HUMMB◉WL

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THESIS PROJECT
DSI 2015

HTTP://HUMMBOWL.ME

Israel is my home. It is where I was born and raised and it is where I want to raise my children. But it is also a place that is entangled in a long intractable conflict with no resolve on the horizon. Living in such conflict is not sustainable. It begs the question - if I want to raise children there, what kind of future would they have?

As civilians, we are not afforded too much agency and decision making power in matters of security, diplomacy and foreign affairs. Or at least, this is what we think and what we are being encouraged to think.
I decided to take the opportunity of a design thesis project to examine where I, as a stakeholder, can challenge that perception. I decided to investigate how a design thinking approach could be applied to a complex conflict situation which I have personally known all my life.

The following is a documentation of my thesis journey, in which I set out to see if and how design can overcome decades old barriers between Israelis and Palestinians.

CONTEXT

The Israeli Palestinian conflict has been going on for close to a century, and some say even for longer than that. It has been the focal point of the larger Arab Israeli conflict and has involved the world's superpowers. It is about territory, religion, human rights and narratives, and has been referred to as 'the world's most intractable conflict'.

The early 1990's were probably the closest the conflict has ever come to resolution, with major negotiations under way between the leaders of both people that included both sides taking significant steps towards compromise and reconciliation. However, the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 seemed to have marked a pivot point after which negotiations deteriorated and violence once again broke out.

In 2002 Israel began constructing a separation barrier as a response to a significant increase in attacks by Palestinian terrorist organisations, which claimed many Israeli civilian lives. Upon completion, the barrier is destined to be a 700-kilometres long network of high walls, electronic fences, gates and trenches. To date, construction has been completed on approximately 65% of the barrier, at a cost of $2.8 billion.

Qalqiliyah section of the Separation Wall

Since the construction of the wall, the number of Israeli casualties of the conflict has dropped significantly. However, the placing of a physical wall also had the effect of adding concrete form to the emotional and psychological barriers already in place between civilians from both sides such as traumas, fear and suspicion. It took away the possibility that was at least somewhat available previously for Israelis and Palestinians to meet directly and interact. The lack of opportunities for personal contact became a breeding ground for disinformation and dehumanization on both sides.

Over the last decade, the violence has peaked into full blown wars on average every 2.5 years. Summer 2014 was an especially tragic chain of events, beginning with the abduction and murder of 3 Israeli teens that quickly escalated to a retaliatory abduction and murder of an Arab teen, violent riots and protests and ultimately a large scale military operation in the Gaza strip. The war went on for 50 days over the summer, costing the lives of 2191 Palestinians and 71 Israelis, keeping civilians on both sides under constant rocket and missile fire, turning much of Gaza into ruins and plunging it into a humanitarian crisis. The war also exposed how much hatred exists between both sides and their supporters and polarized the discussion about peace and reconciliation ever more so.

" AND WHEN PALESTINIAN CHILDREN TELL YOU, 'WE WOULD BE HAPPY TO KILL JEWS AND DIE' – YOU REALIZE YOU ARE SEEING THE FUTURE GENERATION OF ARMED MILITANTS.

...

ISRAELIS DON'T SEE OR HEAR THE PALESTINIANS. THEY ARE THE TRUE TRANSPARENT PEOPLE. THEY REALLY DON'T EXIST FOR US."

OHAD HEMO, PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT FOR ISRAEL'S CHANNEL 2 NEWS

THE INTERACTION LANDSCAPE

The war left me feeling depressed about the prospects for a healthy future co-existence, especially in light of the extreme levels public discourse had reached. But it also afforded me an opportunity to observe the discourse especially as it manifested on social media, in an unfiltered and very exposed state. The sensitive situation made people open up more and revealed opinions and behaviors that would otherwise be subdued. I monitored social media activity, interviewed Israelis, Palestinians and subject matter experts and conducted a survey on how much people actually communicate with people on the other side of the border.

The majority of respondents were Israeli; most of them reported they did not interact online or offline with Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza at all, and barely interacted online or offline with Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship (a.k.a. Israeli Arabs). Around half perceived neither Israeli nor Palestinian citizens as having significant power to end the conflict. The majority didn't see the conflict ending in the near future.

Carmel Vaisman @carmelva · Jul 9
The more rockets in TLV become routine the less i allow them to break my routine. It's not escapism, it's resistance. #israelunderfire

↩   ⟲ 5   ★ 2   •••

Wafa A Al-Udaini @wafa_Gaza · 5h
NOTHING can break my spirit, I'll keep tweeting for Palestine and Gaza despite everything is happening to us #GazaUnderAttack

↩   ⟲ 8   ★ 4   •••

I enhanced my research by reading academic studies on discussion patterns between Israelis and Palestinians, analysis of online discussions and online activity around the conflict peak points, news commentaries and op-eds from international as well as Middle East media outlets, and personal narratives of Israelis and Palestinians.

The research brought attention to the unique characteristics of Israeli Jews and Palestinians in argument styles, that highlight how important cultural contexts are when analyzing and judging behavior. The research shows many destructive patterns, reflective of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, that both groups need to improve in order to be able to actually utilize the online space and communication channel to a mutually beneficial level and to serve the interests of all stakeholders.

The general lack of a sense of agency from civilians regarding the conflict, as it was reflected through my research, was not surprising. I also anticipated the data about lack of interactions between Israelis and Palestinians.
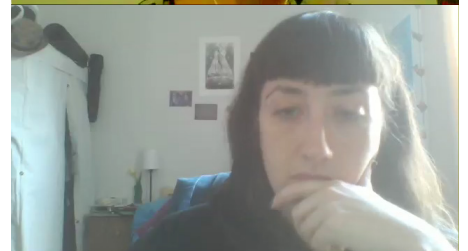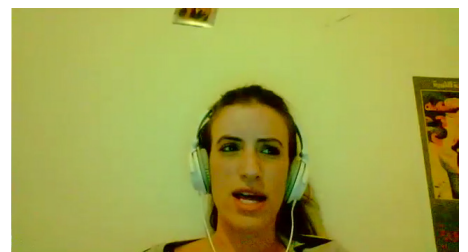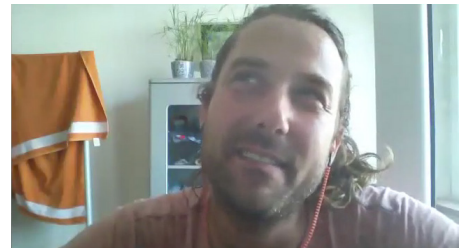
The most interesting findings were actually about the design of available communication channels, namely social media. The platforms are designed in a way that is actually counterproductive to connecting between people from different sides of conflict. The platform drives users to stay in their comfort zones rather than expose them to what is different - the algorithms are engineered to expose the users to the content they most often consume, rather than content they are not familiar with. That which you do not know and interact with often, disappears from your field of view. Opinions and thoughts are reduced to short reductive statuses or 140 characters, filtering out many of the humanizing nuances and aspects of free flowing conversations.
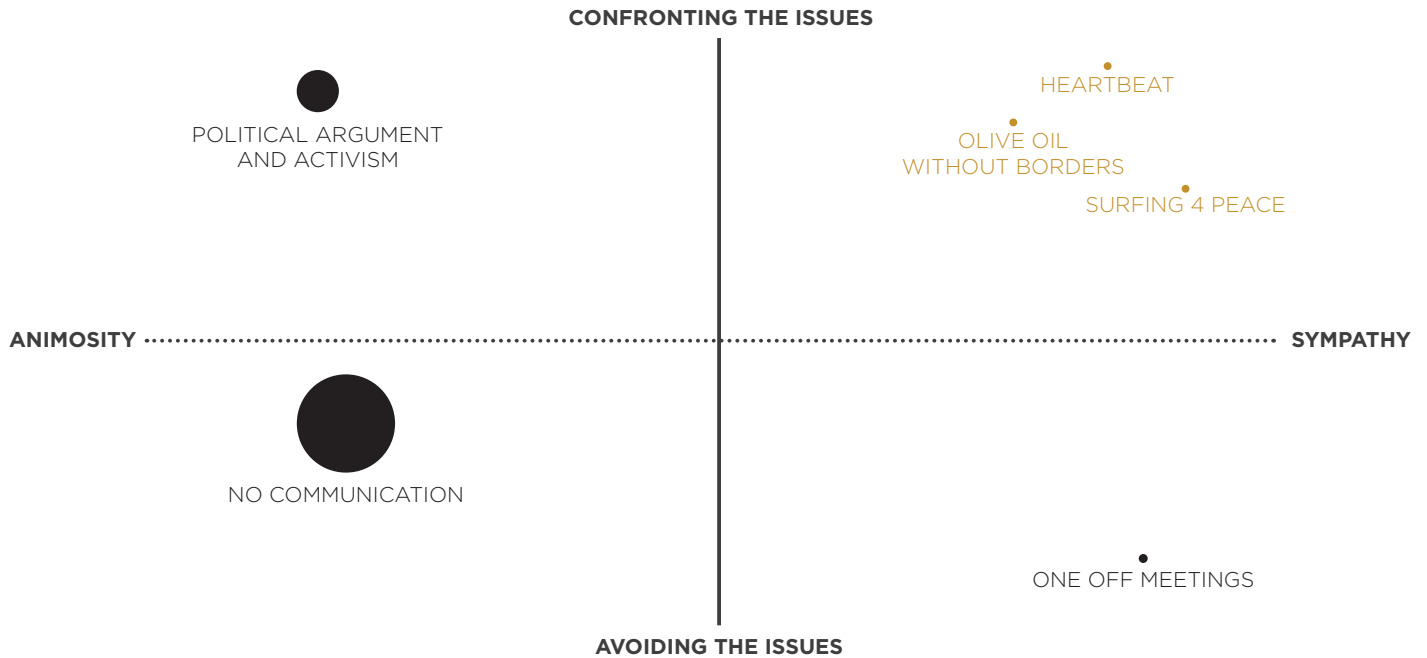
This design has contributed to polarization and animosity rather than bridge the gaps, and encloses users in bubbles of false perceptions of reality - all you see is content similar to yours, people similar to you, which creates the illusion that most people think as you do. The online space doesn't overcome the constraints of the offline physical space with regards to global connectivity, but rather ends up reflecting the same silo patterns. The public discourse as reflected on social media channels over the summer war in Gaza clearly reflected this - as in the physical space, most users interacted mostly with the like minded. When interactions with people from different political views and from other sides of the border did occur, they resulted often in tense arguments and verbal violence.

This is not a constraint of the medium, it's a design question. Communication systems based on connecting people across cultures and locations need to be designed differently, with more attention to the unmet need of exposure and interaction with different points of view and different cultures.
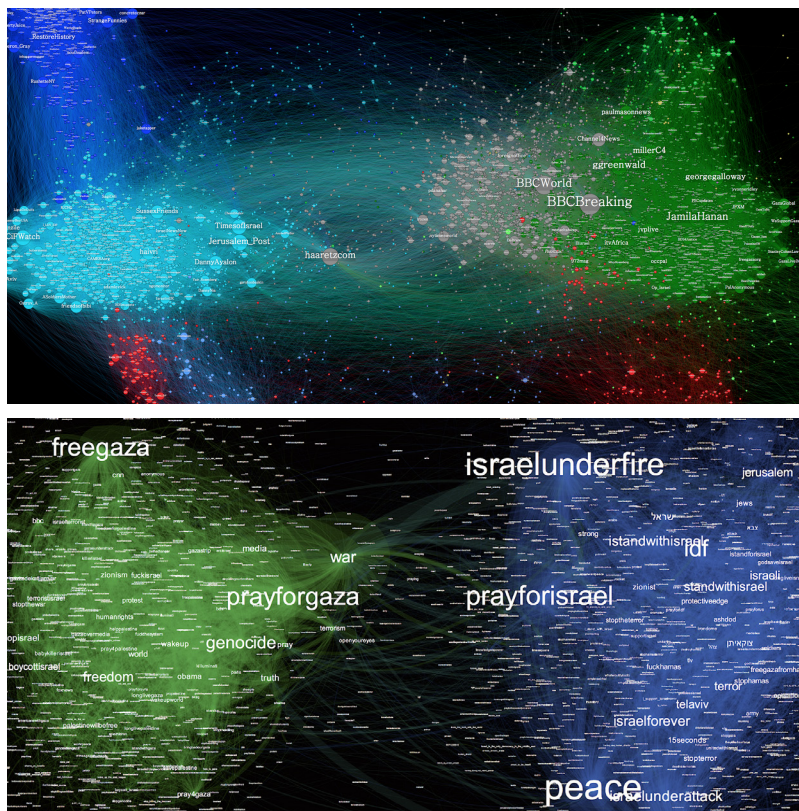
Snapshots of Twitter and Instagram conversations during the summer 2014 war Mapping: Gilad Lotan

THE POSITIVE DEVIANTS

CONFRONTING THE ISSUES

● HEARTBEAT

● POLITICAL ARGUMENT
AND ACTIVISM

OLIVE OIL
WITHOUT BORDERS ●

● SURFING 4 PEACE

ANIMOSITY · **SYMPATHY**

● NO COMMUNICATION

● ONE OFF MEETINGS

AVOIDING THE ISSUES

The majority of initiatives that have been successful in building and fostering relationships between Israelis and Palestinians, are based on getting to know each other over time around a shared interest. Continued engagement is important, as it takes time for stakeholders to overcome pre-existing biases, really open up and unpack tensions together. Many of the initiatives incorporate at least some form of physical meeting as part of the process. For example, the Surfing 4 Peace community facilitates support from Israeli surfers to peers in Gaza and from the West Bank, and brings them together physically in workshops in neutral countries. 'Olive Oil Without Borders' connects Israeli and Palestinian olive farmers for a cross border economic collaboration. 'Heartbeat' runs a lengthy education and capacity building program for Israeli and Palestinian youth musicians, in which they create and perform together.

Surfing 4 Peace

Olive Oil Without Borders

However, most of the population doesn't participate in such initiatives. You need to opt in to take part in the experience, and participants arrive with a pre-existing interest (whether it is in the subject matter or in the cross cultural connection). Not everyone is into surfing, music or farming; not everyone is curious about getting to know the 'enemy'. Most Israelis and Palestinians don't.

I realized the key to the next step was to find something more engaging to larger audiences.

IN THE PAST 20 YEARS, LESS THAN 1% OF THE ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN POPULATION HAS COME TOGETHER FOR A MEANINGFUL, SUSTAINED RESPECT AND TRUST BUILDING EXPERIENCE."

HEARTBEAT,FM

BIGGER PLATES

Food is one language that the majority on both sides speak with passion - a rich and powerful one, at that. As living creatures, food is where we gather and meet; it's a language everyone speaks (in different dialects); it's a joyful experience to make and to consume; and it's an organic storyteller that can reveal contexts, history and experiences without being confrontational. Many Israeli families come from Jewish communities in the Arab world so the cuisine is similar, and had been adopted by Israeli Jews of European descent for its' spice and appropriateness to the Middle Eastern climate. The food that has been defined and marketed successfully around the world as Israeli cuisine, regarded in Israel as a source of national pride, is mostly Arab cuisine. Because of the how this food has been brought to Israel by emigrating Jews from the Arab world, it's not necessarily inauthentic - these are genuinely traditional recipes for many Israeli families.

However, from the Arab perspective, food is a sensitive topic which reflects the core of the conflict - questions of rights, cultural appropriation and narratives. They see the issue of food as one where Israelis are capitalizing on a piece of Arab culture by way of oppression, while ignoring its' significance and other, less comfortable parts of Arab existence - like rights over the land, which are the unresolved core of the conflict.

For example, hummus is a paste of chickpeas, sesame, garlic and lemon, which is the most representative food of the Middle East - and as contentious as it is popular. It has been prepared in the Levant since at least the 13th century, and is consumed to this day on a regular basis by most Middle Easterners. Each culture has its' own habits around it - in East Jerusalem you can see Palestinian children running in the morning to restaurants carrying bowls to fill with hummus for the family breakfast. In Jordan it is served with meat toppings, and in Israel it's the common social activity to partake in for a weekend lunch. Israelis are also making big profit off marketing hummus as Israeli food in global markets. This has called the attentions of boycott and divestment organizers and companies like Sabra and Tribe are targeted for specific consumer boycotts.

I assumed this was the reason, or part of the reason, that no significant attempt to connect Israelis and Palestinians around food had yet to be made. I decided to see if design could provide an answer.
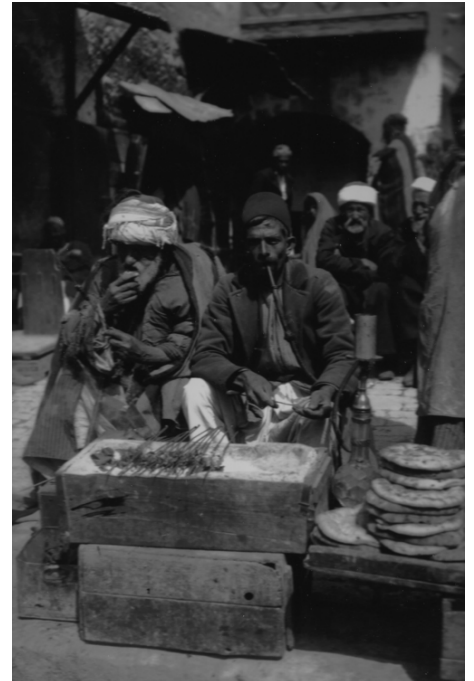
Street food in Jerusalem, 1935

DON'T BUY INTO ISRAELI HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

SABRA HUMMUS PROFITS FROM WAR & OCCUPATION

Sabra Hummus is co-owned by the Strauss Group, a corporation that supports the Israeli army's elite Golani and Givati Brigades. The Golani and Givati have been cited for numerous human rights violations since 1948, including during Israel's three-week assault on Gaza that killed more than 1,400 mostly unarmed Palestinian civilians.

BOYCOTT SABRA
LET DEPAUL KNOW YOUR MONEY WILL NOT SUPPORT ISRAEL'S VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) | sjpdepaul@gmail.com

Sabra boycott flyer

Eating hummus in Palestine, 1935

IDEATION AND PROTOTYPING

I wanted to observe examples of interventions that use food to tell stories of conflict. I had heard of "Conflict Kitchen", a restaurant that serves food and hosts events to educate the American public on countries the US is in conflict with and humanize the people there. They happened to host the Palestinian kitchen just as I was focusing on food as a medium - so I went to visit. The way the food itself could tell me about the Palestinian lens on the conflict, without being confrontational towards me as an Israeli was very powerful. That, to me, was key about changing the way Israelis and Palestinians currently communicate (or don't).

However, I also found the experience to be passive and non-participatory - there was no exchange and no action taken by the audience. The diners mostly consumed food and narrative passively. The content was very powerful, but the audience was mostly sympathetic Americans. The real challenge is with presenting this information to people from the other side of the conflict, who are stakeholders in it far more than the American public.

I started to ideate around cooking and dining. I experimented with cooking, packaging and serving Palestinian food. I also continued interviewing subject matter experts and stakeholders, who kept emphasizing how important it was to address power dynamics and allow depth to conversations, and how delicate the topic of food is in relation to the Middle East tensions.

This reinforced to me that there is a design problem here, and encouraged me to approach it through human centered experience design.

FAILING FORWARD

In January I travelled to Israel to prototype a dinner and workshop format. I thought the power dynamics gap could be addressed through creating a teacher and student setup in which the Palestinian is the authority figure. None of the Palestinians I approached to co-create with showed up and I found myself at a dinner with all Israeli guests, I realized I must have missed something significant. Feedback I got through a third party from one of the Palestinians revealed my fail: "I didn't want to be the pet Arab." I was an Israeli, who had assumed asking Arabs to co-create something with me would be enough, and did not take into account that I needed to offer more to overcome pre-existing suspicions.

I realized the gap wasn't in what happened at the table - it was before that, in how we set the table.

There's an asymmetry to Israeli Palestinian power dynamics, but both people have an equally unmet need to feel legitimacy and acknowledgment from the other. I wanted to see how I could design an experience around food that can provide that before both sides even meet.

> "WE DON'T BUY INTO THE HUMMUS KUMBAYA. FOOD CAN'T JUST BE AN ISSUE OF BREAKING BREAD. IT'S NOT ABOUT PEOPLE GETTING ALONG, YOU HAVE TO ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING ISSUES AND RIGHTS AND CONFLICTS OTHERWISE WE JUST DON'T BUY INTO IT."
> LAILA EL-HADDAD, PALESTINIAN FOOD BLOGGER AND ACTIVIST

THE INGREDIENTS

From my research and prototyping I synthesized the following traits: first, we need both **narratives**, delivered through open, honest **self expression**. They need to feel familiar and in depth, not manufactured or reductive. The experience also needs to be **challenging** and include sensitive issues. This is a practice in leaving the comfort zone of your own narrative and being exposed to the narrative of the other, without feeling it's an attack. So you need to feel a little bit of **discomfort**, just enough to be thought provoking. There needs to be something **collective** and shared, something **relatable** to both sides - but that we can give an individual interpretation to, that will be clearly ours and impossible to appropriate.

I decided to see what I could build that is all these elements?

DIP DIVE

The most prominent ritual of hummus culture throughout the Middle East is the Dip, known in Israel as the Wipe. It's the gesture you make as you eat your hummus with a piece of torn pita bread. Everyone has their own specific style and for some, their technique is a source of genuine pride. It is so ingrained in hummus culture, I had taken it for granted and hadn't even thought about the potential it offered.

The dip/wipe is a collective gesture, that everyone has an individual interpretation to and a ritual around. At the end of the meal, it leaves a mark on the bowl - almost like a fingerprint. Both sides leave this artifact that is both personal and shared at the same time. What if I preserved that which everyone washes away? I wanted to see if the dip could become a channel for people's narratives and personalities?

> "LEARNING TO RESPECT THE NARRATIVE OF THE OTHER MAY BE SEEN AS A COPING PROCESS: ONE MUST LEARN TO GIVE UP THOSE PARTS OF ONE'S NARRATIVE WHICH ARE ESSENTIAL TO MAINTAINING A NEGATIVE AND MORALLY INFERIOR COLLECTIVE IMAGE OF THE OTHER."
>
> SIDE BY SIDE: PARALLEL HISTORIES OF ISRAEL-PALESTINE

H U M M B O W L S

And so, the Hummbowl was born. Hummbowls are storytelling tableware. In each bowl, someone's hand style and narrative is preserved and shared. Users can use the bowl for whatever purpose - although really, the best use for it would be eating hummus.

The process starts with one on one interviews with participants over hummus, to harvest the narratives and dip-prints in a safe setting and a non-confrontational way. I then create a replica mold of the bowl and the dip-print, and cast new bowls out of it. The bowl is then assigned a unique logo and code which when scanned through the augmented reality app Blippar, reveals the story on the user's mobile phone. The new bowl is put into the cycle of distribution and exchange and is given to other participants, for their contribution. Every participant that donates their narrative, receives a bowl with someone else's story and print.

The 3 dimensional shape creates intrigue upon first glance - and more importantly, it creates intimacy when it's used. It's like putting on a pair of someone's weird looking shoes and walking in them. It represents that which unique to us and can't be appropriated, but also our similarities.


The code brings you an authentic narrative of someone you have no access to, without editing or censorship. It contains truths, but is not confrontational, and you get time to consume and digest it privately.

The exchanges between participants keep the conversation going and moving across borders. By participating in the giving and receiving, you know someone is going through the same intimate experience with your print and your story.

PROTOTYPING

I prototyped by collecting 4 narratives and dip-prints from 2 Israelis and 2 Arabs who are currently living in New York, with varying political opinions. I asked them about their personal lives and backgrounds as well as views about sensitive issues and the politics of the Middle East. I also prompted them to add questions they might be curious about. I transcribed the interviews and uploaded them online in hidden links. For reasons of their privacy and safety, their identity needed to be kept discrete - some could get in trouble in their home countries for being in contact with an Israeli like me.

I then created molds and cast the hummbowls out of them. I distributed the bowls to 7 test users - the original 4 hummbowl people and 3 new users, to test for 7 days. At the time of prototyping I hadn't gotten access to the Blippar app yet, so I prototyped with QR codes that linked to the hidden narrative texts. I distributed experience journals with the bowls, asking the users to mark each day whether they used the bowls and had it inspired any new thoughts for them that day, with a space for general reflections at the end. What I mostly wanted to see was whether using the bowls changed anything about how people thought of those on the other side and whether they would be interested in continuing the engagement further.
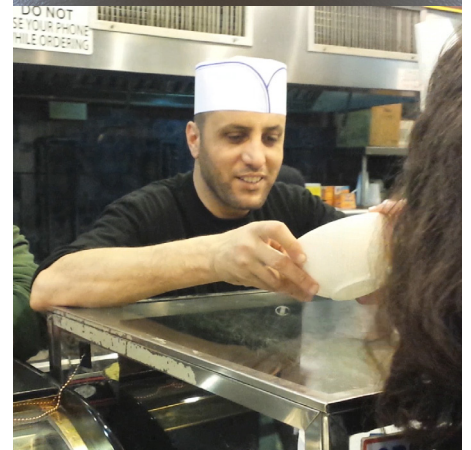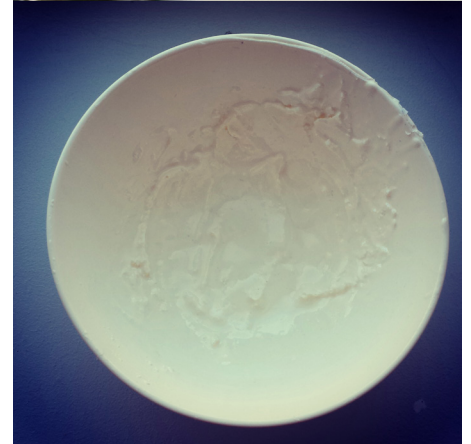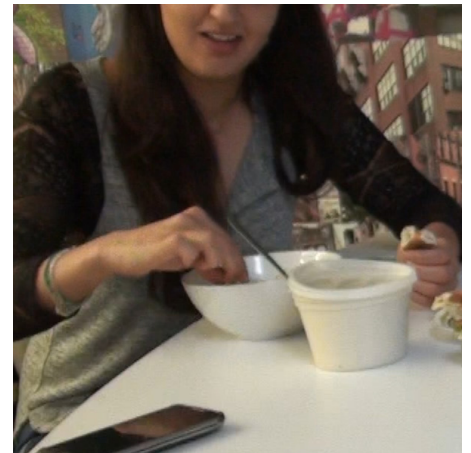
OUTCOMES AND LEARNINGS

All the users had an immediate reaction of surprise and interest in the bowl. They all touched it and traced the inner shape when they received it. All of the users commented on how much the inside of the bowl looked like someone's leftover food, and how intriguing that was - some also expressed feeling discomfort.

None of the users had pre installed QR readers on their phone and they had to download one for the testing. Some of the users scanned the code when they got the bowl and skimmed through the stories before saving the rest to fully read in private; some immediately decided to wait with reading the story.

Most of the users found it difficult to keep up with filling out their journals and instead opted to report their overall experience and reflections at the end of the 7 days in an interview. Some of the users reported having difficulties eating out of the bowl and washing it because of its' irregular shape.
All of the users spoke extensively of their hummbowl persons and recalled their narratives in detail, sounding as if they were talking about someone they personally know. They came up with answers to the hummbowl person's questions and reported getting immersed in the shape of the dip-print, wondering what kind of gestures the person made as they were eating to get that shape. Their emotions towards their hummbowl persons ranged from being very intrigued by their perspectives, to feeling deeply moved. All the users said they did not necessarily agree with all of their hummbowl person's opinions, but found their perspective interesting. Half said the experience made them reflect about the similarities and commonalities they share with people from the other side, with two of the users saying it made them feel really sad.

5 users were interested in continuing communication with their hummbowl person in other mediums, from emailing responses to meeting in person. Two users even stressed they felt a more structured continued engagement was necessary.

> **"**
> **MY FIRST IMPRESSION WAS THAT IT'S A VERY INTIMATE MOMENT, OR INTERACTION, WITH A PERSON I DON'T KNOW. IT ALMOST SEEMS TOO INTIMATE FOR ME TO USE IT."**

Hummbowl in use

The prototype affirmed my hopes and hypothesis that through intentional design, intimacy and humanization can be created between people in conflict before they meet.

Interfaces could be designed to leverage shared interests and technology, that would challenge stereotypes and create a bridge to deeper conversations between segregated communities. However, further iteration is needed regarding technology and structure. My test with limited people was succesful and enlightening, but the real test would be with more people on the ground, around the Middle East itself.

The use of mobile scanning to reach narratives is questionable as I found it's not an intuitive and organic process. Another big next step would be to build a more structured process around engagement with participants during and after using the bowl. There may also be room to experiment with refining the inner shape of the bowl so it is more easy to use, without jeopardizing the fidelity of the imprint which is a big part of the humanizing effect of the bowl.

It is possible for people in intractable conflict to find common ground but it is sensitive and gradual, and must start with something subtle and simple. The needs of Israelis and Arabs are different, and change can happen only in an experience that balances between those different needs. The experience needs to be a combination of basic connection but also provide space for sensitive issues and political opinions to be voiced and heard. The key is in designing a conversation experience, that is non-confrontational; the existing communication (which is scarce to begin with) is either too shallow and doesn't not go in depth to the real issues, or is polarized in the other direction - purely argumentative and confrontational, without revealing enough of the human beings behind it (for example, social media based conversations).

"SHE WRITES THE WAY SHE SPEAKS. ONE OF MY FIRST THOUGHTS WAS THAT I FEEL I KNOW THIS GIRL, I FEEL HER PRESENCE."

"HE HAD A VERY INTERESTING PERSPECTIVE ON THE REAL CONCERNS HE HAD AS AN ISRAELI."

"I REALIZED I WAS LOOKING FOR THE VICTIMIZATION INSTEAD OF THE REAL OPINIONS, THE 'THIS IS WHAT I BELIEVE IN, THIS IS WHAT I THINK.'"

"IT'S LIKE WHEN YOU SEE PICTURES OF SOMEONE BEFORE YOU ACTUALLY MEET THEM, AND THEN WHEN YOU DO MEET THEM THERE'S SORT OF A SENSE OF FAMILIARITY, I FEEL THAT VERY MUCH EVEN THOUGH I DON'T KNOW WHAT SHE LOOKS LIKE. IT'S A FAMILIAR WAY TO LEARN ABOUT SOMEONE'S STORY."

"IT MADE ME SAD. JUST HEARING HIS STORY AND HIS POINT OF VIEW HUMANIZED THE WHOLE SITUATION, AND IT'S REALLY HARD. YOU MOSTLY READ THINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN ABOUT THE COUNTRIES OR COMMUNITIES, BUT IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT PEOPLE, IT'S NUMBERS, IT'S NOT RELATABLE. I RARELY THINK ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE ON THE GROUND. THIS DEFINITELY MADE ME THINK ABOUT HIS PERSPECTIVE. WHATEVER HE BELIEVES, HE'S AFFECTED BY IT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER."

LOOKING FORWARD

Where could this go beyond bowls? what if you could just scan objects in your kitchen and hear the voices of people you've never had access to? what if a family sat in a restaurant in Tel Aviv and were served not just food but also an inside view to the life of a family in Ramallah? What conversations would that catalyze? What happens when there's 50 more hummbowl people? Or 500? Or 10,000 - on the ground, when conflict rages around them?

Storytelling tableware won't reconcile all the people in the Middle East, and it will not end all the ongoing violence and finalize a peace agreement. But it can answer the need both Israelis and Arabs have to express themselves honestly and openly, to be heard and recognized as human beings amongst their 'enemies'. Just meeting those needs already creates different associations and challenges stereotypes, which can open the door to more in depth communication down the road. The process is relevant on the local micro level as well, when there are tensions and friction between groups within the same society - and applies to communities well beyond the Middle East.

FINAL THOUGHT

So many resources are invested on a daily basis in designing instruments of separation. Isn't it time to invest more in intentionaly designing instruments of unification?

THANK YOU,

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