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Ramallah

Life as an artist, writer or curator in an occupied city – the administrative capital of the Palestinian National Authority

BY KHALED HOURANI, T.Z. TOUKAN

T.Z. Toukan

Manara Square, in downtown Ramallah, features a grand sculpture of four imposing lions. The monument, from the mid-1990s, is of uncertain historiographic value: to begin with, one of the lions is sporting a wristwatch. The explanations for this curious detail are many, but my favourite is that the unknown sculptor pencilled in the watch on the last version of his design as a subtle reminder to his commissioners that the project was behind schedule. No one noticed it, so the design was sent unmodified to China, where the monument was manufactured complete with wristwatch. Yet, aside from this intriguing feature, no one really knows what the lions are doing here to begin with, and why there are four of them. Again, explanations vary, but a particularly plausible one is that they represent the four former ruling families of Ramallah. The city was once a deeply patrician place, and its aristocratic history is closely intertwined with political developments.

Today, visitors to Ramallah may be shocked to find that the city feels seductively democratic, safe, relaxed, clean and charming by any standards. There is the delicious food. There are café-bars like the Pronto, where you could spend days and even weeks sitting on the terrace, if only the owner wasn't such a clingy, polyglot babblebox. There is the visiting Hugo Boss Prize winner Emily Jacir, who regularly teaches at the city's International Academy of Art. There are the Hourani siblings – of whom at least three out of 22 are artists: the established painter and installation artist Hasan Hourani, who passed away in 2003; the vigorous Wafa Hourani, now a protégé of curator Catherine David; and Khaled Hourani, who is interviewed for this city report.

Manara Square, Ramallah, 2008. Courtesy: Yazan Khalili

There is also the internationally renowned artist Khalil Rabah, who is supercool, sports a Frank Zappa-style goatee and never answers his emails. His work is offhand and reflexive, often brilliantly blurring the line between infrastructure and art. His 'New Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind' (2006), for instance, is a variable display apparatus which has been on view at a string of international venues, while his contribution to the Palestine Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009 was the Third Riwaq Biennale, defined as 'part art installation, part campaign team', the presentation of Riwaq thus becoming his actual contribution to the show. This edition of the Biennale, which unfolded in 50 different villages throughout the West Bank, was curated by Charles Esche and Ramallah-based Reem Fadda. In addition to the Biennale, the Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation, which Rabah co-directs with Suad Amiry, a writer and architect with an illustrious political CV, is an ambitious non-profit

organization dedicated to preserving Palestine's architectural heritage.

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Other key institutions in Ramallah include the A.M. Qattan Foundation, which distributes important grants, awards, residencies and other valuable resources to artists, and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, with its sustainable, long-term approach to Palestinian art and culture. The Sakakini Center sometimes resorts to shrewd tactics such as coaxing schoolteachers into teaching evening art classes by paying them allowances – and thereby subsidizing their meagre salaries – in the hope of encouraging an art/pedagogical agenda further down the line. There is also the International Academy of Art, a remarkable institution run by the tireless Dr. Tina Sherwell, which hopes to secure funding in order to offer an MA programme. The International Academy of Art is not to be confused with ArtSchool Palestine, which is not a school at all but a multifarious website with an affiliated residency programme, although it does also organize activities including exhibitions, screenings, lectures, performances and publications.

Whilst the city is functional to an almost surprising degree, no account of Ramallah would be complete without mentioning the all-

pervasive occupation. To begin with, to even enter Palestine you must literally squeeze through a wall into this country-as-camp, which is something quite unique in this day and age. Forget the magical world of the biopolitical Empire; the Zionist project doesn't bother to engage with the kind of Postmodern 'this-hurts-me-more-than-it-hurts-you' discourse-doctoring that has accompanied the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, with US statesmen visiting New York mosques and talking nation-building in their socks. In other words, from what little I can tell, contemporary Zionism – unlike Empire as we know it – offers an old-school situation in which a certain quantity of colonizers explicitly defines a certain quantity of colonizees as a subspecies. The former want the latter to get the hell out, leaving, at best, a residue of peasants just to give the landscape a rustic air. Even the most apolitical of art tourists cannot help but be overwhelmed by the countless anecdotes of systematic brutalization. Nor can they help being fascinated by the sight of the spanking new Israeli settlements that encrust every other hilltop in the city. These cutesy citadels of militarized wealth have peaked, Orange County-style roofs; Palestinian roofs, meanwhile, are flat, so as to harbour dozens of water tanks. Go figure.

Zan Plus bar, Ramallah, 2009. Courtesy: Yazan Khalili

All of this is eloquently analyzed by the dazzling architectural collective Decolonizing Architecture (www.decolonizing.ps), featuring Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman. Hilal and Petti have collaborated on projects such as Ramallah Syndrome (2009): a sound installation that was featured as part of the Palestine Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The work consists of conversations reflecting on how the people of Ramallah identify the city as a place of 'normalcy' in spite of the occupation and the daily repercussions it brings – a kind of hallucination of normalcy. In the words of the collective, the work explores a 'particular spatialization of powers and its ensuing constrictions on the city – a paradoxical arrangement and design that we are calling the "Ramallah Syndrome"' (www.artpalestine.org).

Much as I admire the work, in terms of both content and form, of Decolonizing Architecture, Rabah and other artists in the city, I have

to admit that it's sometimes hard to tell when a 'Ramallah Syndrome' becomes something like a 'Venice Biennale Syndrome'. Does trauma – presented in an art context – become aesthetically appealing, telegenic so to speak, and, if so, can the telegenic aspect be a productive thing? The occupation of Palestine is a mind-boggling experiment in the mass degradation of a people, and as such – to put it bluntly – it is often perceived as exotic and sensational by the art world. As one artist friend of mine put it: the first thing you want to do when you encounter art work about Palestine is cross Kalandia checkpoint with a camera and take your own photos. It's an impulse that is, however, complicated by the enduring urgency of getting the story told, and further complicated by the fact that almost all art from, and about, Palestine runs the risk of being turned into something 'representative'. Questions pertaining to form, format, genealogy and medium fade into insignificance as art becomes just another way to 'understand', 'document' and 'reflect' the disastrous situation. Writing this report, maybe I've been telegenic enough – or maybe too much so.

Khaled Hourani and Daniel Miller

Khaled Hourani is the Artistic Director of the International Academy of Art in Palestine, and an artist. From 1998 to 2009 he was the graphic designer for Mahmoud Darwish's Al-Karmel Magazine*; between 2004 and 2006, he worked as General Director of the Fine Arts Department at the Palestinian Ministry of Culture. In 1997 he founded Al-Matal Gallery in Ramallah. Daniel Miller is a writer who lives in Tel Aviv, Israel. He writes for* Art Monthly, Icon *and the* Times Literary Supplement.

Daniel Miller Why, with you current project, are you attempting to bring Pablo Picasso's *Bust de femme* [Bust of a Woman, 1943] from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, to Ramallah?

Khaled Hourani Picasso is the most famous modern artist; if I asked my mother to name one modern artist, she would name him. Of course, other artists were also conceivable – Marcel Duchamp, for example – but I was keen to bring over a work by an early Modernist, since we are not in a contemporary situation here yet – at least, not in terms of our discourse. We need to have the discussion around Modernism first.

Pablo Picasso, *Bust de femme* (Bust of a Woman), 1943, Oil on canvas, 105 x 86cm. Courtesy: Collection van Abbermuseum, Eindhoven; photograph: Peter Cox

DM Why did you select this particular work?

KH The painting was chosen by the students of the International Academy of Art, here in Ramallah. As you know, the work is a portrait of a female figure, rather than an overtly political piece. It's not

Guernica [1937]. Nonetheless, I believe that the work has political implications in Palestine. Portraiture is about self-representation. For this reason, I think that introducing into a Palestinian art context a female figure, which is a deconstruction of a traditional representation of a woman, raises a series of relevant questions.

DM What kind of logistical issues does this project involve?

KH The project has proved very difficult to realize, for reasons relating to our abnormal living conditions. The insurance company is currently studying the Oslo Accords in order to understand the Palestinian risk environment. And there is also the question of where to house the painting; it requires a museum environment, but there are no museums in Palestine. Together with an army and an airport, a museum is a key component of a modern state. But Palestine is not yet a state. Essentially, we are attempting to bring a major art work here, without having the infrastructure in place to do so. So we are building this system; this is the other half of the project.

DM What do you hope to achieve by bringing the work here?

KH Each aspect of the project is important in a different way. On one level, we want to bring the political reality of Palestine into contact with the world of contemporary art. At the same time, we want to exhibit a Modernist masterpiece at an international standard and we want to construct Palestinian art institutions, to help reform our culture. The project is not only about the work of Picasso: it's about bringing Picasso to Ramallah. Picasso is widely regarded as 'the Great Artist'. But the role of the artist today is no longer just about producing great works, or great representations, but about creating a concrete connection to social reality. We throw a stone in a lake and it makes waves. At the same time, we're not going to pretend that we

can deliver normality under the present conditions. We shouldn't believe that art can do more than it can.

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The International Academy of Art, Palestine, 2009. Courtesy: Khaled Hourani

DM You mentioned earlier that the situation in Palestine was 'abnormal'. What exactly did you mean by that?

KH Nothing has been normal for some 60 years now. What happened in 1948, with the Nakba [catastrophe] and again in 1967, with the Naksa [setback], were historical ruptures. Try to imagine: A farmer is suddenly deprived of his land. Who does he then become? This is what happened in Palestine on a national scale. We haven't grown up normally; I'm not sure that we know what normality is any more. We have no state, but we have two governments. It's absurd, to be honest.

DM What has been the significance of the Oslo Accords of 1993?

KH Oslo hasn't achieved a solution, but it has achieved changes – especially on the Palestinian side. From 1967 until 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed, the Israeli military occupied Palestinian cities. During this period, many restrictions were put in place, including on art. For instance, it was forbidden to make any image that used the four colours of the Palestinian flag: black, white, green and red. So, you couldn't paint a picture of a watermelon. There were also political restrictions in place concerning social gatherings. You needed permission to organize any gathering involving more than three people. Obviously, this affected the social aspect of art. Many openings were disrupted and many art works were stolen by Israeli soldiers. We still don't know where they are.

DM What have been the main cultural changes?

KH The situation before the Oslo Accords was much clearer: there were refugees; there were fighters; there was a desire for a homeland. Now things are much more ambiguous. We say: 'The occupation may have gone out the door, but it climbs back in through the window.' We still use the Israeli currency of the shekel, we are still being managed by Israeli authorities, Israeli soldiers still regularly roll in and

out of Palestinian urban centres. Israel also continues to throttle our economy. There are efforts at the moment to build a second mobile phone network in Palestine, but this has stalled because Israel refuses to release bandwidth frequency. Yet the cultural paradigm has been completely transformed. In the past, the most widely read magazine was called The Revolution; now, it's Palestine Today. It's a completely different language – one that is still struggling to forge a new political form. The younger generation have a different agenda, their own questions and concerns. They are questioning their fathers, their history and their present. This is healthy, but it's also destabilizing. Hamas, for instance, is a youth movement, while among older men you can still find members of the Communist Party. But the Muslim Brotherhood does not consist of old men.

DM What was the situation like before?

KH Before 1967, there was a big dream. The President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was proclaiming the unity of the Arab world, and the renowned Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum was performing 'You Are My Life' [1964] for the young Arab men fighting for that dream. But then the Arabs lost the war, and the dream was shattered. Kulthum started singing a new song: 'What Love Are You Speaking Of?' [1967] This love song, this very direct address, suddenly turned into: 'Who are you? Who does this emotion even belong to?' Some people tried to say: 'Don't give up.' But the feeling of collapse was overwhelming. And this is when the new wave of fundamentalism began.

DM So, there was a kind of identity crisis.

KH Yes and no. What really happened was a kind of world crisis: a very real experience of breakdown and defeat. Out of this, two

different types of images, or identities, ultimately emerged. Images of victims and images of heroes. Really, this axis underpins the whole discourse: you can try and negotiate with it, but you can't avoid it. Two images captured during the Second Intifada [which began in late 2000] are especially striking examples: the photograph of a Palestinian boy, facing a tank, throwing stones, and a video, shot by a French film crew, of a young boy named Muhammad al-Durra apparently being killed by an Israeli sniper. The two images became iconic, because they touched something deep in the Palestinian psyche.

Maqha Ramallah café, 2008. Courtesy: Yazan Khalili

DM What is the practical effect of this axis?

KH It's very dangerous, and it distorts the reality of our lives here. Palestinians are not simply heroes or victims. We have thieves in Palestine, silly people, mad people, good people and bad people. But

if someone wanted to talk about the lives of Palestinian thieves, in art or in literature, many people would think it was strange. We need to present a more complex picture of Palestinian society, one that includes the everyday aspects of life here – the drama of being, of humanity, of trying to cope with every day as it comes. I recognize the desire for these images, but I think that art should go deeper than what people are asking for.

DM What is the image of Israel in Palestine?

KH It's that of the enemy. The soldier, the civilian, the settler – they are all the enemies of Palestine. In this way, the image of Israel triangulates the Palestinian images of heroes and victims. At the same time, the image of the Israeli people in Arab literature is ugly, and often unrealistic. But I think that Palestinians are the people best positioned to understand Israelis, and that we have to propose an intelligent, incisive and truthful representation of the way things are.

DM How does this relate to the strategy of a cultural boycott of Israel?

KH I support the official boycott, because Israel is breaking international laws. But there is a difference between supporting a boycott and not allowing yourself to read a book by an Israeli author. We should read Israeli books, because it's important to know what the Israelis are thinking. But I want to state this clearly: the essence of this conflict is not misunderstanding, just as between a warden and a prisoner the problem is not a 'misunderstanding'. It's a problem of concrete agendas. That said, I also believe that the Israelis are, in some sense, being held captive themselves: by simplified binaries, by their government's policies, and by a system that feeds them representations of Arabs which allows them to tolerate wars such as

Gaza.

DM And part of the project of the International Academy of Art is to change these images?

KH Yes. The idea of starting the Academy took shape during the invasion of 2003. Obviously it was unrealistic to attempt such a venture in these kinds of circumstances. Fundamentally, the project was – and is – about the future, and the future is always in some ways unrealistic. We felt that artists needed to be brought into contact with each other, and with different experiences, in order to achieve something larger, for their communities and for themselves. So the Academy was finally established in 2007, with this intention in mind. It's a long-term project, but it's here as a fact now.

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