

Interview

Curating Film

Rasha Salti in
conversation with
Fawz Kabra

Rasha Salti is a writer and curator of film and visual art. In 2011, she co-curated the 10th edition of the Sharjah Biennale and is currently the programmer of African and Middle Eastern Cinema at the Toronto International Film Festival. In this interview, Salti speaks with Fawz Kabra on one of her latest projects, *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s to Now*, a three-part film series co-curated with Jytte Jensen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The series, which began in 2010 and ended with its final segment in November 2012, looked at classical genres

Sun of the Hyenas,
1977, Tunisia, directed
by Ridha Béhi. Courtesy
Willem Thijssen.



in Arab film, but also showed experimental, documentary and non-fiction that challenged the histories and conventions of Arab cinema. Considering experimentation and subjectivity were key concepts guiding this curatorial film project, Salti talks about the notions of 'mapping' histories and genres of Arab film and proposes new ways of reading these classical and unconventional filmic works.

Last Days in Jerusalem,
2011, Palestine/France,
directed by Tawfik Abu
Wael. Courtesy Wide
Management.



Fawz Kabra: Can you talk about how you and co-curator Jytte Jensen conceived of the three-part film series *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s to Now*?

Rasha Salti: Experimental cinema is associated with a set of widely known attributes that are more or less specific and forged from within the western canon of cinema. In asking if there is an experimental cinema in the Arab world, the answer is complicated. On the one hand, yes, there are a few films that can be identified as such. But on the other hand, there are major works that don't quite speak the language of experimental cinema and yet the authors of these works experimented significantly with regards to the canons of Arab cinema. There are also videos made by artists that can be described as artist films, but dwell in the universe of contemporary art practice rather than in the universe of film itself. We were also tempted to use the notion of personal cinema - widely used in the US especially - in parallel to experimental cinema in order to identify a more radical auteur cinema. However, in this case as well, several works did not quite conform to the attributes of the genre. But as the essence of personal cinema is the author's subjectivity, the elements of our curatorial principle were pieced from these two key notions: experimentation and subjectivity. We looked at fiction and non-fiction as well as narrative and non-narrative films of all lengths, where the author's subjectivity inspired radical form and content.

On another level, another question emerged in facing the challenge of tailoring the programs of each of *Mapping Subjectivity's* three editions. Namely, whether there was a conversation happening between the various works across generations and countries, shared sensibilities, recurring motifs. We found fascinating resonances regardless of whether authors had actually ever met, or even seen

one another's works. This is one of the reasons we sometimes included 'classics' like Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina's *Chronicle of the Years of Embers* (Algeria, 1976), because at the time of its making, the filmmaker was forging his own singular vision of a liberation epic, becoming 'canonised' as a classic for these reasons. Each of the editions contained thematic motifs, around which we aggregated a number of works. This is what the 'mapping' refers to in the title. At its heart, the program challenges conventional narratives of the history of Arab cinema and proposes to read works in an entirely different perspective, going against the grain of scholarly or academic methodology. The premise of surfacing a conversation between films and videos and their authors across time and space is purely poetic; it's the privilege of curators and programmers.

Tender is the Wolf,
2006, Tunisia,
directed by Jilani
Saadi. Courtesy
Cinéconsulting.



FK: There are many stories of the Arab uprisings in 2011 that remain untold in the general news media. Does *Mapping Subjectivity* cast a light on these hidden narratives? Did the post-spring and socio-political context of the Middle East, not to mention the aggression in Syria, affect the curatorial framework and selections?

RS: *Mapping Subjectivity* was never concerned with the manner in which the media, Arab or western, portrays the Arab world, its events or its inhabitants. Surely, it is something that cannot be ignored when communicating with the wider public and the press, but it did not matter for a single minute when we were articulating our curatorial concept or selecting films. The first edition was presented in 2010, with the eruption of the Arab insurgencies happening in the winter of 2011. We were faced with the daunting question of how to engage with the audiovisual materials released by insurgents across the region from within the curatorial paradigm we had defined. In the second edition of the program, we decided to look back in time and include works considered seminal in how Arab filmmakers have engaged with 'revolution' and 'liberation', so we opened the program with *Chronicle of the Years of Embers*. As I mentioned above, the film can be said to embody a canon in the region's cinema. However, we also included works that have cult status in their country but received

little attention or exposure outside, such as Mohamed Zinet's *Tahia Ya Didou* (1971), a visionary masterpiece that reflects on the legacy of revolution and post-liberation society, only a few years after Algeria's independence. In the third edition, we screened Yousry Nasrallah's *After the Battle* (2012), an eloquent and complicated work forged in the belly of Egypt's insurgency, and Lamine Ammar-Khodja's *Ask Your Shadow* (2012), a very personal chronicle of the filmmaker's experience with the botched insurgencies in Algeria, 2011.

Death for Sale,
2011, Morocco/
Belgium/France,
directed by Faouzi
Bensaïdi. Courtesy
Urban Distribution
International.



'Casting light on hidden narratives', as you say, may be attributed as one of the virtues or missions of the works in the program, but it was not what we were looking to highlight when considering what had been produced in the context of the 'Arab Spring'. Forgive the cliché, but cinema is a sculpting of time and we were looking at works where the filmmakers were able to produce another time proper to their films - be it in fiction or in documentary - based on or inspired by the reality they lived and witnessed, not to mention the events they took part in. There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of videos that recorded, documented, bore witness to and vehicled moments of these 2011 uprisings. They shed light on the media's blind spots or complicate a simplified picture. Without a doubt, they have performed very important missions, yet only a few speak the language of cinema. As a case in point, I will cite the film *Babylon* (Tunisia, 2012), directed by Ala Slim, ismaël and Youssef Chebbi. It films the erection of a makeshift refugee camp for Libya's multinational guest workers at the Tunisian border, which got caught in the crossfire. Is this film 'about' the 'Arab Spring'? Not quite, but certainly, yes. It is a visually stunning and scathing meditation on the regime of humanitarian aid and it won the award at the FID Marseille in 2012.

FK: Do you see these films functioning as documents or a source for one to seek a particular knowledge and truth?

RS: This is a complicated question. In my personal opinion, one of the deeper problems in the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of contemporary artistic practice in the Arab world and its engagement with the international scene as well as the market, is precisely that the production of knowledge and the

production of poetics are confused. I don't know how to understand 'truth', or what you mean when you say 'truth', so I will leave that notion aside. Poetics is definitely a form of knowledge: it is neither superior nor more important than scholarly knowledge, and vice versa; it is merely a different one. But it should not be substituted for anthropology, sociology or political theory. These films are no more documents than this email, the dresses you own and the currency I use to pay for internet access; they are first and foremost artistic works, forged in the imaginary of the filmmaker and/or artist and the team of collaborators that contributed to their fabrication.

The 'Arab Spring' has generated a plethora of audiovisual material: still images, poems, ephemeral art, performances, songs, et cetera. With regards to this material, I am not sure how many are actually films, or less abstractly, I don't know how many will eventually be indexed as cinema. This is a question I, as all film programmers, visual arts curators, archivists and activists, are dealing with, especially when it comes to their showcasing outside the time and place of their original broadcasting, that is, YouTube, a news channel or Facebook. My hunch is that even when their authors intended to present these works as short films or documentary films, or when curators have done that, very few contain the basic elements of what makes an audiovisual work cinematic.

Autoportrait, 1971/2012,
Lebanon/France,
directed by Simone
Fattal. Courtesy the
filmmaker.



FK: Could you elaborate on the importance of highlighting subjective histories rather than something functioning on a more ubiquitous scale?

RS: From our perspective, subjectivity is more profound, complex and political than the 'personal' because it articulates the filmmaker or artist's being in the world - her or his lived experience in a wider history. Subjective histories challenge official discourses and dogmas, whether those coerced by the officialdom of the filmmaker's country or by the western world, and they are generally subversive. If

you consider Mohammad Soueid's marvellous lecture-presentation on his own story as a filmmaker delivered in the second edition of the program, which you can stream online from MoMA's website, you will find a totally uncanny narrative that strings together Hanna Schygulla, Marlon Brando, Maroun Baghdadi, the Lebanese civil war and B-action films. This back and forth between fact and fantasy is not entertainment: it is a fascinating subversion of conventional histories of western and Arab cinema.

FK: Because art was playing a role in mediating and constructing narratives on the sociopolitical situations long before the Arab uprisings even began. Are there any particular films in *Mapping Subjectivity* that you feel speak to the context and the political complexities of the Middle East today?

The Pessimists,
2009/10, Palestine/
USA/UAE, directed
by Sama Alshaibi.
Courtesy Selma Feriani
Gallery and Lawrie
Shabibi Gallery.



RS: This is a bit of a difficult question because in my view nearly every film has done that. I will share an anecdote. In the last sequence of Oussama Mohammad's *Stars in Broad Daylight* (1988), Kasser, a young man, who has left his abusive family and bleak predicament in his native village to make a new life for himself in the capital of Syria, Damascus, is staying with his cousin who is completing his military service and is on a brief break. Before they fall asleep they each talk about their plans for the future. Kasser wants to open a bird shop and his cousin, who is posted at the Golan border, wants to open a tank repair shop. Before the insurgency broke out in Syria, the

reference to repairing tanks was a caustic and scathing reflection on the state and future of the Syrian army-regime. After the insurgency, the reference has entirely different resonances.

FK: The first two installments of *Mapping Subjectivity* seem to explain more generally the content and 'mapping' of cinema in the Arab world. Yet the final installment is themed 'Transgressions' and looks at particularities such as a timely look at sexuality and gender roles in the Middle East. Can you speak further on yours and Jytte Jensen's decision to use this as a basis of exploration for the final installment?

RS: With the theme of 'Transgressions', we gave space to films by women filmmakers articulating a gender critique. For example, Assia Djébar's *The Noubia of Mount Chenoua* (1974), or Raja Amari's *Buried Secrets* (2009). We wanted a more pronounced focus on sexuality and masculinity, with Nouri Bouzid's *Man of Ashes* (1984) and Said Marzouk's *My Wife and the Dog* (1975). That said, I don't think the first two editions ignored these important questions, either. For instance, Omar Amiralay's *The Sarcophagus of Love* (1986) is a powerful film about gender in Egypt and relationships between men and women, while Moumen Smihi's *The East Wind* (1976) is a compelling critique of gender and sexuality. So is Rania Stephan's *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011). All the films in *Mapping Subjectivity* deal with issues timely to and of the region at the time of their making. It was not in reaction to what is going on in the Middle East right now.

Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo, 2012, France, directed by Wael Shawky. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery.



FK: 'Transgressions' refers to crimes, disobedience and a breach of some kind. Can you please talk about this further in terms of radicality, sexuality and gender issues in the Arab region?

RS: We used transgression in its basic or commonplace usage, namely a breaking of boundaries without a possibility of recovery, return or 'repair' and the films we selected were transgressive in either form and content, or both. Consider Nouri Bouzid's *Man of Ashes* (1986) and Ridha Béhi's *Sun of the Hyenas* (1976), which deal with the issue of male homosexuality, prostitution and tourism. The two films were produced in part by funds from the Tunisian Ministry of Culture and screened at international festivals as well as in Tunisia. Yet, upon their release in Tunisia, as well as elsewhere in the Arab world, they were received with both praise but also harsh critique from conservative voices that were outraged by the films' representation of society. Both films waged daring battles with censorship. Films like these, which have dared to broach these subjects, have been extremely rare. The subjects were timely in 1976 and 1986 and remain so until today. To cite another example, Mohammed Bennys' *Mohammadia* (1979), reconstructs with animated etchings and 16mm footage the story of the Mohammadia Palace in Tunis. The story is also a fantastic parable about the folly of rulers, corrupt regimes and the complicity of the west. *Mohammadia* is at once uncanny, totally novel, contemporary, and highly imaginative. It could be read as a critique of the IMF and World Bank and of our postcolonial and postmodern web of dependencies. In other words, 'Transgressions' refers to a certain radicality.

FK: *Mapping Subjectivity* looks at a little known heritage in the Arab world; a novelty for New York audiences. But what about the circulation of these films and their reception in the Arab world?

RS: A significant part of the films are unknown to Arab audiences, especially younger generations, because the older works produced in the 1970s and 1980s don't circulate and the newer more radical titles and videos sometimes circulate within the realms of contemporary art. For instance, Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (2012) is most likely to screen in an art gallery, as well as Yto Barrada's *Hand-Me-Downs* (2011) and Sama Alshaibi's *The Pessimists* (2010). The older titles, in part because they were produced by public funds from the filmmakers' respective countries, are stowed away in the archives of each country and rarely, if ever, are they screened publicly or travel abroad. The crisis of film distribution is probably at its worst moment in the Arab world and there is not a single entity that is culpable. It is a series of policies, the failure of structures, the imperium of the private sector, increasing social conservatism and I would say, lack of curiosity among film programmers and curators to ask questions. But there are wonderfully defiant people who resist the collapse of film distribution in the Arab world: this program would not have been possible without the incredible generosity of some filmmakers and critics who shared their knowledge and experience.

FK: The last segment of *Mapping Subjectivity* is described in a

MoMA synopsis mentioning how the uprisings and new elections in the Arab world have since inspired new approaches to filmmaking. Can you elaborate on this and explain how you see this taking place?

RS: The 'Arab Spring' has and will continue to bear a tremendous impact on individuals and institutions in the region, obviously, but without a doubt it is too soon to have a real sense of the extent of that impact. How people articulate their subjectivity as citizens, as gendered individuals, as artists and intellectuals, is yet unsettled and inchoate to pin down. What is clear at this moment is that the veil of self-censorship has either thinned or lifted: the 'unsayable' or the 'unrepresentable' seems to have lessened.

FK: Where do you see a place for contemporary art and filmmaking in the Arab world today? Do you see a blurring between the 'amateur' and the artist in a region fighting for a change that undermines hypocrisy, dictatorship and a true reshaping of infrastructure?

Ask Your Shadow,
2012, France, directed
by Lamine Ammar-
Khodja. Courtesy the
filmmaker.



RS: Among all the expressive arts, film and especially documentary, or non-fiction, has been at the forefront of militancy in the past ten years in the region. Authorities and public bodies have been singularly punishing towards filmmakers: documentary cinema was the genre most subjected to prohibition and it almost never received support. In terms of form, documentary - or non-fiction cinema - is where you find the most daring and imaginative experimentation. Documentary films have screened in unusual places made accessible by independent initiatives from civil society and activists have also hosted screenings and discussions with filmmakers that have been vivid and memorable.

FK: In your practice and research you have looked into current events, such as the uprising of Syria for example, and studied it alongside film-making, art and visual culture. How do you see these elements affecting the way you work and do you differentiate between them or are they part of a larger body of seeing and understanding?

RS: My personal reading of the 'Arab Spring' is that it has heralded a new era, which I have experienced first and foremost as a call for humility and compassion. The most salient word across the

insurgencies in Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world where there have been protests is dignity. Dignity brings humility and compassion. I know it may not seem so from broadcast media and the first post-dictatorship regimes voted democratically have caused rancor, disappointment and turbulence. But at a grassroots level, I have observed and noted a distinctively new experience of compassion and humility. A great deal of artists have produced work, some of which are an immediate and almost instinctive reaction to what they experienced. But what is truly remarkable is how some artists have lent their skills to contribute to the insurgency. This is most noteworthy in Syria at the moment, because a lot of these initiatives are posted and disseminated on Facebook and YouTube. To give you a simple example, artists have made videos that teach everyday folk how to administer first aid, to disinfect and stop a wound from bleeding, or how to create an 'alternative' economy of exchange to implement a general strike against the Assad regime's economy. In Egypt, during one of the protests, artists lent their skills, using Photoshop and other media, to create masks in the faces of the fallen martyrs for people to wear as they marched through the streets. There are also 'interventions' in public spaces that are recorded on video; performances, songs, puppetry and so on. What happens when these works are documented and showcased in a museum or gallery space is a question I have avoided dealing with and I am extremely weary of sensationalism. Context is key. When I have been asked to curate a program of 'insurgent' films, I have either proposed to show films made prior to the uprisings that engaged with the 'crises' in premonitory ways, or I have offered instead to deliver a lecture where I show images and speak in a speculative tenor.

FK: What are you working on next?

RS: I am working with Kristine Khouri on the documentary and archival reconstitution of an exhibition that took place in Beirut in 1978, *Exhibition of International Art in Solidarity with Palestine*. Our exhibition is due to open at the MACBA in the fall of 2014. I am also working on smaller projects and film programs at the Musée Jeu de Paume in Paris for June 2013 and January 2014. The first is around the notion of the martyr and the second on new voices in African cinema. Ideally, I would like to raise funds to make a book for *Mapping Subjectivity*. I found so many fascinating primary sources, it would be a shame not to collect them in one work and disseminate them to film and culture scholars.

Rasha Salti is a freelance writer and independent curator, she is also an international programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival. From 2004 until 2010, she was the film programmer and creative director of the New York based non-profit ArteEast where she directed two editions of the biennial *CinemaEast Film Festival* (2005 and 2007); she also co-curated *The Road to Damascus*, with Richard Peña, a retrospective of Syrian cinema that toured worldwide (2006), and *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s until Now*, with Jytte Jensen (2010-

2012) showcased at the MoMA in New York. Salti has collaborated with a number of organizations, including the Musée Jeu de Paume in Paris, SANFIC in Santiago de Chile, and The Tate Modern in London. In 2009 and 2010, Salti worked as a programmer for the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, where she was also involved in SANAD, the festival's regional film production grant. She has administered a number of events, including a tribute to Edward Said titled *For a Critical Culture* (Beirut, 1997), and *50, Nakba and Resistance* (Beirut, 1998), a cultural season for the fiftieth commemoration of the tragedy of Palestine, and co-organized *Waiting for the Barbarians: A Tribute to Edward Said* (Istanbul, 2007) in collaboration with Metis Press and Bogazici University. In 2011, she was one of co-curators of the 10th edition of the Sharjah Biennial for the Arts, with Suzanne Cotter and Haig Aivazian. Salti writes about artistic practice in the Arab world, film, and general social and political commentary, in Arabic and English. Her articles and essays have been published in *The Jerusalem Quarterly Report* (Palestine), *Naqd* (Algeria), *MERIP* (USA), *The London Review of Books* (UK), *Afterall* (US) and *Third Text* (UK). In 2006, she edited *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Filmmakers* (ArteEast and Rattapallax Press) and in 2009, she collaborated with photographer Ziad Antar on an exhibition and book titled *Beirut Bereft, The Architecture of the Forsaken and Map of the Derelict*.

About the author

Fawz Kabra is a writer and curator currently living in New York. She is an MA candidate at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (2013) and received her BFA in Studio Arts at Concordia University in Montreal (2004). Fawz previously worked at the Emirates Foundation, Abu Dhabi (2007) and continued on to curate public programs at the Cultural District, Abu Dhabi from 2008-2011. She co-curated the ongoing project, *Brief Histories in Sharjah*, UAE (2011) exploring responsive practices to rapidly shifting contexts and meanings of global politics.