and thoughts through Walter Benjamin's description of the ‘Angel of History’. It continues into a discussion of more

¹⁵ The word *Sham* means ‘there’ in Hebrew. In Arabic it refers to Sham, Greater Syria, which included Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria of today.

¹⁶ Sham, short film, 22 min. (2016).

¹⁷ The film is the outcome of a live performative action, the script has been written after the film was edited.

recent art practices that prefer to literally intervene in their surroundings rather than to represent an image of it. The chapter then, discusses the argument in the art world regarding these two approaches and ends by rethinking the filmmaking and the qualities and characteristics of my own present and future art practices.

1. Pre-Production

EXT. Judaea Plains – DAY

At an intersection of footpaths in the Judaea Hills, an open-back truck is at a standstill in the road. It is almost empty. One person sits in the back watching people as they decide which road to take.

This is a perfect location to film the truck. Just standing here and looking around, I feel the four thousand years that people have occupied this land.¹⁸ I can almost smell the blood repeatedly shed here. I just hope it won't rain.

The film will be the second in a series created as part of the *Guava Platform* for art-actions that advocate for free movement and the removal of borders east to the Mediterranean. With residents of the area, it practices constructive political imagination in this place through film, video, performance and participatory art.

EXT. Judaea Hills DAY

Samira (Arabic): What are you looking for?

Goni (Hebrew): Signal, I'm looking for a cellular signal.

Samira smiles, and gestures with her hands that there isn't one.

A pile. A huge pile of things and people on the side of a road. This is the first image I have when I think about the film. After a few moments, I notice that something is moving inside this pile, which looked dead at first. It has life within it, moving slowly, finding its way around the pile. As usual, I tell Yuval about the idea. Almost every time I have an idea, I talk to Yuval first. At least, as long as he was living here. It could seem like technology dismisses distance, but there is a quality of dialogue and friendship that is possible only when you're on a shared piece of land. Not surprisingly Yuval brings up Benjamin in our discussion.

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet...

¹⁸ References to cities built in the area are found in the so-called execration texts (ancient Egyptian hieratic texts, listing enemies of the Pharaoh, most often enemies of the Egyptian State or troublesome foreign neighbors). For a detailed research on archaeological findings in the area see: Dagan, Yehuda. 2004.

This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹⁹

Benjamin's angel of history is caught between hope and catastrophe, between future and past, his body and gestures turn towards the future but his face looks to the past. There, he sees a constant growing pile, growing tremendously up to the sky. His gaze into the past sees a growing pile, not a chain of events, as we might think of the past, but more and more wreckage and ruins growing into an endless pile.

July 2014. 3 teenage Jews kill and burn a sixteen-year-old Palestinian in Jerusalem. A month earlier 3 teenage settler Jews are kidnapped and killed in the occupied West Bank.

I lose hope. There is so much violence and fear around me. I grew up in the ongoing cycle of clashes, which had been going on for years before I was born. But I was never afraid before or uncomfortable to speak against the notion of war. After twenty years of being an activist the loss of hope feels like someone has pulled the carpet from beneath my feet. One must to have a certain amount of optimism to continue a struggle.

July 2014. Israel launches Military Operation²⁰ 'Tzuk Eitan' (Strong Cliff) in the Gaza Strip.

Benjamin's angel of history is blown irresistibly by the wind of the storm. It is left impotent, without the power to assist or be with the actual ruins of the past, stuck with the gaze of the pile. 'He would like to stay, resurrect the dead, heal, redeem, but he cannot. The storm of paradise is pushing him in the opposite direction, back into the future.'²¹ Progress, Benjamin writes, is the storm that drives the angel away from the pile of catastrophe and into the future of hope, watching it growing endlessly.

¹⁹ Benjamin, Walter. 1968. 257-258.

²⁰ I use the term military operation and not war because of the asymmetric nature of the violent conflict between the state of Israeli, and the ruling party of the Gaza strip, Hamas.

²¹ Handelman, Susan A. 1991, 346.

November 2014. The Israeli police arrest an artist for corrupting the Israeli flag, during one of her performances.²²

Benjamin's description of the angel of history is inspired by the watercolor mono-print *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee.²³ Over the years it has become a left-wing icon, symbolizing the options of an alternative historical idea. "As an icon of the left, Angelus Novus has seemed to hold out an elusive formula for making sense of the senseless, for reversing the irreversible, while being subject to a kind of political brooding all the more protracted the less promising the prospects for political practice appear to be."²⁴ Benjamin himself owned the mono-print since 1921 and has mentioned it in three other texts.

The image of a truck standing still, stuck, with only the constant expectation to move, to go somewhere, keeps coming up in my thoughts. Over and over again I imagine a pile of people and cargo 'growing' on the open-back truck and they, like the truck, will sit there, stuck and almost still.

In Benjamin's thesis, the angel of history is a detailed description of the angel in the artwork, combined with a description of an imaginary reality Benjamin 'sees' in it. In Klee's mono-print there is no catastrophe, piling wreckage upon wreckage as described by Benjamin, no claws and wings sharp as knives. In *Agesilaus Santander*,²⁵ an earlier text, the angel's movement is described quite differently. In the Angel of History, the angel wishes to stay but is forced to move on; in *Agesilaus Santander*, he is expected to move forward but resists movement. The changing image that Benjamin 'sees' in the *Angelus Novus* print reveals two qualities of the image: to represent thoughts and feelings; and its openness by which it allows one to 'see' opposite things in a single image. The former reveals the option of representing within an image and the latter insists that representation is not finite, but flowing and open to change.

²² At the time of writing this chapter, Natali Cohen Vaxberg has been questioned by the police 5 times and is waiting for her trial. <https://fundrazr.com/campaigns/d1585d/ab/45N5U2>. Retrieved September 2016.

²³ Paul Klee (1879-1940), *Angelus Novus* (New Angel) dated 1920, mono-print, Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, 31.8 x 24.2 cm, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

²⁴ Werckmeister, Otto. K. 1996. 242.

²⁵ Benjamin, Walter. 2005. 712-716.

August 2014. The ‘Tzuk Eitan’ war²⁶ ends. 2203 Palestinians and 72 Israelis were killed. 2457 Israelis and over 11000 Palestinians were injured.

The war ended, and quickly life goes back to what is considered ‘normal’ around here. The more one faces the image of death, the faster one learns to put it aside – that is among the only possible ways to continue living here in the present. But each time it is put aside, something changes, without noticing, sight becomes more narrow, as the images of death pile up in the margins of the field of vision.

EXT. Judea Plains – Afternoon

Waseem (Arabic) off screen: I know you from somewhere.

Amitay (Hebrew): I don’t speak Arabic

The sound of another man’s footsteps as he enters the truck. The sun is setting.

I usually think of Guava as an unbalanced mixture of past and future, and as such I imagine the truck waiting between the past that made people set out on the refugee roads and the unknown future that exists at the end of these roads. But Lin emphasized the Guava actions not as something that moves in time, but parallel to the present.

The political imagination of the *Guava Platform* practices the dismissal of borders east of the Mediterranean and evokes the idea of residents inhabiting this land without national borders. In the film *Sham* this practice is performed in an open-back truck, which, during the film, loads up more and more people and cargo. The image of the pile of people and stuff on the truck refers to an image not just of the past and future, but of the present as well. At present times, the image is associated with the current movement of refugees, especially between the Middle East and Europe from the war in Syria. Yet, it is part of the history of both sides of this local conflict as well. A truck filled with people and cargo implies the destruction of hundreds of villages and thousands of lives of Palestinian refugees in the Nakba (1948 war), and the Jewish history of the Holocaust. Finally, as

²⁶ I use the term war because of the amount of killed and injured people, as well as the damage that occurred, and as an opposition to the state of Israel which continued to refer to it as an operation because of the International and economic implications Israel will have to face with a declaration of war.

the film creates in-itself a micro-cosmos of a living place, it points out courses of actions of how this way of living might be possible in the future.

In the past two decades, an increasing number of artists have turned away from creating artworks that represent a variety of thoughts and feelings, in opposition to what the ‘Angelus Novus’ represents in Benjamin’s writings. Instead, these artists are motivated to make artworks that will ‘do’ something in the world – that will take part in finding a solution to world crises. Over the past years, this notion of art has been referred to in many different ways: participatory art, dialogical art, new genre art, relational art, all of which try to express its motivation, process and outcome. In one of the first works of research done in this field, art theorist Suzanne Lacy suggests “the underlying aversion to art that claims to ‘do’ something, that does not subordinate function to craft, presents a resonant dilemma for new genre public artist.”²⁷ Lacy claims that the ‘new genre art’ practice is built on the concept of audience, relationship, communication and political intention, and not upon materials or spaces. She also claims that artists are looking for ways to raise awareness of the social political surroundings they are working in. In her research, Lacy reconstructs a history of the art field based on these concepts, rather than from the more common perspective of materials, spaces and artistic media.

The art world, Lacy claims, has been ambivalent towards the new notion of practicing art. Detractors in the art world referred to the new notion as not being art, and questioned artists’ motivation to transform and affect their surroundings. The gap between different approaches leads to an ongoing search to capture the relationship between the ethical motivation of the artist and the aesthetic value that the artwork incorporates. Lacy suggests that the ‘new genre art’ practice is not only about the subject matter or the site of the art, but: “...about the aesthetic expression of activated value systems.”²⁸

May 2015. Miri Regev (the new minister of culture in Israel) tries to demand Norman Issa, a Palestinian actor (and citizen of Israel) to perform in the settlements although he refuses to do

²⁷ Lacy, Suzanne. 1994. 20-21.

²⁸ Ibid., 30.

so. She threatens to detract an upcoming budget for his children theatre, and at the same time cuts the budget of Al Midan theatre in Haifa.²⁹

Almost a year has passed since the last war, and still I'm not calm, outside me everyone and everything becomes more and more right-winged, and inside me the image of the truck slowly filling up with more and more people and cargo. I decide to send out an open call and invite whoever wants to join in 'the political imagination act' on an empty refugee truck during 24 hours.

‘This is an open call for people to take part in a performance for a short film whether you have performative experience or not...’

2. Production

Sham is part of a film series that addresses and presents an imagined borderless area east to the Mediterranean, and the situations in life that residents of this place might face.³⁰ The films present a fictive dismissal of borders that stands in opposition to the concrete walls dictated by national and political authorities and the restriction of movement they dictate. In the first two films of the series, residents begin to find their way towards places they were not able to reach before. These films are set in a place without official national status and an absence of nationality, and this setting allows stories of loss to be told, alongside tales of new opportunities and questions about a future for the this area. In other words, the series is a poetic lamentation on the great Zionist dream in the Middle East, while simultaneously evoking a life for residents in a land without national borders.

The motivation to have an impact and to blur ‘life’ and ‘art’ has grown in artists alongside social movements. These artists have pushed towards taking responsibility over continuing social and political crises around the world since the 1990s. They were responding to global and local events such as the fall of communism, AIDS, global warming and globalization. The field of art was shaken by socially-engaged art that sought to impact the world, as curator Nato Thompson claims:

²⁹ Stern, Itay, Skop, Yarden, Ashkenazi, Yair. "Israeli Arab Theaters Under Fire for Terrorism Play, Refusing to Perform in West Bank Settlements". Haaretz Online. Retrieved Septemeber 2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.660463>.

³⁰ Resident represents the people living in the area on a long-term basis, both Israelis and Palestinians.

“these cultural practices indicate a new social order – ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power and span disciplines.”³¹ To explain how this engaged notion of art is part of art history and not mere activism, Thompson looks to the desire of artists to blur life and art as growing from a combination of the various avant-garde movements in the twentieth century, like Fluxus or Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. It is an anti-representational desire, originating in the alienating effects of spectacle, according to Thompson. Socially-engaged artists have found out that “the arts have become an instructive space to gain valuable sets of skills in the techniques of performativity, representation, aesthetics, and the creation of an affect.”³² Thompson describes the realm of the political as perhaps the most appropriate place for the arts, as one that is necessary for its manifestation.

I met responders to the open call for *Sham* individually. Through dialogue we decided together what they would bring to the truck – a gesture, an object, or a state of mind – that would direct their time there. They also received information on the meeting point and time. There were no rehearsals, and they did not meet each other before the filming of the performance/film.

June 2015. Minister of Culture Miri Regev decides to withdraw the financing of choreographer Arkadi Zaides’ latest artwork³³ because he works with video footage of the Betsalem³⁴ archive. This is one of Regev’s first acts to demonstrate her intention to apply a new set of rules for artists and artworks: “One shall not: Deny the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; Incite racism, violence and terror; Support terror against Israel; Note the Israel Independence Day as a day of mourning; Corrupt the Israeli symbols; Call to boycott Israel.”³⁵

³¹ Thompson, Nato. 2012. 22.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

³³ Naveh, Gil. "Culture Ministry Removes Sponsorship of Dance Show Over Video Clips From B'Tselem". Haaretz Online. Retrieved September 2016. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.659484>.

³⁴ The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories was established in February 1989 by a group of prominent academics, attorneys, journalists, and Knesset members.

³⁵ Based on the bill Miri Regev promoted in the Israeli Knesset. Translated by Thalia Hoffman. Retrieved April 2020. <https://main.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/pages/press05.11.18bv.aspx>.

EXT. Judea Plains – Early Evening

Towards sunset a large group of people join the truck, and everyone needs to move around to find a place for themselves and their things. Ayelet continues to separate pomegranate seeds into a large tray. The sun is setting.

Hadil (Hebrew): How much did she give you?

I'm confused and afraid as the production of the film moves on. Confused about how to act as an artist while the political surrounding turns so severe and afraid to make mistakes that won't allow me to continue working here.

The dichotomy between the detractors and supporters of socio-political-engaged art has deepened since the 1990s. Art critics, artists and scholars have found different ways to describe the flaws of the practice, and to suggest alternative theories of judgement and interpretation. British artist and scholar Alana Jelinek claims that politics and activism are not to be mixed with art. In her recent research, she claims that non-art such as activism and other fields the art practices have collaborated with are merely a consequence of neoliberal pressures in economy and politics, alongside the internalization of neoliberal values by the art world. Neoliberal values, such as success rates and measurements of success, are a result of the confusion between art practice and non-art sociopolitical practice, Jelinek claims. The values of politics have become more important than the values of art. In order to counter this development, artists should reclaim their responsibility for art, and not rely upon the meaning of non-art actions: “The art world has lost a way of articulating the value of what we do and art is now understood directly in market terms, or indirectly in other neoliberal terms, as a measurable instrument for the amelioration of social ills as defined or at least sanctioned by government.”³⁶ To succeed in articulating the value of art, art should be understood as a knowledge forming discipline, Jelinek suggests, and as that it should reflect on the discipline of the art practices, and not other fields. Understanding art in that sense will define what art is, and what it is not.

³⁶ Jelenik, Alana. 2013. 119.

EXT. Judea Plains – Night

Yoram walks around the truck, examines it, and notices someone sitting on the higher bars of it.

Yoram (Arabic): Be careful sitting so high up, the road is dangerous.

He continues walking around the truck, catches a leg of a woman sitting upon it, and moves on.

Samira is covering a kid who is lying down outside the truck with a blanket.

Yoram (Hebrew) Off Screen: So much trash people take with them.

September 2015. The 3rd Intifada³⁷ erupts. Palestinians are killed during demonstrations and Jews are being stabbed in the streets. Palestinians use anything they can find to hurt (kitchen knives, scissors, etc.) and Israelis (citizens and military) shoot to kill whoever seems alarming.³⁸

Each time this happens it feels worse – fear and violence pick up their volume dominating the streets, again. The possibility of changing the direction of this circulation becomes even more out of reach. Discouragement shuffles all my cards of ideas, thoughts and feelings, and I’m clueless which ‘hand’ will be a good player for this game. I don’t understand why I should continue to make this film.

Art historian Claire Bishop argues that relational art practices prefer collaborative activity over aesthetics. She established a critical reading of this practice and the necessity of a connection between art and politics or between aesthetics and ethics. Bishop claims that one of the biggest problems about the ‘Social Turn’ in art since the 1990s is the “disavowed relationship to the aesthetic”³⁹ it created. Relational practices, she says, attempt to merge ‘real life’ and art, equality and quality, participation and spectatorship. They do so by focusing on the process and not the object, by preferring collective or co-authoring art practices that are judged by humanist values, and by turning spectators into participators. But, models of democracy in society do not have an

³⁷ A protracted grassroots campaign of protest and sometimes violent resistance against perceived oppression or military occupation, especially either of two uprisings among Palestinian Arabs in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, the first beginning in 1987 and the second in 2000, in protest against Israeli occupation of these territories.

³⁸ This is still ongoing as the chapter is written.

³⁹ Bishop, Claire. 2012. 26.

inherent relationship to models of democracy in art, Bishop argues. The equation between the two is misleading and “does not recognize art’s ability to generate other, more paradoxical criteria.”⁴⁰ The ongoing attempt of artists to combine their work with the socio-political sphere surrounding them, although motivated by an urgent call from their experience, fails to address both ethical issues and aesthetic criteria. Instead of merging ethics and aesthetics, art should underline the necessity to sustain a tension between them. They should be thought of simultaneously and not as one, sustaining a continuing tension.

Two weeks after the Palestinian uprising in East Jerusalem began, the group of people that joined the *Guava* action participated in a twenty-four-hour performance. The entire film crew, performers and staff volunteered to take part in the art-action, and were responsible for activating and operating the camp. During the first hour, people were introduced to their collaborators and the landscape. After this, the crew, performers and staff gathered for an opening talk. As a general rule, people were asked to act as themselves, and not play a role or a certain character. In addition they were asked to not act or represent during the performance anything that would illustrate the situation. Finally as was agreed between us before hand, they were asked to *use* the one behavior or gesture that we discussed individually as a last resort.

I can't sleep. This is the only time we have to rest for a couple of hours during the filming, and I walk around the landscape between the people. It is dark, so I can't see much, but I hear the openness and emptiness of the scenery and some whispering in Arabic and Hebrew. I decide to lie down next to the truck, as if something would happen, I would be able to protect it.

The twenty-four hours were divided into six separate performance sessions (day-afternoon-evening-night-morning-day). For each performance session, numerous participants joined the truck either alone or in small groups with her/his/their pile of things – a bag, some cloth, sometimes water. One after the other, females and males of different ages left the refugee roads they were walking on and piled upon the truck. Between each session more and more stuff – jerrycans, bundles of cloth, suitcases and boxes piled up in the truck. With each new person arriving, former ‘residents’ had to find their way to deal and contain the ‘newcomers’. The camera shot each session from another

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

angle of the truck, keeping the truck in front-centre of the camera. The movement of the camera was planned in such a way that the final scene would be shot from the same angle as the first.

EXT. Judea Plains – Midday

The truck is full of people. More than fifty are squeezed next to each other. The camera returns to its first position parallel to the truck. Multiple conversations are held between the people on the truck, from time to time one can hear parts of them. Another woman finds a place to sit on the truck and opens a red umbrella to make some shade. Nazir is teaching Shir Arabic.

Shir (Arabic): El shams btitlaa' min el shark o btenzel fi el gharb⁴¹

Art returns to the social throughout history, Bishop claims, whenever there is a collapse in collective thinking in society, political upheaval and movements for social change: “a utopian rethinking of art’s relationship to the social and of its political potential – manifested in a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated.”⁴² The current return of art to the social, which began in the 1990s, is “focusing on the ‘project’ as a privileged vehicle of utopian experimentation at a time when a leftist project seemed to have vanished from the political imaginary.”⁴³ Relational art practices stand without relation to an existing political project, and usually work independently and move from project to project. This is a result of these art projects not having any institution to continue their activist art. This should not be addressed by collapsing art and ethics together, Bishop suggests, but rather “the task today is to produce a viable international alignment of leftist political movements and a reassertion of art’s inventive forms of negation as valuable in their own right.”⁴⁴ Art should be recognized as an experimental activity, one that overlaps the world and might lend support to existing political institutions by exchanging ideas.

‘24 hours of utopia’, one of the participants says to me at the end of the filming. ‘A utopian dystopia’ I answer – but was it?

⁴¹ English translation: The sun rises in the East and sets in the West.

⁴² Bishop, Claire. 2012. 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

3. Post-Production

October 2015. Dareen Tatour, a Palestinian poet living in Israel next to Nazareth, is arrested for inciting violence and supporting a terrorist organization, as expressed in one of her poems. She is kept in custody for over seven months and her trial begins in May 2016.

The failure of socially-engaged art, Bishop claims, is “an ethical reasoning that fails to accommodate the aesthetic or to understand it as an autonomous realm of experience.”⁴⁵ Following philosopher Jacques Rancière and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, she argues that to hold the tension between ethics and aesthetics, art must leave space for perversity, paradox and negation. Her answer to this failure is that socially-engaged art should create a space that occupies a territory between mere life and mere art – a space that will multiply the ways to be present in participatory art and diversify its negotiation of the social.

The film shoot ended and the film went into its next stage of editing and sound. *Sham* was edited into a twenty-minute film that ties together the twenty-four-hour performance. The editing connected the six separate sessions into one scenario during which the truck begins almost empty and ends with a long scene in which all fifty people who took part in the performance fill the frame on the truck. Today the film stands alone as a video work, but at the same time it is part of a film series, that was created as part of the *Guava Platform*. The film demonstrates the layered form of action within art that is part of the larger quest of the platform: how art can act in both the aesthetic regime and the politic regime?

I keep thinking about the shooting as I edit the film. The twenty-four hours there were the only moments in which I felt the non-symmetric shared fate of both the Palestinians and Jews who are living here in this blood-soaked land.

The owner of an art collection offered to purchase the film and I decided to collectively ask the participants, crew and staff how to make use of it. I wrote an e-mail to them all asking what they prefer to do with the money:

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

1. Donate it to an NGO working in the area
2. Have a party
3. Create a new art-action on the *Guava Platform*