

Public Movement



Also Then? 2009
official group
photograph outside
the Olympic Stadium
in Berlin

Dancing in the Streets /
How long is now? 2011
performance during
the Occupy social
protests, Tel Aviv



One evening in early February this year, I waited for an appointment in the crowded lobby of a large Manchester hotel. After confirming my identity by presenting my passport, a young female assistant with a clipboard ticked my name off her list. Photography and filming, I was told, were not allowed. After some minutes I was introduced to a dark-haired, neatly attired woman who, during the next 20 minutes, imparted a complex story containing a great deal of information, about which I was not allowed to take notes but was requested to memorise, to the best of my ability. I was one of several who had signed up to take part in a series of 'Debriefing Sessions', held over two days to mark the end of the exhibition 'Radical Conservatism' at Castlefield Gallery, created by the Tel Aviv-based 'performative research group' Public Movement.

Founded in 2006 by Dana Yahalomi and Omer Krieger, with the aim of doing 'art that creates reality', Public Movement dissolves the dividing line between art and politics. There have been a series of 'actions' such as *Spring in Warsaw*, 2009, in which Public Movement led approximately 1,300 people on a ritualised walk around sites of the Second World War uprising in the Polish capital's Jewish Ghetto. More recently, Public Movement has staged large events with corporate-sounding titles such as the 'transnational public relations project' *Rebranding European Muslims*, 2012. Held at Steirischer Herbst Festival in Graz, Austria, this attracted scholars, diplomats, belly dancers and a Bosnian choir. What all Public Movement's work attempts is to draw audiences and participants into an awareness of group identity – whether religious, national, ethnic or cultural – and how it intertwines with the creeping tendrils of state power.

After Krieger left in 2011, Yahalomi (who held the intense, private *Briefing Session* I experienced) now leads Public Movement on her own. She describes it beginning as a hierarchical group, originally of ten, but now more fluid in its membership structure. 'In our case leadership and power was important,' Yahalomi says.

'The idea of being two at the top and ten members relatively equal with each other was part of the experiment of Public Movement, of thinking of these political structures.' Nowadays Yahalomi sometimes works alone, or perhaps with a local 'agent' of the group. At the opposite extreme, one project, *National Connection*, planned to take place in 2015 at Tel Aviv Museum, will employ between seven and twelve members in performance every day for three months – an ambitious undertaking. Yahalomi describes the evolution of Public Movement as a transformation 'from a group which acted on its members into a methodology'.

It is fascinating to discover how one Public Movement project has given birth to another. The 'Debriefing Sessions' originate in, and largely concern, the political and organisational minefield Public Movement had to navigate in preparing *Salons: Birthright Palestine?*, 2012, for New York's New Museum Triennial 'The Ungovernables'. These Salons, or 'performative public discussions', deconstructed Birthright Israel, the ten-day free trip to Israel open to young Jewish people worldwide, funded by the Israeli government and US Jewish philanthropy with the aim of renewing Israel's sense of identity as well as linking with the pro-Israeli lobby in the US. The Salons finally voted in favour of a proposed Birthright Palestine programme.

But along the way, Public Movement's negotiations with arts funding bodies, national interest groups and campaigns – notably the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions Campaign – created a storyline resembling that of a detective novel. The 'Debriefing Sessions' drop participants into the complicated plot and present them with the possibility of becoming active agents at some later date.

It was during the preparation of the 'Salons' series in New York that Yahalomi came across the story of



the Cordoba House, better known as the Ground Zero Mosque, providing the spark for another idea: *Rebranding European Muslims*. Yahalomi recalled that what caught her attention was a statement on Cordoba House's website: 'We are modelled after the grand Street Y – a Jewish Community Centre in Manhattan. 'I wanted to understand what were they planning and why did it fail,' she says. Meeting Sherif El-Gamal, the project's CEO, she discovered he was a real-estate developer who wanted to establish a centre containing a swimming pool, restaurant, nursery and a small prayer room. Wondering what was behind the shift in public opinion, she went on to meet conservative blogger Pamela Geller, who was running the campaign against the Muslim Community Centre. Geller admitted hiring branding strategists, collectively coming up with the name Ground Zero Mosque. 'Although it was never really planned to be a mosque and it wasn't really Ground Zero,' Yahalomi says, 'the brand caught on so strongly that even Sherif had to identify himself according to this name. And at that point I began to be really fascinated with branding strategies.'

Rebranding European Muslims took place during celebrations marking 100 years since the recognition of Islam as an official religion in Austria. Against the background context of the rise of the European right, and a growing Muslim population in the EU, Public Movement launched a billboard campaign quoting Angela Merkel's 2010 speech in which she announced 'multiculturalism has failed ... completely failed', while inviting three agencies – Denner, Merlicek and Bergmann (DMB), *Love Tensta* and *Metahaven* – to 'rebrand' European Muslims. Proposals were subsequently voted for by the audience at a gala event; the winning entry, by DMB, which disguised the words 'Look again' in what appeared at first glance to be Islamic script, was shown on billboards around the city of Graz. Despite the story being widely reported in the Austrian media, Yahalomi comments: 'Branding itself is doomed to fail. The performance of the gala in Graz was an attempt to expose the unbearable and unbridgeable gap between image and reality, between signifier and signified.'

Yet there remains in the work of Public Movement a choreographic heart that has existed from the synchronised car accidents of its earliest action, *Accidents*, 2006, the folk-style circle-dances of *How long is now?* 2007, and *Also Thus!*, 2007, to subverting the stylised military precision of the soldiers guarding Chiang-Kai-shek Memorial Hall, Taipei, in *Honour Guard*, 2013, created for the Fourth Asian Art Biennale. Another project, or 'demonstration', *Positions*, 2009, involves two rival groups,

continually being formed and re-formed according to calls issued through a megaphone, proposing opposite preferences, prejudices, moral claims or political opinions, such as socialism/capitalism, gay/straight or men/women. *Positions* was first performed by ten Public Movement members, but it is unusual in that it can be acquired by public institutions or museums (one per country) and activated by 'authorised agents' – museum workers trained for seven years until they are authorised to write the list of calls themselves – subject to a contract 'derived from marriage contracts', according to Yahalomi, 'so it therefore has the possibility of divorce'. *Positions* embodies what Yahalomi calls: 'a strategy for us to ensure that the content of the action doesn't lose the political edge and doesn't become an archive. Every time we activate *Positions* we create a new list of calls to be performed and it is always "discourse specific", suiting the choreographed demonstration to current and local concerns.'

The group's first regular exhibition, 'National Connection', opening in February 2015, promises to be not only ambitious but also particularly well suited to its setting, because the original Tel Aviv Museum of Art happens to have been where the State of Israel was originally declared by David Ben-Gurion, who was soon to become the country's first prime minister on 14 May 1948. There have since been re-enactments and commemorative events representing what Yahalomi calls 'the extreme penetration of art into politics and politics into art', which Public Movement's exhibition, or performance – however one defines it – is sure to intensify.

Another future project, in Helsinki, *MakeArt Policy*, is a one-day performative summit to coincide with Finnish parliamentary elections. For the summit, Public Movement has asked representatives of all the country's political parties to present their agenda for art. The trouble is that, so far, despite enthusiastic support from all for the event, only the Eurosceptic right-wing Finns Party (formerly known as the True Finns) has any real strategic plans for the arts. One wonders whether other political parties are doing anything to catch up, in anticipation of the summit and not only the elections. Perhaps Public Movement's focus upon the 'extreme penetration of art into politics and politics into art' will actually influence political change. ■

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Positions 2015 performance at Washington Square, New York

Honour Guard 2013 performance at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, Taipei