
The Jerusalem Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art provides a platform for artists who examine aspects of Judaism and the Jewish world through their work. Ram Ozeri, the Biennale’s founder, described it as “an opportunity for the world of Jewish content and the world of contemporary art to meet. [...] The term ‘contemporary Jewish art’ challenges the Israeli art world and offers an alternative to the prevailing definitions of belonging.” The second Jerusalem Biennale was held in 2015, for six weeks, beginning on September 24. Atypically for Biennale exhibitions, most of the participating artists were women. Held in seven locations around Jerusalem, nearly 150 Israeli and international artists took part in ten different exhibitions.

Among the various exhibitions was one entitled “Women of the Book,” curated by Shoshana Gugenheim, Ronit Steinberg, and Judith Margolis, which was the result of a seven-year project during which women artists from eleven countries created works on parchment, each devoted to one of the weekly Torah portions. Another exhibition was “Bezalel: In&Out,” curated by Shirat-Miriam Shamir and Ido Noy, which showed primarily works by teachers in the Jewelry and Fashion Design Department at the Bezalel Academy, the most important school of art in Israel. The works in the exhibition sought to challenge the boundaries between contemporary art and Judaica and, essentially, created Judaica with a twist. The perspective of the exhibition “Ima Iyla’a: The Art of Motherhood” is described by its curators Nurit Sirkis Bank and Noa Lea Cohn as a “post-feminist” perspective on motherhood. This exhibition showcased many ultra-Orthodox ("Haredi") artists. Susan Nashman Fraiman curated “A Fine Line,” an exhibition of works that explore questions of boundaries and balances: between the sacred and the profane; between friends and enemies; between the public and the private; and between the real and the imaginary.

Most of the media coverage of the Jerusalem Biennale was in English and provided, for the most part, an uncritical perspective. The very concept of Jewish art is so foreign in Israel that even journalists with an allegedly Jewish or religious agenda paid no attention to the Biennale, and it goes without saying that the Israeli art world ignored it completely. Jewish art is an established discipline in academia outside of Israel, and yet Israeli academia views the field with suspicion. In 2015, the Department of Jewish Art at Bar-Ilan University held a conference entitled “Constructing and Deconstructing Jewish Art.” Organized to examine what exactly constitutes Jewish art, the conference was held following an assessment of the department by the Council for Higher Education, which questioned whether the university was justified in maintaining a separate department for Jewish art at all.

Biennale exhibitions of contemporary art are characterized by transcultural perspectives and often group works of art from around the world together.1 This constellation is certainly applicable to Jewish art, since Judaism is diasporic, active in many different places at the same time.2 Accordingly, the Biennale of 2015 asked for proposals from curators and artists from all over the world. Groups outside of Israel that responded to the invitation included: the Jewish Art Salon (JAS), which is based in New York; the Jewish Artists Initiative (JAI), from California; and a group of Jewish and non-Jewish artists from Argentina. Although there is nothing new in international Biennales about showing artists from around the world together, in the Jewish-Israeli context it is not self-evident and, as I demonstrate below, largely undermines the basic structure of the Israeli art world. This rejection could explain the complete disregard shown by the Israeli art world toward the Jerusalem Biennale.

The exhibition “New York/New Work: Contemporary Jewish Art from NYC,” which I curated with Dvora Liss in the Van Leer Institute as part of the Biennale, was shown later in the Museum of Art, Ein Harod, presented contemporary Jewish art from New York. Using the perspective of Jewish art in the United States, we proposed a discussion of “fields of art” through the works of one group of American artists who address Judaism through artistic expression. We considered what is happening or might happen in Israel in this connection, and thereby demonstrated the importance of the Biennale. In 2013, the art historian Matthew

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Baigell termed our era the “Golden Age” of American Jewish art.³ He noted that since the 1970s, and particularly the 1980s, American artists have focused on Judaism from a personal perspective, which is very different from how artists had previously looked at it. No longer does the discourse on Judaism stem from paintings of dancing Hasids or simple biblical stories; now the subject is addressed through complex, critical, and inquiring perspectives that result from deep knowledge and textual re-interpretation. But art, like culture in general, exists in fields and is experienced through discourse. Therefore, in our attention to the American Jewish art world, we must look not only at the works themselves, but also at the field in which they are created. Accordingly, the exhibition “New York/ New Work” was based on the fact that the province of Jewish art in the United States exists as its own defined and developed field, alongside other domains of art. Like any field, that of American Jewish art produces a canon of work and operates through agents—artists, museums, galleries, curators, scholars, collectors, and audiences. Groups and associations of artists who draw their inspiration from Judaism have also helped to develop the field of Jewish art in the United States.⁴

“New York/New Work” presented new works by artists who are members of New York’s Jewish Art Salon (JAS), one of the most important groups in the field of Jewish contemporary art and certainly the largest.⁵ Unlike a group of artists who embrace a similar artistic approach or common themes, the JAS, aware of the influence that an artists’ association can have within the broader art world, functions primarily to advance displays of Jewish art.

The Jewish art created by some of the artists in the New York exhibition is included in the canon of American Jewish art, but these artists have also produced works without any Jewish content. On the one hand, their “not Jewish” art is displayed and collected by the most important American museums, for example, abstract works by Archie Rand are found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the works of Helène Aylon are included in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum, and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. On the other hand, the “Jewish” art created by these artists was not initially accepted into the province of American art.⁶

The existence of Jewish contemporary art as a defined field in the United States enabled a canonization process of their “Jewish” works. When a particular field of art gains a certain level of symbolic capital and prestige, there is a trickle-down effect from the canon it creates to more central and hegemonic domains. Accordingly, once Jewish art was excluded from the broad field of American art, a canonization process took place in the Jewish field, which trickled down to the general field; for example, the works of Rand and Aylon are included in Art & Today under the rubric of “Art and Spirituality: Rediscovering Transcendence,”⁷ and the works of Siona Benjamin are included in Art + Religion in the 21st Century by Aaron Rosen under the rubric of “Creative Differences”.⁸

In Israel there is no defined field of Jewish art that allows for the canonization of art that addresses Jewish content from a diversity of perspectives. Israeli artists who incorporate Judaism into their art necessarily turn to the only local field of art. However, the Israeli art field often rejects them—particularly in the case of art that draws on clearly traditional, nonsecular, perspectives. An Israeli artist who chooses to engage the world of Jewish content and wants to be accepted in the Israeli art field is faced with at least one condition: if the artist deals with Jewish content, he must detach his work from Jewish tradition.⁹ In practice, most of the art that is perceived as being “too Jewish” is rejected by the Israeli art world. At the same time, the Israeli art scene also rejects Jewish diasporic art. Works that are included in the canon of American Jewish art are generally disregarded in Israel. Helène Aylon told me in an interview earlier this year that one of her collectors offered to acquire her feminist work “All Rise: For Women Judges on a Beit Din” (2007–2009), a piece that represents a new religious law court for women judges (dayanim), for the Israel Museum, but that the museum responded that it would be interested in acquiring others of her pieces, but not her “Jewish” works.

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