

The Guardian



Reflect and resist

From theatre in a Bethlehem refugee camp to the Venice biennale, Palestinians are making art out of adversity - and doing it with grace, finds Ahdaf Soueif, organiser of the Palestine festival of literature

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Leaning against padded walls in a darkened room we eavesdrop on an argument: "the elite think they can get independence without resistance - by collaboration -"

"What's wrong with being normal? Normality as a form of resistance -"

"What is normal?"

"You know, sometimes I forget that we're under occupation . . ."

Last week I heard the same phrases in Ramallah. Today, we're listening to them at the Venice biennale, in Ramallah Syndrome, a sound installation by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti.

Three biennales ago, in 2003, Bethlehem-born Hilal and her husband, Petti, provided the exhibition with Stateless Nation: a number of giant passports that you came upon, one by one, in the pavilions of different states. The passports were issued by different authorities, but the bearer's place of birth was always Palestine. Now I'm struck by the converse: the number of people born in different parts of the world who identify themselves and act as Palestinians. And this year the Palestinians have - well, not a pavilion, but a space of their own. As one of the

44 "Collateral Events" of the 53rd biennale, they are housed - courtesy of the City of Venice - in the former Convento dei Santi Cosma e Damiano.

A few metres away from Ramallah Syndrome, on a spotlight patch of floor, tiny figures float, meet and merge, reproduce, splinter, vanish; OK, hit, hit but don't run is an animation by Shadi Habib Allah that aims, he says, to create a "tension between the mechanisation of nature and the naturalisation of the mechanical". It makes you think of amoebas, of cells under microscopes. You can follow a meandering train of thought to the Palestinian condition if you like. But you don't have to. The point about the art on show here is that it both resists the Israeli project for Palestine and resists being seen only in terms of resistance.

Six Palestinian artists are grouped in Palestine c/o Venice - the name reflects Palestine's historic condition of always being c/o someone else: the Ottoman empire, the British mandate, Jordan, Egypt, Israel. In an excellent catalogue, the curator, Salwa Mikdadi, describes the strategy of the exhibition, from the 100% Palestinian financing to seeking out Italian artistic partnerships. Most significant is the exhibition's presence, with duplicate work, in six art institutions in Palestinian cities. And here we have the elements at the heart of so much Palestinian work now.

Palestinian philanthropists and charitable organisations have been working in aid and education for some time; the Welfare Association, for example, marked its 25th anniversary last year. But recently a second generation has become visible. Young, dynamic and mostly American-educated, they are branching out to finance and invest in art - to notable effect.

Diaspora Palestinians are constantly activating links with home - and links between different bits of home - forming productive partnerships as part of a wider community of artists. As the Israeli process of building walls, settlements and settlement-only roads breaks up and cuts off established communities in Palestine, their friends abroad work to establish bridgeheads, virtual links, common projects.

Khalil Rabah's presentation at the biennale is an account of the restoration work undertaken in 50 Palestinian villages by the Palestinian architectural NGO, Riwaq. His aim is clear: "Riwaq has created an opportunity not only to investigate the trappings of our visual and cultural codes, but also to look at ways to reconnect isolated and walled Palestine to the international art world."

Jawad al-Malhi's House No 197 concentrates on the "project" where he grew up, Shufhat refugee camp in Jerusalem, where buildings - although built in concrete - are "never conceived as a whole from foundation to rooftop, but rather are built in piecemeal fashion for temporary use as their occupants wait to leave". The work, which also examines community and its durability under stress, is eerie in its crowdedness, emptiness, the occasional splash of colour.

Taysir Batniji zooms in on one room, his studio in Gaza - inaccessible to him for almost two years because of Israel's siege. In Hannoun, the studio floor blossoms with the pink curls of pencil shavings: are they evidence of a thousand acts of preparation for one act that hasn't - and may not - happen (writing or drawing)? Or are they poppies? The blood of martyrs dead in their thousands for something that may or may not happen? Batniji's works, the artist says, are always an attempt to speak to what is going on, but also beyond it; he wants them to have "an existence sustained through time, not consumed by the actual situation or event they evoke". As Mahmoud Darwish said in his address to the writers of the first Palestine festival of literature just before he died in 2008: "An art born of a defined reality is able to create a reality that transcends reality - an alternative, imagined reality."

The overall title of this year's Venice biennale is Making Worlds. "It is," says the director, Daniel Birnbaum, "about possible new beginnings." One such beginning - or resumption - was envisaged by Emily Jacir. Jacir, winner of the Golden Lion at the 2007 Venice biennale and, in 2008, of the Guggenheim's Hugo Boss prize, planned to display the names of each vaporetto station along the Grand Canal in Arabic alongside the Italian. "Centuries of cross-cultural exchange between Venice and the Arab world are clearly visible along the canal . . . The Arabic translations place each floating platform in direct dialogue with the surrounding architecture and urban design, linking them with various elements of Venice's shared heritage with the Arab world" - and pointing to possible future exchanges. The intervention was approved by the biennale commission and by the Venice municipality. It was welcomed by the vaporetto company, and Jacir began work, but a month later the official letter from the company came - and it refused the project. No reason was given for passing up this opportunity to highlight an un-crusading, mutually beneficial and productive historic relationship between a western power and the Arab world.

Mona Hatoum's exploration of relationships in her solo exhibition is more oblique. Her work is on two floors of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia museum. On one floor, her objects are wittily inserted into the permanent exhibits: a circle of elegant drawing-room chairs are connected by a spider's web of emerald beads. Under a huge late 17th-century painting of a battle, described as an oeuvre d'inspiration militaire and praised for the violence of its effets de lumière, Hatoum's *Natura Morta* places - in an antique cabinet - hand grenades produced in mirrored glass. They are made in Murano and could be exquisite Christmas tree baubles in luminous reds, lime greens, sapphire blues and sunshine yellows. On the other floor are her stand-alone works: *Hot Spot III*, a huge wire globe with the contours of the world's continents outlined in red neon fizzing and spitting with electricity; and the breathtaking *Impenetrable*, where a cube constructed out of three-metre lengths of barbed wire becomes an object of both dread and wonder as it shimmers and levitates in a white room. From certain angles, you can just about see a way through the wire.

What is clear is that, behind Hatoum, Jacir, al-Malhi and every Palestinian artist making a name internationally, there is a whole society in a state of cultural mobilisation. You can interpret this mobilisation as a survival mechanism; a visceral response to Israel's continuing occupation, its ever-tightening siege. Or as a product of the money invested in Palestinian "culture" over recent decades by international donors. Whether it's one or the other, or both, the result is a tremendous surge of activity throughout Palestine, with people from every sector engaging in activities that they define as cultural and as affirming Palestinian identity and resistance.

People tend to think of resistance as resistance to one force. Palestinians today have several to choose from. Israel is the obvious one, then there's American and European complicity in the Israeli project, and the Arab leaders' subservience to American complicity. And recently there have been the bloody internal divisions of the Palestinian leadership. Resistance, therefore, is an insistence not just on freedom and statehood, important as they are, but on identity, cohesion and being part of the larger world.

As we travelled through Palestinian cities for the Palestine festival of literature two weeks ago, this cultural mobilisation was as evident, as visible, as Israel's wall - itself now a giant canvas for local and international drawings and graffiti. In Jenin, we visited the university and the Freedom Theatre, then lunched at a women's co-operative where the members made a living by cooking traditional recipes and selling traditional embroidery. The founder, Imm Imad, told us about her son, a journalist, who was killed by the Israelis as he photographed their invasion of Jenin in 2003. His portrait dominated the main room. "It is hard," she said, "he was my eldest and my friend and adviser. But he inspired this project and here it is."

We attended two concerts given by offshoots from the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music. The audience clapped and stamped and yelled. But for many of us, the most enduring image will be of Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. In an exhibition of photographs taken by the children, a girl in a white dress smiles luminously from the grainy page, a Shrek-like giant of a man dozes on a chair in front of his house. There are no photographs of Israeli soldiers. Yet they are there. A British camp-worker/photographer told us that the kids used to hear the jeeps when they were playing on their football pitch, and would run and hide. Then the wall was built and swallowed up their football pitch and threw up the watchtowers.

Against the wall, and under one watchtower, the Palestinians built an open-air theatre: the Return Theatre, they call it. And after we've seen the exhibition and bought the crafts and eaten the fatayer, the children dance for us. Not in their theatre - that would be asking for trouble - but in the room where they practise. Little girls and boys fly around in their costumes of black and cerise. They skip and leap and tap out the dabka and sing songs of olive harvests and of travel and homecoming to villages they have never seen.

Palestinian talent is making itself felt. And, because of the divisions, there is no party line. They are making art out of adversity and are doing it with grace. This is clear at the Venice biennale. It is also clear in every Palestinian town, university and refugee camp.

For more on the Palestine festival of literature, go to www.palfest.org The Venice biennale continues until 22 November: details at www.labiennale.org

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