



How have you been? How is it going over there in Japan, and at Arts Maebashi? I saw you have a beautiful show right now.

I started working on your request right when I got the email, making a large diagram of the past three months but it became so confusing and looked like an artwork :)

So I am sending instead my thoughts, ideas and everything that is going on right now in my life, in relation to art, the pandemic and politics, from an interview to ARTIS.

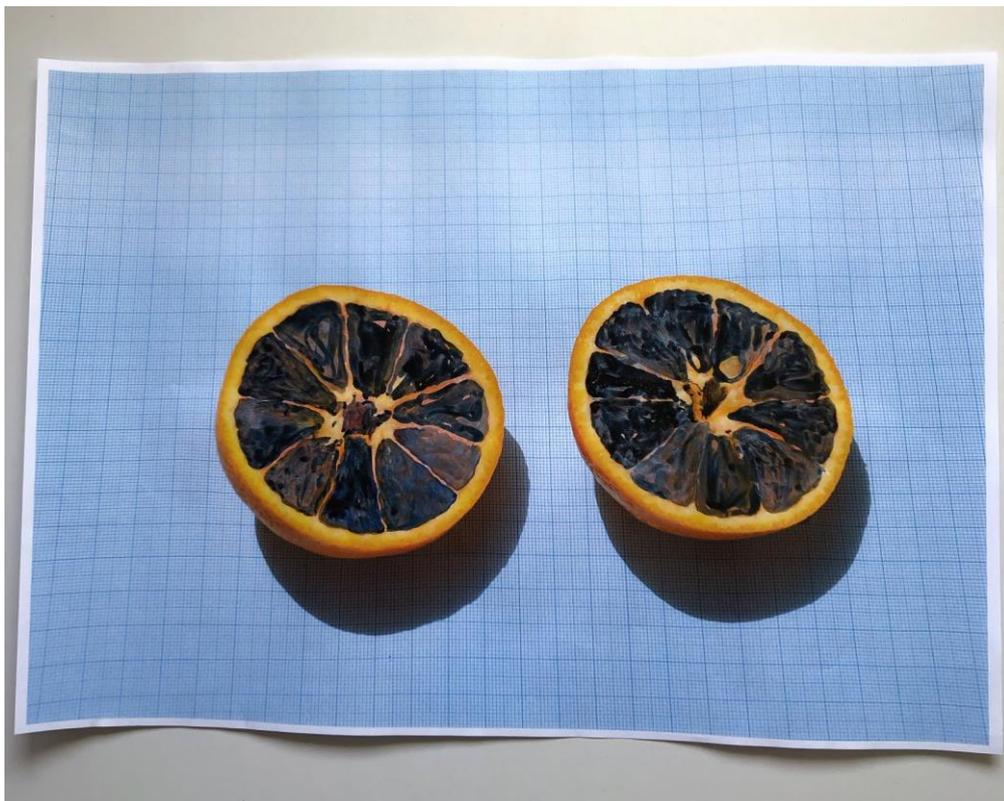
It is a very transformative moment in New York...the demonstrations and the political change that it might bring. Being here in Israel brought up new thoughts about my homeland and my relation to it.

Best,

Keren

June, 2020.

From the Desk Of Artist Keren Benbenisty, an interview with artist Keren Benbenisty about her practice and observations on the current moment. Based in New York full-time, but currently in Israel, Keren employs an investigative approach in her work. Her practice explores notions pertaining to loss and displacement through historical narratives and myths. Her work focuses on micro-events and their long-term ramifications within the disciplines of archeology, biology and linguistics. She writes to us from her temporary studio in Jaffa about her current research on a viral disease affecting citrus plants, and a new body of work that examines power relations between language, place, and land.



Keren Benbenisty, *Blurange*, 2020. Blue ink on inkjet archival print.



Keren Benbenisty's temporary studio in Israel. Photo courtesy of the artist.



COVID-19 caught me at a moment of transition. For the past 8 years, I have been living in New York. But beginning in the Spring of 2020, I planned to split my time between Israel where I would conduct research for new projects and Brussels, Belgium, where I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at the [Villa Empain](#) this spring. Due to the pandemic, the residency at Villa Empain was postponed, as was a planned [solo exhibition at Art in General](#) in Brooklyn, New York, which was slated to open in September 2020. Amidst these changes, I decided to proceed with my plan to travel and work in Israel, where I have been focusing on two new projects since mid-March.

The first project, a film titled *Blurange (Tapuchol)*, is a continuation of my body of work, [Fajja](#), which was exhibited at the Petah Tikva Museum of Art in Petah Tikva, Israel, in 2018. *Fajja* examines the relationship between topography and typography through the lens of the cultivation and production of Jaffa oranges, and uses the wrapping paper of the Jaffa orange brand as material. Semi-documentary, semi-surreal, my new film, *Blurange*, will juxtapose scientific facts about citrus greening disease, a disease found in citrus fruits that is threatening to the citrus industry, and research methods used by genetic engineers, with surreal ideas about producing new, imagined hybrid strains of blue oranges.

I often use the color blue in my work, unpacking how scientific contributions shape the relationships between people and places. The imagined blue orange variety in *Blurange* is a hybrid, a mutation of the orange fruit that we are familiar with. Its origins are neither in the West nor the East. It is placeless, evoking the notion of Levantinism in the [writing and thought of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanov](#), where she explores a new identity, that straddles different regions, particularly between the East and West, offering a refreshing reassessment of Arab-Jewish relations in the Middle East.

The second project is a video-collage that will be filmed in four adjacent locations at [Apollonia Tel-Arsuf Sidna-Ali](#), an archeological site located in the northwestern



part of the modern city of Herzliya, Israel (my hometown). The video will document daily life in the area viewed from multiple perspectives, capturing complex histories, experiences, and cultures that inhabit this one place. Parallel to this video, a text-based work will show the evolution of Apollonia 's various place-names over time at different points in history, which are a result of Hebracized Arabic or Latin place-names. Through a multi-layered contemplation of a place and toponym, the project will examine existing power-relations between language and land.



Blurange, 2020 work in progress, video still provided by the artist, 2020.

Has your practice shifted in response to social distancing and quarantine regulations?

Physically, artists are in quarantine most of the time while we work in our studio. Conceptually, COVID-19 has made me see new parallels between our current experience and the research I am doing for my blue oranges project. When



COVID-19 surfaced in January in Wuhan, China, I had just started researching the Greening disease in citrus trees, and I realized that the disease, caused by a vector-transmitted pathogen in plants, is similar to the outbreak we, humans, are now experiencing.

I often use organic material in my work, such as orange peels, fish-skin, silk worms, and stones, to show the process of metamorphosis, decay, or rebirth, and to emphasize our ambiguous and complex relationship to nature.

Capitalism and globalization allows us to eat strawberries all year round, among other magnificent things, but it also accounts for the transmission of diseases, such as the greening disease in oranges, threatening not only the crops but an entire international citrus industry.

The project I'm now working on expands on my research into the relationship between globalization, transport-related environmental decay, ecology, and economics. The onset of COVID-19 is coincidentally relevant to my practice, but the issues have been present for years prior to the outbreak.

Is there anything, in particular, that you miss from life before social distancing?

Intimacy, my studio, swimming...



Keren Benbensity, *Verlan*, 2020. Collage from vintage original Jaffa oranges wrapping paper.

How are you staying connected to friends, family, and colleagues? What does community and solidarity mean to you nowadays?

Living and working in Israel, away from my studio in New York, and following news about the pandemic online, reminds me of the 90's the years I was still living here, before moving to Europe and eventually New York and the pre-internet, pre-smartphone, pre-smartTV eras. I am re-watching films by Krzysztof Kieslowski, which shaped my adolescence. Looking at banal, daily activities, like our use of the telephone to correspond with one another, Kieslowskis films deal with themes of communication and technology, and reveal dark ideas, like the telephone as an invasion of privacy, a gadget of power that keeps us at a distance. "*The telephone embodies synchronous intimacy and distance, the voice*



without the body, the word without the vision/image, and the symbol (words) without their immediate context in the lifeworld.” (The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: The Liminal Image By Joseph Kickasola)

Today, our body is the threat, and distance is the solution. We communicate through screens, participate in public events, lectures, talks, dance-parties and happy-hours by video call, but it accentuates the absence of our human, in person interactions

It is a challenge to understand what community means and looks like today, in a capitalist society and in big cities like New York. Does Capitalism allow for community or support the idea of community? Is the idea of community based on solidarity or on capital? To me the idea of community in a capitalist society feels like a contradiction, and I have more questions than answers at this point. I think, and hope, that communities will be more valued now. Rebecca Solnit argues that disasters bring out the best in us and provide us with a common purpose. In situations like these everyday concerns and societal structures vanish. A strange kind of liberation fills the air. People rise to the occasion. Social alienation seems to vanish. Unfortunately, I am not in the U.S. right now and am unable to physically participate in the current movement and Black Lives Matter demonstrations, but it feels like, from afar, that Solnit's words, written 10 years ago in her book "A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster" - are revived and more accurate than ever. I hope it will also become our new reality, where people take more actions (rather than words) to achieve a purpose. As I'm currently living in between two continents, I'm not sure to what community I belong, and the frustration of not taking an action that will make a difference is bothersome to me. I arrived in the midst of a political turmoil in this country that seems to be the norm here- to what extent do I get involved, and how? Is it my place right now to change my



approach and be more active (and political?) in this country and take action? For example, the parallel event that took place in Israel not too long ago of a young Arab boy who got shot by Israeli police force in Jerusalem raises personal questions and inner debates of what further actions are needed by the local community to bring a deeper societal change.

ARTIST BIO

Keren Benbenisty was born in Israel and moved to Paris in 1998. She graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2004, and attended California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) as an international exchange scholar. She was an artist-in-residence at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2009); The International Studio & Curatorial Program, Brooklyn (2011); Residency Unlimited, New York (2016); Arts Maebashi, Japan (2017); and the Open Sessions Program at the Drawing Center, New York. Her work has been exhibited at the Drawing Center; A.I.R Gallery, Brooklyn; Soloway Gallery, Brooklyn; Mishkan Ein Harod, Israel; Petach Tikva Museum, Israel; Ulterior Gallery, NY; The CUNY Graduate Center, New York; Tel-Aviv Museum of Modern Art; The University Gallery, Tel Aviv; The Artist House in Jerusalem; and Human Resources in Los Angeles. www.kerenbenbenisty.com

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Keren Benbenisty; Courtesy of the artist and Ulterior Gallery, New York, NY