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Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions

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Conclusion

Demonstrating the *Guava Platform*: Insist to resist

Movement towards an embodiment of constructive political imagination

The notion of movement is explored throughout the thesis the *Guava Platform*, both physically and conceptually. In its physical meaning, the term circles around the effort of opening up the area in which I live, east of the Mediterranean, for movement. I aim to create concrete mobility in order for people living here to be able to interact with each other and explore the neighboring lands. Conceptually, *Guava* analyses movement as a form of resistance to the restricting and limiting borders of the region I live in. Most of the states around Israel are considered enemies and as a result there is almost no movement between Israel and the neighboring states. Furthermore, the Israeli State surrounds the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, thereby controlling the movement of people within, and restricting movement into them. These restraints have been part of Israeli history since it came into being in 1948, and escalated as a result of every war, military operation and the ongoing occupation of people and land that Israel still practices. Political sociologist Adriana Kemp claims that since the establishment of the Israeli State, no government succeeded or conversely attempted: "...at bringing about a consensus over the desirable shape of the national 'geo-body', thus leaving the Israeli society in a 'no-border' situation."¹³⁴ As a result, inhabitants of the area have been living with multiple restrictions and no official state borders, and are suffering from the violent consequences of the control those restrictions impose on them. In this research project, when discussing the Israeli State and the conflicts with its neighboring countries, the legal national borders and Israel as a sovereign territory are some of the main issues questioned. The *Guava Platform* is concerned with the consequences of these barriers and the lack of movement the barriers impose on the landscape and the people living in the area.

Although this thesis does not discuss the authority and legality of Israeli State borders directly, I would like to point out the connection between the borders and the lack of

¹³⁴ Kemp, Adriana. 1999. 79.

possibilities of movement in the area. Since the establishment of Israel, the State randomly controls its inhabitants' movement. It considers borders as something changeable with the nation's needs: announcing territory to be a restricted army area, evacuating residents from their homeland, building settlements on private Palestinian lands, placing checkpoints, etc. As a result, fears emerge in people who are living here, the fear to cross a place one should not cross, whether this happens legally or to maintain their own safety. In ongoing discussions about Israeli territory, the main criticism actually regards the state's lack of solid and fixed national borders.¹³⁵ Nevertheless Israel continues to maintain its official 'borderless' position, and maintains restrictions of inhabitants' mobility according to the states needs. These unstable borders and fluidity of the Israeli territory add to the stagnation of people living here, who consequently shut themselves up in their familiar and *safe* surroundings. The *Guava Platform* is a reaction in form of multiple art-actions that insist to stimulate this impasse and find tactics of continuing to live here as an artist.

To react to these physical restrictions, the *Guava Platform* performs art-actions that induce and take part in embodying a political imagination of movement in the conflicted landscape. On the platform, imagination is acknowledged and rooted as a constructive tool. Imaginations "...are proper 'objects' of reflection through which we come to develop our powers of reason and increase our knowledge".¹³⁶ By considering imagination as constructive in *Guava's* artistic re-search, I ask to reclaim arts' ability to participate in its environment and become relevant in discussions that surround it. This standpoint suggests that imagination in art is not merely a fantasy representing something that is illusionary and unreal, but a constructive tool to connect one with their surroundings. This is similar to French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the imaginary. Ricoeur suggests that imagination involves an act of suspending the direct reference of thought to the objects of our ordinary discourse.¹³⁷ Similarly, the *Guava Platform* suggests suspending direct reference to the conflicted landscape and asks to experience it in alternative ways, through constructive imagination. The art-actions of the *Guava Platform*

¹³⁵ For further reading refer to: Kimmerling, Baruch and Weizman, Eyal, 2007.

¹³⁶ Gatens, Moira. and Lloyd, Genevieve. 1999. 4.

¹³⁷ Ricœur, Paul. 2003. 245-354, 261-270.

seek to postpone the common socio-political discussion of the local conflict, and constructively imagine movement in the area to re-think and re-feel oneself in the landscape.

The art-actions on the platform set this imaginative physical movement in motion by using conceptual movement as its dynamic force. The impetus of each action and within every one of them is therefore its conceptual movement: imagined movement triggers the action and maintains its existence; movement is the art-actions' incentive to perceive thoughts and feelings, and stimulates the ways one relates to a surrounding socio-political landscape. This sort of movement correlates to what philosopher Erin Manning conceptualizes as a movement that is an activator of minor gestures: "It moves the non-conscious toward the conscious, makes felt the unsayable in the said, brings into resonance field effects¹³⁸ otherwise backgrounded in experience."¹³⁹ Though it may pass almost unperceived, she claims that it is a force that challenges common sense and transforms the field of relations by offering unlimited experiential variations of alternative forms of being, knowing and doing. What a minor gesture might lead to, is, for Manning, always a political question as it invites new modes of living: "How this singular life-orientation carries existence, and where its minor gestures may lead, is always, for me, a political question."¹⁴⁰ Conceptually the art-actions on the platform aim to activate this sort of movement. The art-actions conduct their structure and practice accordingly, intending to activate this delicate but affective potency of movement.

One expression of this dynamic use of movement throughout the platform is how the Hebrew and the Arabic languages are applied. In all the elements of the platform that contain speech or conversation, Arabic and Hebrew are spoken. They transmit from one to another, as they are spoken inseparably, and not translated from one to the other. On the platform the users of the two languages are in need to unlearn the former knowledge of their main speech or mother tongue. The words in the actions on the platform are taken

¹³⁸ Field effects, according to philosophers Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, are relational fields of everything that takes place (moving or still) in a certain event. These fields are noticed, they claim, when one actively thinks **with** movement, when one bodily's action is thinking. For further reading on this concept: Manning, Erin and Massumi, Brian. 2014.

¹³⁹ Manning, Erin. 2016. 7.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

from Arabic and Hebrew, but to understand or speak what this combined language implies, one is required to redefine and experience how the words are used and what they mean. “I must learn how to speak Arabic” says the main character, Yousef, in Arabic at the end of the film ***A day becomes***¹⁴¹, after speaking this language alongside Hebrew for the whole of it. Yousef implies that even though he speaks both Hebrew and Arabic throughout the film, he is not familiar with his own speech. In order to learn the languages that might be spoken in the new, now borderless, landscape he is facing, he needs to forget Arabic and Hebrew as he formerly knew them.

In the past decades, the violent structures and unjust conditions in Israel changed the use of both the Hebrew and Arabic languages. Although Arabic is the mother tongue and main language of Palestinian citizens in Israel (who represent more than 20% of the society) and it is officially the second language of the state, Israeli Jews rarely speak it. Furthermore, because most of the daily routine is in Hebrew,¹⁴² Palestinian citizens of the Israeli State tend not to master their mother tongue, as they are expected to function in Hebrew. In almost every aspect of daily routine in Israel, Arabic is pushed aside: it is not heard on the streets, nor in the mass media or in any other public realm. As a result, Arabic has become the language of the ‘enemy’ and Hebrew the language of the ruler and ruling system. This insufficient and even harmful use of languages makes it nearly impossible to use their phrases in order to imagine a place that could be open for movement.

These divides between the two languages are the reason Yussef and also participants/viewers/listeners also of the other art-actions, are confronted with and challenged by the language as it is used on the platform. The fluency between the two languages in *Guava’s* art-actions encourages its participants to question the ways one uses their language and move from what was known before, towards a combination of the two that does not yet exist. Yussef’s comment, of his need to learn Arabic, implies that his knowledge of both the languages is no longer sufficient in the landscape he is walking towards. He will need

¹⁴¹ *A Day Becomes*, 19 min. (2018).

¹⁴² The local universities teach in Hebrew, and most of the work in all the fields requires knowledge in Hebrew.

to re-learn the languages to be able to speak in the new landscape that is open for movement.

Thoughts about the connections, relations and separations of the two languages are also the topic of the **radio conversation** with Middle East Studies language researcher Yoni Mendel. Mendel's research focuses on how the political conflict influenced the way Arabic is spoken in Israel. Our conversation was around how Arabic used to be the local language in Palestine before Israel was established. We discussed how it could have been the language that Jews and their neighbors would have had in common. But, sadly we concluded, that the absence of the use of Arabic has made people forget how close it is to Hebrew. Instead it is increasingly used by the Israeli general army forces, and military intelligence, and almost never in daily Jewish environments, except for some curses that every Israeli knows.

Throughout the platform's art-actions, the dynamic force of movement is a direct response to the physical limitations of the landscape: the dynamic force of movement alludes to dismissing the borders and allow movement in the area. One example of how the dynamic force of movement aims at the removal of borders in the *Guava's* art-actions is the geotagging **website**. This website invites people to notice and re-mark the road between Jaffa-Tel Aviv and Beirut. This road allowed inhabitants to move from one city to another before the establishment of Israel. The website invites people to download stencils, spray the stencil on the existing physical route and later upload a picture of the graffiti to the website. Another example is the *Guava's* short film series¹⁴³, which also invites its viewers to experience the landscape as physically open to movement. All these films are placed here, in the local landscape, but they occur in an imagined time, in the midsts of the moment when the borders are abolished. In all the films of the series, people are confronted with the sudden possibility of movement in the area, and are challenged to react to the possibilities it opens.

Other art-actions of the *Guava Platform* also enact the dynamic force through relationships between people. These actions focus on performing and as such, do not necessarily create new objects in the world: instead, there is appearing, discussing and

¹⁴³ *Guava*, 12 min. (2014); *Sham (there)*, 22 min. (2016); *A Day Becomes*, 19 min. (2018).

conversing. They consider the dynamic force in reference to how philosopher Hannah Arendt articulated it through the distinction between labor, work and action in relation to human politics. Action, she claims is the only activity that exists directly between people without the mediation of things or material. It means to “take an initiative”, and to “set something in motion”¹⁴⁴, through action people disclose who they are in the public realm. Action is what makes us human in a socio-political environment, according to Arendt. She claims action is what points towards and reflects peoples freedom and plurality. Freedom in the sense that all people are able to act, to make something new, and plurality because action is something done within the *world* besides others’ and in public. The *Guava Platform* art-actions are motivated and triggered on the base of these two means of action Arendt refers to, freedom and plurality, and seek how to activate them. One suggestion of doing this on the platform is to voice a point of view, to initiate a dynamic force between people and to engage in discussions. Here, the element of conversation becomes the main part of the performance. Several voices are put together to reveal their relations and interactions and to expose their multiplicity. By placing the interrelations between particular people in the centre of an art-action, the socio-political conflict shifts from the national sphere to a personal one. People – not nations – disclose their needs, desires and interest of living here. They confront their aspirations with this land separated from their nationality and converse their relations to it with other people who inhabit the land east of the Mediterranean.

One example of these conversations is the case of the **online radio broadcasts**. As social scientist Sherry Turkle claims, “Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It’s where we develop the capacity for empathy.”¹⁴⁵ On the radio, I organized more than twenty different broadcasts of conversations in Hebrew and in Arabic with artists, activists, academics and cultural entrepreneurs. They discussed independent map-making and urban planning, local activism and feminist theory, alternative historical readings and reconceptualization of being in refuge. In each of them there was a discussion about

¹⁴⁴ Hannah, Arendt. 1958. 177.

¹⁴⁵ Turkle, Sherry. 2015. 10.

current conceptions and actions people currently practice that might be relevant for the possibilities the *Guava Platform* suggests. In these conversations, memories, thoughts, feelings, and fictional accounts all contributed to imagining the landscape as open to movement.

At other times, the raised voices are part of gatherings and conversations that occur during the platform's performances, in which the viewers and visitors are invited to take part. One example is the ***Guava scent collection***. People are encouraged to share memories triggered by the scents presented in the installation, and engage in conversations on locality and inhabiting land in the area. In another ***performance***¹⁴⁶, Lebanese artist and activist Eliesh¹⁴⁷ and I met for the first time on the 'neutral' ground¹⁴⁸ of Leiden University, the Netherlands.¹⁴⁹ Our meeting opened a symposium we organized on the topic of art and artists in the light of national identities: how and in which circumstances do nationalities influence a work of art or the work of an artist? Eliesh and I had a chance to speak and work together online, but we had not been able to travel and meet each other in our respective countries. In Leiden the setting of the performance consisted of two chairs and a microphone. All we decided before was that we can ask each other anything, and the audience can interfere when they wish. Our personal and distinctive meeting in the performance revealed in the performance as a new and particular way to discuss artists' activity in the context of their nationality and feeling of belonging (or not) to a certain place.

The participatory artistic practice of conversations on the platform, alongside the conceptual artistic work did not feel adequate as a sole reaction to the ongoing violence in and over the landscape. The art practices described in this PhD project aim to demonstrate that the dynamic force of movement is activated through interactions between people and conversations. They also endeavor to challenge the common

¹⁴⁶ The performance that took place at the Leiden University in 2016 was never named.

¹⁴⁷ This single name without a last name is the only one I have learned to know him by.

¹⁴⁸ Lebanon and Israel consider themselves enemy countries, meaning its residents and citizens are not allowed to travel between the two nations.

¹⁴⁹ As part of the symposium *Arts in the Eyes of National Identities* that took place at the Leiden University, 23-24 of June 2016.

understandings of language and identity that people living here experience. But the *Guava Platform*'s re-search also seeks to activate this force in a physical form, to work with and inside one's body. Some of the *Guava* art-actions activate the participants and viewers physically within their body. If most of the art-actions activate sight and sound, these actions operate also with taste and smell. The art-actions address simultaneously all of the five senses and interior parts of the body, penetrating one's physical experience in an attempt to raise a political resistance movement from within. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that "The perceiving subject is not this absolute thinker; rather, it functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body".¹⁵⁰ The *Guava Platform* enters every gateway to embody the constructive political imagination of movement. These bodily actions penetrate all the entrances to one's body (eyes, ears, mouth, nose, skin) to broaden the research for additional tactics through feeling, tasting, smelling and the digestion system.

One demonstration of embodiment in the art-actions on the platform is in the film **Sham (There)**.¹⁵¹ In the film people were invited to join a twenty-four-hour performance in the Judea Hills. During these hours, people and cargo piled upon a refugee truck standing on a path in the landscape. Women and men of different ages, speaking Hebrew and Arabic, amass upon the open truck, one after the other. More and more people and cargo huddle together. The people who joined the performance did not necessarily know each other beforehand and their actions were not planned, leaving it open to their intuitive reactions to one another and the piling objects and stuff around them. Participants were experiencing, demonstrating and performing a bodily exploration of their interrelations while constantly in need of finding their place on the truck.

Another example is in the performance **Entrails**¹⁵², in it eating and feeding become the main dynamic activator of embodying political imagination. Morad¹⁵³ told me his life story repeatedly while I fed him lamb internal organs. The more I fed him, the less detailed his

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964, 5.

¹⁵¹ Sham (There), Short Film, 22 min. (2016).

¹⁵² Entrails, Performance, 20 minutes, 2016-ongoing.

¹⁵³ Morad Hassan is also one of the performers participating in the film Sham (There).

version of the story became. On the surface of our interaction lie our dualistic differences: Man-Woman, Muslim-Jewish, Citizen-Resident¹⁵⁴, Eater-Feeder, and the performance shows how feeding and eating underscore these dualities. Alongside these binaries, the performance explored what interrelations are possible between Morad and me through the food we share, and not just relying on the content of what he says to me in his monologue. In the chapter **Feeding/Eating the Other** the reader is taken on a journey mirroring the performance's structure, where various possible interactions are examined. The seven suggestions of possible relationships are unfolded in seven sub-chapters of the chapter, based on the seven repetitions of his monologue. In this chapter the accumulation of suggested interactions between us reveal the possibility of a layered relationship that appears when our shared Hebrew language is put aside and our connection is based on feeding and eating.

The explorations of the *Guava Platform* insist on full embodiment, engaging the five senses to re-think and re-feel the political imagination of this conflicted landscape. The platform re-searches both conceptual and poetical possibilities through the senses and through the whole body, including the inner bodily systems of digestion and olfactory capacities. None of these actions are sufficient on their own, separately, because *Guava* is in search for interrelations and re-actions that suggest possibilities of re-articulating what it means to live in this landscape. And for this, multiple and ongoing tactics of intervention are needed.

At the beginning of my PhD trajectory, we, as students, were requested to “demonstrate knowledge and understanding” as part of our aim in completing the thesis. Encountering the concept of ‘demonstration’ again— in such a different context and with completely different tools than the demonstration I recall from my political experience— made me draw a small sketch in my new PhD notebook. The sketch was of a female-like person

¹⁵⁴ I am a Jewish resident of the state of Israel, and not a citizen. My parents moved to Israel when I was a child, and decided to refuse the Israeli citizenship in order to keep our German citizenship. Since I have been an adult, I chose not to change this. Officially, because I'm Jewish, my residentship in Israel is very stable, and I have to fulfill all my duties (including army service). The only thing I cannot do is vote.

standing with her right hand held up and holding a sign saying: 'I know how to research'. While *she* continued standing in the middle of the page in the notebook, it took me a couple of more years to articulate why *she* was protesting and how *she* intended to do so.

At first I was motivated by the attempt to find ways to continue living, as an artist, in the violent and conflicted landscape of my home country. This incentive continued throughout my PhD project and is still stimulating my practice and my research today. On the thesis/website I looked for possible courses of art-actions as a response to the socio-political surroundings I am part of. I focused in particular on how the borders in the area restrict inhabitants' ability to physically move from place to place, and the constraints these borders dictate upon their political imagination. Eight of these art-actions (films, performances and radio conversations) and four chapters that are written around them are the components of this thesis/website. The chapters reflect and contextualize the research process and manifestation of each art-action in order to better understand and develop my response as an artist to this landscape. The thesis/website brings all the art-actions and texts together and organizes them in the same *space* for the first time. All of the actions and texts pursue the initial research questions: "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?" The research resulted in evolved and expanded methods of constructing and acting out these art-actions.

The tactics and techniques of the *Guava Platform's* art-actions that were articulated during the research process include four main understandings in regard to the questions raised. These four points together determine my positions in the field. They convey the ways I found to act in the field of socio-political-engaged art while living here, east of the Mediterranean.

One is the trans-medium approach of the art-actions, promoting the use of various time-based art forms on the platform, including films, performance, participatory art and public

interventions. The platform structure and thesis/website allow these various media to interact, relate and influence one another. Many times within the context of each individual art-action, different media cooperate. An example of this are the performative techniques that are employed and play a role in the structures of the films, or the conversations held as part of the scent collection exhibition. Since the various media on the platform relate and affect each other and as a result go beyond, across and through their original definitions, I refer to this understanding as a trans-medium approach.

Second is the understanding that the art-actions should operate in a large spectrum of participatory tactics. The platform's art-actions invite people to explore multiple ways of taking part. The participants always perform as themselves, not representing a larger group, and especially putting nationalities aside. In the art-actions participation ranges from promoting direct action to simply watching the films. In between, participants are called to take part in conversations, to speak on the radio, to listen to the radio, to perform in the films, to take part in conferences, to read the texts and listen to lectures, to smell or to eat.

Third is the understanding that the art-actions should activate an embodiment of socio-political constructive imagination, conceptually and physically and therefore operate the five human senses, the digestion and olfactory systems. The local socio-political conflicts of the area east to the Mediterranean, where I live, is vigorously interpreted both visually and vocally. Everyone puts effort into explaining the reasons and outcomes of this conflict, and therefore *everyone* has an opinion. Between the news, TV-shows, films, blogs and academic research in various fields—endless information has already been communicated, documented and recorded regarding the conflict in this area. As a result, on the platform I experiment with all the senses and inner parts to explore the possibilities of embodying a socio-political constructive imagination through them. These experiences are a result of both dissatisfaction with the efficacy of working only with sight and sound, and of my eagerness to subversively interact and affect participants on the platform.

Fourth is the understanding of activating conceptual movement within the art-actions in order to stimulate a political constructive imagination of physical movement in the area east of the Mediterranean. Because the art-actions generate metaphorical and symbolical

movement in time, memory, language, landscape and identity, they encourage and enrich the inhabitants' possibilities of a socio-political constructive imagination of physical movement in the area.

The thesis/website is the outcome of a demonstration that began with a female-like person sketched in my PhD notebook, offering a demonstration of the *Guava Platform* re-search. The tactics, terms and methods of this re-search demonstrate how *Guava*, as a whole and in each of its components, is engaged with the re-action of an artist in a conflicted landscape. This thesis/website may be the completion of the re-search project, but not the conclusion of the *Guava Platform*. At the moment I am in the process of developing a new film in the series named *Yatir*.¹⁵⁵ Yatir forest is the largest planted forest in Israel. It covers more than 40,000 square meters with about 4 million pine trees on the edge of the Negev desert in the south of Israel. The forest was planted at the beginning of the 1960s, but this particular area of land is already mentioned in the Old Testament and is thought to be inhabited by humans since then. The film will record the branching and ramifications of the trees in the forest. It will seem as though there is no way out of the forest, no direction to follow and no path to go by. The only trail the film will find is into the endless desert. In the film a tree will fall down, collapse. All of the participants in the film will appear in different scenes by the tree that is about to fall. In other words, the deeds of many people collapse into a singular action, the falling of the tree.

The *Guava Platform* will continue to follow the notion of reclaiming imagination through time-based art as a constructive tool. It will keep researching through art and writing how to respond and react in conflicted landscapes by embodying constructive political imagination. Through this embodiment, my research into the possibility of how to live in these places while resisting the increasing racism, violence, injustice and fear of my surroundings, is ongoing.

¹⁵⁵ Working title.