

Experimental Video Project

For the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, I propose to spend a year making an experimental video project in the city of Hebron, West Bank - one of the most volatile points of friction in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather than making a film, I will establish an internet-based television channel, streaming live and pre-recorded content specifically concerned with the Israeli-controlled 'H2' sector of Hebron and the political, cultural, and personal realities of its residents. The website - named HEB2.tv - will be a vehicle for documenting and sharing experiences and observations over the course of the year, but it won't be limited to my work alone. Instead, I plan to make it a broad, collaborative platform where community members will be invited to produce and present their own tapes. More than just an online presence, HEB2.tv will also have a tangible counterpart within H2 Hebron: a broadcasting station offering training sessions and production facilities to the project's participants. It is my goal by the end of the year for HEB2.tv to generate a significant body of documentary work on the H2 Hebron area, while also leaving behind a viable, sustainable community platform for personal expression, visibility, and empowerment.

MOTIVATIONS AND GOALS

The city of Hebron is a unique political, geographical, and demographical entity in the region. Occupied since 1967, Hebron is the only West Bank city with Israeli settlements at its heart, amidst Palestinian homes. Since 1997, Hebron has been separated into two zones: the majority of the city (H1) is in the hands of the Palestinian authority, while the downtown area (H2) remains under direct Israeli military control. The latter, H2 Hebron, is home to around 20,000 Arabs and 800 Jewish settlers - with about as many Israeli combatants stationed for their protection. H2 also encompasses the Tomb of Patriarchs - the burial site of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - a religious site of

monumental significance to both Jews and Muslims in the region. With the outbreak of the 2nd Intifada in 2000, and following a series of deadly attacks on the Jewish minority within, the Israeli army placed crippling restrictions on the Arab majority of H2 - closing hundreds of stores, preventing movement on main roads and streets, and subjecting residents to frequent curfews and house searches. These policies brought about a mass departure of Palestinians from H2 - turning a once bustling economic center into a virtual 'ghost town'. Overall, around 42% of all homes in H2 are abandoned, and 77% of the stores have closed down. These properties remain in a state of severe neglect; many have been vandalized or looted, others seized by the army or occupied by settlers. Those Palestinians who remain in H2 live a life 'under siege' - largely confined to their homes, their coming and going monitored by the army and open to physical violence by their Jewish neighbors.

These harsh political and humanitarian circumstances, and the deep-rooted animosity that exists there between Arabs and Jews, make Hebron a strong study case and a crucial warning sign for the state of Israeli-Palestinian relations. The possibility of Arab-Jewish coexistence, a fundamental foundation for any future peace agreement, has never collapsed as violently as it has in present-day Hebron. All the while, the reality of H2 Hebron is largely absent from Israeli and international TV sets, and little has been done to document its ground-level realities. Mainstream media typically fails to convey what daily life is like in the Occupied Territories. Media coverage, regardless of any possible political leanings, tends to be superficial and sporadic. Whether a deliberate programming policy or the inherent shortcomings of the medium - Hebron is not being televised.

As such, the attempt to expose and explore Hebron has been a central focus in my creative work for the past four years. In 2007, while on leave from Harvard College, I co-founded the 'Camera Distribution Project': an initiative of the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem that provides video cameras to Palestinian civilians in high-risk, high-friction areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

With over 30 cameras in Hebron alone, the Camera Distribution Project is now a prominent source of footage for local and international media, and has made significant in-roads in reducing the amount of human rights violations committed by soldiers and settlers in the city. However, the project also showed remarkable potential as a platform for documentary, with participants engaged in filming not only political but also personal dimensions of their lives. This brought me and a fellow colleague, Issa Amro, to establish the HEB2 media centre in H2 Hebron as a community space focused on video training and production. The centre, housed in an abandoned Palestinian home at the edge of the Tel Rumeida settlement, runs workshops for the Camera Project's participants for using video as a creative tool for personal expression and communication within the community and outwards.

Through my involvement in these two initiatives, I have sought methods for generating public awareness as well as a better personal understanding of Hebron. The fellowship will allow me to develop a new approach to achieving both. Emerging web-based technologies such as live video allow for radically new practices in documentary production, in how it involves its subjects and engage its audiences. Unlike the singularity of authorship and narrative in most documentary films, the internet offers inclusive, collaborative, and open-ended methods of making content. Traditional boundaries between film-maker and film-subject can now be trespassed freely. A platform such as HEB2.tv can also break through far more rigid borders - those existing between Israelis and Palestinians. The immediacy and intimacy of live broadcasting can be a powerful tool for Palestinians to communicate outwards and for Israelis (and non-Israelis) to be drawn inwards, into the Jived experience of H2 Hebron. As such, the choice to structure this project around the convention of television is not merely an aesthetic one; I believe that such a platform could explore - if not redeem - some of the medium's original promise - its potential for broad coverage and multiplicity of perspectives; for quick response, sustained involvement, and direct distribution.

make necessary localizations. Web Programming will be coordinated and funded through the Israeli Center for Digital Art.

The setup phase will also be dedicated to preparing the website's real-world counterpart _ the HEB2.tv Broadcasting House in the Tel Rumeida neighborhood of H2 Hebron (see supplementary visual materials). For the course of the fellowship year, J will transform the upper-floor studio of the HEB2 media centre into a makeshift television station, a process I began in an extensive renovation process in July 2010. One of the few safe, openly-accessible spaces in H2, the HEB2 centre will be a crucial location for the project's community-related activities - such as training sessions for participating video-makers and public screenings of products and live broadcasts. Once the studio is set up, and before beginning actual broadcasting, I will run a series of training workshops in video production, with the assistance of other video and film makers: Nurit Sharett, Guy Briller, !do Haar, and Yael Bartana - to name a few who've expressed interest.

The HEB2 space will serve as the project's base of operations, as a meeting place for participants and collaborators, as well as a controlled environment in which to tape interviews and conduct other in-house filming. The majority of production, however, will take place in residents' homes and in the streets of the city. The project will essentially involve the making of short, 10-30 minute videos - focused on cultural, political, and personal points of interest, whether my own or those of local collaborators. These so-called 'TV shows' will run a broad spectrum; I envision cooking shows, soccer games, wedding videos, living room talk shows, and so forth. Production will be a collaborative effort with the participants, and made with the means at our disposal. My equipment as well as the cameras provided through B'Tselem will make up our production kits. Some content will be pre-recorded and edited, other will be made directly on-air. While the majority of participants will be Palestinian, I will make the effort to try and involve Israeli soldiers and ex-soldiers, policemen, activists, and even settlers as possible subjects and/or makers.

PRODUCTS

Over the course of the project's 'broadcasting season', HEB2.tv will produce dozens of video tapes and hours of live footage. Alongside production, certain highlights will be uploaded to the website. Once the season is concluded, I will take between 2-4 months of off-location time to go through, edit, translate, and organize the project's archive, making it available online. This process will also allow me to prepare other modes of presentation - an exhibition at the Israeli Center for Digital Art, as well as other possible by-products (a DVD, a booklet, etc.).