Israeli Cultural Diversity and its Presence in The Arts

Abstract:

This research centers around the presence, or lack there-of, of art within institutions in Israel. I question whether this presence stems from an appreciation of art or if its usage is there as a tool for other venues. Although there exists an extreme amount of cultural diversity within Israel, there also exists a complexity of segregation. Art usually serves as a tool through which one can better understand a society, which is why this works looks to understand the cultural representations that permeate through Israel’s art. Using several venues of participant observation I tried to understand the usage of arts within institutions such as museums and schools. Several visits to cultural institutions within Israel have allowed me to understand the ways in which art serve as a means by which cultural diversity is actually allowed to exist within Israel. Art seems to serve the purpose of allowing people to set aside the problems in their life both on a personal and national basis. Leaving this project I have a more complex understanding of Israeli culture and its historical transformations through art.

My research focuses on the presence of art in Israel and the social implications that come along with it. I chose to focus most of my research on the presence of the arts within institutions like schools and museums, and question where the lack of it stems from. For the purposes of this paper “The arts” consists of a variety of arts from many different categories including, but not limited to, music, painting, ceramics, bead work, street art etc. I began my project with the intentions of questioning how the arts fit into Israeli society and whether or not this placement is important. By Israel being such a culturally diverse, yet segregated country, I felt as though this would be the perfect place to study whether or not their exists cultural diversity through the venue of the arts. Through this paper I will highlight experiences and realizations that I encountered during my two-week research project and visit to Israel.
I have seen many times in the United States the arts being utilized as a tool to help people and students better understand aspects of their lives. This is an experience that really got me questioning the placement of art in societies. Coming into this project I knew that my background and life experiences would have a huge impact on how I would go about looking at things as well as how I would go about talking to my correspondents. Because of this I want to make sure I take my life’s influences into consideration with every statement and analysis I make. To be more specific I would say my research began with my constant questioning and need to understand the placement art in U.S culture. Coming into this class I knew, with the kind of person I am, that I would end up creating some sort of comparison between my home culture and Israeli culture to form a better sense of life here. Knowing that Israel is such a culturally diverse place I assumed there would be a diverse array of art forms here, yet still questioned the transmission or fluidity of different cultural forms of art between different groups.

Preparing for my research trip to Israel I developed questions that would help me to explore the cultural diversity that exists within Israel’s state institutions in relation to arts. I researched and found local artists to question about the subject matter of their work and see where they draw their inspirations from and whether or not they feel they are able to express their cultural identity freely. I hoped to speak with artist who immigrated into Israel from elsewhere and question them about the acceptance of their work into larger Israeli society and see if they feel they fit in. I paid close attention to exactly what type of art was allowed to be on display and shown in public spaces and questioned what or who decides this.

Seeing that a great deal of my research questioned around the presence of art within schools, I knew it would be pertinent for me to visit schools. It was extremely helpful for me that it was in the plans for this course to go visit schools with extremely different focus areas. Within
the schools we visit I planned to speak with an official from each school and ask questions about the usage of arts within their school. Within schools whose main focus is not art my focus will be put on what the students feel they are learning versus what the teachers want them to learn and who gets to choose if this learning process is a success. I really want to look at the discourse that surrounds “Art” and see what people think of when I mention the word art.

Beginning the process of this research project I formulated a group of questions I planned to use to help guide my interviews which include:

- What is art? When you hear the word “Art” what is the first thing/place that comes to mind? Do you feel art has a place in the state/institutions/schools? How do you feel art should be used? Do you feel as though you actively participate in “Art” culture?

Beginning the interview and observation processes I kept my formulated questions in mind. Although these questions served as a tool to help guide me, I also felt them holding me back a bit during my interviews, because I felt myself getting a bit too attached to them. Below I will provide detailed explanations to what I view as my most meaningful experiences.

The observation and interview exercise in Midrehov created new experiences, realizations and ponderings for me that I never expected. Many of the things I noticed were related to our class sessions, either directly or indirectly. I found after speaking with people the lines of what I thought I knew were blurred to the extreme.

Starting my observation assignment I didn’t really know what to look for or if I should be looking for anything in the first place. Sitting down I realized it would be best for me to just sit, take a seat and let Midrehov take me in the direction I should be going. I began noticing all the different variations in people and how they had the ability, despite my previous beliefs about
Jerusalem, to cohabitate in a space at the same time. I noticed so many religious symbolisms, mainly Jewish, that I never really see back in the states. Midrehov had the obvious signs of a place aimed towards a culturally diverse audience.

The process of interviewing people was a tad difficult for a reason I didn’t expect. Many of the people I originally walked up to, and asked if they spoke English, responded with a too perfect yes. This prompted me to dig deeper into where they were from only to realize many were from America, even stranger, Chicago in particular. The first person I approached with success was a black male street performer. He caught my interest when I started hearing jazz music playing. This startled me a bit seeing as I was in Jerusalem, even though I know jazz is popular worldwide, and this particular jazz sounded very familiar to what I hear in many Chicago clubs. When I approached the man and asked him if he spoke English he responded with yes of course and proceeded to tell me he was from the U.S. He was born in Chicago and came to Israel in the 60s through the inspiration of people like M.L.K. Jr and Malcolm X. He believed that Israel was a means for him to find a new identity for himself in what he views as Northeastern Africa. He told me he practices Hebrewism which he views as a nationality and not a religion, in order to help him further find an identity. This interview was both eye opening and bewildering to me at the same time. I say this because I never knew blacks migrated to Israel as a means to find an identity in an area where they really had none.

My second and third interviews were with a couple which consisted of an Ethiopian-Jewish woman named Ortal and a White-Jewish man named Dvir. These two were a great find for both me and my partner for the exercise Brianna. The woman was able to answer plenty of questions regarding her project on Ethiopian residents in Israel, and the man was able to help me greatly in finding the direction of my project. He was a reggae musician that was born to artistic
parents who learned the guitar as a child. Through speaking with him and his girlfriend and a few other people I have realized that the arts don’t really seem to have a place in education in early Israel. Although I had no expectations on hearing any specific answers, I really didn’t bank on everyone I spoke to telling me that they had no musical education in school.

My interview and observation exercise in Midrehov and my experiences before really started my ponderings of the placement of art in relation to people of different backgrounds. It seemed as though many people had completely different experiences from one another, but I had no clue as to where these differences came from. Although I knew the arts had, what I perceived to be, a huge presence in Jerusalem I didn’t know the extents to which this presence radiated.

During my observations in the Old City I noticed many more things that I didn’t realize my first trip which broadened my ideas and understandings. I chose to not only stay in the Jewish quarter for observations, but to also travel throughout the many other quarters to make a comparison. I noticed the difference in the way store owners haggle and try to get customers into their stores tremendously while observing the different quarters. I felt in the Jewish Quarter the shop owners were way less likely to haggle with you about prices than those in the Arab quarter. In the Arab quarter I had more opportunities to bargain with the shop owners and try to lower prices and get deals on things. This observation made me question where this difference came from, and whether or not it was due to things such as religious or cultural differences. Through my wanderings I found myself in the Armenian quarter and I noticed an extreme difference in the upkeep of this neighborhood in comparison to the others, on many different levels. This quarter was much cleaner and quieter than the other quarters, which to me gave it more of a residential neighborhood feel. While walking through a church I tried to wander a little bit further into the neighborhood but was immediately stopped by a security guard. There just
seemed to be so much more care and concern for their neighborhoods and this made me question the level of affluence that exists in their neighborhood in comparison to the other cultures in the old city. This experience really helped me see the importance and relevancy of the title for this class: Cultural Diversity. Only in a place with an extreme amount of cultural diversity can you turn a corner and be in a place comprised of a completely different culture.

Beginning my interviews was a tad more difficult for me in the old city than in Central Jerusalem. The amount of traffic and the purpose of the people in the quarter didn’t really work cohesively with the interview process. My first interviews were with two shop owners who had extremely different perspectives on Israel and relationships that exist between Jewish, Arab, Palestinian, and Armenians. It was amazing to hear one person say something extremely radical and then have the other person go and say something of a completely different view. I often questioned the extremeness of both responses and where their intentions came from. One of the shop owners was not afraid to share his extreme thoughts even including a comment that Israelis were child killers. The second shop owner really didn’t want to display extreme thoughts and kept trying to soften the impact of the first man’s statements. I felt as though they were both trying to make me feel more favoritism towards Arabs, but just went different ways about it. The extremist guy tried to make me have an extreme dislike for Jewish Israelis by highlighting all the negativity about them, while the second more reserved guy seemed to want me to see all the good in Arabs and believe they are all really nice people. I say this because he told me “Arabs don’t hate people” in a response to a question about how Arabs get along with Ethiopian people. My discussion with these two really opened my eyes to see how careful you have to be when conversing with someone over such a sensitive subject, because people will always try to pull your affection to their side.
My next set of experiences that really aided in my project included an interview with 2 Israeli Arab female teens and a visit to The Israel Museum. In both situations I asked about the perceived importance of the arts in Israeli society and where these perceptions came from. The group of girls I spoke with told me they believed the arts are very important in Israel because they feel as though they help bring tourist to the country and help commerce because many tourist come to the country to buy artwork created in the country. This statement was pretty problematic to me because most people I spoke with informed me that they had no arts courses in school or if they did it was only for one year at the most and not really focused enough for them to become skilled through school alone. While I spoke with the two shop owners in the Arab market I gained a lot of valuable information from them in pertinence to the arts and their placement in Israeli society. I was informed that one of them loves Indian music and sings it at parties for people just for the fun of it. The other shop owner informed me that he learned music in school from an early age and that his children are in school presently and are also learning music. This information really surprised me because I didn’t expect the level of diversity in the responses I’ve been receiving.

In my visit to the Museum I really enjoyed the fact that they had so many different types of art from so many different cultures around the world. While speaking to one of the men who works for the museum I wasn’t surprised to hear from him that to be such a great artist he had to go to a special school for the arts. The conversation I had with him really opened my eyes and made me realize that the arts in Israel are fostered in specific communities and not so much school. I feel as though art may be something valued, it isn’t really something that is pushed forward by the schooling system for children to do. I also found it extremely interesting that in a place where so many people try to stick to their own culture and people, so many people
participate in the music and art of other cultures. This really stresses the idea that has been coming up constantly in my conversations with people that art really is a universal language that everyone understands and can take part in. To counter this I have found that the arts also serve as a mean for exclusion as I learned speaking with the professor at the elementary school who can’t even sing the national anthem for the country he resides in because of the religious nature of the song.

Through my observations and interviews I really have come to a greater understanding of the placement of the arts in Jerusalem and how they function in the complexities of cultural diversity in Israel.

My experiences in Tel Aviv really added a layer of complexity to my understanding of Israel. I noticed a larger and more noticeable art presence in Tel-Aviv, in more ways than one. Not only was there street music artists, and craftsmen but there was also a large amount of visible graffiti. The type of people, both tourists and Israeli citizens, had more of an “Artsy” vibe to them. This statement comes from the fact that most of the people I spoke to were able to give me concrete examples as to why they feel art is valued or not valued in Israel beyond just using the mere presence of art as an example.

During my observation exercise I noticed so much more graffiti plastered on the walls than in Central Jerusalem where we have been spending much of our time. This to me signifies a completely different kind of arts seen than what exists in Central Jerusalem. Although there are plenty of art galleries in Jerusalem I feel they signify a much different atmosphere than graffiti and crafts work. Most of the artist I spoke with, in both Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, all said that they feel as though the best place for artists in Israel is Tel-Aviv because of the free spirit and increased opportunities that exist there.
I noticed a huge difference in the atmosphere at the artisan market versus the regular market in terms of the quality of items offered, quality of presentation, and prices of items offered. In the regular market you could tell the items present were of poor quality by the way they looked and were presented. The shop owners seemed to care less about each individual piece as they were thrown about and no specific items were on main display. The items were all priced relatively low in the regular market and often were parts of deals such as 2 for 50 shekels or such. When I went to the artisan market the shop owners were more willing to tell me about how the piece was made, what is was made from and the significance of the piece to them. Each person was more than willing to tell you their life story and how they began their specific type of crafts they were into. I felt as though this just made me more willing to spend the money on these specific items because it felt as though they were more than just an object but also a story and a piece of the person I bought them from. There seemed to be way more thought and care put into the display of the items in the crafts market to go along with what the item was. None of the spaces seemed to be too filled up or overcrowded.

During my interviews I spoke with several artists in the Artisan market as well as some passer-bys at the beach. Each person I spoke with told me they felt as though Tel-Aviv was a place much more conducive of the arts lifestyle. People told me there was a much more interactive and fostering atmosphere that helped them to strive as artists that profit from their work. I was really surprised when one of the guys I spoke with told me he played guitar and learned at his elementary school as a child. He told me as though this was something normal and not unheard of. This made me believe that Tel Aviv may even have more of an arts atmosphere in their schools, in terms of diversity and intensity of classes offered.
I spoke with a woman who was selling her paintings in the artisan market who told me she began her career as an architect. She informed me that she felt she always wanted to be a painter but didn’t feel as though she was able to fulfill this dream because of her parents and the view in her society as painting not being a real job. She said although she is still an architect painting is where her heart is. This statement really stood out to me as a manifestation or echo of the things I have been hearing my entire trip. Many of the artisans feel as though the majority of the Israeli citizens don’t appreciate hand made things and are not willing to spend more money for quality. The painter I spoke with told me she feels as though Israeli citizens are more concerned with material things and having a large amount of things versus having good quality things that are going to last. She told me she struggled with finding importance in her work and having people more than just tourists come to buy her work. I can understand this because this is the case many times even in America for people who like to shop at stores like Wal-Mart because they can get a lot more items for a cheaper price.

Through my observations in such diverse places I feel as though I am getting a more complex understanding of the placement of the arts in Israel. Although many people believe the arts are an important facet of Israeli life and culture, many are not as willing to financially support the fostering of the arts in the lives of children and artists themselves. I heard a really interesting statement by one of the craftsmen in the artisan market; “It is easier being a musician in Tel-Aviv.”. As of now I am not completely sure how I should take this statement or place it in terms of all the other things I have heard. Easy can mean so many different things to people it really depends on how you are measuring, and what you are measuring as success. Speaking in terms of acceptance I can see musicians having it easier, because many people get instant gratification from music and it is something they can actively participate in, and most times is
free of charge. You can make an event out of going to see an artist and have a moment to remember for the rest of your life. Buying an item on the other hand is completely different. As an artist your work relies on others buying it and not just looking at it, because you poured so much time into the thought of someone using each piece. I have so much more to think about and put into context in relation to Israeli culture and acceptance to understand arts and their relation to Israel.

I strongly believe this research project was both eye opening and helpful to my understandings of both Israel and my personal agendas. I have long appreciated art and its placement in U.S institutions and felt as though arts education should be implemented in schools. This project has further stressed my view point due to the witnessing of so many people of different cultures, religions, nationalities, and ethnicities interacting with the arts of others. Utilizing the venue of the arts I feel as though I have obtained a more comprehensive understanding of Israeli culture. Even though I feel my research questions are nowhere near to being answered, on the contrary, and I have even more questions, I feel as though this has been one of the best learning experiences of my life.