

BEFORE THE WALL. US/THEM II

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In 2001–2002, at the time of his second visit to Jerusalem, Peter Riedlinger started to record the dramatic changes to be seen on the outskirts of the city, known as Greater Jerusalem. These changes included an increase in the number of roadblocks, the multiplication of checkpoints, never-ending and unnecessary road construction, general closures, and settlement construction, all of which constituted the organic material out of which Greater Jerusalem was being built.

What emerges from this series of images is a study of Israel as a state and as a country in formation. With his camera, Riedlinger systematically examines the architectural concept of settlement and investigates the territory it occupies, revealing it to be divided, invaded, and thoroughly under construction. In doing so, Riedlinger manages to give the viewer an understanding of the constraints on dialogue in Israel, which started with the political and military conflict, and were compounded by decades of psychological barriers. The battle for land and for mobility within this land is inscribed in these images as a subtext that allows the viewer to see the power at play in the institutional screening and intimidation of the region's ethnic other, the Palestinian.

In their straightforward documentary manner, Riedlinger's images not only contribute to our understanding of a traumatized state, but also provide some insight into the history of the making of Israel and its "territories." His photographs are governed by the political will to bear witness while simultaneously refraining from judgmental commentary. As such, they are a prime example of the conjunction of politics and art within the history of critical documentary and—metaphorically speaking—an example as well of the role played by contested territories within cultural production. These impressive photographs, whether read as individual panoramas or as a series of images, give the viewer entry to what remains outside the norms of daily life—where a civil society intent on the formation of the state remains on high alert, and where division and hatred determine the everyday experience of many. In this way the work provides a unique view of civilization and its role in the formation of villages, towns, cities, and the countryside.

In a recent debate in Berlin, film director Michel Khleifi described Israel as "a Jewish Democratic State" and stated that putting forward the "possibility for a future modern pluralist society" means to break the "ideological wall." And film director Eyal Sivan concluded, "How do we live together with each others' trauma, sharing a positive future," while simultaneously acknowledging that the condition of "emigration to Israel was followed by ethnic cleansing of Palestinians."¹

If artists are to play a key role in recording and writing histories, then Riedlinger's *Us/Them II* offers a bleak view of the likely outcome of any positive development ensuing from twenty to thirty years of settlements and the disturbance of stable ecologies and communities, including the deforestation of hills and valleys—all part of the complexity of the region that we have learned to designate as Israel/Palestine.

Israel and Palestine remain as stigmatized states—possible states “creolized” by their conjoined geography and position on the globe. Like the Silk Route, they are both nodal and yet of outstanding regional significance, occupying a place where the world has flourished, been abolished, and been reconceived. It is partly in the contemporary reality underpinning the formations of these states that Riedlinger unearths both evidence of intrigue and the surreal.

In one image, Riedlinger captures the largest settlement, Ma’ale Adumim, placed strategically on a red hill that has been completely deforested, with any potential hideouts razed to the ground. A chain of mock Mediterranean, red-tiled buildings follows the ridge of the hill, served by a network of roads that cling to the earth’s undulating form. The differing elements of nature and humankind, the sky, the buildings, and the earth form a sedentary landscape reinforcing the biblical ideology of the state of Israel. It is only within the next photograph that one views the settlement’s proximity to a Palestinian village further down the valley. It is within this structure of presenting and re-presenting images and power that we start to realize the interdependence of the communities, and the manifest design for control, surveillance and the defect of it all.

Before 1948 the Jewish communities were among many minorities living in Palestine. But with the advent of settlements such as Har Homa, Ma’ale Adumim, and their kin (where only their kith can live), the pluralist society that was known as Palestine has become an infertile ground.

1 Michel Khleifi (Palestine) and Eyal Sivan (Israel), conversation about their collaborative film *Road 181* (F/B/D/GB 2003, 270 min.), Akademie der Künste, Berlin, March 23, 2004.