

Issue 8: Interview Art Interview

Orientalism Palestine Biennials

# A Conversation with Khalil Rabah

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Khalil Rabah's work lies somewhere at the demarcating line between the hyped-up essentialist consumption of "subversive" work by an ever-hungry art industry and the very serious task of engaging with the issues of nationhood, essentialism, and representation within the Palestinian context. The Ramallah-based artist, who has dragged trees into gallery spaces, repeatedly pounded olives with a rock, and created — perhaps you can say absurdly — a museum, an airline company, and a biennale, seems to be playfully aware of the risks and rewards of his position. Rabah was born in Jerusalem in 1961. He studied fine arts at the University of Texas, and has taught at the Department of Fine Arts of Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem. His work has been featured in the Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Sydney, and Kwanju biennales, as well as in many other exhibition contexts.

In September, Rabah discussed his museum project with Mai Abu ElDahab, one of the curators of Manifesta 6, the itinerant European biennale for contemporary art, whose latest installment-to-be was finally canceled given troubled politics with its

host country Cyprus. Here the two take on the question of whether there is an art scene in Ramallah, the last Istanbul Biennial and something Rabah has obliquely coined the United States of Palestine Airlines. This interview took place on Skype.

**Khalil Rabah:** I am here finally.

**Mai Abu Eldahab:** Hello hello.

**KR:** You never told me what happened with Manifesta?

**MAD:** Jesus, it's a long story. Read *Artforum* or *Frieze*. Where are you?

**KR:** Leaving the hotel in Amman where I just arrived from Venice and going back to Ramallah. Eventually.

**MAD:** What were you doing in Venice?

**KR:** We are planning to hold the Second Riwaq Biennale in October 2007, so we thought of going to the Architecture Biennale in Venice – networking, kissing, that's what I did a lot of...

**MAD:** What's the Riwaq Biennale?

**KR:** It's a biennale in Palestine focused on architecture, art, and design. The first one took place in 2005 in Ramallah. It is another attempt to see what can come of a biennale in Palestine.

**MAD:** How was the first one?

**KR:** Quite successful here but on a small scale. This time we want to involve people from abroad. You know it's crazy going to Venice for two days and spending two days to get there through Jordan and the same coming back. That's why I will initiate USPA in March.

**MAD:** USPA?

**KR:** United States of Palestine Airlines.

**MAD:** For whom?

**KR:** I will open the main office in London, first in Knightsbridge, in March 2007. This will be the airline's first encounter with people.

**MAD:** Tell me more...

**KR:** PDF will design the corporate image, airplanes, uniforms, mileage cards, tickets, offices, an airline magazine with routes, etcetera. The office will issue mileage cards, memberships... anyone who comes to the airline opening can get a membership card. Through the membership card you get a serial number that allows you to access certain information about airline activities on the internet.

**MAD:** What is PDF?

**KR:** PDF is the Palestinian Design Force, which also designed the new Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind at the Acropolis in Athens, close to the new Acropolis Museum, which is being built now. You can visit the museum until September 29, 2007. It was commissioned by the Contemporary Art Museum in Athens.

**MAD:** But isn't a museum a monumental space of preservation, a place for dead objects? Is this a final gesture in your work or pure narcissism?

**KR:** It's somehow more interesting to be undecided regarding meanings. The museums you are referring to are different — you know, ours has no board of trustees, directors or anything of that sort. This one does what it wants, where it wants.

**MAD:** But your choice of a museum automatically implies a monumentality.

**KR:** This is about identity, or invention, the synthetic.

**MAD:** Is the gesture personal, about Palestine, or is it playing with other references to museums like Marcel Broodthaers or Meschac Gaba?

**KR:** It will be interesting because the Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens wants to acquire the work to install in their new museum — a museum inside a museum, a total mummification, eternal. It is a way of redefining Palestine for me, or making a place from a non-place.

**MAD:** Tell me a little about the reception of the museum, the audience response.

**KR:** They keep asking if it is real.

**MAD:** What does that mean? It is real if they are standing in it, no? How do you respond?

**KR:** November Paynter from Platform Garanti [in Istanbul] wrote something about it.

**MAD:** What did she say?

**KR:** “It’s important that people ask about reality as they do with films and literature. So why not about art?”

**MAD:** How do you respond?

**KR:** Dreams can eventually be manifested as paintings, sculptures, videos... That’s what she was saying about art.

**MAD:** What do you think?

**KR:** I no longer differentiate much between art and life.

**MAD:** Speaking of November Paynter, what did you think of the Istanbul Biennial?

**KR:** Great.

**MAD:** Why? What was interesting?

**KR:** It was great for the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind to have the opportunity to invite a team from the Riwaq Center for Architectural Preservation in Ramallah as part of the “work” in the biennial. Members of the anthropology department of the Center worked in Istanbul for one week, researching old photographs from the time of Sultan Abdel-Hamid in particular. Sometimes the museum is perceived as a psychic and intellectual project, but here it was collaborating with a real institution in the form of the Riwaq Center.

**MAD:** What about the show itself?

**KR:** I thought there were great works and working with [curators] Vasif [Kortun] and Charles [Esche] and the team was fun. It was good exposure.

**MAD:** Exposure to what?

**KR:** Lots of people came and are interested in developing works together. The parties were also great.

**MAD:** Like whom? And what works interested you?

**KR:** I liked Phil Collins’ work and Halil Altindere.

**MAD:** There’s a lot of criticism of the way art from the Arab world and other non-western contexts is represented, though the Istanbul Biennial is seen as one

“successful” forum. What do you think? How was your work framed in the context of the show as whole? Are you critical of the existing exhibition models?

**KR:** In Istanbul, it had something to do with the curators and making a non-monumental biennial.

**MAD:** But are you critical in general of how Arab or Palestinian art is presented or do you not consider the context in that way?

**KR:** You know it’s sexy to say something about Palestine — it is immediately political. But I do this kind of work because I am aware of this. I try to control the reception.

**MAD:** How is your work received in Palestine? Have you shown in the museum there?

**KR:** I always have had criticism here from the official art establishment, but it’s fun with the contemporaries.

**MAD:** How do you mean? Is there an art scene in Ramallah? Who sees your work? Are there writers? Reviews?

**KR:** Here’s a story. You know there were eight pieces for sale at a recent auction at the Sakakini Cultural Center. They were all sold during the auction, something we farcically called the “3rd Annual War Zone Auction” that was created to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Palestinian Museum of Humankind. Of course it was not the third annual, but really the first ever. Referring to it like this provided a sense of history. Anyway the museum conducted this auction, call it fake or real, and as we collected the money, three people refused to pay. They thought it was a performance — and guess what? These were three artists. That gives you an idea as to the art scene in Ramallah.

**MAD:** That’s too funny! Do you enjoy it though?

**KR:** One of the things I am trying to do and the reason I am trying to have a biennale in Palestine, is because maybe we will recognize the urgent need for such an industry, cultural production, knowledge dissemination, and participation. You know when we started to establish the al-Ma’mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem, people were asking us what a contemporary art foundation was in the first place.

**MAD:** Why do you think someone like [curator] Okwui Enwezor says, “Palestinian

artists do not partake in the globalization of the art world the way other artists do”?

**KR:** I don't understand this statement.

**MAD:** Me neither! Do you think public art as an aesthetic gesture is still relevant? I know you've been involved in public art projects which are always somehow connected to the community in which they exist. Do you think that is a significant factor in your choices?

**KR:** It's not a significant factor in my choices to manifest some aesthetic ideas and forms as public, but sometimes it can have a life which extends into the public domain.

**MAD:** Can you give an example from your work?

**KR:** As I mentioned, I am currently working on a project called USPA, and it is a very personal work. It has the potential to become a public institution. Like the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, the works that ignited the collection of the museum are very personal, yet at one point — especially when we built the museum in Athens — I could see that it too could become a public institution. This is what interested me about such things, because they explore alternative institutional building.

**MAD:** Your work used to be much more formal and loaded with symbolism, like a show you once had at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo. Now it seems much more conceptual. How did it change?

**KR:** I think maybe the work related more to artifacts. Symbolism became the fog, the accepted dogma, a familiar language that I wanted to use to narrate a reconstruction of something.

**MAD:** Where did you study art?

**KR:** I didn't study art. I took an extra semester in the art department, mainly painting, to get a double degree with architecture. At the time, my father thought I must become an architect with a traditional lifestyle. An art degree was a form of rebellion.

**MAD:** I thought you studied in the US? Where and how was it?

**KR:** At the University of Texas, but mainly in an informal way. I read what I wanted and went to museums and was doing works that I realized later in life had

to do with art.

**MAD:** Can you tell me a little bit about Texas?

**KR:** I have to admit that I managed to get a good education in architecture but after some work experience, I was very bored and had to leave. I thought my life would be more interesting between Ramallah and Europe.

**MAD:** You have an American passport, don't you?

**KR:** I do, it's one of the best things that happened in my life. Can you imagine how I could possibly move around, traveling with my Palestinian passport?

**MAD:** Why do you have an American passport?

**KR:** Ninety percent of the Ramallahites are American passport holders; it is the largest Palestinian community outside of Palestine.

**MAD:** Is there anyone specific you would like to work with?

**KR:** I would like to do an art project with Irwin and maybe Phil Collins. But I am especially interested now to work on a second Riwaq biennale.

**MAD:** *Bidoun* wants to know if you would rather have dinner with Noam Chomsky, Michael Jackson, Tracey Emin or Angelina Jolie?

**KR:** If I could have dinner with all at the same time, that's fine with me. Otherwise I am not interested.

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