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## **Wound-Weaving Art: Empowerment through Empathy**

Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary

The first maps drawn during the Renaissance were works of both art and science. Their creators sought not only to represent the respective location of topographical elements, but also to convey the sentiments of their contemporaries towards these territories. Rivers and mountains cohabited with sailing boats and dragons in visual images that were made to be observed and admired, not only used by merchants and military strategists. These maps were sometimes shaped in the form of a silhouette, most often a female one, in order to enhance to the organic structure of the nations that were, during this period in Europe, defining themselves politically. In many ways, Ariane Littman's work resonates with these beautiful 16<sup>th</sup>-century maps, while also questioning their underlying premises by means of its powerful aesthetic and political resonances.

Indeed, over the years Ariane Littman has built a remarkably coherent body of work, whose underlying themes unfold in each of her “cycles” in new and surprising ways. The Second Intifada in 2000 constituted a turning point in her artistic trajectory, imposing the political agenda of that moment upon her inner quest for identity. A combination of alienation, guilt and anger was translated into a sense of commitment as she took up a camera and began documenting the erection of the separation wall around Jerusalem, while assuming the risky position of an artistic performer.

It was Littman's explorations of performance art that first led her to tinker with maps, intervening with the precision of a surgeon on OCHA Closure maps of the West Bank and Jerusalem produced in 2004. Piecing together bits of paper with extreme care, she re-arranged the elements as if putting together a huge puzzle. In doing so, however, she did not aim to offer a political solution, but rather to underline the absurdity of the ongoing separation between Palestinian and Israeli territories that are so tightly woven together. In her first public intervention, titled “*Surgical Operation*” (2004), she ironically opposed the vocabulary of military interventions and tentatively attempted to heal the territory through the mending of its map – a gesture that would become a recurring motif in her work, most notably in the *Wounded Land* series (2004–present).

The years 2008–2009 represent another crucial point in Ariane Littman’s career, marked by her decision to turn away from her direct engagement with violent Israeli-Palestinian encounters and by her daughter’s accident, which created a brutal clash between the different dimensions of her life. As the bandages she had initially explored in her art-making now became a concrete part of caring for her injured daughter, she began to increasingly implicate herself personally in her work. One after another, her conscientiously filmed performances, turned to construct a highly personal aesthetic universe, in which the whiteness of the flowing bandages and the beautiful lights stand out in contrast to the somberness of the deadly topics.

Her more recent work has unfolded in a manner that brings together the elements of her personal universe, as made evident most notably in the *Grafted Land* (2015–2017), where the original design almost totally disappears below plastered bandages. The artist tries to mend it by sewing the fragments with a green thread, but also stitching it as if she were using skin grafts like the ones her daughter needed after her accident: As if the "Green Line" demarcating Israel’s pre-1967 borders could reunite those it tears apart on a daily basis.

At the same time, the more recent *Twin Embryos* (2017–2018) may be one of her most political productions to date: concentrating on the territory of the West Bank and underscoring its contours, she discovers that it resembles the shape of a human embryo. As embodied on the map, form is a testimonial to indefiniteness: neither conceived as a separate entity nor totally included within Israel, it is revealed in all of its in-betweenness

The current text is nourished by the relationship that Ariane and I have developed since our first encounter in 2010, in her Jerusalem studio, where I arrived following the recommendation of Galia Bar Or, then the chief curator of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod, which I had visited as part of my research on border art. The following year, I invited Ariane to participate as a keynote speaker in the international conference that I organized between Geneva and Grenoble on “Mobile borders,” a concept that I was just starting to develop. This context has proven fertile to both of us, creating as it does a nexus between science and art that has continue to grow stronger over the years. Today, Ariane Littman is acknowledged as a major border artist: who has better attended to the dialectical role of cutting and suturing that is played by boundaries? Her nuanced interpretation of the complex notion of the border is highly evocative for both art connoisseurs and for contemporary scholars engaged in understanding what they call the “everywhere border”. When the functions attributed to borders are disseminated into spatial networks, as technologies “pixelize” what used to be a simple line, it becomes difficult to convey updated

representations of this political tool. In this context, the dialogue with artists such as Ariane Littman proves highly fecund for both creators and theorists, raising more questions rather than solving the existing ones, and expanding the possibilities for both scientific and artistic research and creation

In Ariane Littman's works, the consciousness of the wound and the pain that it causes is answered to by the will to mend and repair. Even if aesthetics does not have the power to heal, it can certainly point at trauma and suggest a way to overcome the pain without denying the scar. In contrast to the Renaissance artists who put their talent at the service of the powerful, Ariane Littman has charted her own remarkably independent artistic trajectory, drawing together subtle political insights and a highly original visual language, in which her body remains a powerfully humane cornerstone.