PUBLIC MOVEMENT

PERFORMING THE NATION

Alhena Katsof

This Country is a Museum, and, in this Museum, there is a Country.
Public Movement, excerpt from the unpublished script for *National Collection* (2015).

Between 1951 and 1955, British philosopher J. L. Austin presented his foundational work on speech act theory and performative utterances in a series of lectures, repeatedly introducing then repudiating the term "performativity".[1] For Austin, performativity refers to a category of utterances that are more than descriptive; they enact or produce what they name. There are a handful of sentences that notably demonstrate this. When spoken aloud by a "proper" subject and under correct circumstances, these sentences *do* the thing. Consider the phrases: "I promise", "I sentence you", and "I do" – as in marriage. Even more specific, a perlocutionary act, according to Austin, is the effect of a performative utterance on interlocutors. For example, if someone shouts "fire" and by that declaration everyone exits the building.

Taking place just a few years before the term was coined, the declaration of the state of Israel from within the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1948 may be among the most consequential performative utterances of the 20th century. The declaration was a deadly perlocution and the staging exploited a long-standing relationship between museums and the nation-state. The galleries were turned into a mise-en-scène for the political stage, metonymically aligning the state of Israel with Western liberalism by way of museums and their collections.

Based in Tel Aviv, the performative research body Public Movement has been exploring the relationship between art and the nation-state for over a decade. From their perspective, performance is one of the most effective ways to investigate nationality, museums, and art collections, because it can activate the relationships between them as they are taking place. These relationships are live and current. The state uses performative acts to enforce

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These lectures were collected and published in the book: J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford 1962.

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its narrative, engaging the public in a series of ongoing historical embodiments. Its declaration is enacted every day.

Initially, Public Movement's inquiry began outdoors, taking into consideration streets, plazas, and monuments – sites we think of as public space – as well as the publics and civil workers (emergency medical technicians [EMTs] and firefighters) that move through them. Since 2013 the group has expanded this practice, turning indoors to address and activate the museum as a site that trains the civic body. This work takes into consideration the history of museums, the role of art in society, and, most urgently, the ways art is used as a tool for statecraft.

As a core aspect of her practice, Dana Yahalomi, Director of Public Movement, brings together artists, dancers, researchers, and writers to collaborate on large-scale projects. Some develop long-term relationships with the group, becoming Members or so-called Agents. Yahalomi's education is in choreography and philosophy. As such, she brings embodied and theoretical forms of investigation to her projects. My conversations with Yahalomi began in 2011 and we sometimes referred to them as a meeting between the curatorial and the choreographic. These conversations helped shape Public Movement's work in the museum, and actions like Debriefing Sessions, but my engagement with the group's activity in Israel became increasingly limited due to my support of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.

In our conversations, Yahalomi and I approached *National Collection* through the lens of performance and performativity. We were not *only* interested in enacting performances on site at the museum, but in asking what do museums *do*? We asked ourselves: How do museums perform? What is their role in the nation-state? And what is the museum's role in the imperialism with which the state extends its power? We also asked: What does that role tell us about power? We were less interested in the individual artworks on display than in the way collections are organized to tell a story about identity and belonging. We were interested in how publics move through museum galleries, interact with artworks, and respond to the mechanisms of authority that are enacted in that space; all of which contribute to ethno-nationalist narratives and the erasure of colonial violence [Fig. 1].

Drawing on Public Movement's long history of working with processions, *National Collection* was inaugurated with a ceremonial walk that began at the original site of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art on Rothschild Boulevard and culminated at its current location 2.5 km away. Public Movement Members carried a reproduction of Lesser Ury's painting, *Holsteinische Schweiz* (1908) as the procession's central image. In 1948, the painting was one of just a few works in the museum's fledgling collection, which occupied little more than a room on the recessed ground floor of the mayor's house. During the declaration, which was broadcast over radio and photographed, the painting was installed next to a photo of Theodor Herzl, founder of modern Zionism. It depicts a lake-side landscape

[Fig. 1]
Public Movement, National Collection, 2015. Tel Aviv. Photo by Oz Mualem © Public Movement.

with a handful of trees but no people in it, symbolically underscoring the idea of Palestine as empty territory ready to be colonized and evoking the slogan "A land without a people, for a people without a land", which is an integral part of Israel's founding mythology. The slogan is echoed in the rhythm and structure of the epigraph to this text. The epigraph, an excerpt from the unpublished script for *National Collection*, is an example of how Public Movement strategically subverts state-sanctioned propaganda [Fig. 2].

Departing from the steps of the building, which is now a national museum called Independence Hall, Public Movement Members marched in a militaristic style (as they often do) towards the public square that architecturally defines the museum's current location across from Israel's main Defense Forces base. The cultural complex that houses the museum is emblematic of how the city was built to mirror European architectural ideals.

Once the opening ceremony was complete, audience members could participate in the performative exhibition by signing up for scheduled processions that took place multiple times a day for six weeks. These were led by Public Movement Members, many of whom have been with the group since it was formed in 2006. The audience would gather for each tour in front of the large glass doors in the museum's foyer. The procession began when the group's Members approached from outside, marching in formation. The Members moved through the museum's doors and up a ramp to approach the audience. There, they paused momentarily to stamp their feet. Having signaled to the participants that they should fall in line, the Members marched onwards into the museum's main gallery where they spread out and stood like bodyguards in front of the paintings hanging there. Two Members walked towards each other while putting on a pair of white conservation gloves. Facing one another, they held hands and leaned into each other's bodies for a brief, but tender kiss. Then, they turned to the painting hanging on the wall behind them (a reproduction of the Lesser Ury landscape), expertly removed it from the wall and carried it, leading the procession into another room that contained an immersive installation, modeled after the original Independence Hall. There, audience members encountered a reconstruction of the space where the declaration of the State of Israel took place.

Audience members participated in a series of activations that took into consideration the museum's architecture, security protocols, conservancy measures, and traffic flow. Ceremonies, short speeches, rituals, and numerous instances of choreographic engagement were enacted by the group's uniformed members who, clothed in their usual white pants, skirts, shirts, and sneakers, ran, skipped, jumped, shouted, pushed, embraced, and danced their way through the museum. Public Movement touched and handled both artworks and audience members in atypical ways that drew attention to the behaviors, gestures, and mannerisms that we uphold in museum spaces. In one instance, Public Movement Members walked the audience, one by one, through a collection gallery, leaning in to

[Fig. 2]
Public Movement, Opening Ceremony for National Collection, 2015. Tel Aviv. Photo by Kfir Bolotin © Public Movement.

whisper conspiratorially about which paintings had been selected to go down to the vault in the event of a national emergency. In another instance, Members broke into a dance, tumbling and tussling with each other across the length of the museum's main Brutalist hall [Fig. 3].

At one point in the procession, the audience entered a gallery where the museum's contemporary art collection was installed. Some of the Members' bodies were already positioned limply within a large installation of broken concrete, as if they had fallen under the rubble. One of the Members approached a body. Moving carefully, he inserted himself into the ruin, placing the "injured" person on top of his torso, taking care to lift her head and arrange her body in slow motion while making himself as stiff as a board. He evacuated her from the ruin in this way, using his body as if it were a stretcher. The piece is based on the lifesaving movements that are performed by EMTs and firefighters during emergency evacuations. Public Movement studied these movements and then transformed them into a haunting, corporeal choreography [Fig. 4].

Early in the research, we realized that there were no examples of modern art made by Palestinians before 1948 in the museum's collection. According to Israeli museums, these works do not exist, because European Jews brought modern art and culture with them to the desert. The national museum does exhibit Palestinian antiquities because it gives the impression that the culture is in the past. On our visits to the military archives, we read detailed accounts of the looting and destruction that took place during the wars of 1947 and 1948. These accounts included lists of items forcibly removed from Palestinian homes including rugs, pianos, and paintings. We also heard about paintings that had been smuggled out and live in the Diaspora, as many Palestinian people are forced to do. We wanted to follow the thread of these paintings because they are bonded to the story of the nation-state. To do so, we created a performance within the performance. Audience members could sign up for a *Debriefing Session*, a private audience with an Agent who would deliver a twenty-minute, one-on-one account of our search for the paintings. On one hand, we wanted to hold space for the paintings, refusing to normalize the narrative of their absence from the collections. On the other, Israeli museums do not have a right to those paintings, and we wanted to abstain from replacing their absence with images of the paintings themselves, which could be construed as a gesture of absolution. Those kinds of art historical revisions are easily coopted to claim that structures of violence have been resolved and to legitimize the violence of the day [Fig. 5].

National Collection ended in a room featuring one painting, a reproduction of the French artist Hubert Robert's *An Imaginary View of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre in Ruins* (1796). In this piece of Romanticism, Robert portrays the Grand Gallery of one of the first public museums as a ruin. It is an image that speaks to the overall project – the notion of ruins was woven throughout *National Collection*, physically in the form of broken concrete and

[Fig. 3]
Public Movement, National Collection, 2015. Tel Aviv. Photo by Dan Haimowitz © Public Movement.

[Fig. 4]
Public Movement, National Collection, 2015. Tel Aviv. Photo by Kfir Bolotin © Public Movement.

[Fig. 5]
Public Movement, National Collection, 2015. Tel Aviv. Photo by Kfir Bolotin © Public Movement.

choreographically in instances of collapse. In the museum, we are walking on ruins every day. It also speaks to the importance of art in the earliest moments of the nation-state. As if in anticipation of the role it would play in the new polity, during the French Revolution, guards were placed at the Louvre to protect the art, which until that point belonged to the king and not to the people. *National Collection* temporarily returned the Independence Hall to the "Hall of Art" to demonstrate the interdependency of these two institutions and the imperialism they help underwrite.

Alhena Katsof organizes exhibitions and performances with artists. Her projects include *Towards the Unknown*, a touring exhibition of drawings, scores, and graphic notations by the autophysiopsychic musician Yusef Lateef. With Dana Yahalomi, she co-authored the book *Solution 263. Double Agent* (Sternberg Press). Katsof has published essays about artists including Nicole Eisenman, Andrea Geyer, and Gordon Hall. Her writing about gardens and exhibitions has been published in volumes such as *On the Necessity of Gardening. An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation* (Valiz); *The Artist As Curator. An Anthology* (Mousse Publishing); and *How Institutions Think. Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse* (MIT Press). Katsof is a member of the editorial collective for *Women & Performance. A journal of feminist theory* and teaches at Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts, The New School. She is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University.