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Marina Abramović and Ulay, still shot from double video "Lovers: The Great Wall Walk" (1988/2010). Credit: MARINA ABRAMOVIC / ULAY

The Architecture and Human Folly of Barriers

An exhibition in Tel Aviv focuses on fortifications, from the Great Wall of China, to the Maginot Line, to Israel's separation barrier

By **Moshe Gilad** | Dec 12, 2018

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green moss, standing in the heart of a forest. Bunker 5 is a remnant of the Maginot Line, which in the 1930s separated France from Germany and was supposed to prevent a Nazi invasion. We know how that ended. Eighty years on, the line has undergone fascinating metamorphoses. The vegetation that covers both bunkers and memory seems wondrous. The horror has been aestheticized. The green gives rise to life after death.

A few minutes later, as I stood opposite Micha Bar-Am's marvelous photographs of the Bar-Lev Line along the Suez Canal in the early 1970s, it struck me that it's unfortunate that no documentation exists of what has survived from that famous line of outposts today. Is "Budapest" still there, or "Purkan" or "Hamezah"? Are they, too, covered by green moss?

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Alexandre Guirking, "Bunker 5" (2007). Credit: Alexandre Guirking

"Bunker 5" is one of a dozen shots taken by French photographer Guirking that are now on view at the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery at Tel Aviv University, as part of an exhibition titled "Defense Lines: Maginot, Bar-Lev and Beyond." The exhibition, as a close perusal reveals, allows the visitor to see life in Israel, and in general, as one long sequence of building fortifications. Some of them will turn out to be superfluous – or stupid.

The list of defense lines close to home in Israel is a long one, and includes (just in the past few decades), the outposts on the road to Jerusalem, Ammunition Hill, the Bar-Lev Line, the mine fields in the Arava desert and on the Golan Heights, the fortifications in the Jordan Rift Valley, the [separation barrier that snakes around the West Bank](#), and, at present, the immense wall across from and around the Gaza Strip. Names change, defense remains. Of the sites mentioned above, only two – the Bar-Lev Line and the separation barrier – are seen in the show, but the others are hovering just above.

It's important to remember that such barriers and fortifications are not an Israeli invention. Hadrian's Wall, in northern England, which is 120 kilometers long, reminds those who walk along it that superfluous walls were already being built 2,000 years ago – and that particular one didn't prevent the "savage" Scots from invading southward.



Amir Balaban, from video "Gazelles, Separation Fence Herd, Jerusalem" (2013). Credit: Amir Balaban

The works of seven participants appear in "Defense Lines." A double video by Marina Abramovi and Ulay shows a walk along the Great Wall of China. Amir Balaban's wonderful videos capture gazelles on both sides of Israel's separation barrier, while Netta Laufer's videos are taken from the surveillance cameras installed along the barrier. Also on display are Micha Bar-Am's images from the Bar-Lev Line and Guirkingner's from the Maginot Line; Yael Lavie's reconstruction of the Egyptians' breaching the Bar-Lev Line; and two photographs of the wall between the United States and Mexico by Assaf Evron.

That list clearly shows the scale of the phenomenon in question. At least two of the most interesting participants – Balaban (an expert on urban nature) and Lavie (a journalist and media figure) – don't describe themselves (in my opinion) as artists per se, yet their works are among the most important and intriguing in the show.

The power of "Defense Lines" derives from the fine curating effort. The chief curators are Galia Gur Zeev and Sefy Hendler; the concept was developed by Dr. Ayelet Zohar. The result is a large and diverse range of gazes at a subject that is ostensibly straightforward as well as acutely relevant.

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Netta Laufer, from video "25 FT – West Bank" (2016). Credit: Netta Laufer

After my visit, while I was contemplating what the exhibition is about, it became clear that it's not actually about art or architecture: "Defense Lines" deals with human folly, with memory, nature, current events, aesthetics, interpersonal relations, fear and the big question of the passage of time.

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At an exhibition of works by seven different people, it's only natural for some of their creations to be more powerful than others. The photos by Bar-Am (and others of their ilk) have already been exhibited in the past. They are certainly first-rate and very well suited to the concept, but they don't really say much that's new. Thus, it is the video works by Balaban, Lavie and Laufer that are the best and most refreshing elements on display here. The works by Balaban and Lavie are journalistic documentation, and that's the source of their power.

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90 days later. But beyond the somewhat familiar insight that defense lines exist within our psyche, just as they do in the very real Great Wall, there's not much to it.



Assaf Evron, "Untitled (San Diego, Prototype of a Wall)" (2018). Credit: Assaf Evron

On display in one of the halls are photos of the World War II fortifications at Normandy by Paul Virilio. Virilio – a French professor of architecture and philosophy, who conducted a dialogue with the curators while they were preparing their exhibition – died this year and the show is dedicated to his memory. In his book “Bunker Architecture” (1975), Virilio defined the bunker as a rare example of modern monolithic architecture; in contrast to most structures, it lacks foundations and reflects the very essence of war.

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Afterward, the questions remain. What prompts people to engage in this insane form of construction? What sort of anxiety causes people to invest such vast sums of money, emotional strength and relentless energy in building lines of defense full of concrete, which, as the past has shown, will only collapse? Every exhibition that generates questions of this nature deserves respect and praise.

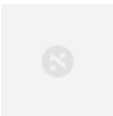
Two concluding notes: Haaretz is one of the show's sponsors, along with Tel Aviv University, the Foreign Ministry, the French Embassy and the National Institute for Security Studies; the university's Theater Arts Department will perform the play “The Claim of Don

Israel Museum 52 shekels; and to the university's Steinhardt Museum of Natural History 50 shekels.)

The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, 64 Haim Levanon Street, Gate 7 of the university; Tel.: 03-6408860; Sun.-Wed. 11-19, Thu. 11-21, Fri. 11-14; exhibition runs until June 6, 1919



Micha Bar-Am, "Israeli Second Line Fortifications Near the Suez Canal" (1971). Credit: Micha Bar-Am



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