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Hope in art is
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resistance

This article explores how contemporary sculptures in public spaces in Tel Aviv may challenge militaristic and patriarchal narratives in Israeli society. Seen through feminist and anti-militaristic lenses, public art in Israel serves as an act of resistance, offering alternative narratives that promote hope, inclusivity, and peace in a context dominated by conflict.

As an intersectional feminist and peace advocate, I believe that public spaces should reflect diverse identities, and that peace should be embedded in the cultural and symbolic structures of society. Representation in public art is crucial—not only to acknowledge diverse narratives but also to challenge dominant discourses that often exclude marginalised voices. If traditional academic writing fails to reach broader audiences, how else can we engage people in critical discussions about peace, war, culture, and identity? In response to this challenge, I explored ways to knowledge more accessible, particularly in public spaces. I developed a series of geopolitical gender-peace walking tours, linking public art to the deeper cultural structures of gender, peace, and conflict. Over the past five years, I have facilitated hundreds of intersectional gender and art tours in public and artistic spaces in Tel Aviv, documented on the Instagram page *The Genderator*. The tours gained momentum during the violence and war of 2023–2024 as participants—younger and older, including Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, predominantly women, though not exclusively—needed to explore and reflect on current events, collective trauma and search for hope through art. This paper presents reflections from these tours, alongside an intersectional gender and peace analysis of public sculptures, offering a reimagined approach to knowledge dissemination beyond academic circles.

Reproducing sexist notions

Many participants of the tours associated traditional public sculptures with militaristic notions, particularly the archetype of a victorious man on horse-

back. However, in Israel, some public sculptures intentionally challenge this paradigm while others deepen the patriarchal sexist notion of men and women. In the heart of Tel Aviv, a 1969 Henry Moore sculpture, placed in 1970, stands prominently at the entrance of the Tel Aviv Museum, the municipal library, the district court, a major military base, and the Defence Ministry. The sculpture depicts a nude, headless, footless, handless, and nameless woman with her legs spread toward the courthouse—the image of a birth giving, sex providing woman as a reward to the soldiers who return from war. Children often climb on the sculpture, disregarding its potential meanings and imagining it as a mythological creature.

However, a significant public sculpture of a headless nude woman invites critical reflection on the implicit messages such works convey. During the gender tours I repeat that public sculptures are not merely decorative; they function as educational texts that shape societal ideals and behaviours.¹ The placement and stark design of this sculpture provoke contemplation on how public art perpetuates gender, ethnic and national power dynamics, particularly in spaces of authority.²

Sending the children to war: diverging interpretations

Power dynamics, authority and militaristic narratives have been at the centre of debates in Israeli discourse. Turning towards background public art displays offers alternative viewpoints and representation in the middle of militarist narratives which consume Israeli society. Israeli art has been an act of resistance to provide a counter-narrative to dominant militaristic and patriarchal norms. In addition, feminist tours raise questions about how women and men are presented and how public art can challenge societal norms, including militarism. Looking at people's representation in public spaces shows how public art mirrors a society's disparities, dominant narratives, and lack of representation of marginalised communities. Feminist public art and female representation in the public space emphasises how public art may disrupt oppressive systems and foster inclusive dialogues through its "radical imagination."³ Hope for more equal societies, embodied by art, directly challenge individual beliefs and social constructions, creating space for new ideas and potential alternative futures. The feminist tours also raised questions about how people from different intersectional backgrounds, paths of life and identities would "read" and interpret a sculpture differently.

Following a temporary ceasefire in the ongoing conflict, some right-wing ministers resigned from the government, expressing their demand for "complete victory" and complete destruction of Gaza making the city inhabitable.⁴ They also celebrated parents willing to sacrifice their hostage son as role models, reinforcing a militaristic heroic ethos over individual love to their children.⁵ An example for the sons' (and daughters') sacrifice in the Israeli society is reflected in a sculpture just in front of the courthouse and Defence Ministry, in the same vicinity as the sculpture



Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure* (1969). Photo: Yair Haklai

1 Brand, Peg: *Feminist Art Epistemologies. Understanding Feminist Art.* In: *Hypatia* (21/3), 2006, p. 166-189, doi: [org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01119.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01119.x).

2 Association for Historical Dialogue and Research: *A space of our own, A handbook on gender and monuments in intersectional public spaces.* Nicosia: Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, 2020.

3 hooks, bell: *Art on My Mind. Visual Politics.* New York, NY: The New Press, 1995.

4 Shpigel, Noa; Hauser Tov, Michael: *Far-right Ben-Gvir Resigns from Netanyahu Government Over Hostage Deal.* In: *Haaretz*, 18.01.2025, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-18/ty-article/premium/far-right-ben-gvir-resigns-from-netanyahu-government-over-hostage-deal/00000194-7a85-d6ab-adff-ffdf681e0000.

5 See e.g. Eichner, Itamar: *Smotrich Opposes Hostage Deal: "Catastrophe, We Won't Be Part of It."* In: *Ynet News*, 13.01.2025, www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rjrdmpimv1l; Azulay, Moran; Strock, *The Victory in War Is More Important Than the Return of the Last Captive.* In: *Ynet News*, 24.02.2025, www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rk557bc5ke.



Menashe Kadishman, *The Binding of Yitzhak* (2008). Photo: Yair Talmor

by Moore: Menashe Kadishman's *The Binding of Yitzhak* (created 1982–1985, placed in 2008), which draws on the religious-cultural narrative of willingness to sacrifice sons found in both Judaism and Islam. The sculpture features a decapitated Isaac, his head lying separate from his body. This imagery serves as a stark commentary on the sacrifice of youth in wars. Some onlookers interpret the sculpture as a visual “stop sign” for such loss in wars; for other it reinforces the necessity of sending young men and women to battle. During feminist tours, it also raises questions about feminist peace making and engagement against war

6 Harmat, Gal: Education and Context. Kibbutzim College. In: *Journal of Research, Arts, and Activism* (9/45), 2023, p. 71-79.

7 Hirsch, Marianne; Smith, Valerie: Feminism and Cultural Memory. An Introduction. In: *Signs* (28/1), 2002, p. 1-19, doi. org/10.1086/340890.

8 Reeder, Maren: Monuments to notable women. Increasing female representation in public space. In: *Trinity Women's Review* (2/1), 2018, p. 115-130, here p. 117, ojs.tchpc.tcd.ie/index.php/TrinityWomensReview/article/view/2057.

9 Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi; Szijártó, István M.: *What is Microhistory? Theory and practice*. London: Routledge, 2013.

versus liberal feminists who argue for equal access to military service and participation in war. In the current war-encouraging environment, the expression of hope and the conversation about the possibility of not sending children to fight through public art analysis becomes an act of resistance.

Resistance and protest in Israeli public art

Another example of public art that challenged militaristic and patriarchal norms was the 2021 guerrilla art installation in Tel Aviv depicting a squatting Netanyahu statue. The charcoal-grey figure, representing the then former—and now current—prime minister, was nude, old, and non-heroic, subverting traditional masculine and militaristic ideals. This provocative act was swiftly removed by the municipality, underscoring the contentious relationship between public art and political authority and humiliation by showing one's unperfect nude body.⁶ This specific installation offered an alternative representation that challenged the societal status quo⁷ and engaged a society-wide questioning of common narratives and history.

Public art installation may challenge “common history”⁸ by bringing to the forefront marginalized voices and narratives. Shifting from the traditional and dominant discourse to “microhistory”⁹, public art pieces may question the mainstream narrative by offering an alternative perspective, working in the Israeli context as an act of resistance.

Recent public art installations in Tel Aviv reflect a growing emphasis on hope and anti-militaristic themes. Yael Bartana's *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb* (2023), installed in Culture Square, depicts a wolf and a lamb lying together beneath a white bedsheet, evoking a sense of intimacy and vulnerability. The composition suggests a playful yet symbolic interaction, inviting reflections on themes of coexistence, power, and fragility. It reimagines Isaiah's prophecy as a suspended monument to peace. The biblical reference connects hope with cultural tradition, challenging militaristic narratives. Tour participants often interpret the figures as a same-sex couple, symbolizing diversity and the possibility of peaceful coexistence. This inter-

pretation is particularly radical in the current political climate, where envisioning non-military solutions is often met with objections. The political context can bring public art installations to the forefront,¹⁰ amplifying their role as symbols of resistance and serving as permanent, daily expressions of protest.

Similarly, Hila Toony Navok's *Lighthouse* (2023) serves as a metaphorical beacon of security and resilience. By day, it captures sunlight, and by night, its illuminated structure evokes themes of protection, reminding Israelis of a shelter or a staircase that protects them from missiles. Hila Amram's *Sprout* (2023) features an enlarged bean sprout in a public space, symbolizing hope and renewal. These pieces resonate as acts of resistance, embodying joy and optimism amidst societal upheaval. What is interesting to explore further regarding these two examples of public art installation is the shift from women's and men's heads and bodies in public space to non-gendered, non-human sculptures. This shift functions as a mechanism to equalise and present narratives that are more inclusive. It is similar to the liberal feminist act of gender-neutral language and the discourse about hiding or highlighting or normalizing one's body and biological sex and gender. Is non-human sculpture changing the gender balance in art in public space?

Hope as an anti-militaristic act

Sculptures that do not represent human bodies might enable a different discourse that moves towards a general hope, encompassing a broader view than solely the body in war. In Tel Aviv, hope itself becomes an act of resistance against entrenched militaristic ideologies. Public art that embodies hope challenges the pervasive narrative of sacrifice and perpetual conflict. Bartana's and Amram's works, for instance, reject the glorification of war and instead envision a future rooted in peace. As such, these sculptures do not merely adorn public spaces but actively subvert militaristic norms, offering alternative narratives of resilience and solidarity. Their presence in the public space offers daily "visual confirmation,"¹¹ by embodying alternative viewpoints and challenging the dominant political and militaristic narrative.

Public sculptures in Tel Aviv reflect the complexities of Israeli society, illustrating a shift in artistic expression within public spaces. Historically, many sculptures reinforced traditional militaristic and patriarchal symbols, such as headless, nameless figures that epitomised faceless sacrifice and conformity. In contrast, contemporary public art increasingly embodies



Above:
Yael Bartana, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb* (2023). Photo: Morris Horesh

Below:
Hila Toony Navok, *Lighthouse* (2023).
Photo: Reut Barnea

¹⁰ Reeder, 2018 (see footnote 8).

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.



Hila Amram, Sprout (2023). Photo: Morris Horesh

life-affirming forms that do not present a human body but objects that are serving everybody and therefore encourage dialogue, foster inclusivity, and represent a vision of hope by ignoring the human body and finding ways to represent life and hope in a nonfigurative manner. In the current political climate, where despair and conflict often dominate, the very act of nurturing hope through art becomes an act of resistance. These sculptures challenge the entrenched militaristic and sexist narratives that perpetuate a reality of hopelessness and inequity by not presenting soldiers and their mothers and fathers, by not presenting a human in their glorious victory or defeat.

Conclusion

By engaging with themes of hope and renewal, public art in Tel Aviv fosters opportunities for societal dialogue and critical reflection. It serves as a medium through which collective imaginaries can be reoriented from a culture predicated on war and the sacrifice of sons and daughters toward the emergence of alternative narratives centred on the possibilities of peace and equality. When public art functions as a militaristic, gendered, and traditional text within the public sphere, it not only reflects prevailing societal tensions but also holds the potential to generate alternative discourses that envision a more equitable and hopeful future. Gender geopolitical tours in public space might expand these possibilities by providing structured engagements with feminist and anti-militarist perspectives in ways that might reduce direct confrontation while fostering critical reflection.

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