

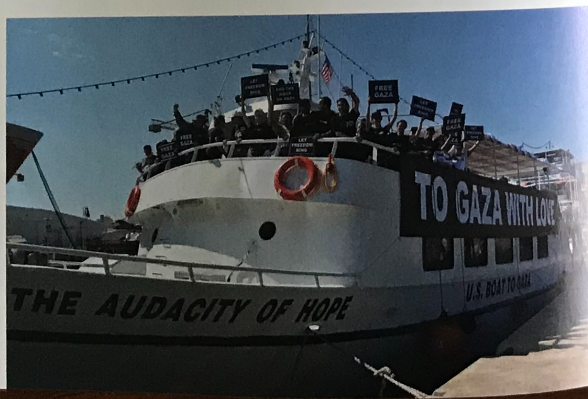


Heterotopia on the High Seas: Battles of Representation Around the Gaza Flotilla

TEXT / NOAH SIMBLIST

In May of 2010, six ships sailed from Cyprus toward the Gaza Strip. The aim of the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" was to break the Israeli naval blockade on Gaza by delivering humanitarian aid, medical supplies, and construction materials.¹ Led by the Turkish passenger ship *Mavi Marmara*, these boats also carried American, Greek, Swedish, and Irish activists. This flotilla garnered widespread international attention after an Israeli military operation against the *Mavi Marmara* ended with the deaths of nine activists.

A year later, in June 2011, another Gaza Flotilla was organized to set sail from Greece. This time, the American boat *The Audacity of Hope* carrying over a thousand letters in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle took a major role in the ten-ship initiative. *The Audacity of Hope* invoked the civil rights victory symbolized by President Obama's 2008 election. Likewise, the flotilla's Canadian ship was named *Tahrir*, after the Cairo square where the recent Egyptian revolution played out. *The Audacity of Hope's* passengers included artists, scholars, and activists such as



Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker. This time, the Greek authorities—working closely with the Israeli government—stopped all but one of the flotilla's ten ships from even setting sail in an attempt to prevent a situation similar to what happened in 2010—tragic deaths and a public-relations nightmare.

A few crucial issues arising from these two flotillas have not yet garnered the attention of the mainstream press. First, the flotillas deploy performative strategies and operate at the intersection between art and activism. This is evidenced in their selected form of protest, which relied on multiple levels of symbolic discourse. Second, the flotillas' purpose and message have also been somewhat muddled by their combination of utilitarian and symbolic aims: the seemingly utilitarian drive to bring goods to serve humanitarian needs and the more abstract, tactical deployment of signifiers such as letters and flags. Finally, the flotillas enlisted the trope of the voyage, which alludes to utopia and new frontiers—both literal and political.

As an idea, the flotilla relies on the notion of the high seas as a space that seems wide open to a new possibility—the utopian imaginary rests on the horizon, which, as we all know, always recedes. This notion is also connected to the phenomenological experience of the sea. As

such, it is a setting fit for a group of activists who are proposing new idealistic models beyond the reach of the political status quo. The sea is also a space beyond national territorial boundaries. It is a realm beyond the laws of any one sovereign power.

REPRESENTATIONS OF VOYAGE

The romance of the sea and its relationship to discovery and freedom traverse centuries of artistic practice. *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, or even the story of Jonah and the whale are narratives of transformation set on the high seas. More recent examples such as *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 1974, by Marcel Broodthaers or Bas Jan Ader's final voyage in 1975 rely on the figure of the amateur, unskilled or unprepared individual setting sail out of a strength of conviction rather than more professional impulses such as fishing, shipping or sport.

The late Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader famously set sail from Cape Cod in *Ocean Wave*, a twelve-and-a-half-foot boat, to cross the Atlantic alone. The voyage was supposed to be the second part of his *In Search of the Miraculous* trilogy. Sadly, he never reached his destination. His boat was found off the coast of Ireland ten months later. This story—an artist reaching for the impossible and ultimately failing—is

INSIDE FRONT COVER: *Swimming Cities*, campaign and oysters launch party of the new boats destined for India's Ganges River (courtesy of Benjamin Mortimer) / OPPOSITE: TOP TO BOTTOM: Thousands of people displaying Turkish and Palestinian flags demonstrate by the *Mavi Marmara*—the lead boat of a Gaza-bound aid flotilla that was stormed by Israeli naval commandos in a pre-dawn confrontation in the Mediterranean in May 2010—on its return to Istanbul on Sunday, December 26, 2010 (AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici); Activists from the U.S., stand on their boat named *The Audacity of Hope* moored in Perama, near Athens, Greece, on Thursday, June 30, 2011 (AP Photo/Darko Bandic) / ABOVE: Palestinian activists wave Italian, Belgian, and Palestinian flags during a protest in support of the Gaza-bound flotilla, at the sea port in Gaza City on Wednesday, July 6, 2011 (AP Photo / Adel Hana)



in keeping with the romantic notion of the artist sacrificing himself for the noble causes of beauty and truth. It is also very much in keeping with the notion of the activist—as opposed to the politician—working outside the system, against incredible odds to try to effect social change. These two heroic models might seem quaint or naive to most contemporary thinkers who have learnt to reject the genius myth. But Ader's work has accrued a great deal of interest recently because his unique blend of conceptualism and sincerity challenges the simple terms that pit genius against its postmodern critique.

So why is sailing on the open waters tied to a sense of freedom? On the one hand, this activity negates borderlands as it plays out in the space between national territories. Michel Foucault called such a space—between utopia and the real—heterotopia.² He thought that heterotopic spaces contained a high quotient of illusion that reveals something about real space. The sea is a heterotopia that, free from many of the confines of real spaces, produces new forms of both interaction and representation. This interstitial space allows for international cooperation, for human rights beyond the regressive laws of nation-states, and the free exercise of discourse that might be difficult, if not impossible, in any one nation. After all, one major factor differentiates the flotilla from its artistic and literary antecedents: Bas Jan Ader, *Moby Dick's* Captain Ahab or *The Old Man and the Sea's* Santiago all rely

on individual, existential struggles. By contrast, the flotilla is a coalition of activists from multiple nations who came together by setting sail in the non-space that is the sea.

Other recent cultural projects have engaged the heterotopic dimension of the open sea. *Women on Waves* is a project by the Dutch physician Rebecca Gomperts who turned a boat into a gynecological clinic that operates in international waters, just outside the maritime borders of countries that criminalize abortion. The *Exterritory Project*, initiated by a group of artists, curators, and critics including the Israelis Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir, conducts lectures, workshops, and film screenings on boats in international waters. This has allowed artists, activists, and intellectuals from places like Tehran, Tel Aviv, and Beirut to meet in a neutral, extra-national site—that is, outside the usual host-guest power relationships that underpin such meetings when they take place in countries like the United States or in the EU. The *Exterritory Project* aims to create a new space for dialogue with the hope that the creativity that goes into constructing such a site and engaging in conversation might give rise to a new political imagination.

Swimming Cities, a group of artists, musicians, and self-described visionaries, probably comes closest in form—if not in content—to the Gaza Flotilla. Each year since 2006, Swimming Cities has built a series of rafts to float down a different waterway. Spearheaded by the artist



Swoon, the *Miss Rockaway Armada*, which sailed down the Mississippi River in 2006, was one of Swimming Cities' first projects. In 2008, *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea* sailed down the Hudson River from Troy, NY to dock in Long Island City in Queens where it was part of Swoon's larger project at Deitch Studios. The following summer, the group sailed from Slovenia, across the Adriatic Sea, to the Venice Biennale. This fall, the group plans to sail down the Ganges River in northern India.

Swimming Cities is probably most akin to Ader's voyage in that it is premised on no explicit political issue other than the romantic embrace of the voyage as a space for freedom. While projects like *Women on Waves* and the *Exterritory Project* are more explicitly political—and in that sense closer to the Gaza Flotilla—they also lack the raucous romanticism embraced by many Flotilla members.

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

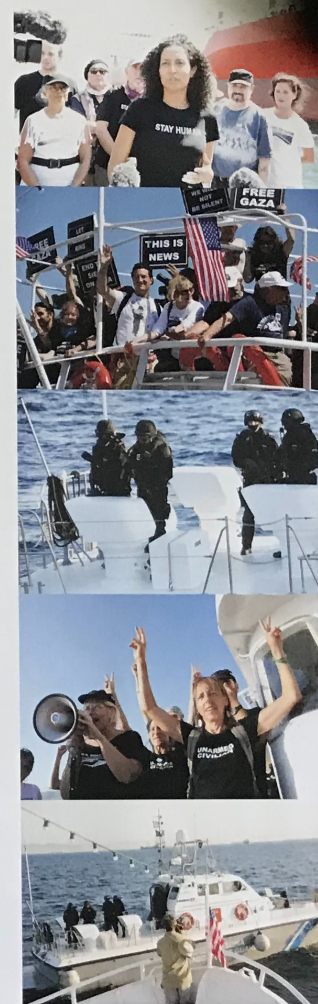
Despite some activists' violent acts in the 2010 Gaza Flotilla, the 2011 crew has been very clear about its intentions to engage in nonviolent direct action. This reflects the belief that nonviolent measures can bring greater attention to the political issues surrounding Gaza's closure and the Israeli occupation of Palestine—that is, the use of violence clouds the moral dimension of the struggle. Like the flotilla organizers, many Palestinian solidarity activists have increasingly embraced nonviolent direct action, drawing parallels to both the American civil rights era and the international pressure that triggered the end of apartheid in South Africa. This strategy flies completely in the face of most normative notions about the location of power. This is in fact its most interesting dimension. The battle for signification, which is fought partially in the realm of the media, contradicts the wisdom that military or economic might are the sole arbiters of political agency.

Guy Debord's *détournement*, a concept and a methodology used to subvert society's submission to the spectacle, is often cited as a model for art and activism that self-consciously deploy forms of representation.³ In many ways, the flotilla uses Debord's situationist strategies. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has hijacked the media with a spectacle of competing ideologies—be it on CNN, BBC or Al Jazeera. The Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, together with non-governmental organizations, have used the media to make their points for years. In this sense, the mediascape is ripe territory for the production and deployment of alternative images that can shift the paradigm.

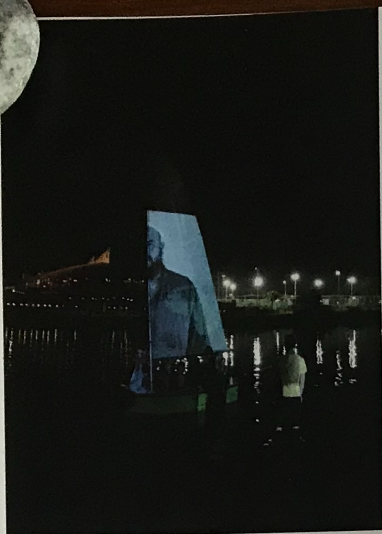
As Debord was writing in late-1960s Paris, a new consciousness of the media's potential power—for both the state and activists—was also echoed by civil rights activism in the US. *Audacity of Hope* passengers like Alice Walker, who has famously written about the African-American experience, and freedom rider Ridgely Fuller evoke activist strategies of 1960s America. The flotilla borrows tropes from both May 1968 and US civil rights protests, taking them from the streets to the sea.

The Israeli government was so afraid of the flotilla's power of representation that it mobilized sophisticated techniques to undermine it. At one point, an Israeli official even declared that international journalists on board the boats would be banned from entering Israel for ten years. This blatant disregard for freedom of the press triggered such an uproar that Israel eventually backed down. Yet, this did not stop US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton from calling on the flotilla to turn around. Nor did it prevent Texas Governor Rick Perry from writing a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder urging him to prosecute all American participants in the flotilla for collaborating with a terrorist group.

In what many believe to have been a savvy use of social media, the Israeli government was purportedly behind the production of a YouTube video wherein the Israeli



OPPOSITE, TOP: Israeli Navy soldiers intercept one of several boats headed towards the Gaza Strip in international waters in the Mediterranean Sea on Monday, May 31, 2010 (AP Photo/Uriel Sinai, Pool, File). OPPOSITE BOTTOM: *Exterritory Project* (Ruti Sela + Maayan Amir), stills from *Staying Human*, 2011, video [courtesy of the artists] / ABOVE: Inauguration of *The Audacity of Hope*, U.S. boat to Gaza; leaving port; then under siege on July 1, 2011 [courtesy of Free Gaza, www.witnessgaza.com]



actor Omer Gershon—playing an activist named “Marc Pax”—claimed that he was rejected from the flotilla because he was gay. A staffer in the Israeli prime minister’s office almost immediately dismissed any involvement in the affair. The Israeli Government Press Office later reaffirmed its non-involvement. Another rumor was also circulated: flotilla activists intended to pour sulfur on Israeli soldiers who would board the boats. Flotilla activists later denied this rumor. Eventually, after intense diplomatic efforts, Israel succeeded in convincing the Greek government to impound the boats, forcing them to stay in port, even arresting the captain of *The Audacity of Hope*. It is also believed that two of the flotilla’s boats were sabotaged so that they could not set sail for Gaza.

All of these Israeli government measures reflect and reinforce the flotilla’s power of representation. But what was the nature of this power? What did it threaten? The current Israeli government is one of the most conservative administrations the country has seen in its short history. It relies heavily on an outdated Zionist picture of the political situation in the Middle East, which is predicated on Jewish victimhood. The story goes like this. In the minds of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, and their supporters: Palestinians—and perhaps all Arabs—are essentially violent terrorists or autocrats who want to wipe all Jews off the map. After suffering centuries of anti-Semitism, Jews are constantly threatened and need to protect themselves at all costs. By extension, anyone in the Palestinian solidarity camp is also a terrorist. Additionally, Netanyahu has used the media to fiercely promote Israel as the sole

Middle Eastern democracy promoting freedom of the press and human rights. However, the much-publicized non-violent populist revolutions of the Arab Spring present us with another picture. If non-violent strategies like the flotilla succeed in giving the world a very different image of both the solidarity movement and Palestinian civil society, Netanyahu and Lieberman’s outdated binary will implode.

MISPLACED FEELINGS?

Defending Netanyahu, Lieberman, and the conservative policies of the Israeli occupation, some on the political right have dismissed many solidarity activists as naive old hippies who have been duped by Hamas. This scenario casts flotilla activists as the very opposite of sophisticated cold-blooded terrorists. It relegates them to a group suffering from an embarrassing set of misplaced feelings. These critics suggest that the power of logic and facts will overcome the vulgarity of their emotions. It is true that many of the activists on board *The Audacity of Hope* were driven by sentiment. But is this so bad? Like its fellow maritime cultural warriors Ader and Swimming Cities, the Gaza flotilla is predicated on an overabundance of feeling.

One of the interesting things about feeling is that it exists between and around physical things. Feeling—or what some have called *affect*—does not pertain to a single body.⁴ Rather, it is about a relation between bodies—a condition that mirrors the interstitial space of the heterotopic sea. President Obama’s audacity—and that of the namesake boat—is radical precisely because simple emotions like hope, empathy, sadness or joy are often ridiculed in both political and artistic circles. The flotilla’s audacity resides in both its use of *détournement* to subvert the dominant paradigm of political representation and its belief in the politics of feeling. *The Audacity of Hope*’s main cargo was love letters. As such, the sentiments of a thousand people came along with the activists’ solidarity. These activists simply wanted to touch the shores of Gaza and exchange with people. They wanted to touch a place that seems politically impenetrable and break through the territory’s isolation.

Heterotopia is a space where messy, unformed or difficult things exist. Brothels, hospitals, and cemeteries delineate and prescribe a space for the abject, that is, for sex, sickness, and death. Similarly, the heterotopia of the high seas allows the messiness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to become manifest. It exists outside of the political and representational binaries that seductively offer the illusion of clarity and form. With the Gaza flotilla, the heterotopia of the high seas is also about the messiness of feeling where empathy, idealism, and the desire to touch the untouchable can exist undeterred by the perceived vulgarity of hope.

ABOVE: Extentory Project (Ruti Sela + Maayan Amir), detail of *Thinking about (un)stable* (images in (un)stable) spaces, October 14, 2010, projection of sequences of still images on sailing boats (courtesy of the artist) / OPPOSITE: *Swimming Cities*, the first 2 of 5 handmade boats being brought to Governor’s Island for the Pigment Festival (courtesy of Czack Tucker); *Swimming Cities*, campaign and oysters launch party of the new boat’s destined for India’s Ganges River (courtesy of Benjamin Mortimer); *Swimming Cities*, before leaving to travel down the Hudson River to New York for the *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea* project (courtesy of Benjamin Mortimer)

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NOTES

1. The conditions under which Israel imposed this blockade are quite complicated. So are the details of the blockade. They are related to a complex history. In short, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip in 1967. In 1993, in conjunction with the Oslo Accords, The Palestinian Authority was established to govern some Palestinian areas, including Gaza. Despite some degree of Palestinian autonomy, Israel continued to control airspace, borders, and territorial waters. In 2005, Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza. Since 2007, following the 2006 Palestinian elections, Hamas has functioned as the Gaza Strip government. But since 2005 Israel, in conjunction with Egypt, has kept tight controls on everything that moves in and out of Gaza—a policy that tightened after the Hamas kidnapping of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Operation Cast Lead, a 2008–2009 war in which over a thousand Palestinians were killed in Gaza in response to rocket attacks on Israel, had a major effect on Gazan infrastructure and made the experience of the blockade even harsher.
2. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16:1 (Spring 1986): 22–27.
3. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1994.
4. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, 1.

Based in Austin, TX, Noah Simblis is an artist, curator, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. His interview with Nicolaus Schafhausen, Director of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, was published in ART PAPERS 35:03 (May–June 2011).

