

BRUTAL FACTS, STILL THERE

Boaz Levin

My father's poems above, and the text that follows were both unearthed from the clutter of old hard drives. We each wrote them during the summer of 2014, in response to a war Israel was waging against the Hamas government in Gaza, as well as to protests we attended and to an exhibition we saw together at the time.

Rereading them three years later is an ambivalent experience: they feel like fossils of my feelings about that horrific summer, but also reminders of how little has changed. Occupation grinds on, "operation"—an Israeli euphemism that lends every new round of carnage a semblance of hygiene and precision, while saving the government's coffers millions of shekels in compensation money that would be otherwise owed to an Israeli population affected by an "official war"—follows operation, intifadas spark, and are just as quickly and forcefully extinguished. Nothing new under the sun. For most Israelis the "situation," as it is popularly referred to, will announce itself once every several months, if they're lucky, every couple of years, only to temporarily subside into the background of everyday life. For Palestinians, occupation is a constant disrupting and lethal force, an imminent threat.

David Reeb, the Israeli painter and activist, whose work inspired us in our writing—my piece being a report of sorts on both his show and the war, my father's, a suite poems, in which Reeb's catalogue plays a cameo role—sums it up well in the title of one of his series, "Let's have another war", which is to be read not as a war cry, but rather as a fatigued, ironic lamentation. Repetition compulsion, but also a grinding everyday reality of an ethnocratic regime fifty years of age, masked as a discrete series of wars, uprisings, attacks, agreements. I'm embarrassed to admit I need a minute to disentangle the successive rounds of violence, headlines from years passed. Yes, I now remember, there's been the so called "Jerusalem intifada" (was it just a couple of years ago?), but was there anything in between? The question of how literature and art can respond to situations of relentless violence, without reverting to headlines, to 'media-worthy' events, seems not only central for Reeb's work but broadly useful as we move into an age when humankind must cope with the repercussions of a global environmental crisis.

The preceding poems and the texts that follow focus on the 'prosaic' horrors of a violent occupation regime, and the challenge of addressing such deadly monotony, of insisting that what has come to be seen as 'matter-of-fact' must be of much concern. Prosaic is, according to my handy computer thesaurus, antonymous to poetic: unimaginative, uninspired, dull, dry, humdrum, mundane, pedestrian, heavy, plodding, lifeless, dead, spiritless, lacklustre, undistinguished, stale, jejune, bland, insipid, vapid, vacuous, banal, hackneyed, trite, literal, factual, unpoetic, unemotional, unsentimental, clear, plain, unadorned, unembellished, unvarnished, monotonous, deadpan, matter-of-fact. As well as: ordinary, everyday, usual, common, conventional, straightforward, routine, humdrum,

commonplace, run-of-the-mill, workaday, businesslike, pedestrian, tame, mundane, dull, dreary, tedious, boring, ho-hum, uninspiring, monotonous. Lists are prosaic. Facts too. This seems like a fundamental challenge for any art with a realist bent set to grapple with the political everyday, to come to terms with the brutality of fact.

THE LABOR OF RESISTANCE/"LET'S HAVE ANOTHER WAR"

"Let's have another war" exclaims the black and white acrylic painting in front of me, its lower part depicting a militant, crouching, an Ak-47 resting on his lap, a second figure leaning on his shoulder, and a third figure, whose face and body are all but cut from the frame, reaching in with an outstretched hand. The figures join to form a human chain, a single unit, bracing themselves together against the future to come. Above them, occupying the upper third of the canvas, are three nearly identical images of a flower pot resting on top of a kitchen chair. The images are separated by the marking of a contact sheet, proof of their photographic origin. In between these two trios—of figures and flower pots—the text: LET'S □ HAVE □ ANOTHER □ WAR, all caps, with each word punctuated by a black dot, separated for emphasis.

Outside war is raging. Well...outside, several kilometers away, in the Gaza strip and its surroundings, war is raging. Tel Aviv, in the center of which David Reeb is currently exhibiting a retrospective, is doing its best at being "Tel-Aviv," a feeble impersonation of a city with no country, no context, an oasis of myopic liberalism. This time around, its infamous bubble almost burst under the load of several dozen of Hamas's brand new M-75 rockets, and so the fragile bubble was hastily replaced by an *Iron Dome*. For weeks Israeli fighter jets and artillery pound Gaza in what seems to be the deadliest, most horrific, round to date: at the moment of my writing the death toll on the Palestinian side has already topped 2000, two thirds of which are likely non combatants—women, children, innocent bystanders, with over ten thousand wounded and roughly half a million people who lost their homes. On the Israeli side, sixty eight people were killed, among them four civilians, and several hundred wounded.

I visited the exhibition en route to another anti-war demonstration; negotiations were underway and a ceasefire agreement seemed imminent. This is Reeb's third large scale solo exhibition in Tel Aviv Museum. In 1983, during the first one, he covered parts of walls of the Helena Rubinstein pavilion in a pattern of blue, white, green, black and red—the colors of both the Israeli and Palestinian flags. At the time the PLO was still considered an illegal terrorist organization by the Israeli government (much as Hamas is termed today), public display of the Palestinian flag was an offense. The exhibition caused an outrage. The current show, though, was received with indifference by the mainstream public, an indication of the increasing marginalization of critical voices, rather than a result of a healthy open discourse.



David Reeb, *Lets Have Another War #4*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 1600x1400mm.

Nowadays, such critical gestures are most likely shrugged off—“Another left wing artist? who cares?” Reeb is persistent, and though a highly regarded artist in Israel, he has had few solo exhibitions abroad. Israel is his scene and Israelis his target audience. Everything in his work seems to revolve around this persistence. He relies on a limited repertoire of painterly gestures: often painting from photographs, using acrylic paint either in black and white or directly out of the tube, in a restricted, rather artificial, palate—he seems to rarely mix colors. At times, his paintings are poster-like, juxtaposing text with schematic figures and outlines. Others are photorealistic: mundane scenes from Tel Aviv, mundane scenes from the occupied territories. It all looks so similar. Is this the first *Intifada*, or the second? An image out of operation *cast lead*, *pillar of cloud*, or is the paint as fresh as the blood spilled, a premonition of our current so-called *pillars of defense* (these pillars, like cadences inscribed by the IDF’s PR unit, are spat out with a dizzying regularity). Reeb’s restrained aesthetic—constant repetitions, recurring motifs, *déjà vu*’s—respond to the dreary everyday reality of an ongoing occupation and the sisyphic labor of resistance. One of the clearest, most heart-wrenching, expression of this predicament is his private archive of videos, documenting the weekly protest against the separation wall in the villages of Bil’in, Ni’lin and Nabi Salih. Reeb has attended and documented these protest nearly

every Friday for over half a decade. A small selection of these videos, all available on his Youtube channel, are shown in the exhibition. For long stretches of time little seems to happen: Palestinian villagers march towards the wall chanting, the youth, the *shabab*, run ahead and occasionally hurl stones at the distant military outpost or pillbox, until a shower of teargas disperses the crowd, sending the protesters running back to the village. Occasionally the camera captures a moment of drama, or tragedy, such as the killing of Bassem Abu-Rahmeh, who was hit by a tear gas canister meters away from where Reeb and his camera were standing, but mostly it's just the arduous grind of life under ongoing occupation and the daily protest against it. Many frames from these videos serve as sources for later paintings.

Calling the exhibition 'timely' might sound cynical; Reeb's ongoing critique, his persistent protest, is bound to its subject matter with a bleak irony—is the work's relevance a sign of its political failure? I'm sure Reeb would rejoice if his paintings, his practice of over thirty years, became unfamiliar, anachronistic or irrelevant, artifacts to be hung in museums. But they aren't. Sadly, the irony of his call "let's have another war" is lost on most of his viewers, the Israeli public is more gung-ho than ever, pessimistic, suspicious. The demonstration that night brought out some seven thousand dedicated souls, a minuscule number compared to the recent social protests in Tel-Aviv, or the peace protest of the 1980s when Reeb started his career. The negotiations failed that night, and failed again and again later; another round of war and killing started. Ironic, perhaps, but as Coetzee writes, "*to the barbarians ... irony is simply like salt: you crunch it between your teeth and enjoy a momentary savour; when the savour is gone, the brute facts are still there.*"

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