

Common Views : Sourcing Water - An Introduction

About the Project

"Common Views" is an extensive, site-specific and durational, participatory arts project, led by artists David Behar Perahia and Dan Farberoff. The project focuses on the relationships of communities sharing a landscape, as a function of their relationship and connection to place. The project's current exhibition "Common Views: Sourcing Water", showing at the Arad Contemporary Arts Center (ACAC) in Israel, represents a juncture in the journey by artists. This first phase of the journey takes place in the region of the desert town of Arad and the nearby Bedouin settlements. The communities that inhabit the area all share a common desert landscape, and yet, there exists between them, in very close proximity, a wide disparity and an inequity in the allotment of and access to resources. The artists have chosen to focus on water as a valuable resource, using the theme to reflect on this distributive imbalance, addressing the political in the context of a wider discussion on environment and sustainability.

Most of the Bedouin inhabitants of the arid Baqi'a Valley (Hebrew, Qana'im), adjacent to the town of Arad, were settled in the area in the early 1950s by orders of the Israeli military. They have relied historically on traditional rain-water harvesting and the use of cisterns and dug up water tanks for all their needs, up until the laying of a water pipe leading to the nearby historical site of Masada. Today, self-laid, sun-beaten, black, plastic irrigation pipes wind their way for miles through the desert, bringing precious water from the official pipeline to the isolated settlements, each controlled by an unofficial stopcock inside a hand-crafted, locked metal box. The Bedouins have as a result gradually deserted their water harvesting practices, with the majority of cisterns becoming neglected and unusable.

The Bedouins' unrecognised status in the area has resulted in an extended limbo-like presence, between permanence and impermanence, in which the authorities prevent the locals from constructing fixed housing, while also forbidding the perpetuating of their traditional nomadic lifestyle. The Bedouins reside as a result inside shacks made of metal sheets, concentrated in small remote hamlets. This situation has recently come to a head, with locals receiving eviction notices as part of the government's push to concentrate the Bedouins in especially designated Bedouin-only urban settlements, with little consultation if any. The Bedouins therefore lack a foothold, with both the traditions that bind them to the desert and any legal ground for their presence, undermined. While this situation is untenable in the long run, with the Bedouins lacking basic services, it has also led to them adopting sustainable approaches in their habitats, as they rely on solar energy for power in the absence of an electricity grid, and make use of grey water for irrigation with water being scarce.

The artists employ site-specific, and community-engaged, participatory practices, working together with local residents and their representatives, to touch upon the native desert tradition of water harvesting and the current distributive inequity.

With issues of environment and sustainability, equitable access to resources, the effects of climate change and the growing global water crisis coming to the fore, in both global and local politics, the need for preserving and learning from time-honoured and sustainable approaches to environment and resources is rising in importance. As part of this discussion,

the establishment of a biosphere reserve in the region has been envisioned by the artists, as a model for sustainable preservation and conservation in a range of aspects, from the biological to the cultural. Their proposal is an expansion of an existing local initiative to establish a biosphere reserve in the region. This model highlights the importance of preserving the natural environment in tandem with the heritage of local communities, not least as a way of dealing with conflict and inequity in a region characterised by a volatile and hyper-politicised discourse.

Participatory Art Actions

As part of the project, the artists initiated actions to revive existing cisterns in the area, with the participation of Arad inhabitants, local Bedouins, and participants from further afield, as well as tours to the local Bedouin communities, venturing into an environment that the general Israeli public is largely unacquainted with. These actions serve as a trigger for sparking a conversation and public discourse, pointing to the possibility of a sustainable future for the region's desert habitation.

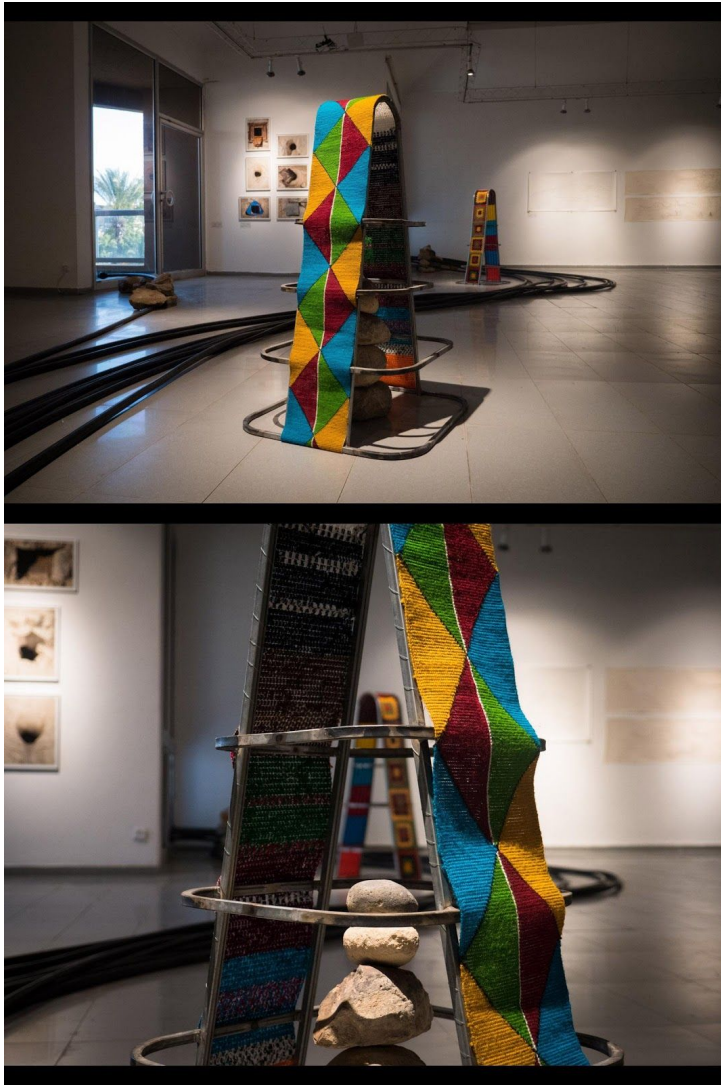






The Exhibition

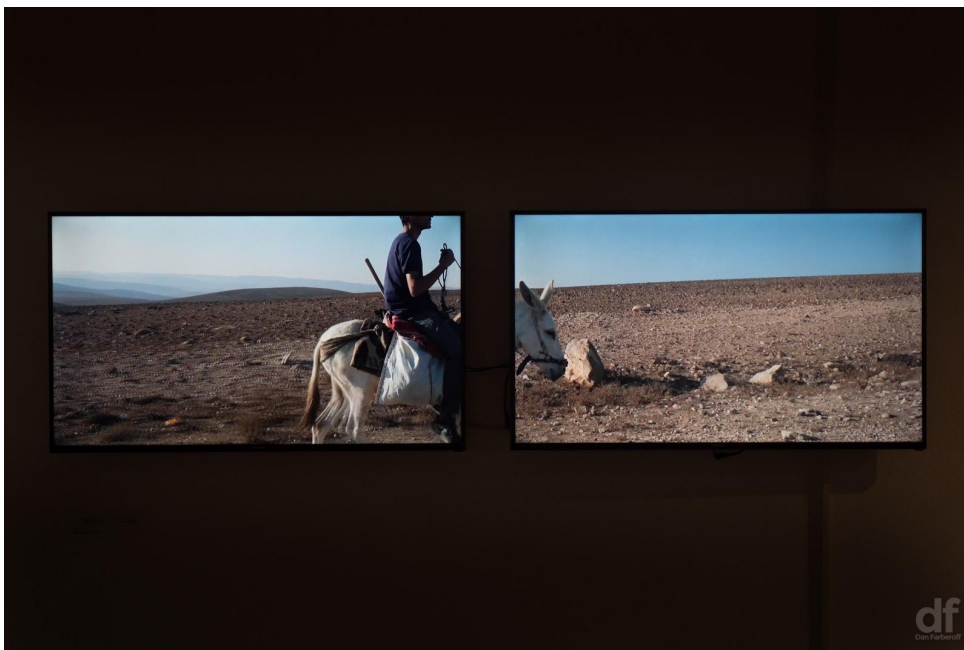
Within the ACAC's gallery space, collected raw materials are transformed and translated by the artists into site-specific, formalistic compositions, parts of which cross the boundary into the public space outside the art center. The artworks include sculptures, video and sound installations, drawings and photographic works, that touch on the topics of water in the desert, the control and distribution of resources, conservation and the relationship between inhabitants and the landscape. Below are a few examples of artworks shown at the exhibition:



A series of "Rujms" – a form of desert waymarkers, traditionally made of piled-up rocks - in the form of a pyramidal, iron grid, "clothed" in coloured knitted surfaces, created by women from Arad and nearby Bedouin settlements, lead to the gallery and weave through it, marking the route of a future trail linking the communities.



The video performance piece “Sourcing Water” follows an action in which a canister filled with water from a cistern in the valley is transported a few kilometers up the ridge to the town of Arad, in order to fill the swimming pool at the local country club. The artwork reflects the great inequality in the access and use of water as a resource within a relatively small geographical area.



The video diptych installation follows a donkey journey, from Qana'im valley into town and back. This journey lasts a whole day and traces the urban experience of the Bedouins, which is very different from how most Arad residents experience the surrounding desert.



The photo series “Becken-Boden” shows the openings of the numerous cisterns in the region around the desert town of Arad, which reflect the old local tradition of water harvesting. This series also reflects at the cisterns’ gendered feminine value in Bedouin culture.

At the entrance to the gallery stands a large black water tank, from which emerge black pipes that spill to the floor - part of the large installation “Allotting”, which break out into the public space outside. The pipes cross the gallery space and burst through a large window down to the street, connecting to a number of locked metal boxes installed on the sidewalk. On the balcony stand two large cubical water tanks, black and white, wrapped in an iron grid. These are fed by a black water pipe that adorns the facade of the building as a dynamic shadow drawing that changes with the position of the sun through the course of the day. At night, golden light emerges from the white tank. The containers, brought here from Baqi’a valley, like the rest of the materials, correspond with the reality of the distribution of water and resources between the city and the valley, reflecting the reality outside.



The project YouTube channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqzWiFigQ-Xre_u3ZQNuifg

Additional material about the project and exhibition can be found on the ACAC website

(Hebrew): <https://www.acacarad.org/%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%A3-%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%A3>