The Ramallah Lecture

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ArtSchool Palestine
NEBULA

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Introduction

In the summer of 2008 I visited Palestine. ArtSchool Palestine had invited me over for the purpose of meeting and working with local artists and other people in the occupied territories. As the theme of my visit was relatively open, my Palestinian host explained that my stay here could be understood as a type of artistic research. That suited me fine as I had worked with activist investigations and artistic research in The Copenhagen Free University for almost six years.

I've followed the situation in Palestine for many years and the Palestinian cause has persistently challenged my political sense of justice. Since September 11th 2001 the conflict has been spun more and more into the War against Terror and life for the Palestinians appears to have become even more troublesome. But what do you really know as an outsider and a media consumer in the West? In terms of the struggles over territory that go on in and around this small piece of land some call Palestine, what actually shapes the scenery that is produced in the public sphere? My stay in Palestine was an opportunity to get closer to the everyday conditions in the occupied territories, although I was constantly asking myself about my own role as an artist and a political person in this situation of conflict.

Images and counter-images

The images of the Palestinian people that can be found in the West are an ambiguous representation. There are many more images than the often simplistic image that is created in the public sphere by the media. Alternative images are also created by more independent sources such as visual artists, photographers and filmmakers. In a sense, the conflict is continued through a battle of images. This image war entails a continuous production and preservation of images as representative of the warring parties. The image of the Palestinian people as "primitive" and fanatical Muslims is one that is continuously imprinted upon the minds of people in the West. Other images are representing the Palestinians as silent victims whose lives are totally defined by the Israeli occupation. In response to this lack — or, rather, distortion — of images, many artists and filmmakers have made an immense effort to portray different stories of the Palestinian situation, which has often given an insight into the precarious and complex conditions of the people in the occupied areas. These representations are often made with the rationalisation that "the Palestinians cannot represent themselves, so they have to be represented". This idea is, of course, not unproblematic. This approach is a type of colonisation, as the post-colonial theorist Edward Said, among others, has pointed out. The independent voice of the Palestinian is often missing in many of those stories. This was therefore a complicated question for me — how could I visit Palestine as an artist with all my good intentions and solidarity without just reducing the Palestinian people and their situation into something simple?

Domination of space

Much of my knowledge about life in the occupied territories comes from critical and cultural sources such as films, visual art and books. What especially has grabbed my attention is the spatial analysis produced by various independent architects of how the occupation is maintained and expanded. They describe the stealth and cunning of the settler movement and the Israeli army and the way they are able to continuously dominate not only space but also behaviour. The strategies deployed are often developed in cooperation with architects and spatial planners who are helping to create a changing and unpredictable geography that shapes the everyday life of the Palestinian people. It's a disturbing thought that, in this way, my colleagues in the field of spatial planning and architecture are part of a military machinery as an important ally in maintaining and expanding the occupation. I'm equally curious, then, about how the Palestinians develop methods of resistance and counter-strategies to the Israeli spatial domination in their everyday lives.

Witness account

At the very least I'd decided to keep an online blog during my visit where I could regularly recount my thoughts and experiences in the occupied territories. In this way I would take on the role of the witness who sets down his accounts for those at home. I would give a critical and personal picture of the conditions although I would also keep in mind my own potential role as a coloniser because, of course, my own gaze is never entirely free from the dominant images produced in the West.

Although, before I left, I thought I was somewhat well informed about life in the West Bank, I was astonished by how different my experience of the conditions were when I physically stood in the streets of Ramallah. That experience alone made it clear to me how far in reality everyday life in the occupied territories is from what is portrayed in the media. I was very much changed by the experience and the chance to be a part of the rich culture that was alive amongst the group of Palestinians with whom I spent most of my time for the six weeks I was there.

I called the blog 'The Ramallah Lecture', as I understood my daily blogging to be a process of learning in relation to my observations and experiences during my stay in Palestine. I hope that it also enabled the readers to learn something about the complexity of life in a war zone. Due to security risks I have used pseudonyms for many of the people I describe in this text.

The Ramallah Lecture

15th of June, 2008

Jerusalem

I was already pretty nervous about passport and immigration control in Israel before my flight landed in Tel Aviv. I'd heard many stories of detainment and deportation at Ben Gurion Airport so I had prepared myself. I was ready to tell the people at the immigration office about my forthcoming tourist visit to the Holy Land, to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in particular. I certainly wouldn't be mentioning anything about the West Bank. Samar, my host in Ramallah, had stressed that I was not to say anything about my actual plans. I had thoroughly read through the tourist guides about the sights and museums on the airplane and tried to remember details of the supposed places I would visit. However, after only 30 minutes waiting in line, and when it was finally my turn at the passport control, I had no trouble at all and whizzed right through. I had already had plenty of trouble on this journey though as I'd almost missed the flight in Copenhagen and was then searched from top to bottom by Israeli security in Zurich. It was a relief to know that my frayed nerves would be spared this time around.

It was good for me to have an address in Israel to stay in for at least the first night in case the immigration officers

questioned me about this. After collecting my suitcase and getting to the Arrival Hall, I was to be picked up by a taxi that would take me to a hotel in Jerusalem. Samar had arranged for the pick up and the taxi driver's name was Youssef who was, until we got into the taxi, very reserved, discreet and not very talkative. Once we had left the airport and were well on our way on the brand new highway, he began to talk to me. First, he said, it had taken him an hour to get in to the airport because all cars have to drive through a 'safety-valve' where the soldiers order all Palestinians out of their vehicles to be searched, even the taxi drivers. Israelis are let through with no hesitation. Youssef told me that the soldiers could tell by his accent that he was Palestinian. Most Palestinians who have permission to move about in Israel can be recognised by their accent even though many speak fluent Hebrew. Samar would never have been able to pick me up because people from the West Bank hardly ever get permission to enter Israel. Youssef has a special identity card, which I think is blue, as he lives in East Jerusalem, and this grants him permission to drive his taxi in Israel (and in the West Bank). Palestinians on the West Bank have a green identity card. The Israeli identity card has a third colour. Youssef told me that at some point he would be given the choice between a Palestinian or Israeli identity card. He was convinced that the Israelis were plotting to incorporate East Jerusalem once and for all, and that the Palestinians that live there would be integrated into this plan so that there would no longer be an independent Palestinian population in East Jerusalem.

Youssef described a separated society, built on discrimination of ethnic groups. There are over a million Palestinians living in Israel, he said. Expanding on his description of

discrimination against Palestinians in Israel he presented me with a hypothetical example: He described two landowners, one Israeli and one Palestinian, who both wanted a building permit from the Israeli officials for nearly identical constructions. The Israeli would hardly have to pay anything for the permit, perhaps 100 shekels, while the Palestinian would have to pay an enormous amount, perhaps 20,000 shekels, for the same permit. He stressed that he was not exaggerating the numbers because the different amounts are in fact completely disproportionate, and not, for example, just double what the Israeli pays. In addition, the Israeli would get a permit to build maybe three floors high, while the Palestinian would be lucky to get a permit for just a single floor. But there was not much one could do about that, discrimination made it hopeless to be a Palestinian in Israel. His tale painted a very grim picture of the conditions he was living under as a Palestinian subject to Israeli rule. After a moment's silence he then told me that this was the very reason why he was cheerful whenever Hezbollah attacked Israel, as they had during the 2006 war in Lebanon, because he felt that he himself could not do what he really wanted to do. For him, the fact that Hezbollah are Shia and Palestinians are Sunni Muslims is secondary; all sides had to unite in the struggle against Israel. The conflict between the Shia and the Sunni Muslims was a different case. He then added that I shouldn't even consider visiting Gaza. It would be impossible to gain access. Even he could not enter. The situation of the Palestinians in Gaza is even more hopeless than in Israel or on the West Bank.

I hadn't been paying much attention to the landscape we'd driven through as we'd been chatting during almost the whole trip and we had just about reached the hotel in Jerusalem. However, I had noticed that the landscape was

dotted with buildings the whole way from the airport to Jerusalem and that between the houses was a hilly and yellow rocky landscape with occasional green bushes and small trees. The hotel was, by my standards, a luxury hotel. As far as I could tell, it was full of people on group tours from Europe and the USA. But luxury hotels entail that there are servants, people that want to carry your luggage, open doors for you, etc. I just hate it when people are made to act subserviently to me — as being the proletarian that I am, I do not know the secret language of tipping and so on. Samar had booked the hotel for me but I would have rather gone straight to Ramallah.

My room was on the 3rd floor and with a balcony. I found the door to the balcony behind the heavy curtains, stepped out and saw the breathtaking view of Jerusalem at night. Although the sight itself was incredible, most noteworthy were the Islamic prayers bellowing out across the cityscape. It was as if the Palestinians were attempting to at least dominate the city acoustically. It was beautiful and a reminder that the battle of domination had not yet been fully won by Israel, although according to Youssef, the future hardly looked bright.

Before I fell asleep I saw the Czech Republic play Turkey on Al Jazeera with an Arabic commentary. The game was being played at the ongoing European championship in Switzerland/Austria and I hadn't exactly counted on following the games here in the Middle East. Europe seemed so far away. I could hear from the sounds of the city that Turkey was the favourite team as people cheered when the Turks made a comeback after being behind 2-0. They won 3-2.

Submitted by JJ 09:41

16th of July, 2008

The apartment in Ramallah

Youssef picked me up around noon at the hotel. The weather was not as hot as I had feared as there was a light breeze that made the sunshine tolerable. People wear considerable amounts of clothing here, the men wear jeans or cargo trousers. Very few wear shorts. We drove towards Ramallah but the journey began in the direction of Tel Aviv. We drove upwards and Youssef pointed across the landscape and said that right over there is the Dead Sea. What I saw was the Wall, snaking its way through the valley. That fact that the Dead Sea is visible from Jerusalem made it clear to me what Larissa (a Palestinian artist based in Denmark) had pointed out to me before my departure: the land is continuous with a continuous landscape. Palestine/Israel is a connected continuum and the borders that are now so violently drawn with walls and fences are artificial and separate people who should be living together. Larissa had also said that the Semites historically are a single people and that the religious differences, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, came later. All the people here are Semites, both Palestinians and Israelis. Why anti-Semitism has later been interpreted to mean only anti-Jewish only the gods would know.

In Youssef's taxi, with its Israeli number plate, we flew right through the Qualandya checkpoint, which controls all traffic in and out of the West Bank. The checkpoint is manned by Israeli border police, a notorious section of the Israeli army. The soldiers are young and their casual behaviour at the border is disturbing. They carried their loaded automatic weapons as if they were musicians in a grunge band just

carrying instruments. There was a lot of running around at this opening in the wall, which spread out in several branches around the checkpoint. There were various buildings set back from the passageway, wedged in between the branches of the wall. There were a lot of mini-buses parked on the Israeli side and there were all the different groups, women, men and children, gathered all around, on their way in or out of the various buildings. From the cab it wasn't clear what was going on but Youssef told me that they had probably been waiting for an hour or two and that all of them would then be searched, the men, the women and the children. The Palestinians are not allowed to bring their own vehicles through the checkpoint, so all the small buses on the Jerusalem side of the checkpoint were mini-buses with Israeli number plates to bring people into Jerusalem or wherever they were heading. Cars with Palestinian number plates are simply not permitted for use in Israel. But cars, such as Youssef's, with Israeli number plates can also be used on the West Bank. The armed soldiers, wearing dark glasses, were mostly, however, surveilling the traffic that was heading in the other direction and leaving the West Bank. They ordered people who wanted to enter Israel to get out of their cars and open their trunks while the soldiers looked on. After we had passed through, Youssef told me that it was probably going to take him about an hour to get through on his way back after dropping me off at Ramallah.

When we drove through the checkpoint it dawned on me that, of course, the Israeli soldiers don't care about who gets through to the West Bank. All their attention is directed at those who wish to leave the West Bank and drive into Israel. There is obviously no Palestinian border control as the

checkpoint and the Wall are exclusively an Israeli project. This is probably why on the Palestinian side of the wall there was a huge painted graffiti piece asking for a reboot: Ctrl-Alt-Delete.

Now the quality of the roads changed dramatically; they were full of pot holes, and plastic bags swirled about in the dust. The landscape still had a lot of buildings spread out across the hills and there were quite a few brand new ones with 3, 5 or 7 floors. Almost all of the houses, tall as well as low, were built with yellow sandstone. Youssef told me that the new houses had appeared after the Oslo Accords between the Israelis and Palestinians in 1993 and the establishment of Palestinian sovereignty in 1994. Palestinians who had lived abroad had returned to invest in the development of the future Palestinian state but there had been no urban planning and Youssef complained about all the buildings that had been built with no overall coordination: a tall 7-floor building stood right next to a small 2-floor one, etc. In his mind this was a big mess. I, however, found it slightly liberating for my Danish control-resistant mentality.

After we had driven for about 20 minutes we were met by a white Mazda. It turned out to be Samar who was waiting for us. She would take us to the apartment where I was going to stay for the next 6 weeks. We drove up and down and back and forth for about 10 minutes through the hilly landscape until we arrived at a rather exuberant villa with a double garage surrounded by a fancy cast-iron fence. It was a true rich man's mansion; and, to my surprise, there were quite a few in the outskirts of Ramallah. So this was the place where I was going to stay, in the ground floor apartment with the owner living above me.

As I was the first person to use this apartment, everything in it smelled completely new and there were still stickers on the sink and the toilet (but no toilet paper). There were two rooms, with a large combined kitchen and lounge as the main room, and a bedroom with two beds — in other words there was plenty of space. All the rooms had a cool, tiled floor and the sofas in the lounge fitted the style of the house — exuberant. Samar, who had invited me down here, was a very friendly woman, and we got along easily. She had lived in London for some years but had now returned to Ramallah where she was in charge of ArtSchool Palestine. It was nice to finally attach a face to all the many emails we'd exchanged before my departure.

Submitted by JJ 17:08

16th of July, 2008

Gold

The apartment was far up a big hill and had a beautiful view over the valley where there was a large new building complex. It looked like a sports centre but it was hard to tell what it was. On the other side of the valley, on the next hill, you could see a row of new high-rises which were probably residential. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky and the sun was glaring, but as Ramallah is approximately 1000m above sea level there was usually a light breeze and the temperature wasn't unbearable. After looking around the apartment and at the landscape, Samar and I drove towards the centre of Ramallah. Here we found an Italian café diagonally across from Ramallah's town hall, which also boasted a little fountain in its small park. Samar told me that the water was probably full of dirt and had never been changed because water was a scarce resource in the West Bank. Therefore, with this in mind, it was a strong and powerful symbol to erect a fountain here. Israel still controls the underground and ground water in the West Bank, which doesn't leave much water for the population here. Due to water shortages the water supply is at times disconnected entirely which is why most houses have 4-10 large black water containers on the roof serving as a reserve for times when the supply is cut off.

After a coffee, a local artist joined us at the café. His name was Adham. We sat and talked for a while, and he told me that he was a bit worn out because he had been at work and had been out in the sun. He explained that he earned money producing backdrops for what he called "the boring Palestinian movies". Recently an entire industry has been emerging around Palestinian movies and it was from this that he had

got his job. A total of five movies were to have their opening night this year, which was a lot considering that the first Palestinian movie was produced, according to Adham, only 18 years ago. But Samar claimed that films were already being made in the 1960s. She had taken part in organising the Palestinian Film Festival in London last year, so she should know what she was talking about. But Adham was calling for more less boring movies, as the ones he knew of were all so serious, stiff and full of clichés. Apparently there has only been one single comedy produced over the years.

For a short while he pondered why the West expects particular cultural expressions from Palestine, in particular the kind connected to the conflict and occupation. He then went as far as to say that it was a great advantage to be a Palestinian artist because there was so much attention and demand internationally and there were a lot of artists who took advantage of this attention and delivered the images which were anticipated from a Palestinian artist. He claimed that in Ramallah everyone is an artist, "Ramallah is flooded with artists". It was often enough for a young artist to take a single photograph of a refugee camp and their career would be kick started. He stated that his own work did not build on the theme of the occupation and joked about having only ever produced three pieces and so even if I was interested, there wouldn't be much to see anyway.

We talked a bit about hip hop and how black people in the USA use music to get out of the ghetto. One can hardly blame a young artist for playing the game if a curator or producer is waving a plane ticket in front of them. Adham didn't agree with the comparison. He wouldn't ever go straight for the gold the way the hip hop artists did. No, there was

more to it than that. However, he was currently faced with a dilemma: he had been offered a place for a MA in Fine Art at the Royal Academy in London as well as at Columbia University in New York. In that sense he was having his own share of the international attention that Palestinian artists are often met with. He had chosen Columbia, as they had offered him a scholarship. The 'American Zionist university' was the way he described it as it was supposedly directed by Israeli special interests. What I knew of Columbia University was that they are extremely good at educating their students to go for the gold in the art market. Perhaps that is an altogether different story though. However, Adham was definitely leaving for the USA at the end of the summer.

Submitted by JJ 09:26

17th of June, 2008

The Native Informant

After spending the day settling in a bit, Samar picked me up at the apartment. I'd found a local supermarket but I wasn't entirely sure whereabouts it was in Ramallah that I was staying. I'd tried to find my accommodation on Google Earth but without much luck. There don't seem to be any tourist maps available of Ramallah although there were rumours that a map had been produced which you could only get your hands on by ingratiating yourself with the staff at one of the better hotels. Samar said that she would find one for me. A year ago, Google Earth was useless for looking at the Occupied Territories but lately the real picture had become clearer and I could easily see the roads in Ramallah even though I couldn't find my own house.

We drove to a bar and restaurant that rested beautifully on a cliff over a pine valley. The place had a large, wooden outdoor porch. At the end of the porch, there was a bar with a camouflage net over it. This was a little strange. I guess it's an easily accessible material during war. Before we'd had time to order, Gabriele and Khalil arrived. Gabriele is a British/Indian artist and Khalil is a young local artist and also her boyfriend. We ordered red wine, but decided to wait for dinner. As the conversation across the table grew, Gabriele made some really interesting remarks about colonial relations that still exist today between the West and the rest of the world. Colonial power is all about domination and retaining a certain hierarchy of values: economic, cultural, etc. Although the British withdrew their troops from Palestine long ago, the relations that remain still continuously reproduce aspects of the old hierarchies, especially in terms of culture. As an interesting reference point for these relations, she highlighted the idea of 'The Native Informant' as developed by the Indian philosopher and postcolonial thinker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/print.asp?editorial_id=9960). This conversation developed almost as a continuation of the discussion I'd had with Adham the day before about the types of images sought from Palestinian artists by the surrounding world. The Native Informant is, according to Spivak, a colonising projection from the Western visitor put upon a person in a foreign culture, and is connected to the experience of a radical Otherness. The term is an elaboration on ideas of the 'raw' and authentic human identity that supposedly exists in non-Western and more or less primitive cultures. Spivak's 'Native Informant' is typically the most destitute woman from the third world, but a black commentator on TV talking

about black issues is a similar informant. Through a sense of Otherness, this informant builds a bridge between the 'unknown' and the 'enlightened' West. But the 'Native Informant' is constituted by and constitutes the colonial subject. In the context of our being in Ramallah, the Native Informant is the supposedly 'authentic Palestinian'. Although such an authentic Palestinian exists only as an external colonial projection, it is constantly reproduced and has power nonetheless over the images created within Palestinian culture.

Of course I am not entirely without guilt when it comes to this 'gaze' upon foreign cultures and foreign people. I guess no-one is. As a European, I also carry this colonial gaze as baggage even though I'm constantly attempting to be self-critical and somehow repress it when I notice it. My expectations of my visit to Ramallah are, however, informed by what I know. Most of the traces of this colonial projection usually dissolve once I get closer to the people that I meet here but I have to admit that I've been surprised by the variety and level of reflection in our conversations. That's my dumb colonial mind! I have to unlearn it. Even after just a few days in Ramallah, I can see that all of the people I have met have different stories, histories, educations, nationalities and a whole variety of perspectives on Palestine. However, it is probably this image of the Native Informant that many Palestinian artists are asked to fulfil when they are invited for shows in the West.

The Three Occupations

Our company kept talking and, under the pine trees, another conversation emerged about how much responsibility one could place on the Israeli occupation. Samar kept repeating

"Don't blame everything on the occupation". But Khalil proposed that it wasn't only a question of one occupation but of at least three as he saw it. First there was the Israeli occupation, which was the most comprehensive. Secondly, there was the Hamas occupation, in other words an occupation by fundamentalist Islamism that also imposes limitations on people's lives. Finally there is an occupation in the domestic sphere via male domination. Palestinian macho-culture has lately been mapped out through research into the conditions of women in the town of Jenin, Khalil said. There the frustrations that men felt in their everyday lives due to their hopeless living conditions often got translated into violence towards women, both in the home and in bed. Violence permeates the everyday life of women and even their sex life. A certain agreement developed that you could separate the various occupations; they are all interrelated but need to be resisted in different ways.

Suicide bombers

To return briefly to the notion of the Native Informant, Khalil — from an outsider's view — could quite easily become the 'raw' Palestinian. He was an amazing and very thoughtful person. Coming from Hebron, one of the most troubled and conflict-ridden cities in terms of occupations and settlements, he would jokingly say whilst holding his shoulder that he'd got a strong right arm and that he'd thrown many stones at Israeli soldiers and tanks ever since he was a boy. Spivak suggested a transnational perspective to replace the colonial relation, which of course would be fair, but then again we are all products of the cultural conditions we are living in.

Later in the evening, and after a good amount of red wine, we moved to Samar's house for dinner and Ismail and Nadia, as well as Rana, joined our company. Ismail and Rana are both artists, while Nadia is a social worker. At this point, Khalil had begun to share his knowledge of Palestinian suicide bombers. He'd apparently researched Palestinian suicide bombers and had ploughed through every case since the phenomenon took hold after the first Intifada. He'd been close to several suicide bombers as four of his family and friends had committed suicide attacks but he was very dismissive of the approach, insisting that suicide bombers are brainwashed and used as pawns in a political game. There was nothing sacred about taking such an action and he fleshed this out in a curious manner by explaining how lots of suicide bombers were detonated by remote control before they'd even reached their target. Their purpose was not to necessarily kill people but to create fear (although the bombers inevitably have killed many over the years, in addition to themselves). But there was no holy mission and these poor people served as props in a political game. The dream was of course to make some difference and to be depicted on martyrs' posters around the city and to become celebrated as heroes. In this sense, Khalil said that he could possibly put himself in the mind of the suicide bomber but that on a political level he couldn't understand the point of it. The people who went on a suicide mission were drugged in the preceding months and weren't fully conscious when they committed the action. For Khalil, it was clear that a suicide mission was a mission of hopelessness.

Submitted by JJ 09:54

18th of June, 2008

Al Qattan

That afternoon we visited the A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah (http://www.qattanfoundation.org/en/index.asp). The Foundation is a private organisation that supports and coordinates a variety of disciplines in Palestinian culture, including education, visual art, and culture for children, among other things. It's financed by a wealthy Palestinian family based in London. I was with Nicola, a British artist and curator, who was visiting Ramallah for the purpose of organising a Palestinian solidarity exhibition in London in the autumn, and together we met Mahmoud, the head of the art and culture department. He was a bit tired and rushed but nonetheless found time to speak to us about the organisation. Mahmoud started off by describing his recent journey to London from which he'd returned this morning. The journey home had been demanding and had taken him two whole days which was why he was tired. Palestinians who carry the green identity card for the West Bank don't have permission to travel through Israel and so Mahmoud, on his way back from London, had to travel via Amman in Jordan. That's the normal route Palestinians from the West Bank have to take when they want to travel internationally. No wonder he looked exhausted.

Mahmoud works as a coordinator in support of Palestinian visual art, not just in Palestine but across the world. The organisation supports Palestinian visual artists who live in Israel, the so-called '1948 Arabs', as well as all Palestinian artists who live in the region, especially in Jordan and Lebanon. It also supports Palestinian visual artists who are spread across the world including those who've never

ever been to Palestine. He explained that in this way they strengthen Palestinian culture across the borders and walls that otherwise characterise the culture of the West Bank. This is how the Qattan Foundation resists the powers that try to limit Palestine to the areas delineated by the Wall and to strengthen Palestinian cultural presence in the region and across the world.

Another area of investment for the Qattan Foundation is in children's culture. They run a children's cultural centre in Gaza, with workshops and the largest library for children's literature in the Middle East. He told us that even during the recent disturbances and armed conflicts in Gaza between the rival Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas, no one had touched the children's centre. 'Not a single bullet', he said. The place is built like a 'souk', an Arab market, with workshops and other rooms dispersed off a long corridor that runs all the way through the centre of the building. It would be interesting to visit the centre but it is extremely difficult to get permission from the Israeli officials to visit Gaza. I wasn't even sure whether Mahmoud had ever been there himself.

On his desk, Mahmoud had a pile of identical books with the title, 'Story of a Siege'. It was a book of photography about the Israeli siege of Palestinian governmental buildings in Ramallah in 2002. This was where Yasser Arafat was confined while the Israelis flattened all the buildings one by one until there was almost only one left. The book ends with Arafat's burial, which took place at the same place shortly after. 'The Israelis took his life', it was said. I asked if I could buy a copy and Mahmoud said that there was no bookshop in the Qattan building and that there didn't exist any actual book shop in Ramallah at all. These kind of interesting books have almost

no distribution, which is quite symptomatic of the Palestinian condition. I bought a copy from Mahmoud for 100 shekels. Then he gave me a book from their latest exhibition of Palestinian visual artists called 'The Young Artist of the Year 2006', an exhibition that they organise bi-annually in Ramallah. It turned out that Nicola had organised this exhibition.

Submitted by JJ 14:57

19th of June, 2008

The Fire Brigade Union

After I'd had dinner with Nicola and Samar (we'd eaten tabouleh, Arabic salad and lamb shish), we then went out to meet a group of solidarity travellers who'd come to Palestine from the UK. Nicola knew them as she had been hired by their organisation to put together a solidarity exhibition in London with Palestinian artists. The organisation is called the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (PSC) (http://www.palestinecampaign.org/index2b.asp). The exhibition is to raise money for both the PSC and the Palestinian artists.

It was quite a big group that was sitting and eating in the little park by Ramallah's Town Hall. The park is really half park and half amusement ground, with a bouncy castle, a playground and plenty of coloured lights and candles. There are also restaurants to eat in, to have a Palestinian beer or a cup of Arabic coffee. The group turned out to be a mixed group of people from the campaign plus trade unionists from both the UK and Palestine. Nicola introduced me to Mike, the coordinator from the PSC, who told me about the group and their study trip. There were, among others, two representatives from the British Fire Brigade Union

who had been travelling around with the group in Palestine. Today they'd visited Hebron where they'd got up close to the Israelis settlers who were living in a settlement in the middle of the city. They'd spotted a piece of graffiti that said 'Death to the Arabs', or something like that, and had gone up to have a closer look at it. While they were there a group of very aggressive and armed settlers had shown up and this experience had been very intense — and quite depressing.

Back in Ramallah, the group had met with some people from the Stop the Wall campaign (http://www.stopthewall.org), which is a Palestinian research group that is mapping the Israeli seizure of Palestinian land in connection with the construction of the Wall. They are following the process closely through a multitude of local groups that are based in villages along the Wall. Over the next few days, the group of solidarity travellers were going to travel a bit more through Palestine to Nablus and to Jenin, and then finally to Israel where they would visit some of the Palestinian villages that are still in ruins after the cleansing of 1948.

Before I had travelled here, one of my questions had been — what does solidarity with the Palestinian people mean and how it can be practised in a way that truly supports them? Many of the numerous initiatives that exist around here are made up of people from all over the world who come to create what they call 'peace' and 'dialogue'. In reality, this often seems more like self-therapy for the visitors than offering any genuine support which the Palestinian people would actually gain something from. It's obvious that the Palestinian people will not benefit from people coming here to encourage a dialogue with the Israelis whilst, on a daily basis, the occupation forces are extending an almost

unhindered land grab from the Palestinian farmers and making their lives unbearable. For the Palestinian people, as far as I can see, the situation is about fundamental rights and so 'encouraging dialogue' is pretty useless: why should they speak when their voices are clearly not heard?

One of the people from the Fire Brigade Union got up to the table and made a very nice speech about the issue of solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to independence. He told us, with his very Scottish accent, about how The Fire Brigade Union had been the first union in the UK to support the ANC in South Africa and had actively worked for a boycott of the apartheid regime in the 1980s. That boycott had worked as planned, and from there he drew a straight line to what was happening in Palestine and Israel today except, he said, that the conditions here are even worse than what you could have seen in South Africa then. He had been touched by all the people he had met and also all the stories that he'd heard during his travels and when he got back home, he wanted to do everything he could to support the Palestinian cause by speaking out about their conditions. Not only would he work actively for a British boycott of Israel but he also wanted to give financial support although, he said, when it came down to it, it was the Palestinians themselves who would have to settle with the Israelis and achieve their independence. He didn't want to try and give lectures on how exactly they should do that, so the only thing he could say to his Palestinian friends around the table was "Good luck". In respect to the Palestinian's right to self-determination, he didn't want to offer up any solutions on their behalf about how to end the occupation; instead he would work to expand the international awareness of the atrocities that he had witnessed — and in this way, build support and solidarity for

their struggle for independence on an international level. The fireman's thoughtful grasp of international solidarity and his good humoured compassion for the Palestinians ended with some magic tricks. Among other things, he put out a burning cigarette with a Palestinian scarf without burning a hole in it. He explained that they had a lot of time at the fire station to learn those kinds of tricks.

Submitted by JJ 09:20

20th of June, 2008

Bethlehem

Nicola arrived in a taxi to pick me up at about 8:30 in the morning. She was going to Bethlehem to visit some artists in connection with the exhibition in London and so I accompanied her. There are several routes you can take to get to Bethlehem but we chose the most direct one through Jerusalem. This is a route that is reserved, however, for people with a Jerusalem-ID or for foreigners with international passports. People with the green ID from the West Bank aren't allowed on that road and instead have to take a long curve around the city. From the bus station in the centre of Ramallah, we took the number 18 bus which drives through the Qualandya checkpoint to get to Jerusalem. When we got to the checkpoint, Nicola told me that older people and foreigners could stay in the buses whilst all the other passengers had to get off and go through the control inside the building. I thought about going along into the building but decided to stay in the bus with 8 to 10 other people. A very young Israeli soldier with a machine gun and bulletproof vest got on the bus, looking over everyone's documents and messing

around a bit with peoples' bags and so on. The machine gun dangling at his side was pretty overwhelming for me but for the Palestinians it was obviously completely commonplace. The control wasn't very thorough though and the bus rolled through the checkpoint to pick up the other passengers on the other side. Apart from one person who'd apparently had problems in the control building, everyone got back on board and the bus carried on towards the bus stop at the Damascus Gate. After a few problems finding our next bus in the confusion of the Old City, and after a cup of Arabic coffee, we took a number 21 bus and drove on towards Bethlehem.

Jerusalem is dispersed across several hills and it's quite fascinating to see the many views that appear whilst the bus is moving. Bethlehem lies to the south of the city but because of the settlements that have been built on the hills between the two cities it almost merges with Jerusalem. After going through several checkpoints, it was difficult at times to tell which side of the wall we were on as the journey was very curvy and hilly. The different areas of the city lie like tongues next to each other; the settlements and the Palestinian neighbourhoods in between one another. Beit Jala is a smaller city next to Bethlehem and we drove down there to meet Samira. Samira is married to the Palestinian ambassador in London but as their son wasn't happy about living in London, she was back at home in Palestine. Nadira, a friend of Samira, was visiting her. She introduced herself as an 'amateur artist' but it turned out that she had made some good things. For example, she had made a game of cards of all the various UN resolutions over the years that had condemned Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people. These resolutions had, however, never changed a thing. There were

many cards in the pile. I'm not entirely sure why she had chosen a card game to represent the uselessness of the UN. It might have had something to do with suggesting that the international community plays games with the fate of the Palestinian people — or something along those lines. Samira had baked for us some small breads stuffed with cheese and some excellent cakes with a lot of nuts in.

Nadira told us something about Samira's house being broken into but Samira misunderstood this and took out pictures from 2002, a time when their house had apparently been hit by an Israeli missile. She thought this was what we'd been talking about. One could see from the pictures how the missile had dug itself through the outer wall and then exploded inside the house and caused a lot of damage. The family had been in the house at the time but no-one had got hurt because the missile had hit the furthest side of the house. There was also a picture of Samira's son, who was about 10 years old at the time, proudly holding up the missile canister. 'Made in the USA', Samira said, which sure enough was written on the side of the canister. She told us that there had been people from the Palestinian militia in the area and that they'd fired rifle shots towards the Israeli settlement Gilo that is on the next hill in the direction of Jerusalem. The Israeli response had been the missiles. Samira jokingly complained that no one from the militia had even been in their fairly large house, because "at least then we would have deserved the missile", as she put it.

Samira was clearly from the Palestinian political establishment but had a wide political engagement. She works, amongst other things, in the organisation Open Bethlehem (http://www.openbethlehem.org) that strives to get

tourists and more life back into Bethlehem. The city has become completely squeezed by the Wall which now surrounds it, and at the same time tourists in Israel are told that it is dangerous to stay in Bethlehem for too long at a time. So the city's hotels, restaurants and shops are dying. Open Bethlehem is trying to change this development.

Nadira, Samira, Nicola and I left in Nadira's car to visit another artist in Bethlehem. Here we met Samar, who does watercolours and computer graphics, mostly of women with very large eyes. We were also fed a lot of coffee and snacks here. Samar's mother then started cooking hot food for us which we had to politely refuse as we were by now already full up. There is no limit to the generosity when it comes to both food and stories here.

After we had visited another artist on Nicola's list we went to the Nativity Church at the heart of Bethlehem. Everything was peaceful and joyous, with a wedding procession outside and tourists on the inside and in the cellar where it's said to have happened — by this I mean the birth of Jesus. I could not help but think of a big battle that had taken place in the church only five years earlier when a group of militant Palestinians sought refuge in the church which was then put under siege by the Israelis. Approximately 25 Palestinians died on that occasion. It's quite peculiar how in Palestine such traumatic experiences are very quickly normalised so that life can go on. There were no traces to be seen of the siege. I only noted how few tourists there were in the church and the narrow streets of Bethlehem were quite deserted, which was sad to see.

Submitted by JJ 16:32

20th of June, 2008

1032 channels

I was pretty exhausted when I got back from Bethlehem and just wanted to see a good football match on TV. I'd yet to turn the telly on in my apartment but now was the time as the European Championship was just beginning to reach its climax. The TV was clearly receiving via a satellite antenna, so I crossed my fingers that I would find a channel with the European Championship on. On the menu tonight was Germany vs. Portugal. I turned everything on and started browsing the channels. After I'd flicked through the first hundred it wasn't looking good as I hadn't found the game. I thought there would at most be a couple of hundred channels. Half an hour later I'd reached channel 704. Finally, here was a German channel that was showing the Championship. However, it had taken so long to get through all the channels that the first half of the game was almost over, Germany being ahead by 2-0. When the game had finished, with Portugal losing badly to a dead boring German team, I looked through the rest of the channels and made it to channel 1032 before it started all over again. Most of the channels were showing Arabic-speaking men who were making statements about this or that. Well, that was my guess! Once in a while there would be women, with or without a veil, speaking and then even some channels with Arab XXX that mostly showed commercials as far as I could see.

Submitted by JJ 09:09

21st of June, 2008

Beach holiday by Tel Aviv

At first glance, life in Ramallah can seem quite liberated where people really like to go out and have a beer or a glass of wine in the handful of bars that serve alcohol in the centre of the city. As well as that, people are very welcoming and often invite you for another drink at their home. During my first week here, I've been out every evening and almost without exception I've returned home late after drinking substantial amounts of Palestinian beer or wine. It's been really nice and there's always a lot of laughs. Perhaps there's a tendency to turn one's back on the problems and all the restrictions that the various occupations impose, but there also lies a certain kind of stubborn resistance in this insistence that life goes on despite all of the problems. Ramallah is also the wealthiest city on the West Bank, the base of the Palestinian government and president, as well as a centre for all of the international organisations that operate here. I still haven't been north to Nablus and Jenin where the atmosphere is supposedly a lot heavier and the feeling of hopelessness is much more prevalent. And Gaza is bleeding, as one of my friends said. Nicola and myself wanted to go to Gaza and visit some of the local artists who are totally isolated just 75 km from here but we couldn't go as it was impossible for us to get permission from the Israelis. People told me that if I could get permission then I should go because the people in Gaza need to be heard.

Returning to 'the good life' in Ramallah: on Friday I went to yet another party at Khalil and Gabriele's place. They are on their way to London and have now had at least three

goodbye parties. I have been to two of them. At this latest party there was a German person I knew called Lisa. She had organised a couple of exhibitions that I'd been in over the years and it was a surprise for both of us that we were to now meet in Ramallah. Khaled was there too. He is a local artist and organiser who over the last year has been involved in establishing a Palestinian art academy in Ramallah. Before this academy there weren't any actual art schools in Palestine, just a few courses at the various universities, of which there are six in the West Bank. Through the academy, Khaled is trying, to establish a more critical and internationally oriented culture around visual art in Palestine. The academy is a subsection of the art academy in Oslo, Norway, that apparently finances the whole project. I am going to visit the academy one of these days and it will be interesting to see how it works.

Lisa said that the reason she was here was to attend a conference in Tel Aviv that had the theme 'Art and Nationalism'. At the conference she'd spoken about the changing role of art institutions in a globalised era. Her argument was that art institutions were about to break free of the state and various nationalist projects that otherwise had been their main point of departure since the 1800s. It was like throwing a bomb in the party, when she told us that she'd put forward this argument at a seminar in Israel. In Europe, where art institutions are increasingly privatised, she might have been right but in Israel art institutions and the writing of cultural history is used as a political tool in the construction and justification of the Jewish state. On the 60th anniversary of the state of Israel there'd been a series of exhibitions that erased nearly all traces of Arabic culture from their history.

In such a way these institutions contribute to the very myths that preserve the Jewish state and Israeli nationalism.

I was pretty upset by Lisa's story. In my opinion, it's very problematic to contribute to these kinds of conferences in Israel even if you have a critical angle. In such a context, this critique merely functions as a justification of the state as it makes it possible for the Israelis to claim that they give space for critical voices even though they continue their everyday atrocities in the occupied areas. It's probably quite typical, however, that today's professional art administrators simply take part in these contexts without taking into consideration the wider political implications. Hotshot international exhibition organisers (like Charles Esche) were also contributing to the conference about art and nationalism that took place in the Digital Art Lab in Holon outside of Tel Aviv. (http://www.digitalartlab.org.il).

Our argument led to a discussion about the campaign for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel that is starting to gain some attention in the West. For example, in Great Britain there are several academics that are said to have made the decision to boycott and stop all academic and cultural cooperation with institutions in Israel (http://www.pacbi.org). Most recently, the French film director Jean-Luc Godard had been invited to speak at the opening of the Film festival in Tel Aviv in May. Initially he'd agreed to do it but then, after political pressure from Palestine, he had decided against it (http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9570.shtml). It seemed peculiar that Godard would have appeared in such a context after he had made a film in the 70s and 80s about the Palestinian struggle for liberation.

From what I've seen, heard and read during my brief stay here I don't actually think there's any other way other than a total international boycott of trade and institutional cooperation with Israel. In this way it would then be up to the Israeli people to work out with their leaders what is to happen with this insane occupation. Lisa said that, as a German, she had some specific historical problems that made it difficult for her to refuse an invitation to a conference in Israel. In her opinion, the Holocaust was decidedly the most horrific crime against humanity ever committed and that, as a German, this fact could not be easily dismissed. Gabriele disagreed though. Gabriele, who, as I said, has an Indian background, suggested that the colonial era was equally as horrific and with even more victims as a consequence: 'First the Europeans did it to others, then they did it to themselves', she said. But Lisa insisted that it was difficult for a German to distance herself from Israel.

Khaled, who was at first sympathetic towards the idea of a boycott, chimed in that it was important to know the Israelis otherwise you run the risk of exaggerating or distorting the other side. He said that people in the wider Arabic world often imagined that Sharon drank blood when he was thirsty and ate humans when he was hungry. However, the acquaintance between Palestinians and Israelis that had existed before is about to disappear because the Israelis have now closed all work related and regular commuting from the West Bank and Gaza into Israel. Palestinians also no longer watch Israeli TV as they did before. Now they watch Al Jazeera. This separation has become much more pronounced in the past few years and thus the myths, prejudices and images of the enemy are becoming more and

more black and white. Khaled sees this as a big problem. He would read Barak's and Netanyahu's autobiographies in order to understand their way of thinking. Barak was clearly the worst according to Khaled. At least, you know where you're at with Netanyahu. Lisa offered, with a smile, the chance for me to come and visit her in Tel Aviv next week. She was going on a beach holiday by the Mediterranean coast. Khaled said he thought that it sounded like a great idea but I replied that I didn't really feel like going.

Submitted by JJ 09:41

22nd of June, 2008

Hamas on Palestine

People have tried to explain to me several times what happened at the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006. Hamas won the majority of the votes and defeated Fatah who had been in power since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994. Fatah is traditionally the socialist inspired Palestinian party that was established in 1954 by Yasser Arafat, among others. Hamas is a relatively new Islamist party formed in 1987 and inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Everyone says that people voted for Hamas as a protest against Fatah, especially here in Ramallah which is a very worldly city with a mix of Christians and Muslims and where it's hard to find any trace of Hamas and Islamists on the streets. Many women wear the hijab but, especially with younger women, the scarves are incredibly fancy and mostly look like fashion statements. On the other hand, I've heard that only ten years ago you would hardly see a woman wearing the hijab amongst the Palestinians on the

West Bank. This development, however, isn't just Hamas's work, as Fatah, I've been told, is increasingly employing religion. Hamas supposedly has more influence and plays a larger role in the North where people's lack of basic needs is greater, and also because they actually do a lot of work there, helping people in their everyday lives, through local initiatives and institutions.

I was at the premiere on Saturday night of the documentary 'Hamas on Palestine'. The screening took place in the Ramallah Cultural Palace which is an enormous building at the top of one of the hills in the city. The centre had been donated by Japan and to me looks more like a nuclear power station than a social space. The concert and theatre hall are accordingly large and can probably hold a couple of thousand people. For this film showing there were about 200-300 people. Before the film started, we'd met one of the featured personalities. Nicola, who I was with, knew him. He hadn't seen the film until the day before and wasn't convinced about its quality. He was an artist, about 60 years old and was one of the voices in the film that was critical of Hamas. I asked him whether his comments would cause him any problems. He shrugged and pointed towards a short man with a grey beard who'd just arrived. He told me that this man had been a minister in the Fatah government and had taken about 20 bullets in an attack by Hamas. 'But he can still walk', he commented dryly.

The film was basically one long attack on Hamas. Its connection with the Muslim Brotherhood was described and also how, during the party's formation, it was supported by both Israel and the USA. The Israelis and the US wanted Hamas as a means to create divisions amongst the Palestinians. This

division was illustrated through shockingly bloody images of dead and wounded people from sectarian Palestinian infighting in Gaza. These accusations weren't necessarily untrue but they were certainly bluntly portrayed. Another criticism made of Hamas was that it had never had an independent Palestinian state as its goal but rather was working towards a pan-Muslim caliphate. After the film, which was hardly very analytical and rather just more opinionated, there was a discussion. It was conducted in Arabic but Nicola and I stayed for a while to see how it would develop. Two wireless microphones were circulated among the audience and the female film director stood on the stage answering questions. The debate was very heated. One of the questions (as far as I could understand) was about why Hamas didn't get to speak in the film. I don't think there were any representatives from Hamas in the audience but the discussion began to get even hotter and came close to ending in a big fight. People started speaking at the same time through the two microphones and the whole thing ended when the previous Fatah minister gave a long speech. This seemed to calm things down a bit. It was a shame that I couldn't understand what was being said, but one thing is certain: politics in Palestine is never simple because the daily reality is constantly shaped and reshaped by political decisions made, not only in Ramallah, but more so in Tel Aviv and in Washington. Daily life in Palestine is a result of global and geopolitical decisions made somewhere else but the impact on people's life is very concrete. When you talk about what appears as local politics you're actually very often talking about a geopolitical situation that is out of reach of the Palestinians and this, of course, creates lots of indignation and anger when it comes to a political debate like this one. There

is no local solution even though the infighting between Hamas and Fatah has many very local consequences.

Submitted by JJ 11:41

23rd of June, 2008

SIM card

Samar had suggested several times that I should buy a local SIM card for my mobile phone so that I could call people directly and people could call me. Around midday I got a text message from Samar on my Danish mobile phone where she said that she'd drop by in about ten minutes so that we could go and buy a SIM card. That's fine, I said, but I'd rather she came in twenty minutes because I'd been writing my blog and still had to have a shower. When I was clean and ready, I left the apartment to meet Samar on the way. She was coming in her car. My apartment was in a neighbourhood called Al Tireh, just slightly outside of Ramallah. The weather was very hot so I settled for a slow tempo. After fifteen minutes I'd almost reached Ramallah and came to a large crossroads but I was now a bit unsure whether Samar had taken this route. I called her and it became clear that we had misunderstood each other. We agreed to meet in an hour at a café called Café Pronto. I thought that this would be a good opportunity for me to try and find my own way around. I'd been told that I should walk straight until I reached a gas station where I should turn right in order to get to the café. After ten minutes walk from the suburban area where I was living and into a slight more densely built urban area, I found the gas station and turned as I'd been told. There were many small shops and workshops in the streets on the edge of

the city centre: bakeries, electrical goods, shops with spare parts for cars, etc. There were also a lot of people in the streets. The shop owners often sat outside their shops on chairs reading the newspaper.

There were two improvised memorials around the gas station for what I assumed were martyrs killed by the occupation forces. Firstly, there was a memorial with pictures of a very young man, almost a boy, who must have been killed at this very location. There was a stone slab with Arabic writing as well as several flags and Palestine-checked clothing, red and black, blowing in the wind. This memorial took up part of the road by extending half a meter outwards from the curb. Further down there was a similar memorial. This time there was a grown man on the pictures. Apart from the stone slab with flags and so on, an electric sign had been erected that had a picture of the militant on when still alive lying in a landscape aiming a large machine gun. I'd noticed the sign before but couldn't entirely understand what it was about until now. It almost looked like an advertisement sign for a restaurant but now I could see that it was a memorial for a martyr.

On the streets you often meet small, short-haired boys under ten years old selling chewing gum. This time was no exception and a little boy was trying his luck, walking with me part of the way and trying to sell me gum for 2 shekels. After a little while, I got him down to 1 shekel. Finally though, I thought what the heck and gave him 2 shekels and took a packet. His face lit up and he took the money and ran back to where he'd come from. On the way back he shouted to his friends about his luck and immediately 4 or 5 chewing gum sellers came after me. I said, 'Next time', but they answered,

'No next time!'. I ended the whole thing by stating very clearly 'No way'. The Palestinian boys, however, were good businessmen and had clearly started their training early about how to earn money through selling. I noticed that Samar often has long conversations with the young vendors and her tone is not always friendly, however this doesn't always stop the little ones.

I soon reached an area that I couldn't recognise at all and started to consider asking someone for directions, but then I saw the bouncy castle next to the City Hall and this brought me back on track — and to Café Pronto. This was a bit of a victory for me as I was now feeling independent from Samar's very friendly help and protection.

Samar arrived shortly afterwards and we drove to a quite comprehensive shopping centre. We quickly agreed that the

existence of a shopping centre must be one of the preconditions for taking a future Palestinian state seriously. So, one of these now existed, of course, and it looked like any other shopping centre in the world. Here we bought a SIM card at Jawwal, the Palestinian telephone company. I could have bought Orange, which is the Israeli-based company but although Samar says that she is not very politically-minded, I've noticed that she always makes sure to buy Palestinian products. That's why she took me to Jawwal. Then we went shopping in the large supermarket that is also a part of the centre. There were a lot of good fresh products on the shelves and it reached the standards of European supermarkets. However the produce was in an entirely different league with fresh wild tomatoes, squash, aubergine, salad, and so on. By chance we met Khaled, who I'd met the other night, in the supermarket. It was starting to dawn on me that Ramallah is not very big although it's still difficult for me to find my way around.

If you want to get hold of me you can reach me on my new Jawwal number: 0097259801684 6. Speak to you soon.

Submitted by JJ 14:09

24th of June, 2008

Good intentions

As I mentioned earlier, Ramallah is Palestine's face to the world and the place where most international visitors arrive when they are going to visit the occupied territories. On a global level, there are many people who support the Palestinians and it's almost a tradition for progressive artists and

intellectuals to support the Palestinian cause, just as I do. In this sense Ramallah, the most stable and Westernised city in Palestine, has become home to a whole variety of international cultural festivals. June is especially packed with cultural events, usually of a particular bi-lateral pattern: Palestinian/Swedish cultural festival, Palestinian/German literature festival, etc.

On Monday evening I went to two of these events, mainly to observe how these meet-ups unfold and to see to what degree of collaboration we can speak of as there are so many heartfelt Western intentions that can rapidly become patronising and colonising when they arrive here. So I went to a Palestinian/Belgian poetry night in Al Mahatta, an artist-led gallery in the city centre. The space consisted of a huge room with perfect white walls — a true white cube. The group behind the project had fixed everything up themselves. Any gallery person in Europe would be envious. On this evening Al Mahatta made space for three Belgian poets and a Palestinian to present their texts.

It was a true séance from Babel, with French, Dutch, English, Flemish — and Arabic, and there's a certain pleasure in listening to languages you don't understand. You inevitably start listening to other things than just the literal 'meaning' of the words. I became more aware of the style of presentation and especially the body language. With this in mind, I wasn't particularly comfortable with what I saw from my European colleagues. They were, of course, nervous about the context they were presenting in and were probably overdoing it in order to underline their status as artists. Most of them made a lot of exaggerated facial expressions and slightly too energetic movements during their reading,

although perhaps I'm just being oversensitive. The Palestinian poet read a couple of poems from a collection in a more concentrated manner, and that was that. He didn't try to translate or make up for anything by performing.

The first question from the audience was, in fact, directed at the collaboration: What collaboration had there actually been between the Belgian and Palestinian poets? I didn't quite understand the answer but it became apparent that the group of poets were going back to Belgium together to do the same performance. The theme of the event was 'identity', and there was an interesting discussion about where the production of identity is located. A member of the audience explained that in Arabic poetry identity is embedded in language — it is shaped through language. What was implicit in what he was saying was that identity is not created by the person, which, for me, was exactly what we'd just seen examples of from the Belgian poets who were very preoccupied with making their words their own, so to speak.

We left the séance before the discussion ended and decided to go to another event: a Palestinian/French jazz session. It turned out to be a French jazz-quartet who had incorporated a Palestinian percussionist as a fourth member. The percussionist was a young man who did his best to accompany the three Frenchmen who were playing piano, bass and trumpet. The band played American jazz classics, cool and bebop, and played them well. At one point, the drummer switched his drum kit for a Palestinian drum: a tabla, which you play with your hands. He was good at accompanying the music but it immediately sounded strange to my ears, although strange in a good way. Then a young local man from the audience took over the drum and went on a wild solo that quickly

dismantled the rest of the orchestra. They just stood and watched the temperamental drumming of the new band member. The original percussionist continued at the back on his drum kit, blending in with the rhythms of the tabla. After a while, the French musicians attempted to play along but were slightly awkward although in the end they were slowly able to rein in the music and pull it back to the safety of traditional jazz. It seemed like the Palestinians could play along with the jazz but the French couldn't contribute much when the music started moving into unknown territory for them. All in all, however, it was a good concert and the café owner Bazem was really proud of the event.

Submitted by JJ 11:12

25th of June, 2008

On the border of Zone A

The Oslo Accords of 1993 meant that the West Bank was divided into a series of zones. The intention was to leave all control around the large cities in the hands of the new Palestinian Authority. These particular areas were given the name 'Zone A'. What this means is that the Palestinian Authority is solely responsible for security there and can decide what happens on the land there; for example, using it for building houses on. This division into zones also means that the Palestinian controlled areas have become a series of small islands surrounded by areas under Israeli control. Thus there is no continuous land under Palestinian Authority control and, as such, the Israelis control the traffic between the main cities. So there are Israeli checkpoints that you have to pass through in order to get from Ramallah to Nablus, for example. Around

'Zone A' are the 'Zone B' areas. These are areas that are controlled by both the Palestinian Authority and Israel. In real terms this means that it's impossible for Palestinians to build in these areas where Israel retains overriding authority for security. Supposedly only about 5% of the West Bank is actually under the control of the Palestinian Authority. However, this does not stop the Israelis raiding these areas whenever they feel like it. Finally, there are the Zone C areas that are fully under Israeli control.

Until now I had only really been going out from my apartment to the centre of Ramallah and so today I thought I'd have a look around the other side of the hill, moving away from the city. At first sight the centre of Ramallah seems to be far away from the conflict and the battles over land and territory and so I went on a hike out of the city to get an impression of what the situation is like there. Al Tireh is characterised by large pompous villas and apartment buildings and is clearly a wealthy part of the city. Just like the house I'm staying, most of the buildings are brand new and nothing has been held back in the building process. I took a few photos of some of the new houses that are often owned by people who, after the Oslo Accords, returned from the USA or Europe, or they are owned by people who are still living elsewhere in the wealthy areas of the world. Most of the city is characterised by new high class buildings but also by the numerous empty houses that are probably waiting for a tenant to move in or for their owner, who is still in exile, to return. The new houses are exclusive but rarely elegant. In fact, they are often quite the opposite.

I'd got as far as the last houses on the hill and could hear the sounds of saws and hammers as some of these houses were

still being built. The roads were also newly laid down with four lanes and a flower bed running along the middle, and from this vantage point there was an incredible view over the valley towards Israel. The hilly landscape disappeared in the distance and I tried to see if I could catch a glimpse of the Mediterranean Sea but I think it was just past another hill that was further out. Looking to the other side of the valley you can see a large Israeli military complex, and a bit further out still there were several settlements. You can recognise them because they usually settle on the highest points in the area and have tall water towers. A lot of the Israeli control of the West Bank is based on visual control and so the settlements usually tower over the surrounding landscape and look over the Arabic villages that lie further down the hillside. These settlements are, then, an important

aspect of the occupation and they also function as military posts in enemy territory. From my vantage point, the new road went down into the valley but I couldn't see where it finally led to and, as you shouldn't tempt fate here in the West Bank, this made me turn around and head back. There also weren't any more Palestinian flags on the lamp posts as there are otherwise throughout the city, so this was probably the border of 'Zone A'.

I turned around and took a different route back on yet another large new road but after about 100 meters a Palestinian security guard with an AK67 came walking towards me. He stopped and asked me something in Arabic. His friend, who was dressed in full camouflage, followed shortly after him. They couldn't speak a word of English but kept repeating the word 'Israeli' to me. I tried to explain to them that I was from Denmark and took out my passport in which the word Denmark is repeated in several languages. Unsurprisingly, it doesn't say it in Arabic and I silently cursed the authorities at home. In the end I got through to them and they understood 'Dinamarka' but I still didn't know whether I was free to go or what was going on. As they had some intimidating weapons that I'm not used to being around, I waited patiently to see what they would do. They then asked me if I had a phone and I showed them my new Jawwal mobile phone, which they recognised. They then called their own mobiles on it and vice-versa and also looked over my contacts which I think at that moment listed only four people. Eventually they waved to me and said 'come' and we went to their hideout which had some plastic chairs in it and they offered me one. They also offered coffee while they continued checking through my phone. I tried to tell them

that I could call Samar who would explain who I was after which they finally gave me the phone back and I called her. Samar spoke to them in Arabic and everyone started laughing, including me, but not quite as loudly as they were! Later it dawned on me that they'd just wanted to be welcoming and hang out a bit. Once it was clear to them that I wasn't Israeli, there was no problem. Later I heard that only 500 meters away down the hill was an Israeli settlement and this isn't something to joke about.

Then a small man came out of the house next to the little control post to water his plants, which was probably just an excuse to check out what was happening. We got into conversation through the hedge and fairly soon he invited me into his garden. His name was Jadz and his English was pretty good. I asked him about his large new house and he told me that his son, who was a lawyer in the USA, had given it to him. His son's company had led one of the large lawsuits against the tobacco industry over there and he'd had about 1500 lawyers working under him. They'd won about 800 billion dollars and so the son was hardly short of money. Jadz had been a travelling tradesman for the German chemical company Bayer but now he'd retired to his place of birth. Ramallah had originally been Christian and he told me that he was a descendant of one of the seven clans who had settled here about 700 years ago. At this point he invited me into the house for coffee and cake. Jadz explained to me that 'Zone A' in Ramallah was about to be 'filled up' with lots of new houses and that increased demand for the land had driven the prices way up. His land was now worth millions although he had bought it for nothing. I'd earlier read a piece of research that showed that in certain areas of Ramallah

land prices are way above those of Manhattan, which says something about the wealth enjoyed by the richest Palestinians (http://www.ynkb.dk/landvalue.shtml). The three refugee camps in Ramallah aren't on the market as the land is owned by the UN, so refugees don't enjoy the benefits of the rising land values. No surprise there. After several cups of coffee, I headed home and on the way back the two soldiers gave me a 'low five', which is the way friends greet each other here on the West Bank.

Submitted by JJ 20:03

26th of June, 2008

Haifa

Before I'd arrived in Palestine I was convinced that I wasn't going to visit Israel during my stay. I would have to travel through Ben Gurion airport but that was going to be it. However, after a lot of discussions with Palestinian friends about the political reasoning behind choosing not to visit Israel, I'd reached the conclusion that I better change my mind. I have the possibility to enter Israel, as opposed to many Palestinians here in the West Bank, so why not go to the other side to avoid making myths in my own head. Another reason to visit is that there are in fact over a million Palestinians living in Israel, the so-called 1948 Arabs. The lack of freedom of movement has made it difficult for Palestinians to keep up contact between the populations in Israel and in the West Bank. While life on the West Bank has its conflicts, the 1948 Arabs have their own day-to-day problems, too, living in the Jewish state, so why not go to see for myself?

Nicola wanted to visit some Palestinian artists who live in Haifa with regard to the exhibition in London and so we decided to rent a car together so that we could drive along the Mediterranean to Haifa, which is in the north western corner of Israel. We left early to go to Jerusalem where we would pick up our rental car. To begin with we took the bus from Ramallah bus station around 8.30 but, unlike a good day at the Qualandya checkpoint when the busses passed through in no time, it took an hour on the other side of the control for everyone to gather back on the bus. For this reason we didn't pick up our car until 10.30 and were quite late in hitting the road because we had planned on coming back that same evening. Before we found our way to the car rental office, we 'wasted' some more time on a cup of Arabic coffee at the Jerusalem Hotel. This is an old hotel in East Jerusalem whose history stretches back to the English colonial period. It is a centre for international travellers on their way to the West Bank and here we met Dave, the English activist, who we'd met earlier in Ramallah. He'd been to Haifa himself to visit two organisations that do work around rights for Palestinians inside Israel. One of them was the Mossawa Centre, an umbrella organisation that seeks to shed some light on the conditions of the so-called 1948 Palestinians. The other one is The Association of Forty (http://www.assoc40.org/index_main.html), an organisation that works for equality for the 40 Arabic villages that are in Israel but which don't exist on Israeli maps. This means that they aren't recognised as villages as such and therefore they don't benefit from fundamental Israeli infrastructure like road connections and water. As no pipes have been laid to these villages, their water is transported to them in large trucks. This situation especially concerns the Bedouin

villages in the Negev dessert. The fact that they aren't recognised as villages means that the Israelis can take their land and evict them with no juridical problems (http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article4358.shtml). The reason that these organisations are based in Haifa is that this city has a large Palestinian minority. Here Israelis and Palestinians live side-by-side and aren't divided into enclaves like they are in most of Israel. However, the Palestinians are still in a minority and number about 10% of the city's 250,000 residents.

We decided to drive to Tel Aviv and take the coastal motorway to the North. There was something nice about getting to the coast after living locked up in the West Bank for a while. Many Palestinian children have never even seen the sea and this can create problems when they do because of the waves and all the things that characterise the sea. Nicola told me a story about one of Khalil's brothers who, alongside one of his friends, had jumped over the fence and gone to the coast to swim in the Mediterranean. They had both drowned. Nicola added that apparently they'd also been pretty stoned, but still they just didn't know what the sea can do. I had also heard from Khaled about how he'd been to the coast with a group of Palestinian children who, when they'd reached the Mediterranean, had started to cry because they apparently were afraid of the open space and the infinite horizon. They'd never experienced anything like it before. It was quite liberating even for us when after a while we could see the light blue Mediterranean from the car and so we left the motorway slightly north of Tel Aviv in order to get down right next to the beach. Here we found a funky tavern and bought a slush ice with fresh lemon and mint. Even here, though, we weren't free from the 'security

situation' as Israeli army helicopters flew low along the coast every 5 minutes.

Overall, as seen through the windshield, the Israeli landscape reminded me of the USA being similarly characterised by large billboards and shopping malls but also with Tel Aviv's skyline in the distance. The motorways were also wide and the signs and traffic information were all very American. However, the signs were written in Hebrew, Arabic and Roman letters and there were lots of blue and white Israeli flags dotted here and there in the landscape. We drove into Haifa and agreed over the phone with Muhammed to meet by the Bahai garden in the centre of the city. Muhammed was one of the local artists who we were going to visit. The Bahai garden is an incredibly beautiful garden that extends in a narrow band across a steep slant and connects the mountains behind

Haifa with the city itself. It's an Arabic garden and its strict organisation reminded me of the Moorish gardens in Andalusia. Muhammed was waiting for us and, after an Arabic salad at a café, we went to his family's apartment. His workplace was on the roof of the building and he paints his paintings under the sky. Muhammed said that he wasn't really a political artist but that he took his own experiences as a point of departure when developing his pictures. In this way the imagery of his pictures relates to the situation of his own life. Many of his paintings were caricatures of people with the appearance of power. He had an extensive series called 'Commanders' which were some trippy and very colourful portraits of military commanders with all types of ethnic headdresses on and various grotesque animal heads like camels, elephants, horses, and so on.

Muhammed had a huge store of paintings in two small sheds on the roof and he said that it was quite difficult for him to sell anything. 'If he had been a Jewish artist here in Israel he would have sold everything', as he put it, and so he was very keen on showing in the exhibition in London. Nicola chose four of his pictures. The view from the roof was incredible, you could see the sea and the shipping harbour that lies next to the leisure harbour and you could follow the coastline all the way to the border of Lebanon. We were also going to visit another artist who was called Sharif and Muhammed came along too.

Sharif's apartment was in what Muhammed described as the artist neighbourhood, and Sharif and his girlfriend Sherin were waiting for us with a whole variety of extravagant dishes that Sharif had prepared himself. Among other things, there was rice with spices all rolled into vine leaves that we

ate with a kind of tzatziki. In Sharif's opinion it was good in the heat and it was definitely hot in Haifa, a lot hotter that in Ramallah. I nearly boiled over several times during the day.

Sharif was a very entertaining person and, as an artist, has a wide international reputation. His style was also more international than Muhammed's, who is self-educated and has hardly ever travelled. Sharif was one of the first artists that I discussed the Mohammed cartoons with and he had a very realistic and thoughtful take on the affair. He also said that many people here felt very wounded by what had happened. After I had told him a bit about the campaigns against Muslims in Danish society, he smiled and said that he'd participate next time there was an opportunity to burn a Danish flag here. He then took a gulp of the cold Carlsberg that was in front of him. We laughed quite a bit about this. One of his most well known pieces is 'Chic Point — fashion for Israeli Checkpoints' (http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2005/waked) where he designed clothes that in various inventive ways are made transparent so that the Israelis can see from afar that anything like a bomb isn't hidden on the person. All in all he had chosen a humorous take on his situation. He told me how, as a person, he was a good example of the future of Palestine as he'd been democratically elected to become chairman of the tenants association of the building where he lived. With a triumphant smile, he said, 'Even the Zionists voted for me'. However, he and Sherin also told us what had happened when they had sought refuge in the lower part of the stairwell when Hezbollah had bombed the city in the war of 2006. On that occasion their Jewish neighbours had been more afraid of the presence of Sharif and Sherin than Hezbollah missiles. They'd all stayed in their apartments during the first attacks,

but when a missile hit the post office next door and caused a lot of damage they were forced to admit that this wasn't a joke. However, for Sherin, the war was a defeat for the Israeli army and a well deserved blow to their arrogance. The army said the campaign into Lebanon would only last for a few days but it lasted several weeks. In the end they never found the kidnapped soldiers who they'd said they gone in to get.

It was mainly Russian immigrants who lived in their building; according to Sharif and Sherin, the city had been invaded by Russians when the iron curtain came down in 1989. Many of them aren't Jewish at all even though they claim to be Jewish and the Israelis are well aware of that. For the officials, though, immigration is important as it's used to gain a demographic advantage over the Arabs. The immigrants receive comprehensive support from the Israeli state. Amongst other things, Muhammed said, they receive 50% support to buy a place to live and 50% to buy a car when they arrive but they aren't allowed to decide for themselves where they want to live and get put in areas where there are many Palestinians, like in Haifa. In this way it's ensured that the Palestinian minority remains a minority.

It was getting late and Sharif was very set on supporting the Turkish team against the Germans in the European Championship semi-finals that would be on later that evening. We never managed to visit the two local Palestinian organisations that we had planned to but the visit to Haifa had made it clear to me that it's necessary to think within the framework of the entire history of Palestine when discussing the conflict and not just limit one's focus to Gaza and the West Bank.

Submitted by JJ 09:42

27th of June, 2008

Writing history

The first time I met Ismail he asked me if I would like to go to work with him one day. He is one of the handful of visual artists who live and work in Ramallah and, although I wasn't sure what 'work' meant in this context, he'd mentioned that he worked in a museum in East Jerusalem. When I met him again the other day I said to him that I would like to go with him to work and we agreed that he'd pick me up on Thursday morning around 8.30. We drove off and passed by the Qualandya checkpoint. We didn't go through because Ismail said that today we'd take the 'settler road' which is the fastest. We drove on a wide road that had been cut into the landscape with tall yellow cliffs on either side. Ismail said that this was the general pattern around all larger cities on the West Bank; in other words, the Israelis build roads around the city centres so that the settlers don't have to drive through the Palestinian cities. Ismail's ID is from East Jerusalem and his car has yellow Jerusalem licence plates so he's allowed to drive on these roads. I asked him whether he lived in Ramallah, which had been my impression. Yes, he kind of did, he said. He told me that it's actually not legal to live in Ramallah with a Jerusalem ID but brushed it off saying that if you did everything the Israelis dictated then you wouldn't do anything. So you have to be able to thread your way. There were lots of cars with green Palestinian number plates on this road, so it's apparently not entirely impossible for them to drive here. It is, however, on many of the other settler roads in the West Bank and it's out of the question to bring a Palestinian car into Israel.

We drove through a part of East Jerusalem that is still a heavily contested area when it comes to claims for land and territory. This landscape is a part of the West Bank and thus a part of the area that was occupied by the Israelis during the Six Day War in 1967. The Israelis, however, are expanding dramatically with new settlements built on the hilltops. The Wall, which after a while becomes a high-tech fence, zigzags through the landscape far into the occupied territories. These settlements don't look very temporary and it's clear that they are built to stay. In between the settlements there are Arabic villages and neighbourhoods that all look a bit older and more organically laid out. You can always recognise them by the minarets that stick up over the buildings. We arrived at a checkpoint by the Wall and Ismail said, "Now we are settlers". We both relaxed a bit in order to look unaffected and as cool as possible and we were waved through without hesitation by the heavily armed Israeli soldier. On the other side of the Wall in East Jerusalem you couldn't really speak any longer of settlements but entire neighbourhoods that had been built on occupied land. These neighbourhoods are most likely never going to be returned to the Palestinian people and Ismail sang with a smile 'Jerusaaaaleeeeem is looooooost' in a tone of voice that mimicked the prayers that are broadcast from the large speakers on the mosques. Eventually we arrived at the little museum where Ismail works.

There is a slightly sad story attached to the museum. Originally, it had been a Palestinian folklore museum but it hadn't been open to the public for the last year and a half. It was one of the few institutions that contributed to the task of documenting and preserving knowledge of Palestinian

culture but, as has happened so many times before when it comes to Palestinian concerns, internal disagreements had arisen that, in the end, had led to the museum's closure. Alongside a handful of other people, Ismail had been hired about a year ago as a visual artist to help renew and re-open the museum. It seemed like Ismail was the last one left of this group and he was clearly looking forward to when his contract ran out the next week. Only one year ago a fortune had been spent refurbishing the building "with European expertise", Ismail said, with a slightly ironic tone but this renovation had been a disaster for the building as all the windows had been covered with shutters and the entire building was about to collapse due to damp. A new renovation had already been planned to save the beautiful building.

Ismail told me that he had tried to change the focus of the museum from being a messy old fashioned and object oriented museum into a museum that spoke more of the context in which the collection had originated. The story behind it was that this collection had been brought together within the framework of a wealthy Palestinian family towards the end of the 1900s, and that the building that housed the collection had been the family's original villa. Ismail said that he wanted the museum to tell the story of both the family and the collection. The collection consisted mainly of pottery, textiles and craft collected from the Palestinian villages. Towards the end of the 1900s there had been a relatively large and wealthy Palestinian upper class that had their own culture and traditions parallel to those of the Ottoman and European high society that also existed there around that time. The museum owned much of the family's furniture and personal belongings and these could easily be integrated with all the other art objects of the collection currently on display in the many galleries of the museum. It wouldn't be like this, though, as the board didn't like the idea and just wanted a 'museum' and didn't want to pursue Ismail's ideas. Currently there isn't one museum about Palestinian cultural history in Jerusalem that is run by the Palestinians themselves. This creates a cultural gap for the Palestinians and makes it easier for the Israelis to reproduce the myth of the Jewish migrants settling in an unpopulated land, the persistent story in the Israeli writing of history. However, in 1948, around 1,750,000 people were living in Palestine, of whom only 31% were Jewish.

Submitted by JJ 11:50

27th of June, 2008

Classical Palestinian

On Friday evening, Ismail was going into East Jerusalem to photograph a concert. As he had space in his car, he asked me if I wanted to come along. The concert was with students from The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music (http://ncm.birzeit.edu/new/page.php). The Conservatory is a Palestinian music school with an emphasis on classical European and Palestinian music. It's based in East Jerusalem but also has another building in Birzeit, just outside of Ramallah. This is where they run their summer school. I'd visited the department in Birzeit before when I'd gone to a reception for a mural created by local Palestinian artists that ran along the entire front of the building. The mural was made up of a long musical staff with the melody of the Palestinian national anthem on it. On top of the staff, local artists had painted pictures of young Palestinians playing various classical instruments. The incorporation of the nationalist aspect into the musical conservatory came across very clearly. It appeared to be based on a rationale that says 'if you are to have a nation, you also need to establish a national culture'. When it comes to music, here it seems to be aimed at a kind of mixture of European classical and Palestinian folklore.

We arrived at The Mormon University where the concert was going to take place. Yes, all versions of all kinds of religions are represented in Jerusalem and The Mormon University certainly isn't just a smaller building amongst the others. They have a very exclusive, large and relatively new, Modernist style building on one of the hills east of Jerusalem's Old City. It was air conditioned and uniformed security guards showed us the way to the concert hall in polite American.

Everything was very posh and I wondered who actually studies here. Young people do tend to leave their marks on architecture but here there weren't any signs of life and the atmosphere was a bit like being in a church. The first thing that struck me when we went into the concert hall was that the back wall of the space was made up of a large piece of glass that gave you a view over Jerusalem's Old City with the Dome of the Rock mosque as the centre piece. It was a very overwhelming view and seen through a glass window from a cool, air conditioned room it makes the entire scenery seem like a postcard. The hall began to fill up, seemingly with mostly family and friends of the music students. Everyone was dressed quite formally.

Then the concert began, apparently with the youngest students first. I don't know if I'm just getting older and was missing my daughter at home in Denmark but it was so touching to see the little ones sitting there playing their instruments. First there was a little girl in a nice white dress who was no older than five years old and who played a small violin. I think it was J.S. Scholze's Dance Song. The program was mainly in Arabic so it wasn't easy to figure out who was playing what. Then there was another girl who was maybe six years old who played another classical piece on her mini-cello. It was a little mechanical, playing back and forth with the bow and with a blank expression on her face and her eyes looking straight ahead being neither in contact with the music nor the audience. However, when she'd finished, her face lit up and she bowed and hurried down to her friends from the music school who were sitting in the first row. One by one they played mainly European music with a few traditional Palestinian pieces every now and then that used a tabla and a string instrument that I don't know the

name of. These traditional pieces were played with the same concentration and devotion as the other classical pieces and it was quite powerful to see all these Palestinian children do everything to recreate a European high culture in front of a backdrop of the beloved Jerusalem — also when the violin didn't quite hit the right note. I couldn't help asking myself what it meant that so much weight is put on a classical cultural education. Of course, many of the young musicians were really talented and it was very touching to see their well deserved pride after they showed us what they could do but for me, as a European, there was also a discrepancy and something very melancholic about seeing the young ones sitting in front of the lost Jerusalem, reproducing a European culture which has rarely helped the Palestinian cause much.

Submitted by JJ 08:54

28th of June 2008

War as daily life

If, like me, you don't read the Arabic newspapers, it can be difficult to follow the clashes that are happening almost daily around the West Bank and in Gaza. The local news stream is mainly in Arabic so it's difficult to get an overview. Here, I am thinking particularly of clashes connected to the Israeli occupation that, amongst the locals, have a tendency to become normalised and get pushed a bit into the background. This happens especially when you live in Ramallah where, at first sight, the war is not experienced as particularly present. Many of my Palestinian friends are aware of this tendency to just accept things the way they are and not bother a lot when there has been an Israeli raid or an arrest in a village up north. But when we discuss this process of normalisation, several of them have underlined that it's important to not just accept checkpoints and the armed Israeli soldiers in the Palestinian territories even though it is part of everyday life. It's just not right! A parallel tendency is that due to the limited freedom of movement, people just snuggle up in the big cities and avoid travelling between the cities in the West Bank. Many say that from Ramallah to Hebron is as far as from Ramallah to New York. The cities have deliberately and definitely been isolated. The connections are limited and people have a tendency to stay in their city and try to make the best of life where they are. During my stay, I've yet to meet a Palestinian visiting from any of the other big cities in the West Bank such as Nablus, Hebron, Jenin, and definitely not from Gaza which is entirely cut off. After I'd found the online English-language, Palestinian Ma'an News Agency on the net the other day (http://

www.maannews.net/en/index.php), an entirely different image emerged of the situation in the occupied territories. It was a graver picture than what I'd experienced and enjoyed here in Ramallah with the ongoing socialising and parties. When you look at Ma'an's telegram list, you see that there are constant hits and Israeli raids. In the last week alone four Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces in connection with a series of clashes and searches in the West Bank. I asked Samar about this low key war which apparently happens almost entirely hidden from view and she said that there could easily be shootings by Israelis on the main street right now as we were sitting in Café Pronto drinking lemonade and that we would probably never even hear about it. In this way, the war has become daily life. This normalising process has been staged by the very mobile and unpredictable Israeli occupation and, at the same time, from the Palestinian side, this process is probably a natural reaction to living in an environment characterised by continuous war. Ma'an, and also Electronic Intifada (http://electronicintifada.net), are very useful ways to zoom out of the everyday and to follow and understand the more brutal reality of the occupied territories as seen from above.

Submitted by JJ 10:42

29th of June, 2008

Ramallah is the new Dubai

I was invited on Sunday to a picnic by Yazid. Emily, Reem and a whole load of other people would also be there. Yazid is an architect and teaches in the architecture department of Birzeit University. Emily is a Palestinian/American visual

artist and Reem is an art historian who works at the newly opened art academy in Ramallah. We met at 10am by Café Pronto and we passed the first few hours together by getting food for the picnic. We went to the fruit and veg shop and bought watermelons, peaches, tomatoes, lemons and a whole variety of other things. Then we went to one of the street stalls and bought freshly made humus and falafel and we also bought pickled cucumbers and various kinds of mixed salads too. Soon we'd pretty much filled up a whole trunk with food which I would guess would have been enough for about forty people even though there were only ten of us. The idea though was that we were going to eat throughout the whole day. 'Food is wine' as Yazid put it when we passed by a friend's place on the way to pick up a grill. People here love food and they love to spend time eating. We drove out of Ramallah and headed north to a little village called Burham. This place was supposed to be one of the only regions in the Ramallah area where there's any forest-like growth. Geographically, we had driven north to the border of Zone B that overlooks Zone C. This was on the border of one of the Israeli-controlled corridors that separates the urban areas. We could see a settlement on the hilltop and the settler road that connects the settlements north of Ramallah to Israel. The options for picnic areas and excursions into nature are so limited around Ramallah that the people in the village had decided to close off this one forest to visitors as the forest just couldn't cope any longer. A local boy from the village came over and told us where we could stay instead and we found a place in an olive grove that was shady and we began to prepare the food. Ahmed, Sandy and Alessandro turned up with their little children and, to my surprise, they had also brought food. Some

marinated chicken and lamb shish for the grill, so we weren't short of anything.

Sandi and Alessandro are both architects and run a project called Decolonizing Architecture which has its offices in Bethlehem. I think Ahmed also teaches Political Theory at the Birzeit University. When there is food, friends and lots of time, there are also a lot of discussions and I'm very impressed with the locals' ability to constantly discuss the 'situation'. So today's big discussion was on the future development of the city of Ramallah. Yazid had already started the discussion in the car when we'd passed a large sign on an empty lot that said 'Bought by Arab Investment Bank'. He sang a little self-made song: 'Ramallah is the new Dubai', and told us that the West Bank has recently been opened for investment by the rich Gulf States. Many aspects of the Oslo Accords concern economic control over the flows of investment and goods into the occupied territories. Within the last few years, Israel and the PA (Palestinian Authority) have, in collaboration with the World Bank and global investors, attempted to open the occupied territories to international investment. Thus a very disturbing mix of military occupation and free trade zone was beginning to take shape.

Much of the discussion under the olive tree was about how the economic and cultural weight is being pushed from East Jerusalem to Ramallah. This process was happening on a variety of different fronts. On the political front, East Jerusalem had already been annexed by Israel in the 1980s and been brought into the municipality of Jerusalem. In this way the Israelis had disconnected East Jerusalem from the West Bank as an area of legal administration. The Israeli-controlled municipality doesn't do much to support and

develop life for the Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Therefore the Palestinian life of the city is starting to dry out there. Daily life has become too expensive and difficult and there is less and less to do there economically as well as culturally. Palestinians go to Ramallah when they want to have a good time and party. The Wall has isolated and closed Jerusalem off from its hinterland on the West Bank and the Palestinians in the West Bank no longer have access to the holy city. Palestinians in East Jerusalem cannot expand their homes and their neighbourhoods are not developed at the same rate as the Israelis. All the while Israeli settlements are continuously expanding, lately by a 1000 new homes in Pisgat Zeev and Har Homa (http://www.ccdprj.ps/en/), for example. The role of Ramallah therefore is also an important part of this plan which in the end would make Ramallah the main city in Palestine. Traditionally Jerusalem had been the capital of Palestine but this role is fading more and more.

When it came to this slow pressure on the Palestinians of East Jerusalem, there were no limits to the stories the picnic guests could tell of how Palestinians with Jerusalem IDs had had their identification withdrawn in various situations. For example, during departure at the airport for long study trips abroad, the guards would simply take the cards and comment that 'this is no longer needed now that you're leaving anyway'. There were currently several ongoing legal cases regarding these events in which Palestinians were trying to get their Jerusalem ID back. The guests also spoke about how, in the middle of the night, at Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem, there would be control visits to check whether people actually lived at these addresses. The police would check whether the bed was warm and whether the toothbrush was still wet. This discussion made me sweat as

I'd written on the blog about Ismail's attitude in regard to the Israeli demands for residency permits here. As I was aware of the problematic security situation, I'd changed most names that I referred to on the blog and the people at the picnic figured this was good enough.

Yazid was very preoccupied by this combination of military control and market interests which stimulates life in some areas of the West Bank but makes life unbearable in others with the purpose of displacing people. This was how Palestinians were being moved from Jerusalem to Ramallah. In regard to this process, the discussion turned to questioning what the PA was doing that was in any way beneficial to the Palestinian people. According to the Oslo Accords, the PA is the administrative organisation that should govern both civil and security related institutions in the areas under Palestinian control. However, it seemed pretty unclear which interests the PA in fact represented. According to the opinions shared at the picnic, the PA was entirely implicated in Israel's, and also the rest of the world's plans, of dividing the areas. As it was said, the security forces don't even protect the Palestinian people. The picnic agreed that if the PA was interested in representing the Palestinian people it should dismantle itself.

In fact, Palestine has for many years been one of the very few areas in the world where people have lived without a state and where the cities have governed themselves in a kind of association of city states (but always under the control of various colonial powers, of course). The discussion ended with a certain agreement that the next intifada would not be against Israel but the PA. While the picnic kept steadily moving and following the sun and shade around the tree

we were sitting under, the picnickers some how reached the conclusion that there isn't a need for a one-state or two-state solution but rather a no-state solution.

Submitted by JJ 21:04

1st of July, 2008

Collective action

I was on my way into the city to get something to eat when Ismail called me and said he was at SnowBar and that I should drop by. As usual I had a bit of difficulty finding my way around but I got hold of a taxi that took me to the place. When I arrived, Ismail's friend Basil was also sitting at a table on SnowBar's large outdoor porch by some pine trees. Ismail introduced him as a friend 'who hates artists' and this pretty much set the tone for the company. Together with Ismail, Basil had lived with a couple of artists in a shared flat for a few years, but not any longer. He had just finished his studies in Political Economy at Birzeit University. "Most of my friends are artists", he assured me although still not denying that he hated them nonetheless. I tentatively said that Political Economy sounded very Marxist to my ears, but he underlined that it had nothing at all to do with Marxist economic thinking. Since the Oslo Accords, everything in Palestine had become neo-liberal and market-oriented and even the university was now only educating people needed for the labour force, whether that was locally or in the Gulf. Despite the fact that the PLO, the PFLP and many other Palestinian liberation organisations traditionally have had a socialist foundation, he hadn't studied any Marxist theory during his studies at Birzeit. As a result of Oslo, that was all

over now. There was no longer any independent research and all education was directed at satisfying the market, according to Basil.

Basil's criticism of the Oslo Accords was ruthless. Not just of their destructive effect in the universities but also of the invasion of international NGOs that had trailed after the agreements. This was yet another occupation and all those organisations could think of was attracting investment and preparing markets for international investors. It was a colonisation, a neo-liberal colonisation brought about by the more than 100 NGOs that currently worked in Palestine. The Oslo Accords were explicitly based on a neo-liberal restructuring of Palestinian society, and the free market was supposed to bring peace and wealth to the Palestinian people. However, this has not happened, said Basil. Quite the opposite.

As a result of this colonisation, everything has been institutionalised and instrumentalised to fit the neo-liberal agenda. This wasn't just in the case of the universities but was also the case with the organisations that worked with cultural exchanges and art. Before, there had been direct collaborations between Palestinian and international artists but now all collaborations were mediated by the NGOs. This was also a part of the neo-liberal adjustment policies. A good example would be ArtSchool Palestine, which had invited me here. Basil said that when the NGOs mediate collaborations, everything becomes very depoliticised and superficial as these organisations are dependent on support from different international donors and try as much as possible to live up to the needs and wants of the international community. I agreed with Basil on this, but then, on the other hand, because of my visit here, I had met Ismail (amongst others)

and I found this relationship important and I would definitely keep in touch with him after I returned from the West Bank.

But, according to Basil, friendships were not enough. The only right way was to do something together, to realise something like a collective action or project. I tried to explain to him that I believed that my task was to observe and bring back to Europe and Copenhagen a witness's account of the situation in Palestine. From my perspective, it just wouldn't be possible as a visual artist to complete a project here in such a short stay as I just didn't know the conditions well enough. If I'd arrived here from Copenhagen with a finished concept of a project in my bag it would, apart from being superficial, probably be also patronising and colonising. There were many examples of Western artists that had come to Palestine with all their well meant intentions and humanist ideals: 'Now we will show you what you need'. That just wouldn't work. What I could do was to work in solidarity with the Palestinian cause in relation to my Danish friends and the Danish public sphere. I thought of myself a bit like a landscape painter who brings back the painting from 'out there' and says: 'Look, this is how it looks out there'. But Basil didn't believe in solidarity. He wanted more, and collective action was the only right thing for him. People had to be 100% on the Palestinian side or rather they should stay away. He told me about some English activists who had moved into a refugee camp in Nablus and who'd joined some of the militant groups there. They'd then been taken out of there by the Israelis and sent back home. For Basil, foreigners had to fight side-by-side with the Palestinians if it was to make a difference. This was also the case for artists, he said, who should join and work on equal terms with local artists.

I understood Basil's perspective but his lack of compromise would make it difficult for any foreigner to engage with the situation here because his demands would be impossible for most people to satisfy. He finished his rant against the international engagement in the Palestine conflict by comparing, without hesitation, the peace activists from ISM (International Solidarity Movement) with sex tourists. The international activists just came to get their adrenaline rush and then headed back home again, he said.

Submitted by JJ 16:50

2nd of July, 2008

Depression

Ismail pulled me aside the other day and with a certain seriousness told me that he had something to say to me. He carefully tried to tell me that all the interesting people that I'd met and the nice company that I'd experienced in the past few weeks were only the tip of the iceberg. According to Ismail, I'd met the most talented and well functioning young creative people one can meet here in Palestine. He was trying to explain to me that there was a lot more there as well. There were many who weren't so educated and didn't know anything at all. Although perhaps I'd got a positive impression of their lives here in Ramallah there was a lot that wasn't so positive. There was a paralysing feeling here. He mentioned some of the artists that I'd met and how, since arriving in Ramallah, they hadn't been able to do anything creative. Adel, for example, had been here for a year and he hadn't produced a single new piece in that period of time.

This was a common occurrence and in this way Ismail made it implicit that it wasn't all that great for himself either.

Ismail's hint really got me thinking. It had been clear since I arrived that Ramallah was a bubble. People had often commented on the hectic social and economic life here: "Ramallah is fake", "pseudo-Ramallah", etc. But it didn't take a psychoanalyst to figure out that people who are subject to such confinement and racism would necessarily experience a mental reaction to it, especially here on the West Bank where the confinement has a certain Kafka-esque quality to it. You never knew if you would be able to pass through the checkpoint or get a travel permit. It was completely unpredictable. The door was sometimes open but was at other times locked, an uncertainty that had the effect that you simply stopped trying to get out. The wall wasn't just around the West Bank but had moved into people's heads as well. This was the analogy that Basil had also used the night before. I remembered having once read a piece of research into the depression rate in the occupied territories and so I searched around on the net for a while until I found it again. The text spelt things out pretty clearly. According to this research from 2006, 75% of Palestinians in the occupied territories suffered serious depressions and only 9% felt satisfied with their lives here (http://www.imra.org.il/story.php3?id=31064). So all the partying might be to defy the Israeli occupation, but perhaps it was also to cover up the feelings of depression and paralysis that apparently was pretty much a general feeling here.

Submitted by JJ 10:27

3rd of July, 2008

Design by destruction

There was a very controversial visit to the Qattan Foundation on Thursday evening. The Israeli architect Eyal Weizman was to give a talk and present his theories about the Israeli army's use of architecture and planning as strategic weapons. I'd heard from many that the Qattan Foundation has a clause in its statutes that forbids Israelis from working at the Foundation and that in order for this talk to go ahead there had been some minor legal manoeuvres. Others said that there had been several talks by Israelis at the Qattan Foundation over the years. The main feeling was that as long as it was an individual and not an institutional collaboration then it wasn't a problem for Eyal Weizman to visit Al Qattan. Eyal Weizman usually works at Goldsmiths' College in London.

I'd read several of Eyal Weizman's texts and the way he described the Israeli army and the settler movement's spatial strategies for the preservation and expansion of the occupation was very thought provoking. As an Israeli academic, he'd been able to interview army war strategists and gotten access to documents and material from the army and the Israeli state which had revealed the thinking behind the Israeli domination and expansion. His analyses had been widely discussed at an international level over recent years. "Hollow Land", his fascinating book (http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9250.shtml), has particularly been the subject of attention. He is one of the few intellectuals who discuss what happens when creative spatial practices — for example, architecture — become part of a military conflict.

The presentation was an introduction to “Hollow Land” and he began very carefully and perhaps a little nervously. He is, of course, aware of his controversial role and especially that his theories are about the methods that the Israelis use for the control and oppression that were a daily reality for most of the people in the room. He put forward an initial provocative question: as an architect and planner, can you commit war crimes at the drawing table? He then explained how architects, in collaboration with the settlers and the Israeli army, have not only been an important part of the conflict but have actively been shaping and developing it.

He gave an example of one of the strategies that the Israeli settler movement uses to seize Palestinian land. Usually you have to establish a small point of access. It could be, for example, the construction of a new telecommunications antenna that will allegedly improve mobile phone coverage in the West Bank. According to the security obsessed Israelis, such an antenna would need protection and so a guard would move in next to the antenna. As there had already been water and electricity installed during the building of the antenna, you only needed to construct a shed for the guard. This was the first step in a process where gradually more and more sheds were built around the antenna and more and more people moved in. Pretty soon a new settlement had been established, although it could not so far be considered entirely legal. However, because the settlement existed and functioned it would be slowly normalised and finally acknowledged as an official settlement. The settler movement and the Israeli authorities deliberately use a diffuse strategy of stealth where one thing leads to another in such a way that more and more Palestinian land is seized. This happens even though the government’s official policy is

to initially distance itself from new settlements. It is in this process that architects and planners play an important role as they establish so-called 'facts on the ground' by building houses and infrastructure that concretely drive the seizure forward, despite official Israeli policy.

He spoke more about how in the Israeli architects' development of the occupying force's domination of Palestinian space, there was a narrow connection between destruction and construction. In this context, he introduced 'Walking through Walls' which clearly is the theme that interests and fascinates him the most: How the city space is deconstructed by the Israeli army in relation to urban warfare. He described how in urban warfare the Israeli army uses what they call 'inverted geometry' and consistently avoids using normal streets and passageways during the invasion of an area. For example, in the attack on Jenin in 2002, they used the method of creating entirely new routes through the buildings by blowing their way through the walls of the houses. In this way the soldiers could advance through the city by moving through private homes. Through planning and destruction, the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) brought into being a new geometry in Jenin and thus avoided being caught in an ambush in the narrow streets of the refugee camp. In this way, during the attack, the Israelis created their own space for manoeuvre and, according to Weizman's analysis, kept the element of surprise on their side (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0507/weizman/en/print). He showed a few images and video clips that explicitly illustrated the army's methods: images of large holes blown through the walls of people's private homes and maps of the army's advances into Nablus and Jenin that entirely avoided the streets of the city.

Although he continuously stressed that these methods were brutal and murderous, there also seemed to be a sneaking fascination with the Israeli army's methods. To me this gave the impression that he was sometimes making the IDF out to be more intelligent than it actually is. According to Weizman, the think tanks of the army read French post-structuralist philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Guy Debord, as well as all kinds of other radical and critical literature. The Israeli army was made out to be almost all-mighty, which, in fact, in everyday life on the West Bank it is. But it was also presented as intellectually invincible. It's debatable how sophisticated the Israeli army actually was in Jenin in 2002, where they indiscriminately bulldozed large areas of the camp in order to stop the Palestinian resistance. There wasn't much 'inverted geometry' about that.

Once the discussion started there were a lot of polite academic and clarifying questions but then, surprisingly, there wasn't a single critical question. I couldn't help but ask where this outlining of the occupying force's perspective leaves the perspective of the occupied? Was this yet another reproduction of what happens all too often in this conflict in that you only hear the voice of the Israeli? Where are the people being objects of these strategies, and where are the counter strategies? He replied that, he wouldn't be capable of putting forward the Palestinian perspective. As a Palestinian architect, Yazid spoke up and gave a good answer when he said that it was now up to the Palestinians to put Eyal Weizman's research to their own benefit. The information that Weizman had gained access to would never have been accessible to a Palestinian researcher, and so in this way these analyses were also important to the Palestinians. In Weizman's account, the Palestinians are simply

described as pawns in a very intelligent and brutal game that's entirely defined by the Israelis. It will be interesting to hear the response from their side.

Submitted by JJ 23:23

3rd of July, 2008

Decolonizing Architecture

Later in the evening several people who were in the audience for Weizman's lecture met down at the Café Pronto. I happened to sit in front of Alessandro, who I'd met the other day at the picnic out by Burham. Just like Weizman, he was an architect, and it turned out that he worked with an architectural practice in the occupied territories. Maybe it's possible that the work he does with the project Decolonizing Architecture (http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/?page_id=2) could be a Palestinian answer to Weizman's analyses. They even worked with him occasionally. It was fascinating to hear about their activities and their work was, in many senses, a good example of a counter-space to Israeli domination. Putting it briefly, Decolonizing Architecture deals with what Palestinians should do about Israeli settlements and military bases when they get vacated by the Israelis. There was no if, only a when, hence the name Decolonizing Architecture, and this despite the fact that it doesn't sound very likely that the occupation is going to end at any point in the near future. Clearing away the settlements isn't something that anyone dares think of. However, perhaps that's exactly why the projects of Decolonizing Architecture are interesting as they are working for the production of an offensive Palestinian imagination and are developing visions of a Palestinian

project entirely based on geographical self-determination. They don't dwell on the political deadlock but work productively to create a horizon of spatial strategies for the Palestinians, despite the restrictions that the occupation brings at present. Thus Decolonizing Architecture creates a possible and positive future that isn't often otherwise present in the Palestinian imagination.

In Decolonizing Architecture's architectural plans, they imagine concrete alternative uses for the settlements that rest on the hilltops of the Palestinian landscape like unconquerable fortresses. Working with various pilot projects, such as the settlement P'sagot by Ramallah, they specifically outline how the takeover would happen and how the settler architecture would be altered and transformed for the pleasure of future Palestinian inhabitants. Alessandro was very aware of the psychological aspects of such a process and that the anger and hate that most Palestinians feel towards the settlers should be a part of the picture. He didn't count on it being a problem-free process to take over the buildings and homes of the settlers as the Palestinians probably wouldn't just move in when the settlers had moved out. It wouldn't be that simple. There would need to be a phase where the settlement would be open to reappropriation. With this in mind, they work with a certain period of time allowed for vandalism and destruction as a form of ritual that marks the disappearance of the former colonialists. As most Israeli settlements are characterised by single family homes and have a very European suburban style to them, part of the process of further de-colonisation would be to change the living patterns by merging houses to create spaces for more varied lifestyles. They also suggest

creating various institutions — for example, preschools — by integrating three Israeli single family homes into one. They thus develop concrete architectural drawings that envisage a time after the Israeli colonisation. Alessandro emphasised that they didn't take a stance on *how* the occupation should end, but they deal specifically with what would happen *when* it was over.

Submitted by JJ 09:07

4th of July, 2008

Bil'in

Bil'in is a small village at the very edge of Ramallah on the western side, towards Israel and the so-called security barrier (http://www.bilin-village.org). For more than three years there have been demonstrations every Friday against the building of the Wall. At Bil'in, the Wall takes the form of a hi-tech fence. The fence cuts through the agricultural land of the village which means that the village has lost half of its land. To illustrate how short the distances are in Palestine/Israel: Bil'in is only 25 km from Tel Aviv and so every meter counts when it comes to the struggle over land. This is why the Israelis drew the fence by Bil'in three km from the Green Line (the ceasefire line of 1948), and thus inside the West Bank, in order to expand the land mass in connection to the settlement Modi'in Illit and the other settlements in the area. The Israelis claim that it's a matter of security, but even the Israeli High Court has ruled against the fence around Bil'in. The International Court in the Hague had already ruled in 2004 that 80% of the Wall that ran through the West Bank was illegal, a ruling which unsurprisingly is ignored by the

government in Jerusalem. So far the ruling of the Israeli High Court has not been recognised either.

Together with Lucia, a friend from Copenhagen who'd arrived in Ramallah on Wednesday, we decided to go to Bil'in to take part in the protests. Lucia and I have been to quite a few demonstrations in Copenhagen over the last few years so it was natural for us, if possible, to try and contribute in a practical way to the struggle for the Palestinian cause. Many of my friends here in Ramallah smiled a bit when I asked them about the demonstrations near Bil'in; they said that it had become quite a ritualised protest. In this way they were also implying that the demonstrations didn't do much to change anything. Anyhow, we wanted to go to see with our own eyes — both the demonstration as well as the conditions around the fence.

The demonstration was organised by a local committee in Bil'in but is also supported by an Israeli organisation called Anarchists against the Wall (http://www.awalls.org) as well as several international organisations. That's why it was a funny blend of local Palestinians, Israeli anarchists and international solidarity people who had gathered outside the local community centre when we arrived. We had to take a taxi to get out here and on the way the Palestinian taxi driver attempted to teach me several Arabic words and names of local villages. Arabic is spoken from a very different part of the mouth than Danish but at least the crash course produced a lot of laughter.

We were amongst a group of people who were at the demonstration for the first time and a kind of interim briefing, led by one of the Israeli activists, was organised. Amongst the first timers was a group of young Americans, apparently

'liberation theologists', and various other young people from the West. We were told about tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets but were told that we should just stay at the back if we didn't feel safe. Stun grenades are small grenades that create a very loud bang.

The protest started, as usual, after the Friday prayers and a large group of Palestinians emerged from the mosque and the demonstration was quickly formed with flags, songs and slogans. Although we were only about 150 people, one has to say that the Bil'in people could really get a demonstration going. People of all ages took part and the atmosphere was good and energetic with the protesters singing and dancing. We walked for about ten minutes, leaving the village and could then see the fence snaking through the landscape. Going through an olive grove we soon got all the way up to the fence. There were several layers of barbed wire and fencing but a breach had been made in the barbed wire beforehand so that we could get all the way to the first fence. As 'the internationals' are considered peace guards, the Palestinians started shouting 'internationals' and called the mixed group of liberation theologists, young students and uneasy Danes to the front of the fence. The idea was that the Israeli soldiers would probably hesitate before shooting at a European. I thought that moving into the space between the barbed wire and the high fence seemed a bit like going into a trap and so I stayed back for a bit with the core of Palestinian demonstrators. A group of Israeli soldiers in full riot gear arrived at the other side and positioned themselves coolly a few meters from the opposite side of the fence. The international demonstrators shouted straight at the soldiers and tried to ask them the question as to what they were there for. Then the stones started flying from the back from

small local kids who were using their David slings to shoot stones over the fence at the Israeli soldiers. Everything then went crazy with stun grenades going off and tear gas spreading. Many of the 'internationals' got caught in large clouds of tear gas between the fence and the barbed wire. After most of them had got away from the fence and the gas, a longer battle continued with the local kids and a few internationals who continued to pelt the Israeli soldiers with stones. This resulted in more tear gas and more grenades. Tear gas is never a pleasant thing and people were sitting spread around under the trees mending themselves with various remedies: onion, vinegar, etc. Lucia and I had bought a bottle of lemon juice that helped quite a lot. Unfortunately I didn't take any photos during the exchange because of the gas and also because my battery had ran out.

On the way home we discussed whether there was any point to those kinds of demonstrations. Although today's demonstration had had, as Lucia described it, a bit of Ghandi-style to it when we collectively approached the Israeli army in order to get beaten without really being able to defend ourselves, these kinds of disturbances nonetheless have an effect. On the one hand, the media were present, and on the other it might help by exhausting the Israeli soldiers in the long run. Perhaps there just needs to be more of these kinds of protests all along the Wall around the West Bank. The fence by Bil'in isn't legal according to either Israeli or international law, so something has to be done. Otherwise the village of Bil'in will die along with a whole row of other village communities whose livelihoods have been indiscriminately hit by the Wall.

Submitted by JJ 09:16

5th of July, 2008

Jerusalem Studies

On Saturday morning, the Centre for Jerusalem Studies (http://www.jerusalem-studies.alquds.edu), in collaboration with the UN organisation OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), had organised a bus tour around Jerusalem called 'The Annexation Wall in and around Jerusalem'. A Palestinian friend in Copenhagen had sent me an email about the tour and Samar had made sure that we'd got a place on the bus, some of the last available. Samar knew Hudda who was one of the organisers from the Centre for Jerusalem Studies and the University in Abu Dis.

The tour would start out from OCHA and everyone who was taking part in the tour gathered together in a meeting room there where Jeff, a very British man, began to describe at length the legal and geographical conditions around the Wall. As a representative of the UN he was very careful about the way he spoke about things. He also didn't allow anyone to videotape his presentation. OCHA's main task is to map out the conditions as they are, the 'facts on the ground' as they call it here. The organisation had a large amount of very detailed maps of the course of the Wall, checkpoints, closed zones, sectioned roads, settlements, etc. Everything was very objective but it was also very, very depressing to see it all laid out across a map. He described how the international community sees the conditions in Israel/Palestine and made it clear that the part of the Wall that is running through the West Bank is illegal under international law. If Israel had decided to erect the Wall on its own territory or on the Green line, it would be legal. The problem was that only

20% of the Wall was on the Green Line and the rest lay deep inside the occupied territories. Jeff then made it clear that permanent settlements in the occupied territories are illegal unless they have a security function; housing for soldiers or security personal would make them legal. The annexing of East Jerusalem in 1980 and the merging of East and West Jerusalem in one large municipality isn't recognised by the international community who take the Green Line to be the legitimate border. In this way, he calmly recounted the series of breaches to international law that the Israeli state is guilty of. He was very civil servant-like and wouldn't comment on questions of a more political nature. For example, one of the participants asked how, on the one hand, the international community does not recognise the settlements even though many of them were financed by the US. He shook his head to express that he knew very well that this was the case and said that he only worked with the 'facts on the ground' and couldn't comment on political issues.

After the more general historical introduction from 1948 forward, Jeff then went through the course of the Wall around East Jerusalem. The map he took us through can be downloaded from OCHA's website (http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/EastJerusalem_closure_March07.pdf). The Wall in East Jerusalem initially follows the border that Israel drew up in 1980 when they annexed Jerusalem's Old City and a large area east of the city. Changes have been made to the annexed area in connection with the construction of the Wall as the construction was initiated in 2002. As a result of the Wall, areas with a majority of Palestinians living in them have now been excluded from the city and been made into part of the West Bank. Amongst other places, this includes

the Shufat Refugee Camp that used to be a part of East Jerusalem but now, with the erection of the Wall, lies as a pocket cut out of the Jerusalem municipality. At the same time it's planned that the Wall will cordon off a large area far east of Jerusalem that's more than half way to Jericho and the Dead Sea. This vast area is called E1 and there is already a large settlement there, Ma'n Adumim. However, international pressure against Israel has meant that they are still hesitant to expand the settlement further and so a large area inside the Wall now lies empty awaiting future Israeli development. Jeff told us, though, that a rich American Jew had just bought and built a large police station 'in the middle of nowhere' with a large four lane access road. You can ask yourself, then, what that might be the beginning of, Jeff said rhetorically. E1 literally divides the West Bank into a North and a South. The Wall around this area is not yet finished and is still being built.

As the Wall snakes and twists and turns its way up and down, in and out in order to exclude Palestinian towns and include Israeli settlements, it's clear that a very complicated map is being drawn around Jerusalem. This means that several Palestinian villages north of Jerusalem have been entirely enclosed and surrounded by the Wall. When this happens, the Israelis build the so-called 'fabric of life' roads that are fenced on both sides or are in tunnels leading through areas controlled by the Israelis in order to connect the secluded Palestinian areas to the rest of the West Bank. This means that although these villages are only a few kilometres from Jerusalem the population has no access to the holy city with its religious monuments and have to travel all the way to Ramallah if they want, for example, to go to the cinema or

to buy necessities. At the same time, this seclusion leads to the killing of agriculture and business life in these areas and makes life in these villages generally more and more unbearable for the inhabitants. In addition to this, the Israelis can close off the thoroughfares whenever they feel like it. Jeff described a future scenario where the border that the Wall defines becomes the national border of Israel — something which would also, of course, be a breach of international law. In this way, the Palestinian populations who live in Jerusalem and have Jerusalem ID but who have been cut off by the Wall will probably be forced to choose to either move across the Wall or lose their Jerusalem ID. This is probably what will happen to the people who live, for example, in the Shufat camp.

People who live outside of the Wall on the West Bank don't even have access to Jerusalem unless they can gain permission from the Israeli officials. This has a wide effect and Jeff explained how the Wall was precisely placed in a way that East Jerusalem's six hospitals lay on the Israeli side of the Wall. In this way, if you live outside of the Wall and need medical attention, you first have to gain permission from the military before you can get treated. This makes it very difficult, especially in acute cases. For example, Samira, who I had visited in Bethlehem some weeks ago, told me about the day when her father had had a stroke and how she'd called for an ambulance that had to then wait on the other side of the checkpoint. She had driven him in her car and sped through the checkpoint and up to the ambulance herself. She said that the only reason the soldiers hadn't opened fire at her was because she was a woman and had been screaming out of the car window. Her father had survived the stroke but there were many more tragic stories where

Palestinians have died at checkpoints. Between September 2000 and October 2004, 61 women were forced to give birth at checkpoints and 36 of those births had been stillborn; statistics such as these put the Palestinian condition in perspective. Jeff was a man of facts and simply stated that one needs a permit if one wants to go to the hospital.

Outside there was a bus waiting for us. Here Hudda from Jerusalem Studies took over. Hudda is Palestinian and didn't need to restrict herself when describing the situation and she didn't hold back when voicing her observations. She started by explaining that the Wall has been given many names but she prefers to call it the Annexation Wall because that is exactly what the Wall is doing: it is encircling and annexing Palestinian land. To start with we drove to the Shufat Refugee Camp. We could see it from a high point on the Israeli side of the Wall where we had stopped. The Wall ran in a nice curve around a densely populated area with small square houses in many layers on top of each other. The camp has been there since the beginning of the 1950s and consists of brick houses. The roads in the camp were mainly gravel. On the other side of the Wall, we could see the settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev, located high above, with nice new asphalt roads and neatly planned buildings. Jeff said that the inhabitants of the two areas, Shufat and Pisgat Ze'ev, paid the same amount of council taxes but that in the settlement there were several public facilities you wouldn't find in the refugee camp, such as preschools for example. There was no secondary school in the camp either which was why many of the school children had to pass through the checkpoint to go to school every morning. Often the Israelis closed the checkpoint and so there wouldn't be any school on that day. In a similar manner, he sketched out a whole

series of differences concerning health and infrastructure in the living conditions between the refugee camp and the settlement — and there was big gap between the quality of life in the camp and in the settlement, even though, on paper, both were a part of the same municipality.

The tour ended near the August Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives from where we had an incredible view over East Jerusalem and could see all the way to the Dead Sea in the East. From here we could also see the extensive E1 area that is being surrounded by the Wall. As was customary amongst the Palestinians, lots of delicious food suddenly appeared: humus, pita bread, cheese, tomato salad and fresh fruit. Jeff, at a small distance from this abundance, continued explaining to a small group of people some more about 'the facts on the ground'. Amongst other things, he

talked about the Palestinian villages that had been squeezed between the Green Line and the Wall up north where the inhabitants were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Submitted by JJ 10:57

7th of July, 2008

Al Mahatta

The areas in which Palestinians are self-governed are geographically very limited. Since the Oslo Accords gained momentum in the mid-1990s, there have been many forces working on building the outline of a would-be Palestinian state with an infrastructure and all the institutions that characterise a nation state. The limited geographical areas and the self-government that the Oslo Accords granted to the Palestinians began this process of state building. The Palestinian people have, as far as is known, never had a state and have historically lived under various forms of colonial rule. Nonetheless they have always been a people who have been able to survive and create their own structures and societies despite the lack of independence. It is my clear impression that the Oslo Accords initially sparked a booming optimism and engagement from the Palestinian people and that many Palestinians who had been living in exile had returned in order, with local people, to build the Palestinian state together. In the 1990s, Samar worked for the newly established Ministry of Culture and said that it had been a very intense time where she had entirely dedicated herself to creating the foundations of an independent Palestinian cultural policy. However, now, more than ten years after the Oslo Accords, the optimism has entirely disappeared and the

faith in the various state institutions had withered away. This is most probably the result of the persistent targeting by Israel of the Palestinian infrastructure and the destruction of most civil institutions during the second Intifada of 2002-05. At the same time, the corruption and incompetence that began to characterise the Palestinian authorities has also played its part in dampening the optimism and trust. The international community has persistently been very keen on the continued support of Palestinian institutions, within the cultural sector also. Many of the cultural events in Ramallah, for example, are organised and sponsored by the German cultural centre, the Goethe Institute, or the French Cultural Centre which command an entire building in the city and continuously organise events while flying the Tricolour. Similarly, as I mentioned before, the newly opened Art Academy is part of the Art Academy in Oslo, Norway. There are very few events or projects that are not in some way or another in collaboration with foreign NGOs or state departments. Just as there is a mistrust of Palestinian official institutions, there is also strong local scepticism of the invasion of the international NGOs which affect and direct the cultural life here in many ways. It is my impression that there isn't much going on, at least in the cultural sphere, which is truly independent and locally controlled.

One exception is the Al Mahatta gallery in the centre of Ramallah, which is an artist-run gallery that has some very nice spaces. They have refurbished the spaces themselves and pay rent from their own pockets. This evening there was an opening for a large group show of work by local artists. It was a comprehensive exhibition with visual artists from many different generations. Amongst the exhibited artists was Vera Tamari (http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/media/

index-m?query=vera&search=1&view=Photos) and Sliman Mansour (http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/media/index-m?query=mud&search=1) who are probably the most established Palestinian artists from the older generation. Many of the very young Palestinian artists were showing along side them. The six artists that run the Al Mahatta gallery were also in the show. They are mostly painters and the exhibition was mainly made up of paintings with a few photographs and videos here and there. It was very interesting to get a snapshot of Palestinian visual art and I went through the show with Nicola who knew many of the artists personally.

Stylistically, the paintings were mostly abstract, with a focus on colour, and most had a very Modernist approach as far as I could understand. There were, of course, many different themes that were touched upon, although it was interesting to consider why so many Palestinian visual artists command a Modernist and Western visual language. Nicola recounted that up until now there had been very limited art education in the West Bank, the Art Academy being only a year old, so much of the artistic inspiration came from various private schools. Among others there was a rather traditional visual art school in Nablus that had exerted a certain influence. Nicola has worked for the journal Third Text in London that deals with post-colonial critique and culture and she said that there was a similar Western Modernist influence, for example, in India. I found the exhibition very interesting and sincerely liked the honesty and deeply felt quality of the images, especially with Nicola's introduction to the background of the artists. One of the paintings was by an artist that lives in Gaza who was only able to send his picture as he couldn't leave Gaza himself. His painting was of small abstract matchstick people caught in small cell-like boxes. The fact that the

exhibition and the gallery was organised and run by the local artists themselves was uplifting and portrayed a different image of the Palestinian art scene than the one international exhibition organisers would generally highlight.

Submitted by JJ 12:54

8th of July, 2008

Hebron

Mohanad, Yazan and some of the people from Idioms Film (http://www.idiomsfilm.com) had been involved in making a book about the old market in Hebron. The market is locally called the souk. The book, published in connection with a comprehensive restoration project of the old souk, was large and full of beautiful images; the photographs they'd taken for the publication were quite delicate and atmospheric, somehow detached from the reality of the place. Hebron is one of the oldest cities in the world: its history reaches back at least 7,500 years. Mohanad had organised a collective journey to Hebron, a convoy as he called it, and all the friends from Ramallah were coming along for the book's launch reception.

As with most other projects here, the restoration project is happening in collaboration with a Western aid organisation, this time from Spain. Parts of the old city of Hebron suffer from occupation by the Israeli army as there are some small settlements in the very centre of the city that have to be protected. This continuing occupation has made it difficult for the shop owners to sustain their shops in the souk as there are frequently imposed curfews and the shops are forced to close. At the same time, the atmosphere isn't

very joyful and the constant tensions between the settlers and the Palestinians have meant that the shops in the old city are slowly and quietly closing down. Many shops today stand empty and sealed up. The restoration project is an attempt by the city to change this situation and reinvigorate the souk despite the Israeli occupation.

Lucia and I went ahead of the 'convoy' on the bus to get a closer look at Hebron. We'd heard many terrible stories of the conditions there and an activist had given me a little stack of black books with the title 'Breaking the Silence' in which Israeli soldiers tell their stories from Hebron (http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il). These stories are personal tales of everyday life as a draftee caught in a low key urban war. Life as a soldier in Hebron is characterised by constant and draining conflicts between Zionist settlers and the local Palestinians. This kind of daily life full of brutality and pointlessness is played out during the endless guard shifts at Hebron's checkpoints, where the effects are often that many of the soldiers lose the ability for human compassion and understanding. In the little black books, soldier after soldier recalls the daily abuse of civil Palestinians and how the brutality slowly becomes normalised in their heads and even becomes insignificant after a while. These are sad stories by soldiers who have chosen to speak out and tell how for years they have been caught up in a meaningless war between 500 fanatic settlers and the 150,000 Palestinian inhabitants of Hebron. So we entered the city with a certain amount of unease.

We didn't have a real map of the city so we walked around a bit looking for the souk. However, we did have one of OCHA's maps of the checkpoints and the closed areas of the old city

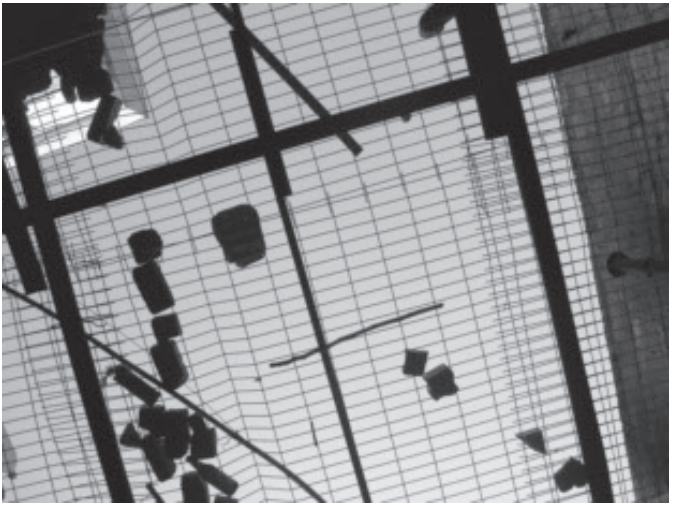
but we couldn't really figure out where we were on that map. The bus driver had just let us off with the word 'Al-Hareem', which is the name of the souk. We clearly weren't there yet as we were in a lively, newer shopping area where cars, pedestrians, shoppers and bulging goods together created an integrated chaotic whole. It was incredibly and fantastically overwhelming; chaos in all frequencies and dimensions. I knew that the souk was in an area partially controlled by the Israeli army, so we walked in the direction of a checkpoint that entirely blocked access to a road. The souk must be somewhere in that direction. We walked through the metal detector which made a sound and an Israeli soldier stuck out his head and asked where we were from. Copenhagen, we replied. They didn't search our bags. Suddenly we were in an entirely different universe; all the shops were sealed up and there were no humans and no chaos, just a dead street with an atmosphere that was film-like and strangely eerie. It was a sharp contrast to what we'd just experienced on the other side of the checkpoint. We walked carefully down the crooked, depopulated street full of closed shops before a newer sandstone building appeared at the end. It was obviously part of the settlement but according to the map the street we were on was a shared one and not one restricted for Palestinians, so we continued even though it was clear that something wasn't quite right. When we got closer to the building, a heavily armed soldier came to meet us and asked in a quiet voice: 'Are you Jews?' We replied 'No', after which he said that we'd better head down a small path that led away from the street and further up into the city.

We walked in a soft curve around and high above the settlement and through an area where buildings were interspersed with small areas that contained olive trees. Slightly further

along it was possible for us to get back down to the city again by going through more almost empty streets. Some Palestinian children came over and asked if we wanted some coffee, which is how people are welcomed here. We weren't sure if they thought we were tourists or settlers and when we walked away they started to throw small stones at us. We walked through an empty checkpoint and entered another part of the city. Again, it was characterised by empty streets with heavy military positions here and there. The only life we saw in the area was two young people who we approached to ask for directions. We asked them how to get to the souk and the girl answered in an American accent: 'The souk — Jews used to live everywhere there but not anymore'. It then became clear that we were speaking with two young people from the settlement and their answer was pointing in an entirely different direction than our original,

very specific question. The eerie filmic atmosphere now turned into a psycho-horror genre. A heavily armed guard approached us, supposedly to help us. We asked him about the souk and he looked down the empty streets and, concluding that there wasn't any danger, pointed us in the right direction. We walked down the street he'd pointed out which was lined with closed shops on which the Star of David had been painted. This succeeded in adding to the already very disturbing atmosphere. My guess would be that it's the settlers that have painted the stars to claim the shops that probably were Palestinian-owned. A strange reversal of the use of the Star of David. We then got to another small square which was again full of military positions and heavily-armed vehicles and soldiers. A few Palestinians with their shopping bags on their way home passed us by. They didn't look at us at all and kept their eyes on the ground.

On the little square, there was what could only have been a settler café. There were large speakers on the roof blasting out Israeli pop music across the Palestinian neighbourhood. The music blared through the empty streets reminiscent of the 'Doomsday Now' atmosphere. The Palestinians probably sat in their houses and couldn't do much about it. We had now reached the Cave of the Patriarchs that is a sacred place for the Jews and provides the justification for the presence of the settlers here. It was a large old building and the back of the Ibrahim Mosque is on the other side. What on one side was a Jewish shrine was, on the other, an Islamic mosque. We moved quite quickly to get out of this tense and extremely depressing place, walking further up into the city and asking an Arabic woman for directions. She just shooed us away, however, and her children stuck their tongues out at us. Eventually after a long walk all the way out to one



of the newly built settlements on the edge of the old city, an older gentleman helped us to get out of the settlement zone. He found a bus for us so we could go back to our starting point in the heart of Palestinian Hebron.

It was a relief to get back to the Palestinian chaos and now we finally found the souk. It turned out that we'd taken the wrong street at a Y-junction. Now we were walking down a busy shopping street with stalls as far as the eye could reach. However, the stalls were closing down as it was now quite late in the afternoon. As the settlements in some areas lie further up than the souk, it had been necessary to put up a steel net over some of the shopping streets as the settlers apparently had the habit of throwing garbage, stones and used diapers down on the Palestinians. The steel net catches the rubbish and you could see all this stuff sitting

on the net above the narrow streets of the souk. Being in Hebron was the most depressing and troubled experience I have had in a very long time.

Mohanad called and said that they had finally arrived; we just had to find the town hall. We got a taxi and called Yazan who explained to the driver in Arabic where we wanted to go. When we got to the town hall there were a lot of speeches and ceremonies going on. The mayor and his followers were present and also representatives of the Spanish government who were here on a visit, and so there were many handshakes and canapés. Yazan, Reem, Mohanad and Sami were sweating slightly as they had been stuck inside their car at the Hebron checkpoint for one and a half hours under the baking sun. The soldiers had simply taken their IDs and forbidden them to get out of the car. Mohanad explained that they'd sat there for 90 minutes after which their IDs had then been returned to them through the window without even an apology, as he said.

The book was really beautiful and full of great pictures of the part of Hebron's old city that had already been restored. Old baths and very beautifully shaped Arabic houses with softly curved rooftops. But no traces of the steel nets and the check points in the pictures. Our team wanted to get to Bethlehem as quickly as possible before the reception had ended because Hebron was mainly Muslim and the bars don't serve beer whereas Bethlehem is Christian. After a long journey through the dark and a very hilly Palestine, we found a bar in Bethlehem right next to the Church of the Nativity and got a handful of Taybeh beers and some food.

Submitted by JJ 15:46

9th of July, 2008

The Jerusalem Show

Today I was going to meet the newly-arrived German artist Pola for the first time. She'd also been invited by Samar and ArtSchool Palestine for a residency in Ramallah and she was going to stay there for six weeks like me. Today, we were planning to go together to the opening of the Jerusalem Show, a very ambitious international art exhibition that was taking place in the Old City of Jerusalem, organised by the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem (http://www.almamalfoundation.org/index.php?action=events&type=9). Finally, here was a Palestinian cultural event that would take place in the streets of Jerusalem. Emily had been invited to contribute and I'd been following for a while the development of her project for the show. She was the American/Palestinian visual artist who I'd earlier met at the picnic near Burham. She also teaches at the Academy in Ramallah and is a strong and analytical artist, mainly working with historical and cultural issues relating to her Palestinian background. She also has quite a significant international career that includes, amongst other things, a show at the Venice Biennale (http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2007/emily_jacir). She wanted to install loudspeakers by the Damascus Gate to play the traditional Palestinian taxi service calls: "Ramallah, Ramallah, Ramallah" — "Nablus, Damascus" — "Nablus, Beirut" — "Baghdad, Baghdad". These old calls could have once been heard around the Damascus Gate but not any longer. Due to the Israeli occupation and the imposed restrictions of movement for the people of Jerusalem and on the West Bank, the calls have long since been silenced. For her sound piece, she

had gotten taxi drivers from Ramallah and Jericho to shout the calls, which they still do within the limited geography of the West Bank. What was special was that she'd got the drivers to make the almost illegal calls involving cities outside of the West Bank. She told me that the drivers were very worried about calling out, for example, "Damascus, Damascus", as they sensed a latent crime in simply imagining the larger space and the extensive geography that the occupation had stolen from them.

Emily had made a test with the loudspeakers yesterday. She was very excited by all the reactions on the street, especially when she saw older people's faces light up with recognition of the long lost calls. The tourists hadn't reacted at all in the chaos around the Damascus Gate, and it was mainly older Palestinians that had noticed the voices from the loudspeakers. However, the Israeli police had also noticed the commotion and the voices and had immediately interfered and forbidden any further broadcasting of the taxi calls. Emily figured that it might be possible to place the loudspeakers in a café across from the Damascus Gate. No attempt had been made, apparently, at getting permission, which probably would have been pretty difficult anyway.

I had organised to meet with Pola at Café Pronto so we could go to Jerusalem together. When I arrived, Reem and Inas were already at one of the tables having a good time over a glass of wine. Like so many other local people, they could not come along to the reception in Jerusalem as they both had West Bank IDs, which meant that they could not enter Jerusalem. So the altered geography that Emily's piece was focusing on was having a concrete effect on the exhibition itself. Inas was actually taking part in the exhibition with a

series of paintings but she hadn't been present during the hanging and now couldn't be at the opening either. This situation was of course distressing and difficult to understand and accept, but Inas and Reem sat in the café joking about what they could do to get over the Wall and into Jerusalem. I offered to help but they needed a car driven by a foreigner, and preferably a female as men always attracted more attention from the soldiers at the checkpoints. They were not quite sure whether they actually dared to try and it seemed more likely a joke. Then, however, Reem called Maurizio, a visiting Mexican artist, who might be able to help with a ride. They would try and drive through one of the settler checkpoints and hope that the soldiers would just wave them through without checking their ID. If they were asked anything, Reem and Inas would say that they were American and had left their passports at the hotel in Ramallah and hope that they would be allowed to turn around. When I left them, I wasn't sure if they were going to try it but I said that I hoped to see them at the opening anyway. Ramallah is almost like a suburb to Jerusalem, but when you think of the single gigantic military machine that's in place between here and there, Jerusalem feels very far away.

Jerusalem, here we come

We met Emily at the bus station and took the number 18 bus towards Qualandya and the checkpoint there. A single ticket cost us 6.20 shekels (a little less than one British pound). Alongside us was Ara, a local filmmaker who was just finishing a film project which was premiering quite soon. It was a comedy about Hamas, he told me; a short-film about a politician without opinions who had been voted in to Parliament to represent Hamas. It sounded like an entertaining film.

Ara, like so many Palestinians, didn't have much faith in the current political system in Palestine and was a proponent of the so called one-state solution. The one-state solution is probably the fairest solution to the occupation and the racist division between Palestinians and Jews, something which would not disappear with the two-state solution idea that the PA, Israel and the international community is working so hard for. The one-state solution implies that all of Israel and the occupied territories are turned into a single democratic area where all inhabitants — Jews, Muslims, Christians, etc. — would have the right to vote for a common, democratically elected parliament. In this way, Palestinians and Jews would have pretty much the same number of votes and they would gain a plural and multi-ethnic state. Ara didn't think that the Israelis were ready for such a solution yet because they still felt superior to the Palestinians, and the Palestinians perhaps still have too much hatred to accept such a solution. However, no-one on either side of the Wall could live with the Wall and such a militarised daily life in the long term. Ara didn't reckon that any of the official representatives from the two sides would support such a solution at present. The pressure would have to come from the bottom up if it was to be made a reality. He felt that the Wall had moved in to the heads of the Palestinians and that they were now contributing to sustaining the Israeli occupation. The idea that the Wall had moved in to the heads of the Palestinians was not a new expression to me. I'd heard this previously during several discussions, but it was a clear image of the psychological effects of being under occupation. Ara was a very intense person and was gesticulating eagerly during our conversation as we bounced along the road in the number 18 bus towards Jerusalem.

When we reached the Al-Ma'mal Foundation's exhibition spaces, just inside the New Gate in the Old City, there was already a crowd and the space was packed with people from all over the world. This was where the tour to all the art projects in would begin, as the art projects of the show were situated in various places in the Old City. The tour was exciting because I still hadn't had the chance to explore the Old City closely and this was a great opportunity. It was also incredible to walk about in the labyrinth-like, twilight-lit city when most of the shops were closed and the usual bustle that characterises the daytime in the Old City had almost vanished. Jerusalem's Old City is large and very confusing with lots of small passageways and you quickly lose your bearings in the narrow alleys. For me though, what really made it more special was to suddenly see Reem and Inas appear amongst the exhibition guests. They'd made it! They had got through with Maurizio. Reem was very excited and had a feeling of having achieved something really great. Usually these kinds of plans remain on the level of a casual joke but this time they'd actually done it and Inas had made it to her own opening. To me the exhibition was less interesting, although I did like Emily's taxi calls that played only during the opening from a café just inside the Damascus Gate. The next day the sound system was dismantled.

Submitted by JJ 12:53

11th of July, 2008

Learned Helplessness

Yazid sent me a text and asked if we should meet around 3'ish. I suggested driving out of the city a bit to get some

fresh air, and Yazid agreed that this was a good idea. The problem with Ramallah, however, is that there just isn't much space outside the city and so we ended up at SnowBar, which, because of its pine grove, seems kind of country-like even though it's in the centre of Ramallah. It was nice to sit outside, though, as the day was really hot. As I mentioned before, Yazid is an architect and works at the architecture faculty at Birzeit University. Emily had also joined us.

We found a place in the shade and Yazid started to talk about the concept of 'Learned Helplessness'. Learned Helplessness is a term taken from behavioural psychology that the Israeli army has initiated research into at the University in Haifa. The researchers there do tests on mice in order to investigate how to induce a sense of helplessness by using a continuously changing environment. In their laboratory, the researchers constructed a labyrinth with two main stations: one for the mouse's nest and the other for food. In between these are a series of different passages and doors that can be opened and closed by the scientists. The mouse gets fed at certain times and in the beginning has no problems passing through the labyrinth and finding its food by trying different routes and eventually smelling its way to its meal. After this first try, the route was altered and made increasingly complicated so the mouse had to use more and more energy in order to find its food. This unpredictable environment exhausted the mouse over time and had the effect that eventually the mouse gives up trying to find the food altogether, even when the researchers opened all the doors and made the path entirely open to the mouse. In the end, the mouse died of hunger even though it could have found the food with no problems if it had only tried. In this way the researchers in Haifa had found spatial strategies that would induce helplessness.

The parallels between these methods and the strategies that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) uses in the West Bank hardly needed to be pointed out and we discussed what strategies could be used to counteract the widespread 'learned helplessness' amongst the Palestinians. Emily said that it was exactly for this reason that people who can travel need to continue travelling around the West Bank and to Jerusalem. There wasn't much else you could do, although it can also seem pretty insensitive to go to an art reception in Jerusalem with half of one's friends whilst the other half have to stay at home. If we all stayed in Ramallah though, she insisted, we would be doing exactly what the Israelis want us to do. Our discussion spurred Yazid to consider doing a project around the theme of 'learned helplessness' and to maybe produce a book inviting Palestinian artists and intellectuals to reflect on the subject. We would all very much like to see such a book project become a reality. Yazid finished by saying that this was exactly the kind of collaboration that goes on between the Israeli universities and the military, and for this reason people should continue boycotting Israeli institutions as they very much assist in maintaining the occupation.

Submitted by JJ 22:18

12th of July, 2008

A settler in the desert

Maurizio, the Mexican visual artist who I'd met the other day, called me up out of the blue and said that he was going to the Dead Sea this morning and if I wanted to come then I should meet him downtown in 30 minutes. I'd been asked

before if I wanted to go but had shelved the idea as I was afraid that it would turn into a quite an uncomfortable day, a bit like being baked in a hot oven. Now that Maurizio had called me up I thought, why not? We were also meeting a Norwegian guy, Henrik, who had been involved in establishing the art academy here in Ramallah. I phoned Pola and she wanted to come as well. It was a journey only for people with foreign passports, and so now we were four people in the car. Palestinians don't have any access to the Dead Sea even though it's in the very heart of the occupied territories and you can actually see the Dead Sea from the higher areas of Ramallah. That's just the way it is. Maurizio had borrowed Khaled's car, which had Jerusalem number plates, so we were set for a day on the beach. We drove through the incredibly beautiful desert landscape east of Jerusalem, with its tall white hilltops and very primitive Bedouin villages scattered here and there. Ramallah lies some 1000 meters above sea level, so it was a long drive downhill to the Dead Sea which is about 500 meters below sea level. It is the lowest land in the world. That's crazy to think about. Along the road there were signs informing us that now we were at sea level, now 200 below sea level, now 400 below, etc. Then the entire Jordan valley opened in front of us and we could see Jericho and the mountains in Jordan on the other side. We drove through two checkpoints and took the exit by the first beach resort we came to.

Everything was very Israeli, with light blue and white flags everywhere. We had to climb down several sets of stairs to get down to the beach where there were some large tents without sides to provide shade. As the temperature was probably above 40 Celsius, sitting under such a baking sun

would have been a sure-fire death. The sand was so hot that it was a question of sprinting to the water in order to swim. I had also left my sandals at home. Henrik told me that it was dangerous to get the salt water into your eyes, ears, nose and mouth. If this happened I had to hurry up to the shower and rinse it all out. The water was so salty that it felt like acid when it got up your nose. It was a unique experience to swim in such salty water. It was simply impossible to sink and it was a struggle to keep your feet on the bottom so I was quickly lying on my back on the surface of the water enjoying the incredibly beautiful landscape that was visible on the other side of the Dead Sea. The mountains rose sharply here and rested majestically, visible through the hot haze, with small villages dotted here and there on the mountainside.

The next step when bathing in the Dead Sea is mud. In some places the beach floor is soft and velvety. This is where you can find the black mud that is supposed to be so healthy for the skin. It's quite a crazy sight to see all the beach goers smearing themselves with black mud. Apart from there being something primal about covering oneself in mud, there is also something slightly autoerotic with all the smearing of your own body. You end up entirely black from the mud. When all the skin is covered up you have to wait for the mud to dry into a dry hard shell. I had got quite a lot of mud in my hair which quickly turned into a kind of crash helmet on my head. The great cleansing effect of the mud is only felt once you've rinsed it all off. Your skin becomes soft like a baby. Later, I also become red like a baby after daring to be in the sun for 10 minutes.

When we returned to the car after a few hours on the beach, the car was so hot that it was impossible to get into it.

Maurizio had to use a towel to cover the steering wheel in order to use it and sweat was dripping off all of us. We drove back up through the desert but the car started to cough when the hills got steeper. Finally, when we reached the top of a hill, it just gave up entirely. Here we were, stuck in the middle of the desert on a heavily trafficked road. What the hell were we going to do? None of us knew much about cars but we managed to open the motor hood and tried to pour water on the cooler. It swallowed one litre after another until we finally didn't have any left, which isn't exactly that great when you're stuck in the middle of a desert.

However, people started to stop. Firstly, a large American Chevrolet boxcar stopped; the driver came out with a container of water and poured about four more litres on the cooler without it looking any fuller. The Chevrolet had a large

sticker on the back with a big Israeli flag, so we knew that we were dealing with a real life Israeli. Other cars stopped to give us water, too, but our guy with the Israeli flag was persistent and tried all kinds of things to get the car started without any success. He didn't know a word of English so everything happened through using sign language. Once he'd concluded that the car was dead, he took out a rope from his big vehicle and tied the two cars together. We were invited into the Chevrolet while Maurizio would steer the shipwrecked car; and, as far as we understood, he was going to tow it to the nearest gas station. We were all very thankful and did all we could to express that, but it was also a bit strange to be helped by an Israeli who was so obviously waving the Israeli flag. We didn't tell him that we were going to Ramallah and just said we were going to Jerusalem instead. For many Israelis, Ramallah equals war and shootings so we didn't want to tempt fate. We didn't discuss it between ourselves so it was obviously a common feeling amongst us.

When we got to the gas station, it turned out that the guy was himself a mechanic and he called a friend who could speak English. He wanted to fix the car at his shop in Ma'ale Adumim which is one of the mega-settlements just outside Jerusalem. Khaled would never be able to pick up his car from there. We just stood there looking at each other for a while and at the 'This Week in Palestine' journal that was lying in the back window of the car. All the while a camel was standing high above on a hill behind us, munching slowly. We finally decided to give the man our keys so he could pick it up the next day and take it to his body shop. He wrote on a note that it would costs 1,900 shekels (about 300 British

pounds) to repair it. We would just have to talk to Khaled about what to do. Right then, we were in a gas station in the middle of the desert and didn't have many other options. We got the phone number from the settler and he offered to drive us to Jerusalem, which was great. He sped down the road and just said 'Shalom' at the checkpoint without stopping (something I had never experienced before) and drove us to The American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem. The situation changed slightly here as we'd thought that he was just being a nice guy, but as we got out of his car he demanded money for the journey and wanted us to pay him 500 shekels (about 80 British pounds). We tried to explain to him that he'd never told us that he would charge us for the trip. We discussed our situation a bit and finally handed him 200 shekels which must have been about what a taxi ride would have cost, but his help was suddenly cast in a different light and our already mixed-up feelings about the situation turned another somersault.

Submitted by JJ 08:09

13th of July, 2008

Welcome in Hell School of Kill

Petra works at the Freedom Theatre in Jenin. She is a Palestinian and lives in Ramallah but drives north to Jenin twice a week. Samar had arranged for me to visit the tiny children's theatre that lies in the middle of Jenin's refugee camp with Petra (http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org). I was picked up with my German colleague, Pola, by a taxi-bus service at Café Pronto at 9am. The taxi was full of other people who were going to Jenin, including Pilar, a Spanish girl who was

working with Petra as a volunteer at the theatre. Then it was a crazy ride through Palestine, over hills and through valleys with the accelerator pressed to the floor most of the way. With our safety belts tight and fingers crossed, it wasn't a trip for the faint hearted but definitely a beautiful ride through the landscape. It took us two hours to cover the approximately 70 km between Ramallah and Jenin and going through various checkpoints. We arrived first at Jenin, a city that has a population of about 30,000. The main street was busy and full of shoppers: men, women and children. The height and style of the houses was slightly lower than in Ramallah and Hebron. We drove through the city to get to the Jenin Refugee Camp that lies on the outskirts. Here approximately 13,000 refugees live in a very densely populated camp in small two-storey houses. Half of the inhabitants are children, so it's almost a city of children.

Petra was running drama classes today, firstly for the boys and then for the girls. Her work also has a therapeutic function and she puts a lot of emphasis on letting the children tell their own personal stories and express themselves. There aren't many opportunities for the children in the camp and their life is often characterised by unemployed parents, few possibilities and hopelessness. And violence is also a part of everyday life here. The refugee camp was the site of a big and bloody battle with the Israeli army in 2002 where over 50 local people were killed and many more were seriously disabled, both physically and mentally. A large part of the camp had been entirely flattened by the Israeli military bulldozers over the course of the weeks that the battle waged, so there were plenty of reasons to work on a therapeutic level with the many young people here where trauma and hopelessness go hand in hand. As soon as we arrived at the theatre, a crowd of children ran over and asked: 'what's your name?' and 'hello', and before I could take any pictures they'd already grabbed my camera and were taking pictures of each other whilst fighting over it. It was very sweet and naughty. The Freedom Theatre has a large stage which, when we entered, had been taken over by a hip-hop dancing workshop. Next to it there was a building for administration and workspaces, but as far as I could see most of the life was happening in the yard between the two buildings.

Petra had to get to work so she organised for two of the young employees at the theatre to take us on a tour of the camp. The first place they took us to was the graves of the martyrs. They showed us a memorial for those who had been killed in the Israeli attack of 2002. There was a poem by the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish on the main

memorial monument. Our guides, Shadia and Hazem, pointed out that behind the memorial there were graves of not just the soldiers but also the women and children who had been killed during the attacks. The camp lies on a steep mountainside and we could see the small square houses clinging to the incline. Many of the houses were completely new and apparently rebuilt after 2002. You could see from the fresh yellow colour of the walls where the new houses had been built. The reconstruction had been funded by a huge donation from the United Arab Emirates and today there was little visible evidence of the massive destruction that happened in 2002. Bullet marks or signs of explosions weren't even visible anywhere. It was decided during reconstruction to expand the roads slightly to make space to let the Israeli tanks pass through without destroying the houses, but this

was regretted later as the IDF have made use of this to drive their tanks into the camp on several occasions since 2002.

Shadia and Hazem showed us a single ruin of a house that had been left as a kind of memorial. On the lampposts there were signs everywhere with images of martyrs, and outside this ruined house there were images of three brothers that had been killed in the house. You could see from the destruction that the house had been bombed from the inside because all the walls on both the ground floor and first floor had been blown out. Only the weight bearing pillars were still standing, albeit precariously. We walked into the grounds and it turned out there was a fourth brother sitting in the ruins with a woman who was sorting through some vine leaves. He was middle aged, probably in his 50s. I signalled to him whether I could take a picture or not and he

nodded. Out on the street he took us through the names of the three martyred brothers pictured on the sign and then he walked over to an old car by the house that was half-hidden by bushes and growth. He described how his sons had been shot in that car. The bullet holes were still visible in the windshield. He was one of the few survivors of the family who apparently still watched over the house and the car that had been the end of so many members of his family. What can you say to such a man other than to just throw up your hands?

We carried on and Hazem told us how the militia had moved between the houses, over the rooftops and through private homes during the attack. According to Hazem, there weren't any tunnels between the houses. As the camp was their home and they knew every corner of it, they had no problems moving around without being visible to the Israeli forces. There wasn't much life in the streets, just a few half open shops and small hordes of children running around. The camp was divided into different areas: one of them was named after Saddam Hussein who is still very popular here because he always supported the Palestinians. It was pretty hot and Shadia started complaining about the heat. She was wearing a hijab and a long black gown over her jeans. Every now and then you could see the jeans sticking out from the bottom of the gown. It wasn't that strange that she felt hot.

Hip-hop and jazz

When we got back to the theatre it was still very lively. The hip-hop workshop turned out to be a Danish project with Zaki and Wahib and some others guys from Copenhagen. It was pretty crazy to travel all the way to Jenin and to then meet a group of people from Copenhagen who were teaching dance

and rap, and writing lyrics with the Jenin kids in collaboration with local MCs. But it was also nice to see them work with the kids. There is a young Palestinian hip-hop scene that has quite a few good acts. The Palestinian hip-hop artist taking part in the workshop was Al Saz (http://alsaz.net). His fairly roughed-up car was parked in the yard. On the windshield it said, 'Welcome in Hell School of Kill'.

Apart from the hip-hop workshop, a Swedish jazz band had arrived and apparently was also going to play. Unsurprisingly, Petra was starting to find it difficult to concentrate on her drama classes. The jazz concert started at 3pm and the Swedes did quite well. They'd brought over some of the young musicians from the Edward Said Musical Conservatory who played with them. They got the audience going and everyone was soon out of their chairs. I left the concert before it was over. Outside there were several ongoing discussions and the situation generally felt quite tense; for no particular reason other than simply perhaps that there was so much activity and the temperature was so hot.

There is no solution

Just to take a little break from it all, I went with Pola down to Jenin city to get a cup of coffee. We walked around for a bit and looked at all the abundant shops that there were in the centre. All kinds of things were on sale: kitchenware, toys, and textiles by the metre. And there was a lot of kitsch, crazy coloured cushions in 100% acrylic and all kinds of battery driven plastic toys that could move or make noises. Quite fascinating. We found a café and sat down a little discretely in a corner because there were only men there. Pola thought that they might not want a woman sitting next to

them, but before we'd sat down a man came over and asked in English if we would like to join them at their table. He was a student of English at the local University and wanted to practice a bit. We said, 'yes, of course'.

The two guys were sitting by a table with a view of the street and across to the mosque on the opposite side of the road. They shook their heads when I asked if they went there. They told me a bit about their studies. Renah had just completed his four year course and was now, as he put it, a 'translator'. His friend, Mohamad, was only on his second year of English studies at the Arab American University. Renah said that he'd applied at the Ministry of Education to become an English teacher at one of the state schools but it wasn't as good as he'd hoped because he wasn't fully qualified as a teacher and had to work the first year for almost free to get his teaching qualification. He'd rather go to Dubai and work. He was pretty sure he could make it there because he had friends who lived there already. Mohamad told us that he wanted to go to Canada so that he could save enough money to come back, get married and then finally settle in Canada with his wife. The dreams of these two young men seemed pretty out there and were most probably just dreams. They told us that they spent most of the day drinking tea, smoking shisha and keeping an eye on whatever was happening in the streets outside. Renah took an extra computer course every morning at the university, while Mohamad was still studying. He had a large book with him about the history of the English language. We looked through and laughed a bit at the part that, as I read the book, described how the Vikings had killed the nuns and burnt the books. Yep, that was apparently my forefathers.

Unemployment is very high in Jenin and because of its militant history it is difficult for people to leave the city at all. Afterwards when we told Petra about our conversation, she said that those guys were unlikely to ever make it to Dubai or Canada and would be lucky to make it as far as Ramallah. We'd had a good time drinking coffee with the two young Palestinians, but it was sad to think of all their dreams that were unlikely to get them anywhere. They had already put this very descriptively when they talked about the occupation: 'there is no solution'. This probably says as much about their own lives as the occupation.

In the taxi-bus on the way back to Ramallah, Petra told us that one of the local political leaders from Fatah had come over today and complained to The Freedom Theatre because he'd seen that the girls and boys had left the theatre together. Petra said that the theatre had a lot of problems in the camp and wasn't always appreciated there. The boys were allowed to go and take part in the activities, but the girls rarely got permission from their parents. The theatre had been closed for several years after the second Intifada and a lot of the people who had previously been involved in the theatre had been killed by the Israelis during the battle in the camp. There was only one person left from this group and today he is the leader of one of the militant brigades. The local people in the camp listen to him and it was he who had to speak to the representative from Fatah in order to solve the day's problem.

Working with the children is very hard as they're badly affected by the situation. She told me that it had been the children aged 10-14 years old who had stood up to the Israeli army in 2002, and they had witnessed the most

terrible things. When she started her class a year ago, it had been the wish of almost all of the boys to become suicide bombers. Petra's work over the past year has had an effect that they at least now also have other dreams for the future. 'But imagine', she said 'an entire generation that just wants to commit suicide.'

Submitted by JJ 11:40

14th of July, 2008

Ramalization

Ramallah is fascinating and a constant source of surprises. Before I arrived here, the images I had of the West Bank were mainly of life in the villages and of the landscape. It's tempting to think that most images in the media tend to portray Palestinians more often than not with a backdrop of the countryside and primitive surroundings, but life in Ramallah is modern, chaotic and invigorating. Certain areas in the very dense core of the city can feel like any other metropolis. In these areas, the houses are five stories high and made of concrete. The streets run deep in between the buildings and there are small busy market places, too, and the number of shoppers and vehicles brings the intensity right up to the limit. Most of the facades are full of advertisements in all sizes and design. They are placed close together and their varied shapes make it difficult to get a sense of the buildings behind the turmoil of all the signs. In the bustle on the sidewalks, the tea sellers light up the streets with the large samovars on their backs and their colourful clothing. It's unclear to me whether they are here for the pleasure of the tourists or to simply serve the people. I tend towards the

latter, since there are almost no tourists. The shop's displays are bountiful and everything from jewels to dried dates are on sale. Banks with ATMs are, of course, also present; although, so far, there is no McDonald's or Starbucks here. The very centre of Ramallah is Al Manara Square, a round open area with its famous lion monument in the centre. The square is flanked with large billboards placed across most of the access roads. Ramallah is not actually a large city, it has only about 60,000 inhabitants, but it has the impression of being a metropolis. Since the Oslo Accords, the city has been through a dramatic change as the Palestinian government and all of its ministries are here alongside the entire international community who come in the shape of diplomats and donor organisations, and so on. Yazid is an architect who works with Decolonizing Architecture occationally. I have discussed the phenomenon of Ramallah with him several times and he is very involved and concerned about the development of the city — not just with regards to urban development but also its increasing importance and power as a centre of Palestine. He used the term 'Ramalization' to describe the processes that Ramallah has set off. I met him on a hilltop on the edge of Ramallah in order to question him about his analyses of Ramallah's chaotic development.

Jakob: As an architect, could you describe how Ramallah is changing at the moment in terms of space, planning and architecture?

Yazid: What is so interesting about Ramallah is when you hear about it from the old people, that it hasn't always been a city — it's a new city. The first municipality was established in 1918 and Ramallah was like a village at that time. You could see the agricultural land and the mansions

in the fields — it was totally and purely agricultural. You could really only walk through fields when you wanted to cross from one place to another. That's what you hear from the old people, all these stories about the spaces back then — it is really a nostalgic image that the old people are referring to. Now Ramallah has become this big monster. The idea of Ramalization means that all of Palestine has become Ramallah, because of the closures and because of the control of space by the occupation. Ramallah is the only exit that has been left. I don't know whether it is happening systematically or in an ad hoc way. I actually think it's done systematically to define where the Palestinians should live. That creates a big problem, I think. Ramalization is just the idea that everything is becoming Ramallah and Ramallah is becoming everything. All the people from Jenin, Nablus, Hebron, Jericho, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, they all see Ramallah as the land of dreams and opportunity.

Earlier Palestine was mainly famous for its agricultural products — Palestine has always been a hinterland for Egypt and Syria and was producing agricultural products to sustain the big powers of the region. The problem now is that agriculture has been abandoned, because of many things — one of them is the large scale production of enhanced vegetables by the Israelis and the closure of markets for Palestinians. Palestinians aren't really able to move anything from one place to another. So the land doesn't pay anymore. Ramallah has now become a refuge for all these Palestinians who can no longer really survive from agriculture. All the job opportunities are here, all the investments that came with the Palestinian authorities in the form of the various ministries, are here, and all the vacancies that came with the establishment of all these new institutions are here. This brought

so many Palestinians from all over Palestine and they were concentrated in Ramallah. They were bringing their families to live and settle in Ramallah because it was the only place where you could earn money and survive in Palestine.

Another problem is the problem of agriculture. Now the farmers are bringing up the younger generations to become urbanised. They don't teach them the crafts of agriculture and the skills of working with the land anymore because they know that agriculture doesn't pay. If they want their youngsters, their offspring, to survive in such a situation, they have to teach them how to be urbanites and send them to the urban centres, and the most urbanised centre is probably Ramallah because it is the place of opportunities. It is now the dream land in Palestine.

They opened up for investment from the Arab countries and asked them to come and invest here. This also had some other consequences, like now Ramallah is becoming 'Dubai'. However, it is also an interesting cultural space. Internationally, all artists, all musicians, all the various international art scenes are interested in what is happening in Ramallah because it is a colonial space on the one hand, and on the other it is a place where the art of resistance is growing. This is interesting for so many people.

Economically it is the only place in Palestine you can invest in, really. The donor institutions are based here and are injecting so much money. Foreign investment is concentrated here; banks and businesses are concentrated here. It's becoming the alternative capital to Jerusalem — overtaking Jerusalem — and that is the danger of the project of Ramallah or 'the big cake of Ramallah'; the idea of centralisation. You can see this as well in the concentration of the upper

middle class, and the fact that all the missionary schools are concentrated in Ramallah. This helps an upper middle class that is also trying to sustain its power within Ramallah, and is trying to transform Ramallah into this space that sustains their social ambitions and provides the necessary services — such as cafés and cinemas. The influence of the upper middle class has been enormous in transforming the whole city into a big central cake for Palestinians.

Another thing that we are interested in — my students and I — is seeing how the Ramalization and the centrality of Ramallah can be dismantled. Before that, though, we can see nowadays that people from Jenin, for example, and Nablus, come to Ramallah to work here, to look for job opportunities, and then they go back. There are so many Palestinians that are trying to come but they cannot really live here because it's expensive and very competitive. There are also many people who are in constant movement between their city and Ramallah. They suffer a lot because of the checkpoints and the limits and difficulties of mobility. All this creates an image of unfairness among Palestinians outside Ramallah — and the concentration of investment in Ramallah does that as well. The Palestinian authorities aren't really thinking about the problems of such concentration. I think they are helpless in terms of decentralising the idea of Ramallah.

Spatially, if one looks at the landscape of Ramallah, it's a big sprawl. There's no control of space. The municipality doesn't have the capacity to cope with new developments and the new trends that are happening. They don't have the expertise to establish a vision for the place — a new vision for the whole city — and they don't try to prevent or limit the problems of space. What we see is that the sprawl is going

in all directions and it's eating up the rural areas — and the city's structure is really becoming something like Amman. Amman has always been a role model for architects and planners in Ramallah. Amman is a big city. Fifty percent of the population of Jordan is living in Amman and the architectural style is something that has been followed here today. You can see that in the new architecture of Ramallah. They want to transform it into a cosmopolitan city like Amman. This is very problematic because Ramallah has different traditions. It has never been like Amman. It was a summer resort for people from Kuwait, people from Egypt, and people from Lebanon. They used to come here because it is situated high in the mountains and is breezy in summer time, so they used to rent houses or go to the hotels. The whole city worked based on this vision of being a small regional summer resort and still preserving the rural image of the place. It's never been thought that Ramallah should become a hypermodern, internationalised centre for business and investment and communication, and so forth. The identities that used to be here or the diversity that used to be in Ramallah — you don't find them anymore, because it has all been funnelled towards one direction and you don't have the option of following another direction. Either you dive into the mainstream and follow it, or you just die. Ramallah is going strongly in one direction.

Jakob: What did the Oslo Accords mean to Ramallah?

Yazid: Ramallah is a temporary and yet a permanent alternative to Jerusalem as the capital. This is the illusion that the city is living. But, it's not an illusion anymore. In fact it has become a reality, because everything is tending to permanence in Ramallah in terms of institutions, in terms of

services, in terms of how the architecture that is provided is along the lines of other similar capitals, and in terms of political centrality. So the Oslo Accords helped transform Ramallah in this way. The Oslo Accords also brought about not a belief in, but let's say a hope of, a future Palestinian State, so therefore investments were really put in place in an explosive way in the city and these investments were very heavy. The thing is that Ramallah is becoming a big swallower of what is around it. It has now swallowed one of the suburbs to the north of the city called Suttah, so Suttah and Ramallah are becoming one whole. It's really expanding like Amman did in the old times. Investors are buying land in Suttah and in Birzeit and in Abukorsh. From the buying and selling of land you can see the direction that Ramallah is going: it's really extending so much and it is eating up the small villages and the cultural landscape around it. This is really scary if it happens all over Palestine. Palestine will become like one big city, one big city on the West Bank and one big city in the Gaza strip because of the demographic. There should therefore be a sort of awareness by the institutions, by architects, by planners and all the decision makers about the centrality of Ramallah and it should be sort of decentralised. The investments should really be directed to villages as well, investments in the resources in the villages because we do have resources other than urban resources and we have other urban resources than Ramallah. There are many other cities like Nablus, which is such an old city. Ramallah has no special history like other cities in Palestine. It's newly built and has become so important. I mean, the historic relevance of the city is not that important and yet it's getting all the attention nowadays.

Jakob: Maybe you could tell me how people can resist Ramalization?

Yazid: We want to decentralise Ramallah and we want the decentralisation to be something that allows every single city in Palestine to take its normal path towards growth. Certainly, though, we don't have that option because we don't have the sovereignty of the land and we don't have the power of planning. We don't have the power to develop a vision because you have to adapt to what is given to you by the administrators, which are the Israeli occupiers, and then you have to live with these limitations. By living with these limitations this means that you really are controlled and streamlined in the way that they want you to be streamlined unless the occupation is ended, and then we can start to think about ideas of the particularities of the different spaces. But, I mean, it appears like we don't have any grip on that as it is now. What you can do is resist it a little bit by having all these dialogues and discussions about the issues and try to make people aware of the big problem that we are facing with Ramalization. What I also think is really important is to work with institutions such as the municipality. I mean resistance now means that you really should direct part of your time towards institutions and capacity building, towards creating awareness, and so on. That's the only thing you can do because we don't have the money really to change much. And we don't have control. At least we can use our knowledge, use language to change things. I mean change it to become a bit better than before, not much better, but at least a little bit better and in this way be also prepared and ready if the chance should come, because then you are able to manage a big leap. You don't have to rethink it all

over again; you are ready for that change and for that leap. So, awareness, capacity building and human investment are really important — that's what I think, personally.

Jakob: Now, with the opening of investments from the Arab world, and internationally — this is going to transform Ramallah once again in terms of the physical environment and the economic structures. What kind of change is going to happen now after the first wave of transformation after the Oslo agreement?

Yazid: I think that's the fear of all of us: that Ramallah is turning into Dubai because now a special lobby for investment has taken over all vacant land in Palestine for further development and investment. They are in control of what kind of investment is going to happen. The same people are the people who are allowing Arab investments to come. If you have big money this means big buildings, more investments, and so on. They have enough money to buy cultural heritage sites and totally destroy them in order to build something else. Nobody can stop them. I mean, the power of money is something that you cannot really, in our circumstances, resist, because we don't have regulations and norms and even a vision about what Ramallah should become. So, therefore, any investor can come and buy any piece of land, if they have the money. We think that the centre of Ramallah will be transformed into really big high buildings — not like New York but I mean big business buildings — and people will start moving towards the suburbs for housing. It will become like one of these big economic capitals in the region. I'm so concerned about what is happening, but you never know, it also depends on the political conditions and political stability, because investors are also a little bit cautious about

investing money under such unstable political conditions. But probably it will be a total change in five years. Ramallah, what we have now, will be totally changed. All the memories about the small places that we used to know — for example, the Bardoni, one of the oldest restaurants that used to be in Ramallah — is lost. The Bardoni was demolished, and the owner — we talked with the owner — he wanted to build a big building because as he said "I am really fed up with running this business and I want money". Well, I mean, it's one of the oldest Lebanese restaurants that was well established in Ramallah. It was a really beautiful horizontal building, not vertical, with lots of plants. He used to plant an island in the street outside the restaurant with lots of flowers and things like that. Everyone knows the Bardoni, even people outside and abroad know about the Bardoni because it was a really interesting restaurant, delicious food and wonderful atmosphere. They destroyed it and now they are coming up with a really huge building. Imagine that this case is going to be replicated in many of the places that we have at present, that have a meaning and are part of what Ramallah used to be. That is what is happening because land prices are really getting high and you have to get your returns from your investments and the only way to do that is to build high rises, to build business offices with cheap architecture. The style is really not important anymore because functionality is more important than formality in these cases. They want something cheap and quick that doesn't cost them so much in terms of material and construction techniques.

Jakob: Now, after the so-called 'Israeli disengagement', at least from the city of Ramallah, is it only economic forces, then, that are shaping the landscape here?

Yazid: Totally. That's the idea of colonialism nowadays in this era. Colonialism does not mean that you have to be physically inside, you can control processes while you are outside. They don't have to be here to transform us into a big consumption centre. They just control what products we consume and that's it. It's all Israeli products and they don't allow us to import what we want. They have limitations on our imports and on what we can actually import, so most of the time you go to a supermarket and find Israeli products or products that Israeli agents are bringing into Palestine. We are economically dependent on Israel and by having these kinds of big investments after the Israeli disengagement, everything has to be somehow related to the economy of Israel. It's not an independent economy and we cannot be independent economically. There are so many development projects going on between regional partners, Arab partners and Israel, especially economically. It seems like that is the only thing that is going on and Israel is always in full control. All the investment is going through the Israelis and it's just another way of controlling Palestinians through the economy. If you want something, they give it to you but in their own form and they control you and you think that you got what you wanted — but still you are being controlled. This is the new way of colonialism.

Submitted by JJ 23:24

15th of July, 2008

Hiking in a contested landscape

This morning at 6am, I met Suhad on the other side of the hill from where I live. She'd asked me whether I wanted to

go for a hike in the valley between Al Tireh and Sheiyhan. She lives in Al Tireh and knows the area from many previous treks. Suhad is yet another local visual artist who I've met during my stay here. She works with photography and, amongst other things, has made a project about the honour killings that happen in Palestine in both Christian and Muslim families. Suhad often lives abroad but when she is in Ramallah she stays with her parents in Al Tireh.

I'd never been out this early in Ramallah and the sun had only just started to rise. The sky was slightly cloudy and I could see the sunbeams cutting through the morning mist. During the month I have been here the weather has always been sunny all day long with only a very few clouds. In the main, blue sky and sun has usually been the norm. The temperature was comfortable but the morning sky was more dramatic than I had expected.

We walked down a steep and narrow road that led to the last of the newly built houses on the mountainside towards the valley and passed by a nearly completed house as yet without any windows. The night watch looked down at us from one of the balconies of the house. There were two chained up dogs down below that barked when we walked past. These new houses are very extravagant and I asked Suhad who were the architects of these buildings. Although she didn't know, she would like to know who'd designed them: 'They are all very ugly', she said. We went further down the mountainside until we were amongst the olive trees. We were trying to find the most reasonable route down through the ancient terraces that hold the dirt around the roots of the trees. There was a lot of goat shit and the grass had probably been razed by the goats that were grazing here.

The vegetation was low and robust and consisted of a large selection of plants with thorns and so we walked carefully.

After a short time, we made it all the way down into the valley where there was a dried riverbed. You could see how the water had shaped the rocks and Suhad said that during the winter the river was full of water. This year, though, in the spring it hadn't rained as much as normal and the summer was also milder than usual, she said, but she didn't have any idea why. It never rains in the summer anyhow. There were a lot of abandoned stone cottages that had been built almost into the terraces and so you could only see them when you got close up. Thousands of years of agriculture and habitation had marked the landscape and when we reached the other side of the riverbed there we saw a large two-storey ruin. It reminded me most of the base of a tower where the

top had gone to ruin. It was several hundreds of years old, just standing there. Suhad didn't know the history of it but the ruin was very beautiful, surrounded by flowering thistles. If it had been in Europe, it would have been surrounded by a historical centre with a café next to it, but in Palestine it simply stood there next to the myriad of other cultural layers and traces that are slowly merging with the surrounding landscape.

We'd been sitting for a while looking at the ruin, when some dogs started to bark and Suhad got a bit worried because wild packs of dogs drift around the area. However, it turned out to be a shepherd with his dogs and goats on his way back down from the mountain. We walked back over the riverbed and up the mountainside. Suhad was swiftly forcing her way up the terraces but I could feel that I hadn't moved at all for the last month. The sun had moved higher in the sky and we ended our hike with a cup of tea at Suhad's house. I was soaked in sweat but it had been a nice walk in the beautiful Palestinian landscape, or rather in a little part of the landscape that still remains.

Submitted by JJ 11:24

16th of July 2008

Demilitarisation of Oush Grab

Oush Grab is an ex-military base on a hill top just outside of Beit Sahour, next to Bethlehem, which had been abandoned by the Israelis in 2006. The base has a history that goes all the way back to the Ottomans who had founded the base in the 19th Century. The Jordanians had made use of it until

1967 when the Israelis had occupied the West Bank. Since 2006, the base has been lying deserted although land does not just sit unused in Palestine. There are always discussions and fights over the smallest bits of land that haven't as yet been claimed. As it turned out, this was also the case at Oush Grab as well.

I called Alessandro from Decolonizing Architecture to see if we could meet up, and he suggested that we go to Oush Grab as they've been involved quite a bit in the future prospects of that area. Lately there had been quite a lot of tension surrounding the base, and recently it had been occupied by a group of settlers. Such occupations take place here under the protection of the Israeli army. The settlers had stayed until this morning, after having been there for four days (http://www.maannews.net/en/index.php?opr=ShowDetails&ID=30558). Decolonizing Architecture had previously taken over the base to run film screenings and bars there, their intention being to go in and quite literally decolonise and demilitarise the base. Part of the project had involved decorating and tagging the buildings in order to make them more useful and welcoming for future civil use (http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/?page_id=40). "Sorry, no rooms available" was one of their tags, a weakly disguised message for any future Israeli settlers who might want to have a look around the area.

I took a taxi-bus from Ramallah to Beit Sahour and met Alessandro in his office in the centre of the city. He had two young English interns who were working hard and the place looked very professional. It was more of an architecture firm than an activist den. It was very civilised, but perhaps such a level of professionalism is needed simply in order to speak

to local politicians and international NGOs. We also briefly visited his apartment just above the office. This is where he lives with Sandi and their baby. Sandi is also a part of the project, but she wasn't at home today. We also went a little higher up to a fantastic rooftop terrace where you could see over a large part of the West Bank to the east of Jerusalem. Oush Grab can be seen from here and Alessandro pointed out the hilltop and the small buildings that could barely be seen in the distance. The Israeli army had destroyed the base before they deserted it in 2006 because they wanted to ensure that the base was not taken over by the Palestinian security forces. Most of the base is therefore in ruins. You could see that one of the buildings was crooked from not having collapsed entirely, which seemed a bit strange. We also had an overview of the surrounding landscape that was mainly characterised by Arabic villages. There were no settlements in sight.

We drove out to the site in Alessandro's car and when we reached the gravel road that leads to the base we could see that there were people on the inside. Alessandro wanted to make sure that they weren't settlers. We could see that the people were fumbling with a ladder and were climbing up to a blue and white Israeli flag that was waving from one of the antenna in the base. Symbols and flags are important tools for dominating a territory and the Israeli flag wasn't going to wave over Oush Grab anymore as these were local Palestinian people who were taking down the flag.

The base is located in Zone C, and is therefore under Israeli control which makes it more difficult for the Palestinians to use the area. People are also afraid to move about in Zone C areas as settlers and the military have weapons and you can

never feel totally safe. The Mayor in Beit Sahour had made a huge effort to decolonise and demilitarise the base and so the parking lot formerly used by military vehicles had already become a playground and picnic area for the Palestinians. It was his big project and we met him in the café by the playground where he was smoking a shisha. He told us that he'd been deeply involved in developing the new facilities. He'd seen that the children would play football pretty much anywhere, and so here they now had a football pitch to play on. There were a lot of people who liked roller skating, too, and so they had gotten a skating rink, etc. There was also a climbing tower, sandboxes, merry-go-rounds and swings. And there was a big café area where the families could picnic overlooking the playground. All in all, it was a lot of fun for the children and their families. Alessandro said that a delegation from the European Parliament were going to come and have a look at the project, but the Mayor said that he wasn't short of money. He'd received one million dollars from the United Arab Emirates for the project and he could do what he wanted with the money. The Israeli authorities were also interested in the ongoing demilitarising of the area as they would do anything to avoid a Palestinian military base there. What is more demilitarising than a massive playground, though?

We talked with the Mayor about the settlers who'd just left the base. He said how over the past few days there'd been a town festival for the local Palestinians in the café and on the playground. There had been about 1000 visitors until late at night and even though the settlers had arrived and settled in another part of the base further up towards the top, the people hadn't been scared. The Israeli army had come with

the settlers and there had been about 100 Jewish activists, but the Palestinian party had just carried on. People had obviously felt that it was their place and had therefore felt safe there. Normally, due to previous bad experiences, the Palestinians are nervous of the settlers. It was clearly a victory for the mayor that people hadn't started to seep away from the party when the settlers and the army had arrived and stayed less than 200 meters from the playground. The Palestinians had had a great party despite the circumstances.

Alessandro told me about how Decolonising Architecture was working with local nature and bird enthusiasts to turn part of the area into a natural resort and bird sanctuary. This was their next project in this civil occupation of the area. It was a temporary project and the Mayor was fully aware that the takeover of the area had to happen in small steps. He was working to have a hospital built on the other side, but that wouldn't become a reality until sometime far in the future. Alessandro had to get back to the office so I decided to stay in the area and have more of a look around.

I walked all the way up to the central buildings of the base where the settlers had been earlier in the day. Sunk into the ground behind earth ridges there were two low parallel barracks with a huge crooked concrete block in between them. This had been the water tower which had now shifted from its base and stood as a huge unsettled cube in between the two barracks. There were murals and graffiti everywhere and the settlers had done a good job in tagging all over the murals and tags done by Decolonising Architecture: "Stop the Arab Occupation", "Victory for Israel", "All of Israel for Jews" and "Israel belongs 2 Jews" were some of the slogans

that were written in English. There were many others in Hebrew that I couldn't read, of course. There weren't any people around and the sun was now low in the sky and the landscape rested beautifully as if it hadn't been at all affected by all the different battles that are constantly waged over control for it. After an hour, I made it back to Alessandro's office where he was in the process of reviewing a presentation about the architecture in one of the Israeli settlements. It was part of the research that the two interns had been working on and they showed slides of small new townhouses with refined front gardens. It looked like any other European suburb. I had to catch the last taxi-bus back to Ramallah and so left quickly.

Submitted by JJ 12:43

17th of July, 2008

Slingshot Hiphop

Thursday evening was a big evening in Ramallah. There was a premiere of the film 'Slingshot Hiphop', a film about the hip-hop scene in Palestine (http://slingshothiphop.com). Rumour had it that several of the artists featured in the film were going to come and play at the premiere. The opening of the film was hosted by the Ramallah Cultural Palace and when I arrived with Suhad and Pola there were already many people and plenty of cameras. These types of events are covered by media from all over the Middle East as well as the many Western documentary filmmakers that flock down here too. There is a lot of culture in Ramallah, but I hadn't yet witnessed such enthusiasm as I saw tonight. There were many very young boys with caps and large T-shirts with prints on them, but the fashion style wasn't very baggy indicating that the scene is young and that there's also not much money for new fashionable clothes from the West.

The Ramallah Cultural Palace is, as I've mentioned, a huge building that lies high up on one of Ramallah's hill tops. The concert hall can probably fit about 1,500 to 2,000 people and this evening it was almost packed. The film had been made by a local Palestinian filmmaker, Jackie Salloum. She had been working on the film for the past five years and many people were saying that it had been very hard for her to finish the film, but now it was here and the expectations were soaring.

It is a historically oriented film and tells the history of Palestinian hip-hop. The main players of the early acts were the 1948 Palestinians, especially DAM who are the godfathers

of the scene (http://www.myspace.com/damrap). The main focus was on Tamer from DAM who is the film's starring personality. He is also one of the main personalities of Palestinian hip-hop. To set the scene, the film opens with images of children confronting military vehicles and Israeli bulldozers that destroy houses and dig up olive trees. In this way, it is immediately established that hip-hop here, as in the rest of the world, is the art of the oppressed. "Hip-hop is our CNN", Tamer comments at one point. DAM come from Lod in Israel, and the three person crew walked through fairly bombed out and destroyed areas of the city talking about their everyday problems as Palestinians in Israel. They had started in 1990 and had actually begun rapping to become rich and famous. That motivation changed when the second Intifada exploded in 2000. From then on, hip-hop became a political instrument for the Palestinian Israelis and they started rapping in Arabic. The most touching and jarring story was the portrait of PR (Palestinian Rapperz) (http://www.myspace.com/palestinianrapperz), who had tried to establish themselves in Gaza. They had no possibility whatsoever of getting out of Gaza and they had had to build everything up from scratch themselves. Their biggest wish was to meet DAM and the other Palestinian hip-hop artists, which simply wasn't possible due to the occupation. The film crew arranged for them to speak with Tamer over the phone, which was very touching; but their dream was, as they put it, to actually meet DAM and to give them a hug. Even for a big hip-hop event in Ramallah where PR were headlining together with DAM, the boys had been stopped at the border despite having got a permit, and had been sent home with no explanation. So the only way DAM could see and hear PR was through the recordings by the film

crew that had been able to visit them in Gaza. Everyone was very impressed by the fearlessness of the three PR rappers: "But they're also used to standing in front of tanks in the streets", as one of the 1948 Palestinians said, and teased the other rappers that they'd probably shit themselves if they had to face a tank. So the film talked a lot about the three groups of Palestinians in Palestine: 1948, Gaza and the West Bank, and about how the three groups are almost entirely separated because of the occupation.

The film was rich with good music and a well produced sound, and the audience in the auditorium cheered every time someone came out with a sharp line. Before the last credits had passed, three energetic and gesticulating rappers invaded the stage; it was DAM. Their most popular tune is 'Who is the Terrorist?', and they did a medley in which bits

of the controversial text was thrown in. The entire audience got out of their seats and it was really moving to see all the hand gestures from the very young girls and boys. Lighters and mobile phones where waving in the air and Palestinian scarves were thrown onto the stage.

The concert, though, got even bigger as almost all of the acts from the film turned out to be there (Arapeyat, Mahmoud Shalabi and WE7). PR hadn't, of course, got permission to leave Gaza which you could almost cry about after having witnessed their totally fucked-up lives and everyday reality in that place. At the end a very young girl got up on stage. She was from the duo Arapeyat, who were also in the film (http://www.myspace.com/safaa3arapeye). Slightly nervous but smiling in a challenging way, she gave several lectures to the audience (in Arabic). When tracks ran out and she hadn't any more beats to rap to, she carried on improvising without backing until DAM got on stage and said 'enough' and 'thank you'. Another hip-hop act who were also missing were the local darlings from Ramallah Underground (http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=6209211).

Suhad told me afterwards that there were probably a lot of 1948 Palestinians that had sneaked across the Wall tonight. The Israelis don't allow people with Israeli passports to go to Zone A areas, but people usually find ways of sneaking across. They risk getting a huge fine if they are caught. "Hip-hop is not dead — it lives in Palestine", as it was said on several t-shirts worn that night.

Submitted by JJ 12:43

19th of July, 2008

Nablus

Nablus is, according to the Israelis, the largest terrorist den in the West Bank. This is why the Israeli army raid the city on almost a daily basis. The main aim of the raids is to shut down various shops and institutions that are in some way or another related to Hamas. At the same time, access to the city has been made very difficult with a series of checkpoints whose main purpose is to ensure that leaving is made almost impossible. This morning, Pola and I took a service taxi-bus from the bus station in Ramallah heading for Nablus. After a wild ride through the landscape on the settler road that leads to the settlements around Nablus we were let off in front of the Hawara checkpoint. I'd been counting on the bus driving through the checkpoint like they do at most other places in the West Bank, but here we had to walk through on foot and then take a taxi on the other side. As usual it wasn't a problem to 'get in', and we just walked through a metal barred turnstile to enter the Nablus side which was full of street vendors and taxis that were parked all over the place. As usual a friendly Palestinian helped us find a taxi. He was quite interested in speaking to us and said that he was married inside Israel. He asked if we knew anyone in Nablus. Nope, not really; although we'd asked in Ramallah but people tend to isolate themselves in their enclaves and there wasn't really anyone we had talked to who knew someone in Nablus. Together, with our new guide, we drove in to the heart of Nablus which is known for its old city and souk. In the end, he didn't even allow us to contribute to the taxi fare!

We didn't have a guidebook or map, so we had to wander around a bit aimlessly. The souk, though, quickly revealed itself and we started exploring the small and chaotic streets. The number of shops and goods were impressive and you wonder who comes and shops here. Nablus is the second largest city on the West Bank (after Hebron), with 135,000 inhabitants, but the amount of stuff on offer was still incredibly overwhelming. The streets went here and there, spreading out like an endless labyrinth. Unemployment is high here especially, because any kind of production is almost impossible due to the occupation, which makes it difficult to export goods and sell them outside the city. There is no tourism whatsoever. We only saw two or three other foreigners during our visit. The souk had small workshops inside the narrow shops: furniture makers, blacksmiths, tailors, etc. It was fascinating to see a city that functions on the basis of pre-industrial principles. However the working conditions didn't look comfortable at all and it was often children who were working away at the sewing machines. One can only hope that the Palestinians will have the chance to develop their own economy and improve their wealth, because at the moment it is not going in the right direction at all.

Nablus is known mainly for two products: cakes and soap. We called Ismail who I knew had taken photographs for one of the old soap factories in the town. He guided us to the oldest factory that is right in the centre, facing the city's large main square: Tjukan soap. The gate was open and we walked inside and met a man who was packing down some large cases with cardboard boxes. People could only speak a little English here but we managed to explain that we were interested in the soap factory, after which he took us on a little tour. First

we saw the mixers and then we were taken upstairs to see where they make the soap bars. The soap mix is first spread out on the floor, approximately 5 cm thick, where it is left to dry for a while. After this, the bars are cut out, stamped and piled in beautiful, curving piles. Here they sit and dry for five months. Everywhere in the old building you could smell the scent of olive oil, the key ingredient in the famous Tjukan soap. We bought ten bars of soap and thanked them for the tour and the time travel back to the 1900s.

At one point in the small streets of Nablus, a young man came up to us and asked in perfect English if he could show us around a bit. We said 'yes', and that was the beginning of a very peculiar tour through Nablus. First, Najir (that was the young man's name) took us to a Turkish bath where we saw the waiting room and coffee house but for some reason we couldn't access the actual baths. Then he took us to visit one of his friends who works at the local Jawwal office as a sales and marketing manager. Jawwal is the local mobile phone company, and we had coffee in their slick offices while all the staff stood around and spoke with us. After this, the tour continued to a shopping centre where Najir's IT teacher worked in the arcade game area. This shopping centre had just been reopened. The Israelis had kept it closed for a while as they suspected that it was related to Hamas in some way (http://www.maannews.net/en/index.php?opr=ShowDetails&ID=30546). The arcade game area seemed quite innocent with a bouncy castle and a whole load of arcade games. From here we walked through the only official park in Nablus, which is excellent in comparison to the other cities on the West Bank where, without exception, there are hardly any green public spaces at all. Najir tried

to make us stay longer but we insisted that we had seen plenty and had to get back to Ramallah for a wedding. It was now nearing 6pm and Najir helped us find a taxi so that we could get out to the checkpoint. He admitted that he'd like some tips for his services. We gave him 50 shekels, although he didn't think this was sufficient. After a hot day in Nablus, the taxi whisked us back to the Hawara checkpoint.

The only experience we had had of a different and rougher Nablus was when we entered a little square where a group of men were fiddling with a sound system. They were testing it at the loudest volume with some very agitated speakers talking in Arabic. We took a few pictures after which one of the guys drew his hand over his throat, as if with a knife, while he looked at us. The city is an occupied city and has suffered a lot since the Israeli attack in 2002. Nablus, just as Jenin had been, was the site of violent battles and the city experienced serious destruction by the Israeli military bulldozers. There are still open wounds in the old city where entire blocks of houses are gone. Martyrs' posters are everywhere. Although people are friendly and welcoming, one shouldn't ignore the state of permanent war that this city suffers from. We were definitely reminded of this when we got to the checkpoint, an 'old school' checkpoint in which people are led like cattle through steel barriers and fences and into the metal turnstile that leads people to the ID check area. The queue of people is controlled by heavily armed Israeli soldiers who bang on the barriers if there is something they aren't happy with. They push through the row of people, searching people's bags at random without even asking, mainly just to demonstrate their power. One of the soldiers put his hand into my bag without searching for anything

really. If he had been really interested in my bag, he would have probably looked a bit closer at my ten bars of soap. When I reached the front of the line, I had to wait for the light to turn green after which I could enter the turnstile over at the metal detector and ID control point where there were more heavily armed soldiers. The woman at the ID control was, just like all the others, wearing a military helmet but she also had a special security neck brace supposedly to protect against explosions. I was told that I could have just gone around the control as I have an international passport, but I thought it was fair to walk through with the Palestinians.

Submitted by JJ 20:04

20th of July, 2008

The so-called peace process

'Stop the Wall' is one of the Palestinian political organisations whose work is very well organised and radical in their critique of the Israeli occupation. They work with mapping the geographical, social and economic consequences that the building of the Wall produces. They conduct their work through a series of local committees that have been established all along the building site of the Wall. They keep close records of the route the Wall takes and of the consequences it has for the Palestinian villages. They collect documentation, for example, of confiscation orders decreed by the Israeli army and they keep precise records of the seizure of Palestinian land and the undermining of local economies that's taking place along the soon-to-be 800km long Israeli Wall. I'd earlier met Dawood from Stop the Wall at a dinner party in the park next to the Town Hall in Ramallah. He's

responsible for tracking the economic consequences of the Wall and the more long term economic development plans of the societies on both sides. He told me about a report from the World Bank in 2005 that described a future scenario for so-called sustainable economic development around the Wall; a report that was made in collaboration with the Israeli and Palestinian authorities and the international community. Normally the occupation is discussed on a day-to-day basis here without envisioning any future at all, really, apart from even more insecurity and injustice. It was therefore interesting to hear about the economic plans, which of course exist, and a future where the Wall has become an accepted and permanent part of the Israeli and Palestinian landscape. The future scenarios that Dawood told me about weren't very encouraging either. It sounded mainly like a grim fantasy where the free market protected by the military will get to transform the West Bank and Gaza into one large labour camp. Such a militarised neo-liberalism would become a reality in the guise of a so-called peace agreement. Dawood introduced me to some of these plans when we'd met the first time. I'd agreed with him then that I would come by Stop the Wall's offices to do a more in depth interview later. Today was the day. I wanted to record the interview with the intention of showing it on tv-tv in Copenhagen. Dawood said that Stop the Wall would also like to use it for their website: www.stopthewall.org.

Jakob: Thanks for doing this interview. Could you start with introducing yourself and the 'Stop the Wall' Campaign?

Dawood: The 'Stop the Wall' Campaign was established in 2002 at the beginning of the construction of the Wall. Actually, it had started even before that as the Palestinian

Environmental NGOs Network, working with environmental issues. When the Wall came, the construction started with a massive uprooting of trees on the West Bank. So this NGO thought that this coming danger of the Wall would be an environmental threat. They held meetings in all the different villages that had their land uprooted and they advised them to create committees in each village, as a reference for themselves and for any international NGOs, news agencies or journalists that wanted to talk about this issue. And also to archive everything that is happening in these villages: from the uprooting of trees and confiscation orders of land, to photos of before and after, statistics, and any knowledge that this kind of network would need. After a while it became clear that the Wall is more than just an environmental issue, it has different political, economic, and social impacts. So they decided to create the 'Stop the Wall' Campaign as a coalition of these 12 local NGOs and around 54 local village committees.

Jakob: I wanted to talk to you about the future plans for the West Bank in terms of economic development, and the kinds of plans that are on the cards at the moment, not only from the Palestinian authorities but also from the Israelis and the international community. Maybe you could introduce some of the plans that have been put forward in recent years that relate to the economic development behind the Wall?

Dawood: Just to give you a background before we start with this: the Israelis have historically — even before the occupation — always made future plans for themselves which is actually very clever. Usually the plans have been for 25 years on average, and for each plan they would gather big think tanks — political and economic, social and

psychological think tanks; all kinds of different kinds of think tanks — and these would put forward a framework and a strategy for Israel for the coming 25 years. In 2002, they had a big meeting in the town of Herzliya, where they launched the disengagement plan. The final detailed plans were published in February 2005, giving them three years of research to put a detailed report on the table on how to implement it on the ground. And usually what happens here, with the Israelis as the occupying power that has had the upper hand in the West Bank and in Gaza for 41 years now, the international community and especially the donors were as always... how to say it... I don't want to say that they follow the Israeli plans, but they accept the Israeli visions for the area. We are talking mainly about donors like the World Bank, IMF, USAid, GTZ, KFW — all these semi-governmental, huge donors. They are also the main funders and strategists for different countries in the Third World. So the Israelis made the plan, laid pressure on the international community and marketed it as a peace building process.

To summarise this plan: now you have ghettos in the West Bank — or they want to build walls on the West Bank to create ghettos — they will confiscate as much land as possible: we are talking about 46%. And they will confiscate as much water as possible: and we are talking about 82% of water resources. They are putting people in different isolated ghettos, and there is no trade between them, no clear connections or continuity between the different so-called Palestinian Authority areas, and there is no real control over the borders regarding trade. The capital — the economic, political and tourist capital, which is Jerusalem — is totally surrounded by walls and annexed to Israel. Bethlehem,

the second tourist capital, is also surrounded by walls and turned into a ghetto. So they have destroyed all the different economic systems that used to exist here on the West Bank. To sustain this apartheid system, or these apartheid ghettos, they had to figure out how to manage them for the coming 20 years. This was the Israeli understanding of how this conflict should be solved.

This solution can be summarised by looking at the group of industrial zones: a group of projects that will be funded by a third partner, an international partner or donor, and run under the supervision of the Israelis and using Palestinian labour. These industrial zones are of various kinds, some of them are manufacturing industrial zones, some are agro-industrial zones, some are tourism related industrial zones or service-related like electricity, water, banking, and so on. So, they did not leave out any kind of economic aspect or subject matter without working it out in detail and connecting it directly to the Israeli occupation authority; not only connecting it, but keeping it under the direct control of the Israeli authorities.

Jakob: How is this ghetto system going to be sustained?

Dawood: The Wall is a main issue in this ghettoisation plan, but not the only method. You also have settlers-only roads that will be walled on both sides; and you will have military zones in the east isolated by ditches or trenches. For us, Palestinians on the ground, there is no difference between the Wall and the settlers' walled road or a trench. The three of them isolate us from our land and from our natural resources. And, as you can see, the whole area is separated into small ghettos and the Palestinians have lost most of their land, lost most of their water resources, lost even the grassing areas in the east, natural grassing areas — so now animal

raising industries are based on buying feed from Israeli companies to feed the animals. And, again, that's why they have to talk about how to sustain such a system. We are talking about almost 2.5 million Palestinians in around 22 isolated ghettos: without land, without resources, without trade, without anything. So they have to talk about how to sustain this ghetto system by providing some kind of work for the two million Palestinians. Here, the international community starts to get more involved. It started actually with a study done by the World Bank in December 2004, which stated that the only viability that can be achieved here — or, a 'development plan' that can be achieved here to provide jobs for the Palestinians — is to build 'border industrial zones', and again that it should be jointly Palestinian, Israeli and a third international partner. The Palestinian role will be to provide labour, the Israeli role is to build factories and the international role is to fund the infrastructure such as roads, water, electricity, and so on. For each of the three main ghettos on the West Bank there will be a group of these industrial zones 'along the border', as the international community defines it (the World Bank mainly). They use the term 'along', it is not 'on', it is not 'in', but it is 'along'. And 'along' could have a very wide meaning here; Israel considers all the West Bank as under its authority and the official border for Israel is the Jordan River, which includes all the West Bank. So, when you say 'along the border' that leaves it open to the Israelis to decide where this border is, and what is going to be considered 'along' and what is not considered 'along'. When you look now at the industrial zones proposed by the international community, they are actually talking about three different zones; you have, for example, an industrial zone in Jericho, in the middle of the West Bank. It is not close to any border except for the

Jordanian border, which is around 6 kilometres away, and they consider it 'along' the border. And you have other ones on the path of the Wall, and they consider it 'along' the border; and you have others in C areas, and they consider it 'along' the border. So the project is simply about providing jobs in these industrial zones. The expectation for the coming 20 years is that there will be half a million Palestinians working in these industrial zones under special conditions and under a special negotiated labour law, and so on.

Jakob: Under whose authority will these new industrial zones be?

Dawood: Because it is the border, it is not under any authority. The three 'partners' are supposed to facilitate the zones. For example, you always have an Israeli side of the industrial zones, controlled by the Israelis; you have a Palestinian side controlled by the Palestinian Authority; then you have a joint coordination office with an international partner involved in this industrial area. And again, because it is 'along' the border it is not on Israeli land, and it is not on Palestinian land. On the ground, these industrial zones are in the West Bank and are in the Palestinian Authority areas, but they say — to encourage Israelis and Israeli businessmen to get involved — that it is a border area and no-one will have real authority over it. Both sides, or the three partners, have — in the different feasibility studies that were published — different roles in facilitating these industrial zones, but none are actually controlling the territories.

Jakob: Could you call them free trade areas?

Dawood: It is a little bit different. They are announced as free trade zones, more like the airport, a duty free market;

at least, this is how they define it in the media. The industrial zones will not be free, there will be special conditions. The idea was to create a zone that will have special conditions and laws for the factory owners. Production will be with no tax, meaning that if you imported something to this area you will not pay taxes, but if you want to sell the product inside the same country - for example, inside the West Bank or Israel — you need to pay taxes to these authorities. The other option is to export internationally directly. In that situation, you don't pay taxes. The West Bank and Israel are very close, mainly, to the European market and secondarily to the States. Having this cheap labour, or the cheapest labour possible, in these industrial zones will allow them to compete on a good level with the Chinese and Asian products in the European markets, even with Latin American products. This is the idea of the border industrial zones. Here the only difference from free trade areas in the rest of the world is that we are still under occupation, basically. Our border is controlled by the occupying power, so any import or export will be through this occupation power and all the taxes and incomes will go to this occupation power as well.

Jakob: Could you tell me a little bit about the role of the Wall in relation to these plans. How is the Wall used?

Dawood: When you talk about border industrial zones under occupation, and under a very bad labour law, that means that the conditions of labour will be very poor. In the previous experiences of joint industrial zones in Gaza, and in some areas here in the West Bank, the Palestinian labourers have been treated really badly, with, for example, arrests, closure of the industrial zones, and firing without compensation or any rights. So the Palestinians know what the meaning

of these joint industrial zones is, and they know how badly they can affect them socially. Both the Israelis, and the Palestinian Authority and the international community, know that the Palestinians will never accept to just become slave labour in Israeli factories (or Palestinian factories — it doesn't matter) or to become cheap labour in these areas. So they had to build on poverty in the West Bank and in Gaza. And due to poverty and unemployment, people are driven to accept anything that is enforced on them — politically or economically. This is how you build peace here.

Jakob: And what roles are the occupation forces and the military going to play in terms of access to these zones?

Dawood: Of course, everything will be controlled by the military, but mainly by special security companies. Israel is maybe the only country in the world that still has compulsory army service. When you are 18 years old, boy or girl, you have to serve at least 2 months every year in the Israeli army until the age of 45. That's why they started a new industry here in Israel based on what they call 'home security', which is both technology companies producing items like cameras, sensors, security alarms, monitoring, and so on, and private security companies, which will work directly with the Israeli army on securing, for example, the industrial zones and the checkpoints of these zones. Actually all three of them will work there: 'the homeland security companies' will provide the cameras, the metal detectors, the sensors, the alarms, the x-rays, magnetic cards, identification systems, fingerprint systems - you can imagine yourselves what kind of systems... Then there will be an Israeli security company that will run all of this... with guns... and secure it, with a smaller number of Israeli forces that will help this company

work as professionally as possible. So these three together will control the industrial zones, and decide who is allowed to enter and who is not allowed to enter. So if you were at any point a 'bad' Palestinian, meaning that you were an activist resisting the Wall, whether as a militant or a politician — it doesn't matter here anymore — you will simply be forbidden to enter this industrial area, or you will never get a permit to enter these industrial zones.

Jakob: The International Community is using the rhetoric of the free market as a lever for what they call peace?

Dawood: The internationals claim that if the Israelis and the Palestinians felt that there will be a kind of profit, joint profit, or a profit if they join the project - that means that the conflict will end. The problem is that they are talking to an élite of Israelis and an élite of Palestinian politicians and businessmen. Both these groups will benefit from any condition, war or not war. They are ignoring totally the normal people on both sides. Let me give you an example: an Israeli salary in an Israeli factory inside Tel Aviv will be something like 7,000 shekels, but this idea of building peace is to move this factory to the border and bring in the Palestinian workers for 1,500 shekels to work in this industrial area. So they fire the Israeli worker and they use the Palestinian labourer as a slave in this factory. So the profit will only go to this élite. But actually, on the ground, both communities will hate each other even more; the Israeli labourer will think, look, the Palestinian labourer took my job, and the Palestinian labourer will think, look, the Israelis are forcing me to be a slave in their factory. So they are actually widening and sustaining the conflict here and not solving it.

Jakob: And finally, how do you view this peace plan in the long term; is it sustainable or what kind of resistance do you see coming?

Dawood: Look, let me tell you something about the Palestinian community: almost every 10 years there has been a revolution. But the biggest revolution, which was actually a social movement and not only a revolution, was the first intifada. Then came the second intifada, which was almost the same in the beginning. These two movements, especially the first one, happened at a time when Palestinians had their highest income in the history of the occupation. 1988 saw the highest income per person for Palestinians in the West Bank. But the revolution happened nevertheless, meaning that we are here as Palestinians; we are not looking for a job, or looking for income, or looking for I don't know what. We are looking for our human rights, you know, such as freedom: the freedom to choose, to go to elections, to build our social system, to sustain our social system, to end our health and education and social problems. This is what we are fighting for. Now, whether they build industrial zones, or they pump in millions of dollars or throw cash at people, or they find a third thing, the idea here is not what is our relation with the Israelis or the border; the idea is, 'what are our rights?'. And our resistance is based on this — 'what are our rights?'. So whatever they, do there will always be a new revolution against what is built unless it satisfies totally the Palestinian demand for independence and freedom. There are, of course, conditions: ending the occupation, accepting that Jerusalem is the capital for the Palestinians, giving the right to move, the right to trade, the right to get married even, and the right to have the chance to give birth

to children. Then, I think, after that is implemented, there can be an option to sustain this peace. Unless they accept this, any project that will be implemented will only sustain the conflict.

Submitted by JJ 20.47

21st of July, 2008

The Cartoons

When I was on my way today through the busy streets towards Al Manara Square in the centre of Ramallah, a man started walking along side me. He was limping slightly and was struggling to keep up with my pace. I looked at him briefly but continued at my own tempo. Then he spoke to me and asked me to slow down my speed a bit. He pointed to his leg and said that he couldn't move very fast; it was Israeli bullets that were stuck in his hip and which had crippled him. I looked at him with a quizzical expression and he asked me where I came from. As usual, I said that I came from Copenhagen. When I said this, he immediately reacted by asking me why we wanted to humiliate the Prophet. Why had we published the Muhammad cartoons?

We were still walking side by side when the man grabbed my wrist tightly. I continued to walk and tried at the same time to pull my wrist out of his grip but he held on tightly. I told him that I had nothing to do with the drawings and that I didn't agree with them being published, but he continued asking why I wanted to degrade the Prophet. He suddenly pulled me through the mass of people right across the pavement and looked at me saying 'security forces' — and revealed

that he was in some way or another related to the security forces. I went along with him, but said loud and clear that he now had to listen to what I had to say. He held up a finger to his mouth signalling that I should be quiet. I was taken over to a group of men who stood on a corner and he told them that I was from Denmark and that Denmark, apart from the Muhammad cartoons, also had deployed forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. I didn't think that the situation was particularly dangerous and his friends on the corner looked at him and just started smiling. They weren't interested. He let go of my wrist but he continued to question me about Danish foreign policy in the Middle East. He was clearly well informed. I tried several times to get through to him, 'now listen!', but where before he'd put a finger to his mouth, he now covered both his ears with his hands, showing me that he didn't want to listen. Anyhow, I told him about how I did everything I could to distance myself from the Danish government and that I in no way represented Denmark, but he didn't want to listen and so I left quickly, disappearing into the crowd of people heading towards the centre of Ramallah.

Before I'd left for the West Bank, I'd heard many stories about Danes who hadn't dared to talk about where they came from when travelling in the Middle East. On the website of the Danish Foreign Ministry, any travelling in the occupied territories was discouraged but I simply wouldn't let myself be intimidated by having a Danish passport as I in no way agree with the policies of the Danish Government and its cultural war against Muslims. The Muhammad cartoons were, in my opinion, simply abusive towards a minority in Denmark and directly connected to the racist policies of the government. The case was not about freedom of expression at all — there

was never any doubt about whether the drawings could or could not be published. They were simply published without any problems at all.

Although I don't support the policies of the Danish Government, I nonetheless happen to represent Denmark as a Dane, which I can understand, although the state and the population are two separate things. However, I felt a total reversal of the usual power relations when the slightly mad man simply refused to listen to me. This was pretty much in line with the self-righteous arrogance of the Danish government when the unrest started. To begin with, it refused to even listen to the waves of criticism flowing in from the Arabic societies. Here, then, was the crippled Palestinian who refused to let me speak or to explain that he was treating me unjustly. What I experienced was powerlessness, combined with the frustration of not being recognised as a person. My anger turned mostly to the Danish Government, whose stupidity had just put my life in danger.

Submitted by JJ 08:23

22nd of July, 2008

Qualandya Refugee Camp

Qualandya Refugee Camp is one of Ramallah's three refugee camps. The camp is close to the Qualandya checkpoint but, of course, on the Palestinian side of the Wall. There are about 13,000 refugees in the camp; people who during the war of 1948 and the years after, had been driven out of Jaffa, Ramleh and other cities in what is now considered Israel. Qualandya was founded in 1953, and after 60 years is still functioning as a UN refugee camp.

The Centre for Jerusalem Studies had organised a visit to the camp, and so this was a good opportunity to get a closer impression of the life and living conditions of Palestinian refugees. I had driven past the camp many times on my way to Jerusalem but had always hesitated to visit the area because I wasn't comfortable with the thought of being a tourist in a refugee camp. However, Jerusalem Studies organise proper trips there every once in a while and it's my experience that Palestinians are usually very happy to have visitors so that they can tell about their living conditions, stories that we foreigners can take with us to the rest of the world.

As the trip started in Jerusalem, I took a service taxi-bus from Ramallah to the checkpoint and met the group in the camp, after spending some time looking for them. I found the group on its way to one of the UN-run schools. The refugees that live in the camp try as much as possible to preserve the temporary nature of the place, as it is a refugee camp and not a permanent settlement. The aim for the refugees and their children is to return to the places in Israel from which they fled; an important aspect of Palestinian self-perception is this 'right to return'. This is why the camp doesn't have any local council and the refugees consistently try to avoid establishing any structures that might give the impression that the camp is developing into a permanent village or something similar. In this way, we only met representatives of the various centres in the camp, as there are no representatives of the camp as such, apart from the UN who also own the area where the camp is located. The schools here are divided into a girls' and a boys' school. Both are run by the UN. Hudda from Jerusalem Studies told us that there were around 35 pupils in each class and that the school ran

from 1st to 9th grade. If you wanted to continue education after 9th grade, you have to look for it outside the camp. Summer school was on at the moment and so there was a group of girls looking and smiling at us while one of the employees at the school told us about the education they offer in the camp. After that we went on a tour of the camp through its small winding roads until we reached the wide open landscape on the other side of the camp. The Qualandya camp lies high on a hilltop but on the next hill, which is slightly higher, there was an Israeli settlement. It seems a repetitive pattern that there are settlements close to all refugee camps overlooking the cluster of small, tightly built buildings. This is the pattern in several places in Ramallah and the surrounding area. It's pretty symbolic, as well as very practical, that the colonising power can in this way continuously keep an eye on the colonised people below.

The area between the refugee camp and the settlement is in Zone C, and so is under Israeli control. Ramallah, though, has growing pains and so the city is expanding and spilling over into the Israeli-controlled areas. Nasser, one of the people who lives in the camp, was showing us around and told us that the Israelis frequently came with bulldozers and tore down people's homes that didn't have a building permit. Within recent years, in the space just between the camp and the settlement, 8-9 houses had been torn down without warning. The Israelis simply don't give building permission in the more than 60% of the West Bank that is Zone C. More than 1,600 Palestinian buildings have been torn down by the Israelis between 2000 and 2007, even buildings which were built before the Zones had been implemented. The Zones were a result of the Oslo Accords.

From this viewpoint over towards the settlement, we walked to one of the first buildings that had been built in the camp by the UN in the 1950s. It stood like an empty shell, and as an example of the living conditions of the refugees in the camp. It was probably 3 x 3 metres, and was to be the temporary home for an entire Palestinian family. Some of the Palestinians on the tour said that this house was pure luxury compared to the conditions in some of the other camps: Jalazone camp, for example, on the other side of Ramallah. As we stood there between the empty concrete walls, it was all a bit abstract and not that easy to understand, but the space definitely wasn't big. The tour ended in the social centre of the camp where there were toys and sewing equipment on the shelves. This was where we were going to have lunch: falafel and bread. The tour was perhaps a bit too touristy and there were many people who had never before

dared enter the occupied territories. Although I am, to some extent, a tourist here as well, the atmosphere was just a bit too voyeuristic despite the effort of our guides who did their best to talk about life in the camp. However, I was happy about the visit but sneaked off and took the service taxi back to Ramallah before the bus with the rest of the group carried on to the Amari camp in the centre of the city.

Submitted by JJ 14:23

23rd of July, 2008

The Wall and the checkpoint

There are an endless number of pictures of the Wall and there are an endless number of pictures of checkpoints. Many of the local visual artists who live on the West Bank are sick of those images. It's like the whisky bottle in the gangster movie. They have become the standard ingredient in much visual art as well as in many of the films that are produced about Palestine. This is also the case in locally produced artworks, but to a larger extent in the work of visiting Western artists and filmmakers. Images of the Wall and of the checkpoints keep the Palestinian people in a frozen image of the situation in the West Bank; this is the general opinion here in Ramallah amongst the people I hang out with. The Wall and the checkpoints are built by the Israelis and are their work. By making them a representation of the people confined by these facilities, you turn the Palestinians into silenced victims. The Wall is already in our heads, as the local people say, and so it doesn't have to be reinforced any further by the continuous repetition of these images. So images of the Wall and checkpoints are contested representations.

For some reason, though, this ban made it somehow attractive and interesting for me to also reproduce these images of the Wall and checkpoints. I'm not sure what it was that drove me but maybe this crime would, for me, create a deeper understanding of these images and how they function. For this reason, I got up early Sunday morning and went to Qualandya to photograph and film the Wall and the checkpoint. I can clearly understand the analysis of how images of the Wall and checkpoints work in reinforcing the persistence of the Wall and Israeli control. So, every time you reproduce an image of the Wall you strengthen it on a symbolic level. The question is then: which representations could then contribute to smashing these facilities. With these considerations in the back of my mind, I recorded images of the Wall and the Qualandya checkpoint. I wanted to penetrate the power of these images. In a kind of way, it's similar to what Godard had done in his film about Palestine, 'Here and Elsewhere' from 1970. He said that there are too many images of revolution but too few actual revolutions. In a similar vein you could say that there are too many images staging a critique of the Wall and too few who actually do anything to make the Wall crackle. For me, this excursion was perhaps the first step in developing a critique of representation with regard to the occupation and to also consider which images not only represent and reproduce, but which ones actually contribute to smashing these constructions, concretely and symbolically.

Submitted by JJ 11:17

25th of July, 2008

Funk in West Jerusalem

Jerusalem is divided in many different ways. The most striking division is the Wall through East Jerusalem which prevents many Palestinians in the eastern suburbs and neighbouring towns from getting to Jerusalem. East of the city, the Wall winds its way far into the West Bank. Then there is the Green Line, which divides East Jerusalem from West Jerusalem. Over the course of the years, the Israelis have done everything in their power to erase this ceasefire line from 1948, which is the only border in Jerusalem that is recognised by the international community. Jerusalem's Old City, with the Dome of the Rock mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Wailing Wall, lies just outside of the Green Line and are, on paper, still part of the occupied territories. West Jerusalem is the heart of the self-proclaimed capital of Israel. The Knesset, the Israeli parliament, and many other state institutions are located in this area. The foreign embassies are still located in Tel Aviv, as Jerusalem is not internationally acknowledged as the capital of Israel. In 1980, the Israelis single-handedly had claimed Jerusalem as their capital.

Adham, one of the circle of people from the Palestinian creative class that I'd been hanging out with in Ramallah, told me one day that he often went out to West Jerusalem to have a good time and party until late at night. There was much more going on in the West than the East where there isn't much happening anymore, especially at night. In West Jerusalem there is music and partying, although it's still no match for Tel Aviv which is the real party city in Israel. Even West Jerusalem is heavily affected by religion, which puts a

lid on things at the same time as it creates a tense atmosphere. Adham is a Palestinian born in Israel and so he knows about life 'inside'. I asked him if he would take me to West Jerusalem one day when he happened to be going there. I'd never been west of the Old City and was curious about what people got up to on the other side. Distances are short here and we're talking about neighbourhoods perhaps 500m on the other side of the Old City, but which might as well have been on a different planet.

On Thursday evening I got a text message: 'Meet me at Qualandya checkpoint at 20:00'. Pola came along and we stood in the sunset at the Wall and the checkpoint. We spent the time we waited having a closer look at the area of the checkpoint where all pedestrians and passengers in cars and busses have to walk through on foot in order to get through to Jerusalem. I'd heard that the system here was high-tech and depersonalised, but it turned out to be the same cattle-style arrangement as in Nablus, where Palestinians are led through small fenced-off passageways. The Israeli soldiers sit in their armed small sheds and communicate via loudspeakers, and so you constantly hear amplified voices commanding people to move forward and the metallic clicking sounds of the metal turnstiles. One of the countless small boys selling gum held us hostage for the half hour we waited for Adham. Inside and outside the checkpoint there was a constant stream of people being dropped off and picked up. The ability of Palestinians to work around and adapt to the Israeli obstructions is fascinating to see, and around the Qualandya checkpoint there is an entire little community of vendors and people hanging out and drinking tea while obviously waiting for friends or family to pass through the checkpoint.

Adham arrived in his mother's car and picked us up. We weren't going through the Qualandya checkpoint as Adham doesn't have permission, in fact, to go to the West Bank. We were going to go through the so-called 'settler checkpoint' further south. Qualandya lies about 10-15 km on the inside of the West Bank and that's still quite far to the Green Line. However, that's a different story entirely. Tonight we were going to rave in the West. Adham didn't really feel like being a guide when we drove through West Jerusalem and pointed here and there but in the end just said, 'It doesn't make sense', and so we just continued driving while looking out of the windows of the car. There was a McDonald's here and a Starbucks there and generally the city life that reminded me very much of southern European cities. We drove through 'The German Quarter' where there were cafés and pizzerias with service and tables on the pavement outside, full of sun-tanned people in shorts and bare shoulders. We were looking for Safafa which is an Arabic village in the West. Adham told us that the Arabic villages are hidden and that it's almost impossible to find them by car as there's often only a single road leading there, often like a side street off a side street. We were going to pick up Adham's friend Dirar, and Adham had to ask for directions several times before we found the little side street to the side street that would take us to Safafa.

Dirar had lived in Barcelona for eight years and was an educated film director. He now teaches at Birzeit University in Ramallah but still lives in Safafa when he wasn't staying with Adham in Ramallah. We drove around a bit and finally found a bar where our night out could start. There were security guards at the entrance with metal detectors and

Dirar automatically lifted his T-shirt to show that he didn't have any bombs strapped to him. He probably did it mostly as a provocation, as Arabs in Israel are treated with a lot of prejudice and fear. Just speaking Arabic on the streets in West Jerusalem instantly creates a sense of fear. At least this was what they told me. I asked Adham and Dirar if there was any danger in speaking Arabic here and they laughed a bit and said that, as an Arab, you had a kind of power in the West because the Israelis were so paranoid. The bar they'd chosen was a bar with both Palestinian and Israeli people inside, so they'd clearly chosen a place where Palestinians would also feel welcome. There was a DJ working hard to get people on the dance floor, and there was Carlsberg and Taybeh on tap in the bar. It didn't take long for our Palestinian friends to start gently rocking out in their chairs. Dirar said that you can always tell the difference between an Israeli and a Palestinian dancing: the Israelis just jumped up and down and couldn't dance at all. I was probably closer to the Israelis when it came to this.

After a few hours, the bar had filled up, and the volume had risen and so it was time to move on. We walked through a pedestrianised street with cafés and bars on both sides packed with people and loud techno music. There were security forces amongst the kissing couples and drinking teenagers and I couldn't help thinking that most of the kids here were quite likely to also be soldiers. As with so much else here in Palestine, there is always a void between what one sees and what one knows, and the carefree life here most likely hides a much more disturbed daily life than what we know about from Europe. On the way out of the party area, we met a young couple where the guy had a massive

machine gun hanging over the shoulder of his white T-shirt. I asked what that was about, and Adham and Dirar said with a smirk: 'A Super Jew' — which probably meant that he was a settler. The night was still young and we carried on to several bars and falafel joints until, in the early morning, we started heading back towards the distant world on the other side of the Wall in Ramallah. When I woke the next day I was pretty groggy and felt that our trip to West Jerusalem had been more like a strange dream-like movie than the usual crazy night out.

Submitted by JJ 11:33

26th of July, 2008

The Green Laser

Pola asked me if I wanted to come with her to visit Yasser Arafat's monumental tomb. She'd met Ahmed who wanted to show us the grand construction. He had been hired by the Palestinian Authority to organise a live stream over the net with real-time footage of the monument for the pleasure of all Palestinians in Gaza, Israel and people throughout the rest of the world who don't have access to Ramallah. So Ahmed knew the monument pretty well. We agreed to meet outside the entrance to the monument, which is part of the PA's headquarters where Mahmoud Abbas holds office. It was this set of buildings that had shouldered the Israeli attack and siege in 2002, where almost all the buildings had been torn down around Yasser Arafat until there was pretty much just a single room standing for him to shelter in. This was the closest the Israelis dared come to killing the Palestinian leader. Two yeas later he died, supposedly from cancer.

I was coming from the opposite end of the city and so I took a taxi to the Arafat monument. When I told the driver where I was going, he told me in a kind of answer, that he came from the Amari refugee camp and asked me if I knew of it. Yes, I knew it, I said. He then started telling me that the PA was about to sell off his rights as a refugee. Money couldn't compensate for their lost homes in Ramleh, Lod or Jaffa. No amount could ever compensate for their losses, not millions or even trillions. He was convinced that the PA was selling his rights to the Israelis and said, as so many had here before, that the next Intifada would be aimed at the PA because the Palestinian authorities were no longer concerned with listening to the needs of their people and even less to the population of refugees. The PA was more interested in talking to the USA and the Israelis. I asked him if he really believed that he and his family would ever be able to move back to their towns in Israel. He was sure of it. Nothing could ever replace what had been taken from them. His anger towards the PA couldn't be mistaken. We had soon arrived at the large Arafat monument, so I shook hands with him and said 'Good luck' — and really hoped that he would be right. Some day he might finally be able to move home, even though it seemed very unlikely.

The monument is a comprehensive set of buildings that apart from Arafat's tomb also includes a mosque. The buildings and tiled ground of white marble reflected the strong sunlight and made the brightness almost unbearable. Pola had already arrived and Ahmed came in his car a little while after. He had to clear us with the security guards before we could get in to the compound. There were hardly any people inside the large metal gate and the wide ramp that

led up to the actual monumental grave also reflected the white sunlight and warmed our feet. Ahmed mentioned that Obama had been here the day before but there were no signs of that now, just as there had hardly been any mention of it in the local media. It was an official event that didn't interest people much. To the left of the ramp there was a large marble relief with a huge inscription. It was a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet. It was a poem praising Palestine and Arafat in the form of a single huge Arabic symbol. At the end of the ramp there was a square building with large glass sections on each side. We could see Arafat's gravestone as a silhouette through the glass. There were two soldiers stationed as honorary guards behind the stone and when we walked in, the two soldiers stood to attention and stared stiffly into the air. The text on the gravestone was in Arabic with dates, etc. An older Arabic couple were also inside with us and the woman was clearly touched by the significance of the place and cried after having kissed the stone. Ahmed told us that Arafat had a near divine status in Palestine. The monumental tomb gives a similar impression. There were no images of Arafat or any descriptions of his deeds and this iconoclasticism added to the pious atmosphere alongside the mosque and the very tall minaret. The white marble reinforced this impression, especially as all the rest of the buildings in the city are built with yellow Jerusalem stone. The entire set of buildings gave off an atmosphere of reverence. Ahmed said that the minaret was equipped with a green laser that could project a sharp green laser ray all the way to the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem. The idea was that this light should shine continuously in order to maintain a connection between this national Palestinian monument and East

Jerusalem, but the laser has only been tested once after which the Israelis had said 'Thanks, but that's enough now', and forbidden it. Ahmed thought that it was sufficient that people knew the laser was here and could reach the Dome of the Rock mosque even if it couldn't shine continuously. After we'd left the square building with Arafat's grave, we saw that the soldiers had relaxed and had started talking with each other. Very typical and encouraging to know that they were taking it easy and didn't have to stand like statues when no one was there. They probably also had coffee hidden behind the stone too.

Submitted by JJ 11:30

27th of July, 2008

The Palestinian bagpipes

As a strange and distant memory, I remember a news item I had seen once on Danish TV where a Palestinian pipe band was marching in a parade through a town in Palestine. Not that it had always been there in my mind, but the memory surfaced again after I came to Ramallah. A Palestinian bagpipe band! I joked about it with my Palestinian friends on several occasions, but they told me that there actually were Palestinian pipe bands. They play at festive times, at Christmas and Easter, when they march through the streets in the big Palestinian cities. After hearing this, the Palestinian bagpipes gradually became something of an obsession for me. Why do they play this mysterious and fascinating instrument in Palestine, something that when normally placed on the cultural map of the world belongs in Scotland?

In the course of time during my stay, I had been to quite a few concerts and rehearsals with students from the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music. They played on instruments that were normally associated with classical European music, or traditional Palestinian folklore. I had heard violins playing Mozart and ouds playing classical Palestinian music, but I'd never seen or heard the bagpipes which clearly weren't part of the classical Palestinian music course for which the Conservatory is responsible. Samar told me that the Easter and Christmas parades were normally arranged by the Palestinian scout movement, and that the bagpipe bands were probably mostly based in the scout movement, or maybe in the Palestinian security forces. So the Palestinian bagpipes were associated with the military culture (of which the scouting movement is also a part). The pipe bands were part of the Palestinian armed forces. Samar promised me she would ask her brother whether there was a band in Ramallah. He had some connection with the scout movement and he could probably help if I wanted to get in touch with a band.

One of the reasons I became so fascinated with the Palestinian bagpipe was that in many ways it short circuits the usual cultural divisions and creates disorder in the categories that have to do with cultural authenticity and ownership of particular forms of cultural expression. This is especially true in Palestine, where war is constantly being waged and land is being claimed precisely on the basis of arguments about indigenous rights and cultural authenticity. "We were here first, it was us who built the first temple", etc. In this context the bagpipes were such a fantastically concrete indication that cultures are constantly being mixed, absorbing other

cultures and splitting into new cultures. Also, I have always, in fact, been greatly attracted to the mysterious and intense sound of this instrument.

After researching the background of the bagpipes a little, I found out that, historically speaking, it isn't particularly Scottish at all. The Romans brought it with them to the British Isles and the Scots adopted it. Most people immediately associate the bagpipe with the Scots and my initial assumption was that the Palestinian bagpipe was a remnant of the colonial period and the British Mandate that ruled here from after World War One until 1948. This story of its origins is, perhaps, also true for the present day Palestinian bagpipes. But, in fact, the bagpipe can be traced back to the Middle East. The first known depiction of a bagpipe comes from ancient Mesopotamia, with precursors in ancient Egypt existing long before European culture emerged. So, if you see it that way, the bagpipe is not authentically Scottish at all and today the bagpipe is played in many cultures: in the Basque Country and in Serbia, amongst other places.

When I got back to Samar and asked if there was any news from her brother, she smiled and said she'd actually thought I was joking. She didn't think I was really that interested. However, I insisted that it had truly become something of a project for me. After that things moved quite fast, as they had to, since my stay was very soon coming to an end. It turned out that the only bagpipe band that practices regularly on the West Bank is based at 'The First Ramallah Group', which is the meeting place of the scouts in Ramallah. I've walked past their activity centre almost every day, since it's on the way to where I live. Someone is almost always playing basketball, watching films in the outdoor cinema

and drinking coffee at the café tables under the pine trees. I hadn't seen any particular signs of scouting, such as shorts, bivouacs or timber huts as we know them from the scouts in Denmark. The First Ramallah Group mainly had the character of a youth club, but here, it seems, there was also a bagpipe band that practiced regularly.

Samar had been talking to the leader of the band. He had wondered why a foreign artist was interested in the band and wanted to meet them. When we finally met, he was very friendly and actually seemed very proud of his band. I told him I was really fond of bagpipe music. It turned out they were practicing that same evening and I was welcome to come and film them as they played. It was like a dream that came true when they put the pipes to their mouths, and the buzzing monotone sound spread through the area. There were six people in the band. Two beat the drums and four played the bagpipes. They were all very young, perhaps in their early twenties, and they assembled on the basketball field to practice their repertoire. They were wearing jeans and T-shirts like most of the men down here. From the bagpipes hung ribbons and tassels in traditional Scottish clan colours combined with Palestinian flags. They played several traditional Palestinian tunes, for example Wein ala Ramallah and the Palestinian national anthem, as well as some Scottish marches. It was quite a special experience.

Submitted by JJ 21:36

28th of July, 2008

I slowly learned to live with the weapons

After being in the occupied territories for nearly six weeks, I now had to start packing my things. My daily life here had been characterised by a high level of intensity, lots of socialising, parties and endless discussions and I had mixed feelings about leaving Ramallah. On the one hand, I was tired because of all the experiences, impressions and the high level of intensity, but, on the other hand, I was sad to have to leave all the incredible people I have met, many of whom had become my friends. They had welcomed me in to their lives with no reservations and they'd become a part of my everyday life here as a temporary guest.

My life in the limestone house of Al Tireh had stabilised into a kind of daily life, or at least some recognisable daily patterns had emerged. The people in the local supermarket had started to greet me when I came to buy fruit, yoghurt and lots of water and I'd found a favourite chocolate out of the selection on their shelves and had understood that they don't sell beer and other alcoholic beverages as it's a 'Muslim supermarket'. Alcohol had to be bought in the Christian shops.

I had become used to writing in my blog almost every morning and it felt good to filter through my experiences in this way and to take a break to reflect on what had happened over the days. The nightmares of violent searches of my house that I had when I first arrived had slowly dissolved, and all the weapons I constantly faced in the West Bank no longer frightened me. When the Israeli soldier leaned over me in the bus and her automatic rifle nudged me on the shoulder, it was just normal to me now — or at least it had

become normal. The armed guards that turn up outside of the house every evening had become people that I greet when I got home late in the evening. Their AK47 machine guns were just part of their gear.

The first nights that I slept in my apartment, I had had some terrible nightmares; a kind of after image from all the documentaries about Israeli attacks and abuses in the occupied territories that I had seen, mixed in with images of the heavily armed guards just outside my door who sat around their fire all night long. Yet another addition to the general atmosphere was my landlord's guard dog that was chained up right outside my window. It was a large German Shepherd who during the night would regularly start barking and howling in tune with the other chained dogs in the area. The armed guards outside turned out to be stationed there in order to protect the head of intelligence of the Palestinian army who lived in the house below. I never really found out what they were protecting him from because the Israelis usually use advanced remote controlled rockets if they want to kill Palestinians who they want to get out of the way. Perhaps they were posted there to protect him against rival Palestinian factions.

However, it is actually quite frightening to realise to what extent I have accepted living in a war zone and how I've got used to the weapons of which there are so many here. This adaptation, though, must nonetheless get stored somehow in the nervous system and the potential violence that, like an evil spirit, is present everywhere spreads across all of the occupied territories, showing its face constantly through daily shootings and killings. So it had slowly become part of my everyday life, actually a horrible thought but which says

something about what war does to human beings. I remembered the words of a researcher of evolution: the human is the animal that can adapt to anything.

Submitted by JJ 11:44

29th of July, 2008

'Check more'

A very common source of worry and discussions for people in the West Bank is departure from Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. All people leaving Israel face a thorough and drawn-out control process. Palestinians with a West Bank ID cannot travel through Israel and instead have to travel over 'the Bridge' and through Jordan; and, of course, it's only those who get permission from the Israeli authorities who can go. If you live in Gaza you cannot leave, not even to visit the West Bank. People like me with an international passport, though, depart via Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. There are many Palestinians who have international passports who also do the same; but leaving is, for some reason, more troublesome than arriving in the country. You risk losing the right to travel to Israel and Palestine indefinitely. There are, apparently, over 100,000 people who have received this unconditional verdict, including, among others, many Palestinians with international passports. For example, Emily's sister Annemarie Jacir has been forbidden from returning, which is a bit of a disaster as that means that she now cannot visit family and friends and the place where she feels she belongs. Annemarie Jacir had recently shown her film, 'Salt of the Sea', at the Cannes Film Festival. The film is about Palestine and was filmed there. Leaving Palestine

is thus a widely discussed topic and is a feared aspect of visiting Palestine, for me also.

The usual strategy for international visitors who have been staying in Palestine is to lie and say that they have only visited the holy land, either as a pilgrim or tourist. You should never mention Ramallah or Nablus. If you do, then a two to three hour long interrogation is guaranteed to follow, as well as a thorough search of bags, computers, video films, mobile phones, etc. This is said to not be a very pleasant experience. Many have had their computers destroyed, images deleted and rolls of film exposed during these interrogations. Another minor detail is that you might miss your flight.

The day before my departure, I had met a guy who had had his computer destroyed and all his film exposed at the airport. So I was rather nervous when sitting in the taxi from Ramallah on Sunday morning. I had spent the last three nights at goodbye parties and was comfortably tired, although the hangover was bearable. The taxi driver was once again Youssef, the same driver who had picked me up at the airport six weeks ago. He was very knowledgeable and told me stories throughout the journey about the places we passed by, villages where in 1948 Jewish terrorist groups had driven out and killed entire populations, and other terrible things. I was tired and was trying to be attentive but it was also just sad to acknowledge that the terror that Palestinians live with historically and in the present is becoming normalised, even for me. When I had first arrived here I had been very aware and attentive and noted down everything that Youssef had told me during our drive from the airport to Ramallah. Now I was less attentive. Perhaps my nerves were all directed at Ben Gurion, or simply just

numbed by too many horrible stories and experiences over the past six weeks. Of course, the beer and smoke from the previous nights had left their marks too. Perhaps I had also incorporated the Palestinian phlegmatic survival strategy, I don't know.

When we got close to the airport, Youssef asked me what story I planned to tell them and I said that I'd probably say that I had been looking at culture in Jerusalem, or something like that. He said that it was not very easy to lie, but that I had to tell them when I was going though the first checkpoint outside the airport that I had only been in Jerusalem. 'Don't mention Ramallah', otherwise it would take an hour just to get into the airport. When we got to the checkpoint by the airport, we were taken aside immediately when the security guard noted that I had an Arab driver. First, Youssef told them something about Jerusalem in Hebrew, after which I was asked how long I had been in Israel and where I had stayed. I had stayed at the Jerusalem Hotel and the Ambassador and had been on an amazing cultural pilgrimage over the past six weeks. The security guard took Youssef's ID and my passport with him in to the security booth but quickly came back out and gave me both IDs and said 'Have a good journey'. Youssef quickly drove his Mercedes taxi out of the checkpoint, and asked if he could see my passport. I flipped it over so he could see both sides and it turned out that there was a little sticker on the back. Youssef said 'Quick, take it off — it will dry' and I peeled the little sticker off easily. Youssef said that it was a note to the security guards in the airport which said, as he expressed it: 'Check more'. They had tagged my passport because I'd arrived at the airport with an Arab. When I was dropped off outside the terminal, the same thing happened again. Apparently there

was security stationed outside the building as well that had seen me arrive with Youssef. I was stopped again before I entered the building and asked where I came from, where I had stayed, etc. I had had to go through a special check already before I had entered the terminal, but it was also a bit lucky as I had not quite yet decided whether I would tell the truth about Ramallah and take the rough ride, or if I should keep up the lie all the way through. However, I was kind of caught in the lie now and I got through the metal detector and the interview without problems. I had spent a long time deleting all traces of the West Bank from my baggage and sent books and presents back home in a separate package from the post office in East Jerusalem. All emails from the past two months were deleted and digital images and video tapes were also in the mail. And I had arrived at the airport four hours before departure.

The next check happened in the line for the check-in where I was waiting to have all my bags x-rayed. A very young girl came up to me and asked me where I had been, where I had stayed, etc. I tried to seem a bit dumb and disinterested and she didn't delve into any further details. She just put a sticker on my suitcase and bag with all kinds of codes and numbers. The largest number was a 5. I'd already heard that they worked with a security grading from 1-6 and thought that I was pretty fucked. At least a 5 was better than a 6. Most of the people around me had been given a 1 or a 2 but they were either Israelis or Jewish, and I heard that the security personnel were checking whether people could speak Hebrew and knew the Jewish religious holidays. Then they would get a 1 or a 2. There were no 3s or 4s, but I saw a young girl with a 6 who was having her toiletries bag searched. Then it was my turn to have my bags x-rayed, and

these got more stickers with big 5s pasted on them. I carried all the bags myself over to a large bench where everyone had their bags searched. When it was my turn, I was asked to open my suitcase and bag and especially my laptop. The girl didn't really ask me anything while she went through my things with a stick with a little napkin stuck on the end. Every once in a while she would take off the napkin and stick it in a machine that, from what I could tell, was a device for doing a molecular analysis of the traces on the napkin. She was probably searching for explosives. Once again I tried to seem disinterested and didn't put my things back into my bag until after she had encouraged me to a few times. She was about to put a special sticker on my bag but then looked at me inquisitively and decided not to. I stood there and looked a bit dazed. Then there was the airline check-in although I still didn't know if I was safe. I could see several normal looking tourists and business travellers around who also had the number 5 on their suitcases which calmed me down. At the same time I saw the young girl with the 6 being taken away by security guards.

It turned out that the first interview and the 5 had been the decisive checks, and I was only superficially questioned when I walked through passport control: 'Where have you been and where did you stay?' My hand luggage was once again x-rayed, opened up and swathed with the napkins before I was finally allowed to go to my gate. Approximately three hours had passed with these checks but I was pretty relieved after all the stories I'd heard of people being strip-searched, humiliated and held for an endless amount of interviews. These kinds of interrogations and investigations do not, of course, occur in the open, and for all the tourists the airport just seems like a normal airport. Somewhere

deep inside this building, though, there might be people who would have just lost their right to ever come back.

Submitted by JJ 11:44

29th of July, 2008

Certain death

When we finally took off from Ben Gurion airport and left Israel and Palestine behind, it was with mixed feelings. I was relieved to have gotten through the airport relatively easily, but I was also unsure of what had actually happened in the six weeks I had been in Ramallah. I had experienced an incredible hospitality and openness and had met people who I am sure are friends and who I will see again. Samar had even invited me to return next year, but I had also experienced something horrible that really affected me. I tried to see the Wall while the plane was ascending through the Israeli airspace (as the Palestinians don't have any airspace) and I hoped that I would be able to get a last glance at the landscape on the other side but all I could see was a strangely hazy landscape towards the east. I felt like I had been a witness to a natural disaster and was now on my way back to my safe home far from the destruction. My ability to organise and classify feelings and pack them into boxes isn't very good, and so I wasn't able to just put my experiences in Palestine behind me and focus on future projects and responsibilities at home even though it would be easier in every way. So this split filled me with uneasiness. We were soon over the sea and Palestine, the Wall, the beers, the dope, SnowBar, the settlements and weapons disappeared behind me at 600-700 km per hour. Everything, though, was

also still with me here on the plane and I could feel that it had left deep marks in my consciousness.

Next to me were two young Israelis who apparently were going to Zurich just as I was. I was tired and didn't feel like talking to anyone. However, I couldn't help myself from thinking that these two young guys must have been enrolled in the Israeli army and had in some way or another contributed to the occupation. They were young and very trendy with short hair and seemed very confident. So these bodies right next to me were in some way or another connected with the evil that I felt that I had truly experienced. At least this was my immediate feeling, but I shut off my brain with my iPod and a few bottles of wine and snoozed most of the way back to Europe.

When we got close to Zurich, the guy next to me turned to me and said that he wanted to ask me a question. He wanted to know if I knew anything about the countryside in Tuscany. The two guys wanted to get out into nature and apparently figured that I knew something about the possibilities in northern Italy. He said that they were going first to Goetheanum in Dornach to a festival of theosophy for a week. They were Steiner (Waldorf) students. While we were speaking, he was suffering quite a bit from the pressure changes during the landing, but he continued the conversation despite the pressure in his ears. He was very preoccupied by existential questions and seemed to be very inquisitive and we had a quite diffuse but momentarily interesting discussion. He asked me where I had been and I answered that I had been to Ramallah. I'd got used to lying, but thought that I might as well be honest and see where it would lead to as I was out of the conflict area now. He frowned, and asked me what I

had been doing there. I told him that I had been invited to teach at ArtSchool Palestine and he seemed quite surprised that there were any art schools at all in the West Bank. We spoke a bit about the conflict and I couldn't help but ask if they had been in the Israeli army and whether they had been soldiers. He lifted a finger and turned it around a bit next to his temple and said that he had been in the army but couldn't handle it. He'd had a breakdown after nine months and completed the rest of his service at a desk in an office. He had become crazy, he told me. This was not the story that I'd expected, but then on the other hand I don't know what I had expected. I asked about what they knew about the West Bank; I tried explaining to them that there are art schools, universities and a vibrant cultural life on the other side, but he looked at me and said: 'It is widely known that it would be certain death for me, as an Israeli, to go to the West Bank. There are enough examples of that. It would be certain death.' I didn't really know how to answer him, but it was clear that he was convinced that he would be killed if he entered the Palestinian areas. However, the only truly barbaric experience I had witnessed in the West Bank was the Israeli occupation.

Submitted by JJ 23.09

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by Jakob Jakobsen

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