

## Review: Gannit Ankori's "Palestinian Art"

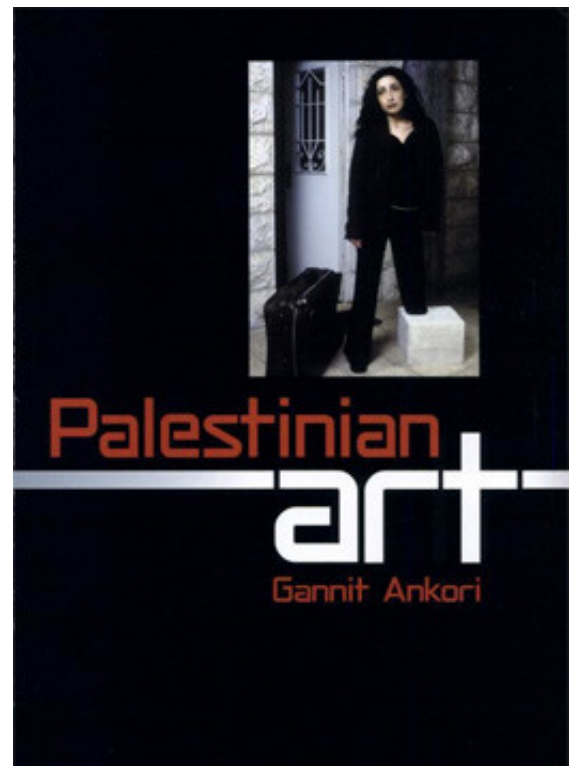
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With a number of English-language publications on Arab art surfacing in recent years, there has been an apparent attempt to counter the Western-centric scholarship of art historical discourse. Written from a variety of perspectives, from first-hand knowledge — such as those penned by Arab artists who have often acted as curators and scholars in the field — to European and American cultural practitioners who have a newfound interest in the region, these texts often present conflicting histories. Nowhere is this most apparent than in the recent documentation of modern and contemporary Palestinian art.

This history, with its unpredictable, fragmented and transnational art scene is perhaps one of the most complex narratives gaining visibility today. These unusual circumstances are of course due to the sudden suspension of Palestinian art with the founding of Israel in 1948, the subsequent stunting of its natural course, and the extreme sociopolitical realities under which artists work. Coupled with these elements is the glaring misrepresentation of Palestine within the global political arena, namely in the West where the Zionist lobby has proven to be extremely successful in shaping opinions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.



Yet art created by Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, under the Jewish state or in the diaspora has gained significant momentum in the international scene. With Israel's anti-Palestinian policies becoming increasingly audacious (and thus all the more violent and oppressive), it is with a profound urgency that the chronicling of this history be furthered and kept up-to-date.

In 2006 Israeli art historian Gannit Ankori published *Palestinian Art* (Reaktion Books LTD, London), a 200-plus page text that attempts to “emphasize the broad range and richness that characterize Palestinian art, as well as its specific manifestations and individual narratives.” Responding to questions of obvious subjectivity in the preface, the author insists that she has “gathered and presented” the material of the book as “objectively as possible” and has done so since the 1980s out of a belief in the “importance and relevance of the subject.” It is with this frame of mind that she has apparently “immersed” herself in the “cultural, religious, social and political contexts within which Palestinian artists forged their artistic expression.” The author also cites her own understanding of being “other” as that which has contributed to a connection with Palestinian art.

Although born in Jerusalem, Ankori emigrated to the US as a child, an experience that resulted in a sense of “displacement, cultural hybridity and fragmentation,” characteristics that she seeks to reveal in Palestinian art. Despite this stated identification, her overall perspective remains from the vantage point of a scholar who has worked within Israel's academic world, having written and lectured on the subject for Israeli audiences. The author is an Associate Professor of Art History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel's oldest academic institution, which was founded on Zionist ideals in 1925. And although her work has been affected by field research (and collaborations) in the Palestinian art scene, a number of elements in her approach to scholarship suggest the overwhelming influence of her Israeli environment. As such, *Palestinian Art* is in many ways written with an Israeli reader in mind — a fact that can be exposed through the deconstruction of her basic premise, the manner in which she applies her theories, and the overall political context (or lack thereof) in which she places Palestinian art.

Divided into four parts, “Foundations,” “Earth and Sky,” “Body and Home” and

“Being Arab in Israel,” *Palestinian Art* largely focuses on artists working after 1948. With the exception of “Foundations,” which provides a quick overview of the formation of Palestinian art before and immediately after the Nakba, or dispossession, Ankori narrows her investigation to a small number of artists, weaving together extensive analysis of their work within a larger framework of what she calls “Dis-Orientalism.” Citing Edward Said’s seminal literary work *Orientalism* (1979) as a basis for her theory, the author argues that:

“The implications proposed by this neologism are intentionally multivalent. They include the suggestions that the creation and study of Palestinian art entail the dismantling of an exclusively Western perspective or ‘scopic regime’ and the alternative, self empowerment of oriental artists. The term Dis-Orientalism also alludes to a literal (i.e. geographical) ‘loss of the orient’ ... Hence it is grounded in history and is linked to the traumatic events of 1948, which resulted in the loss of Palestine and the consequent dispersal and exile of numerous Palestinians ... Finally, contemporary Palestinian art frequently reflects the hybrid identities of the artists and their ‘fluid’ positions in an interstitial space between their oriental matrix and the dominant culture of the West.”

In essence, what Ankori outlines as being essential components or themes of Palestinian art are: 1. the loss of homeland 2. the combating of Western-centric outlooks on art and culture, and 3. the straddling of two worlds, East and West. From the outset, these theories are extremely limited in their scope, as Palestinian artists address a wide range of concepts and work in diverse settings — be it under the Israeli occupation, within the Jewish state or in the diaspora, leading to varying artistic orientations and having a profound impact on the progression of Palestinian visual culture as a whole.

In “Foundations,” the author describes the early stages of Palestinian art in the period of icon painting that occurred in Jerusalem in the late 19th century and continued well into the first half of the 20th century, a history that Ankori cites as artist/scholar Kamal Boullata’s “unique and most significant recent contribution” to the field. From this school of painting came a number of influential artists such as figurative painters Zulfa al-Sa’di and Daoud Zalatimo, both of whom studied closely with influential icon painters.

She then explores the concept of “loss” with artists who worked shortly after the Nakba in exile, such as painters Ismail Shammout and Ibrahim Ghannam, who both lived in Beirut and often worked from memories of the homeland.

This focus on “loss” continues with a look at the oeuvre of multimedia artist Sliman Mansour in the second section, “Earth and Sky.” Since the 1960s, Mansour’s paintings, installations and mixed media works have dealt with notions of nostalgia and the rupturing of Palestine’s cultural patrimony with the establishment of the State of Israel. The subject of exile is further articulated with examples of paintings by Kamal Boullata, which Ankori suggests are “linked directly to a very specific home and hometown. The geometry of [which] suggests a longing for the thresholds that will allow a symbolic return to his place of origin.”

The notion that Palestinian art combats Western-centric outlooks speaks of artists whose work is engaged with Europe and the US in one way or another. This is often true of those living in these locales or participating in international exhibitions and festivals such as the Venice Biennale. Yet, she ignores the significant contributions of Palestinian artists working under the severe sociopolitical conditions of the Israeli occupation (and its offensives), namely those working in Gaza, where the least of their concerns is how the West views them. For these artists, the urgency of mere survival and continued resistance is most pertinent to their work. Although the author establishes early on that her analysis is “not an encyclopaedic approach,” the title of the book suggests a sweeping investigation of the subject. She continues by arguing, “I have nevertheless, made a concerted effort to choose artists from diverse religious, cultural and geographical settings, whose works reflect different artistic styles or sensibilities.”

The examples of art work that Ankori provides in the third and fourth sections of *Palestinian Art* serve to demonstrate her theories on “the self-empowerment of oriental artists” in the face of “an exclusively Western perspective.” Her text contains a strong emphasis on artists working or trained in the West, such as conceptual artists Mona Hatoum and Khalil Rabah, with analysis of their work appearing in “Body and Home.” Those living in Israel, having been trained at

Israeli institutions, and thus confronted with similar notions of “otherness,” are also used to ground the author’s thesis and include painter Asad Azi and conceptual artists Raeda Saadeh and Jumana Emil Abboud, who are discussed in “Being Arab in Israel.”

Returning to her overall theoretical premise, Ankori proposes that much of this work points to a larger framework of “post-colonial cultural trends,” as “the hybridity of Palestinian art and its mode of deconstructing the East-West dichotomy” may be linked to such. Yet her examination of their work and the cultural contexts in which she places them serve to reinforce this exact “East-West” dichotomy. In her discussion of Khalil Rabah’s work “Untitled” (1995), which contains a large cube glass that is filled with olive oil, branches and wicks, Ankori suggests direct references to “High Modernism” or the “hard edged, minimalist sculptures” of American Tony Smith while arguing that the Palestinian artist “confronted the occidental cube with the oriental olive oil.”

Ironically, the author frequently reverts to using the term “oriental” when describing Palestinians. This appears in discussions of everything from their “oriental matrix” to “oriental motifs.” She does so by citing Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as grounds for using this adjective. Ironically the use of this term, with its loaded historical implications and glaring political pitfalls, “connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism,” as Said affirms on page two of *Orientalism*.

Although Ankori’s use of the term is generally viewed as outdated and one would be hard pressed to find Palestinians identifying as “oriental,” in Israel it remains widely in use.

Moreover, Ankori’s discussion of Palestinian art as fitting within a larger framework of “post-colonial trends” is incorrectly applied. To speak of a “hybridity” of Palestinian art linked to “post colonial trends” suggests a connection to the modern and contemporary art of formally colonized non-Western peoples. That is, work created by artists in Africa and the Pacific Islands who were forced to adopt Western modes of representation under colonialism but resisted this cultural hegemony by injecting aspects of their own artistic

heritage into works that spoke of the meeting of two cultures. Not only does Israel operate with the extreme features of a colonial power, it systematically attempts to squash Palestinian culture altogether or appropriate it as its own in a quest for identifying as an indigenous people. Unlike colonial powers such as the British and French in Africa and the Pacific who sought to implement Western cultural sensibilities as dominating aspects of visual culture, the continued Israeli policy towards Palestinian art has been to curtail creative expression through the ransacking of cultural centers, artists' homes and institutions (details which Ankori leaves out). If anything, under this colonial state, Palestinian art has utilized cultural expression to resist the cruelty and injustice of Israeli policies while clearly enunciating its intention to survive.

It is of no surprise then that Ankori attempts to dismiss an important aspect of Palestinian art history, what artist Samia Halaby identifies as the "Liberation Art" period that came into prominence in the second half of the 20th century in both Palestine and its diaspora in the Arab world. One of the most influential artists of this time was Abdul Rahman al-Muzayen, a former resistance fighter who worked with the Palestine Liberation Organization and often designed its political posters. Combining images of the land, farmers, Palestine's ancient history and recognizable cultural symbols (the use of Palestinian embroidery, the key implying the right of return, the female subject as the embodiment of the homeland and images of fighters) al-Muzayen and others created a distinct aesthetic that sought to speak to the Palestinian masses and inspire a sense of resistance and *sumoud*, or steadfastness. Yet, according to Ankori:

"This brand of political art, often directly based on militant poems and displaying a plethora of muscular warriors, continues to this day, especially in paintings by self-taught artists in the refugee camps of Gaza, the West Bank and throughout the Arab world. The emphasis on 'armed struggle,' with its various cultural manifestations, has been criticized by Palestinian intellectuals, who are concerned with the detrimental effects it may have on Palestinian society and culture. What began as the desire to overcome a sense of weakness and victimization seems to have turned into a fetishization of power."

Despite Liberation Art's significance during the 1960s and 70s and its

demonstration of the early intersections of Palestinian politics and culture, the author insists on dismissing this movement. She does so by attempting to pit artists against each other and taking a quotation from Edward Said out of context. Ankori writes:

In 1986, for example, Edward Said wrote:

I have long believed, for instance, that our insistence on ‘armed struggle’ — originally a phrase symbolizing the Palestinian will to fight unremittingly and on our own for our political rights — very quickly turned into a worship of fetishized military postures, guns, and slogans borrowed from theories of the people’s war in Algeria and Vietnam.

What Ankori does not quote, however, are the next lines of this passage, which read:

“This ritualized and gross emphasis on arms caused us to neglect the incredibly complex and far more important political and cultural aspects of our struggle, and it played right into the hands of Israel, which with its superior propaganda apparatus turned everything we did against its occupation of our lands, its devastation of our villages, and its oppression of our population, into ‘terrorism.’

Still, these pessimistic and critical things by no means tell the whole story of what is in fact a remarkable rise out of destitution.”

Ankori not only changes the fundamental meaning of Said’s quote by not citing the complete passage but further skews his insights by stating, “Said also notes that these images were instrumental in transforming Palestinians into stereotypical ‘terrorists’ in the eyes of the West.”

She continues with this line of thinking by categorizing the art of this time which utilized images of farmers, refugees or armed fighters as constituting the “representation of Palestinians in three stereotypical roles (as ‘primitive’ farmers, as suffering refugees or as armed fighters) [which] may have inadvertently contributed to the construction of prevailing (often negative) views of

## Palestinians in the West.”

In essence what she achieves by selectively quoting and incorrectly paraphrasing Said is the sidestepping of any mention of Israel's crimes, while simultaneously branding the artists of this movement as self-victimizing and at fault for stereotypical representations in the West. It is not in fact the mere displaying of arms or the act of armed resistance that defines perceptions of “terrorism” in the West but a complex web of power, alliances and political postures. As Said notes, it is Israel's “superior propaganda apparatus [that] turned everything we did against its occupation of our lands, its devastation of our villages, and its oppression of our population, into ‘terrorism.’”

Furthermore, many Palestinian artists have seen such works as “necessary” components of their culture and political struggle. In an exhibition catalog published by the New Vision group (an art collective founded in 1987 that consisted of artists Sliman Mansour, Vera Tamari, Tayseer Barakat and Nabil al-Ani) the need for such art was eloquently stated:

“It is not uncommon to find political symbolism in the artistic expression of people struggling for freedom. Aesthetic values are often sublimated in favor of revolutionary subject-matter. For the Palestinian artist, political themes were for many years part of his visual vocabulary. Those were a necessary means to express the aspirations and dreams of his people but he never ceased to explore new aesthetic venues and ways of expression. This continuous search reflected a deep sense of liberation and inner freedom. The Palestinian artist sought beauty and truth while daily struggling to survive and attain freedom” (from the catalog *New Visions*, exact date unspecified).

This tendency to exclude information or to inject “the West” when in actuality the instance pertains specifically to Israel runs throughout Ankori's text, most significantly when the Jewish state is implicated for its oppressive policies and its history of large-scale violence towards Palestinians. Take for example her discussion of the New Vision group, which sought to resist the Israeli occupation by boycotting its art goods. Ankori explicitly cites the group's use of local products, mainly organic materials such as clay, mud, straw and leather, as a



“deliberate decision to seek a substitute for boycotted Western (hence foreign) art materials,” when in fact their decision was based on a collective recognition of the first Palestinian intifada and a direct reaction to Israeli policies and its economic control of the occupied territories.

To document that artists have been reacting to Israeli policies is to underscore the ways in which they have been affected not only by the founding of Israel in 1948 but also its long, brutal history of occupation — a narrative that remains pertinent to understanding the evolution of numerous trends in Palestinian art. Ankori willingly emphasizes the trauma of the Nakba and the fragmented state and “disorientation” marked by exile when discussing artists’ work, yet she goes to great lengths to avoid an in-depth discussion of the state of the occupation, its effects on the cultural scene and the continued aggression used to maintain it. When discussing Sliman Mansour’s work, which has been highly informed by his experiences of living and working under the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Ankori argues, “The physical, economic, social, political and psychological hardships that are experienced by Palestinians living under Israeli occupation cannot be properly addressed in this context, given their enormity and far-reaching proportions.”

And so it is established early on in the text that any necessary discussion or mention of such will not appear.

As the occupation wages on and Palestinians continue to be subjected to catastrophic events such as the recent large-scale assaults on Gaza and the frequent Israeli incursions into the West Bank, can Palestinian culture be discussed with selective references to history and nearly no mention of the present? The answer is unequivocally, no. If the reader is to be informed of the Palestinian experience (through art) over the last six decades via Ankori’s study, only a partial view will be obtained, one fashioned exclusively by notions of memory, trauma and the alienation of exile. Yet what remains is the stark reality of life under occupation, one enunciated in various ways in works by Zuhdi al-Adawi, Tamam al-Akhal, Mohammad Abu Sall, Taysir Batniji, Aissa Deebi, Mervat Essa, Tarek al-Ghoussein, Samia Halaby, Rula Halawani, Emily Jacir, Rashid Mashharawi, Bashir Makhoul, Fayez Sersawi, Laila al-Shawa, Nida

Sinnokrot, Mary Tuma, Sharif Waked, Adnan al-Yahya, Hani Zourab and the countless others who are left out of the art historical and theoretical trajectories of Ankori's *Palestinian Art*.

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