

# Conquering spaces of complicit amnesia in Jerusalem: portrait of two independent art institutions

A walk between two independent art institutions in the east and west of Jerusalem shows us how far society is still fractured in the city, and the role of art in conflict.



*Eyad Baba, "Gaza", Palestine, 2009, on display as part of the exhibition "HomeLessHome" in 2010 at the Museum on the Seam. All rights reserved. Only a 15 minutes walk through the dusty streets of Jerusalem takes us from Al Ma'mal foundation in the east, to the Museum on the Seam in the west of the city; a walk through the monotone ochre coloured streets, framed by street sellers and a bustling highway. Located in the heart of the conflict, the two art organisations take a stance and a position from within: being based in Jerusalem around the old city centre, Al Ma'mal and the Museum on the Seam shed light on the everyday friction between Palestine and Israel, speaking up through art.*

It is this short 15 minutes walk which lets us cross borders: through religions ; through politics; through history and society. Crossing a land that has been claimed by Muslims, Jews and Christians over the course of time, crossing from east to west, between two exceptional art organizations.

Both art foundations provide a space for criticism

The locations of both art organizations are no coincidence, but a meaningful position. Both are based on the lines of a deeply fractured society; The socio-political Museum on the Seam is binding physical borders, located in a former army outpost which once marked the frontier between Israel and Jordan, today's green line. The art foundation Al Ma'mal is located within the old city of Jerusalem, where Christians, Muslims and Jews hold some of their most holy sites - the Temple Mount, the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The Museum on the Seam is focusing on socio-political topics, some of them are to be found on the edge of Israel's condition and the art foundation Al Ma'mal is forming a persistent and stable representation of Palestinian art in Jerusalem. Both art foundations provide a space for criticism, in the centre of Jerusalem and its society.



*Museum on the Seam's debris facade. All rights reserved. The non-profit organization Al Ma'mal, founded in 1998 by a group of artists, architects*

*and activists, supports the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign. By boycotting the Israeli state and its institutions, Al Ma'mal is aiming to stop international support for Israel's position towards Palestine. "Governmental funding is impossible. Even if we would accept Israeli support, the right-winged government would prohibit and shut us down immediately" reflects Aline Khoury, program coordinator of Al Ma'mal.*

These financial limits shaped the art organization to what it is: a space that is both created by and creating a community. By deriving revenues through organizing workshops with educational outreach, residencies, concerts, and other cultural events, it offers a platform in the neighbourhood for people to meet, learn and re-connect. The name of the organization is honouring the deeply interwoven neighbourhood, as it is unchanged since the location used to be a tile factory, the soul of the quarter.

Al Ma'mal is a pillar of the art scene in East-Jerusalem, defending a cultural life that mainly has moved to Ramallah. Its curation is a vital proof of Palestinian existence, setting a sign beyond the political news, being acknowledged for its quality and engagement in art circles by renowned platforms, such as [E-Flux](#), [artsy](#) and [ArtAsiaPacific](#).

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The foundation's mission is to reanimate Palestinian presence through exhibiting Palestinian art in the heart of Jerusalem. Encouraging especially young Palestinian artists, Al Ma'mal is trying to shed light on the conflict by putting Palestinian artists back into the discourse, while staying independent.

As much as privatised institutions have the freedom to express opinions more freely than government-led institutions, they are fully relying on the

courtesy of the donors and commonly struggle for funds. Al Ma'mal refuses any Israeli funding and thus is constantly applying for new funds and as the German Holzbrinck family cut their support, also the Museum on the Seam finds itself in an exceptional financial drought. Despite their variation, the two outstanding and outspoken institutions face similar monetary hardships, abstaining from any financial support from the Israeli state.

The building of the Museum on the Seam, right next to the light rail that marks the invisible border between East and West Jerusalem, appears like an old villa, yet disturbingly different: A huge crater hollows out half the façade, windows are bricked up, parts of the building look like debris. A feeling of instability arises when passing through the door directly underneath a balcony, that is marked by bullet holes. It strikes one as a surprise, to step into a perfectly clean exhibition, thereafter. The contradicting aesthetics of the building can itself be understood as a symbol for society's fraction, in a country where appearance is always maintained.

The first series of exhibitions at the Museum on the Seam started between 2005 and 2008, looking at human rights issues. The series tackled the vulnerable point of Israel's ill condition, drawing the blurring line between normal and abnormal situations. It crystallized what life in Israel is about: when a temporary emergency situation becomes daily reality, when this state of emergency gets accepted by the silent majority and violence establishes itself as an unaltered part of life.

After opening the museum in 1983, it has been generously funded by the German Holzbrinck family and therefore had the means and, over the years, also gained the reputation to invite some of the most important contemporary artists, internationally, such as Wim Wenders or Anselm von Kiefer, as well as nationally like Yael Bartana, Sliman Mansour, Moshe Gershuni or Fouad Agbaria. The curation gives equal space to

international as well as to Israeli and Palestinian artists, overcoming political differences and reconciling politically determined oppositions. International papers such as [Spiegel](#), [CNN](#), [The New York Times](#) honoured the Museum on the Seam for its cultural value and its outstanding exhibitions. "We had exhibitions which had to do with every aspect of the real topics of our society. The conflict is so huge but at the time we never dealt with it." explains Raphi Edgar, curator of the Museum of the Seam.

The significance of both these art institutions is not solely articulated through the acclaim they receive in art circles, but by offering a free and open channel to talk about a polarised conflict, something that is rarely found. Whereas mainstream media are often strongly biased and rarely independent, art has the ability to approach uncomfortable topics in a more sublime manner and with more variety. The ambivalence of the visual language of art thematises and combines issues in such a sophisticated way, that it may speak louder than verbal communication. "Art is a language which is international and which can be perceived by all nationalities and backgrounds" finds David Amichai, Press Manager of the museum.

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The curation of the two institutions, Al Ma'mal and the Museum on the Seam, managed to establish platforms for artists and topics that are preferred to be annihilated by the state institutions. The exhibitions oftentimes serve as amplifiers to the voices in society, that politicians and mass media knowingly mute and neglect.

In the end, the function of both art institutions is not only to convey issues through the correlation between ideology and art. Al Ma'mal and the Museum on the Seam enliven art as communicator without boundaries and, thus, construct an organ of freedom of speech at a point

where politicians fail. With the increasing move to the right especially with the current Israeli government which is suppressing dialogue between and within frontiers, it is the language of art that can provide a space for the formation of opinions. Art in this context does not only reflect reality but constructs a possible world. Amid a polarising conflict, it offers access beyond political stigmatization to the perspectives and voices of the people, and thus to another truth.

As much as the ideal of arts' ability to mediate and communicate kindles hope, in fact the monetary struggle has been hitting these institutions more and more in recent years. Above all, the wounds of the conflict seem to be ripped open in this border-wasteland of Jerusalem more than anywhere else in the country. As much as peace is sought after, the urgency for equal rights prevails and is always propagated by the two institutions, Al Ma'mal and the Museum on the Seam.

It's a 15 minutes walk that makes us realize how far society is still fractured in today's Jerusalem.