

# The Foreign Observer: Gilad Melzer Talks to John Smith

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***Works by British filmmaker John Smith will be presented in the forthcoming exhibition According to Foreign Sources, but he himself has decided not to attend. A talk about boycotts and wars, suspicion, propaganda and accusations of anti-Semitism***

## **Preface by Gilad Melzer**

Translated into English by Ami Asher

The foreigner is always positioned at the not-entirely-correct distance. Constantly seeking to see, capture and understand more. Always frustrated by gaps in culture, language, style or taste. Ever suspecting, ever suspicious. Never knowing enough, but – and this is a big but – always distant enough to produce precisely that shift, twist or discovery that more intimate and inside observers (those swimming in the swamp of Afghanistan or Britain, Palestine or Israel) are incapable or unwilling to produce.

The film series *Hotel Diaries* by British filmmaker and artist John Smith is one of the most fascinating examples for that measured, hesitant gaze. A gaze that is to me an essential part of the exhibition *According to Foreign Sources*: essential to complement our preoccupation with secrets, cover-ups, censorship and the problem of seeing and representing that which may not be seen or shown.

Born in London in 1952, Smith is considered one of the leading avant-garde filmmakers and video artists of our generation. Since 1972, he made more than forty films, video artworks and installations. His works are regularly exhibited in museums, biennales and film festivals worldwide. Like his other works, *Hotel Diaries* – presented in an Israeli premiere in Holon – has won awards and acclaim and has been screened in full in several leading world venues, including Centre Pompidou.

Smith currently lives in London and teaches at University of East London. Smith is a member of the Palestine Campaign for Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), the British Committee for Universities of Palestine (BRICUP), the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHD).

This talk was held in the summer of 2011, following his decision not to attend the Holon exhibition, but nevertheless to allow the Digital Art Lab to exhibit his works.



## Frozen War

**Gilad Melzer (GM):** When I first approached you via e-mail, asking you to participate in the show I curate, you replied that you'll be glad to do so. However, in the second exchange, you said, that although you will be glad to present your "Hotel Diaries" film series, (which, I am so happy *is* in the show), you must mention that you are an active member and supporter of a few groups who call to boycott Israel. So, the films, as mentioned are in – and central to – the show, but you declined our invitation to visit Israel and the Centre.

So ... who are these groups? Why do you support them? And finally, why did you agree to show your work in Israel, but refuse to come and be a guest of the Centre?

**John Smith (JS):** In 2007 I took part in a study tour of Israel / Palestine and saw for myself that the apartheid system that operates there was even worse than I had expected. After the 'Operation Cast Lead' attacks on Gaza I decided to support PACBI (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel) and refuse to show my work in Israel until the situation improved, or at least until the Israeli government demonstrated some willingness to engage in a meaningful peace process. I was aware that international artists frequently exhibited or performed in Israel in ignorance, with very little knowledge of the ongoing occupation that persistently impedes and disrupts almost every aspect of the lives of Palestinians – in Gaza, the West Bank and, to a certain extent, within Israel itself. I was persuaded that boycott could be a highly effective means of reminding those who might forget, both in Israel and in my own country that, after many years of occupation, Israel continues to break international law and violate the human rights of Palestinian citizens while purporting to be a democracy where all have equal rights.

So when I was asked to show my 'Hotel Diaries' video series in 'According to Foreign Sources' I was faced with a difficult situation. There are two reasons why, despite my support for the boycott, I eventually made an exception and agreed to participate in this particular exhibition. Firstly, the work that I have been asked to show relates to the current conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan and is largely concerned with the Israeli occupation – it is directly critical of Israel's policies and actions (as well as those of the USA and Britain). Secondly, the exhibition venue itself seems to be openly critical of the Israeli state, asking on its website's homepage, for example "how an art institute can reflect and react to volatile conditions of culture and politics and produce a critical approach to the oppressive power of the government". So, although the Center for Digital Art is a state-funded institution, and therefore subject to boycott under the PACBI guidelines, I have made the personal decision to show my work there in this instance.



Museum Piece

I would very much like to visit the Israeli Center for Digital Art, meet fellow artists and curators and engage in debates around the theme of the exhibition and the current political situation, but after much thought I have decided against it. As a member of several organizations that support the cultural and academic boycott (British Committee for the Universities of Palestine, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Israeli Committee against House Demolitions) who has signed petitions urging other artists not to perform or exhibit in Israel, I do not feel that I can make an exception for myself and say “this situation is different”. I am aware of the fact that making a visit to Israel as a cultural figure, for whatever reason, can be interpreted as giving tacit approval to the status quo and that such visits are frequently presented by the Israeli state and its supporters as ‘victory over boycott’. I am also painfully aware of the large number of cultural or political debates that I have attended in London where the chair of the publicized Palestinian speaker has remained empty due to last-minute travel restrictions imposed by Israel, sometimes with the collusion of the British Government. Ultimately I have decided that I do not wish to take advantage of my own privilege and good fortune to visit a country where, by accident of birth, a large part of its indigenous population is denied freedom of movement across its borders, both external and internal. I am pleased to have the opportunity to meet and talk with Israeli artists and filmmakers in Britain and other parts of the world but at the present time I do not feel able to do this in Israel.

**GM:** There’s a sense, both in Israel and in the Jewish world, that the critique of and actions against Israel are only a camouflage, and that the boycott is part of a new anti-Semitism. In a world full of state, corporation, and organized atrocities, why boycott Israel, and not, for example, the US – which is engaged in much more, and much deeper atrocities and human rights violations?

**JS:** Anyone viewing ‘Hotel Diaries’ can see that I am just as critical of the actions of the USA and Britain, my own country, as I am of those of Israel. I totally despise anti-Semitism (and Islamophobia, which has increased alarmingly in Europe and the USA in recent years), as does everyone I know who is a member of a pro-boycott organization or campaigner for an end to the occupation. As a non-Jew I was relieved to discover when I became actively involved in the Palestine solidarity movement that a high percentage of its supporters were Jewish – in fact the most outspoken critics of Israel that I encounter in my own country are most certainly Jews. You talk about ‘the Jewish world’ in your question, but one reason that Jewish critics of Israel are so angry is that they reject the racist idea that their ethnicity should define their political allegiances. It is very distressing to see these principled people who speak out against the occupation being denounced by Zionists as ‘self-hating Jews’. It seems to me that because supporters of Israel’s policies have no real argument to defend its systematic oppression of the Palestinian people, and extreme actions like the unlawful killing of civilians in Gaza and aid workers on the Mavi Marmara, they have to resort to smearing Israel’s critics with false accusations of anti-Semitism.

Israel has not been ‘targeted’ for boycott from outside. The boycott of Israel exists not because of anti-Semitism but because, as with the South African situation previously, the call for boycott came from indigenous people within Israel / Palestine, initially from Palestinian civil society, but now increasingly from within Israel itself, as demonstrated by the new laws that make support for boycott a civil offense.

It is over 60 years since the foundation of the state of Israel when Palestinians were first expelled from their land. The illegal occupation, the longest in modern history, has gone on for over 40 years and is getting worse day by day as Gaza remains a virtual prison, settlements in the West Bank are expanded and more Palestinian land and property is stolen in East Jerusalem. In the absence of progress by any other means, boycott is simply a strategy of non-violent direct action that hopes to help achieve justice for the Palestinian people where diplomacy and reasoned argument have so far failed.

**GM:** When did you visit Israel and where did you go here?

**JS:** I went to Israel / Palestine in 2007 on a study tour organized by the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions. Amongst other places I visited Bethlehem, East Jerusalem, West Jerusalem, Aida Refugee Camp, The Galilee, Hebron, Ramallah, The Negev, Haifa and Tel Aviv. It was truly shocking to see how extreme the differences in the conditions of daily life could be for people living in different places within such a small piece of land. While I was in Bethlehem and East Jerusalem I made 'Dirty Pictures', the seventh episode in the 'Hotel Diaries' series.

**GM:** You shoot films both in your home, Britain, and abroad. Is it different, and if yes, in what ways? What does it mean for you to be in the position of "the foreigner", looking at a different country, culture, people?

**JS:** I am pleased that you have asked me that question as this dialogue so far has concentrated on my opinions about the situation in Israel, a country which I have visited only once and about which I can only have the perspective of an outsider. Up until 2001 all my films were made in my own country – in fact I was known for making work which was directly concerned with my own experience of, and familiarity with, the place where I lived. But after September 11<sup>th</sup>, when it became clear that Britain was about to become part of an aggressive force in Afghanistan and engage in military actions that I did not support, I started to feel like a foreigner in my own country. Ever since then, the border between personal experience and events taking place in faraway places has become blurred, as reports of horrific events in Afghanistan and Iraq, filtered through state propaganda machines and unreliable news media, have become a major part of everyday experience at home. Over the past ten years, as a British person who deplores the international policies and actions of his government, I have felt compelled to make work that addresses the wars that have become such a big and disturbing part of daily life.

The 'Hotel Diaries' series started by accident with 'Frozen War', which was a spontaneous record of a disorientating experience I had when the USA and Britain started bombing Afghanistan. But after I made this video it seemed as though it could be a suitable model for other related works, which might provide an appropriate vehicle for speaking out. Despite my comments earlier in this dialogue, I have always been very wary of making films that address issues outside of my own experience, as I have not wished to present myself as an authority on situations that I am not directly involved in. So, with 'Hotel Diaries' I take on the role of the distant and alienated observer, protected from the realities of the world in comfortable hotel rooms, who responds to fragmented news coverage of conflicts in faraway places. Although I am almost always staying in other countries when these videos are produced, I am never, with the exception of 'Dirty Pictures', in the country that I am talking about. I hope that this, together with the improvised and sometimes throwaway nature of my commentary, undermines any sense that I might claim to be an 'expert' on the subjects that I am addressing. Nevertheless, I hope that 'Hotel Diaries' has some value as a record and personal interpretation of related events that have taken place during a particular time in history – if nothing else it has enabled me to present and discuss the work internationally and remind audiences in other countries that not everyone in Britain supports the hypocritical US / British led 'War on Terror' and the repressive measures and racist policies implemented in its name by many other 'democratic' governments around the world.

**GM:** One of the main issues that you raise in your films, and certainly in the "Hotel Diaries" series, is what I call the paradoxical nature of knowledge in the so-called "age of information". On the one hand, we are flooded with information in all media, everywhere (almost...), all the time (unless the censor wakes up), but on the other hand, information – and therefore knowledge, awareness, consciousness – is very limited, controlled, and deceptive. In the light of this double-bind, how do you gather, construct, and arrange information in your films?

How do you approach the problem of knowledge in the face of such a propaganda machine?

**JS:** My own strategy has always been the same – to deliberately make the information that I present in my films suspicious, blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction. Truth, as we know, is often stranger than fiction, so I don't find it difficult to present factual information in such a way as to make the viewer question its authenticity.

I also remind viewers, through directly referring to the filmmaking process or using non-naturalistic techniques, that they are watching something that has been constructed, that it is not a simple record of real life. I also explore ambiguity, subverting the original meanings of images and sounds through editing and selective framing, breaking the illusion that any piece of information can have a single 'correct' reading. Sometimes I combine factual statements with obvious lies, or mix humour with horror. So, although I certainly have specific things that I want to say in the films, I hope that all of the devices I have mentioned undermine the authority of the information that is presented and encourage viewers to mistrust what they are shown and told, facilitating an engagement with the work where ideas and information are questioned and explored, rather than passively consumed.



Throwing Stones

**GM:** Finally, John, I know we will meet soon. Final words to your audience in Israel/Palestine?

**JS:** Thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk about my work and my position in relation to boycott, which I hope readers will find interesting. One of the most common criticisms of the boycott strategy is that it impedes discussion with those Israelis who wish to end the occupation, or at least are open to persuasion. But in my own experience the precise opposite is true and I regularly find myself involved in exchanges like this one, both with British and Israeli friends and colleagues, addressing awkward issues that might otherwise have been avoided by both sides. There is no doubt that boycott has generated heated debates and intense disagreements around the world, sometimes resulting in entrenched positions, but in my opinion this is necessary at this point in time. The existence of the boycott pushes each of us to let others know where we stand, stopping us from pretending that cultural exchange can take place in a vacuum, outside of any political or moral context.

**GM:** Thank you very much, and we hope, and will, have you as our very welcomed guest, in better times. Peace.

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