



ETHNOGRAPHY + ART: CONVERGENCE OR COLLISION?

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'Today there is a related paradigm in advanced art on the left: the artist as ethnographer. The object of contestation remains, at least in part, the bourgeois institution of autonomous art, its exclusionary definitions of art, audience, identity. But the subject of association has changed: it is now the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist often struggles.'^[1]

- Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?'

From the flurry of interest emanating from exhibitions, publications, and other initiatives since September 11, anthropologist Kirsten Scheid infers that 'all signs suggest an imminent flourishing in the study of contemporary Arab art'.^[2] In an effort to focus this 'unprecedented opportunity,' Scheid endeavours to identify precisely 'What We Do Not Know' about contemporary Arab art. As such, she enumerates four key areas ripe for enquiry: '1) historiography; 2) concepts and forms; 3) audience cultivation; and 4) institutional support and funding.'^[3] With their attention to social and cultural relations and processes, anthropologists are well situated to address these contextualising frameworks in ways that pull them out of the background and demonstrate the importance of these lived realities.

As a fellow anthropologist, I want to suggest another area of enquiry, which is concerned with ethnographic aesthetics and affective modes of knowledge production, an area of theory that visual anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and anthropologists of the senses and the body have been developing in recent years. Rather than focusing on 'background' dimensions of the art world, this intersection between art and anthropology addresses shared practices and methodologies. Anthropologists Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright argue that anthropology needs to critically engage with artistic practices that draw on material and sensual registers rather than only textual ones. These contemporary art practices provide means for apprehending the performative aspects of quotidian experience, embodied meaning, affective intensity, and agency of objects and images. These are ideas that are likewise central to anthropological understanding.

Shifting the frame of analysis to the sensory and affective registers of contemporary Arab art has radical implications. Based on my own research with filmmakers and mixed media artists in Lebanon, the idea of *making sense* - not based on comprehension per se, but rather on sensory experience - is productive for engaging work that deals with incomprehensible lived experiences. In other words, the production of states

of confusion in contemporary Arab art is an important challenge to the frenzy of interest in the Middle East in this post-9/11 era, which carries with it assumptions about the accessibility of understanding and the mastery of knowledge.

As new forms of representation emerge with the increasing accessibility of digital media, especially in the hands of those dispossessed of their histories, traditions and land, we must continue to grapple with the role of media as an expressive tool in these contexts. It is particularly important to consider these new renderings of 'reality' in societies that have undergone forms of violence or trauma that undercut realist notions of truth and evidence. While Lebanese film and video has been faced with the burden of representing the failure of the nation and its replacement with prolonged political violence, experimental approaches have emerged that emphasise the 'impossibilities' of traumatic historical representation. The impossibility of representing the political violence in Lebanon is of course debatable in the strict sense, however, more than the idea of a prohibited practice, 'impossibility' serves as a critical muse. For many artists, like Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige, Jalal Toufic, Tony Chakar, among many others, their work conjures the impossible in order to undercut the taken-for-granted assumptions about representational possibilities. In the face of personal and communal suffering, media saturation, ideological machinations, historical density, and inaccessible lived experiences, neither art nor anthropology can hope to represent something as abstract as the 'Lebanese civil war'. Instead, these artists utilise non-linear personal narratives, embedded documentary elements, and media recycling in order to blur boundaries between fact and fiction, art and ethnography, and identity and subjectivity.

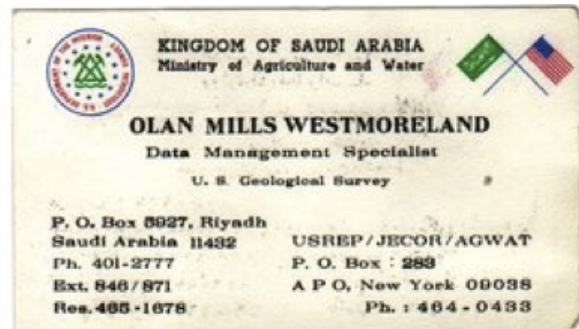
These documentary endeavours are efforts to make manifest the imaginaries that haunt a landscape of forgetfulness, amnesia and impossible representations. Documentary artefacts are thus not records of the real, but casings, hollow shells, empty remnants of remembering. That is to say that these media remnants exist as fossils, always decaying, but also always as an object that is simultaneously of the past and of the present. By re-enchanting these mimetic artefacts, Lebanese documentary experimentalists break through the blockages of amnesia, to see around representational eclipses, and rupture ossified narratives that reify violence. In other words, the impossibility of representing the traumatic past is met by creative approaches to understanding the remnants of the past in the present. This critical distance doesn't provide time to see the past more objectively, but rather to see the way ideas, images and objects from the past refract in the present in ways that elucidate the social and political imaginaries. The interface between art practices and ethnographic enquiry provides a key site for apprehending the affective potential of ficto-criticism to momentarily crystallise these imaginaries. It is worth noting that direct criticism would not yield the same result regardless of the merits of each approach. In order to demonstrate this, I want to engage here with the oeuvre of a little-known experimental



Marhaba Tata, *Objects of Oppression (BAG)*, 2001, DV video press materials.

filmmaker working in Beirut who goes by the name of Marhaba Tata.

Tata's work provides a poignant case study of the way experimental documentary in contexts of recurrent violence engenders alternative archives, fabricated narratives, and critical auto-ethnography. These experimental modes of documenting help to elucidate the intersection of postwar subjectivity and the mundane experience of geopolitical processes. The breadth of Tata's work has fallen under the banner of 'The Post Script Project' (2005-11). He explains the rationale of this project, based on the notion of an addendum to a written document, as accentuating the idea of an afterthought. Like the appended postscript to a letter, he told me, 'an afterthought is a latent reverberation, something that occurs out of time, displaced from its originary instance...when afterthoughts can easily be edited into the body of the correspondence, the postscript serves a more nuanced function, one potentially against the grain of the preceding message'.[4] Post thus aligns with a series of concepts, like postmodern, postcolonial, postwar. Each of which are also types of afterthoughts. Accordingly, we can see Tata's work as revisionary.

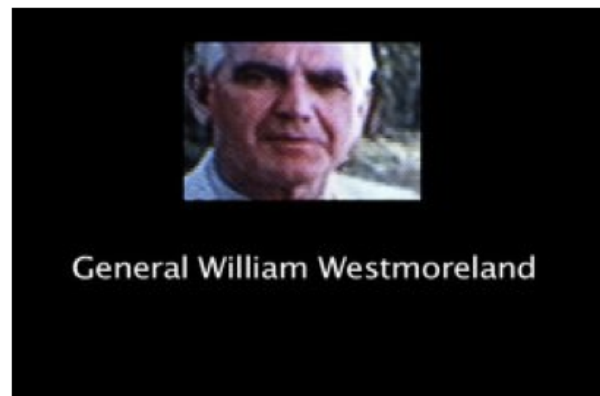


Marhaba Tata, *In a Family of Hearts and Minds*, 2003, DV video press materials.

Most of this work, he says, 'interrogates the history of American wars in the Orient'.[5] Provocatively, he addresses these issues primarily through a re-mediation of an American expatriate child living in the Middle East during the early 1980s. Tata's efforts to re-voice the American diplomatic missions in the region draws upon objects he found in the debris of the US embassy after it had been obliterated by a car bomb in 1983. In the rubble he found this bag containing a child's memorabilia: toy camels, home movie videotapes, and an illustrated story written for school, among other things. He re-enchants these found objects with subversive narratives about the politics of foreign intervention.

Inscribed inside the bag is the name P.S. Westmoreland. The first two initials of the bag's owner clearly connect to Tata's evocation of a postscript. Tata thus appropriates both the initials and the contents to utter a subversive afterthought from the rubble-reduced edifice of the American diplomatic mission. In his video, *Objects of Oppression* (2001), Tata re-enchanted these mundane objects as latent evidence of imperial domination, by drawing on footage from the found videotapes.

In Marhaba Tata's next piece, *In a Family of Hearts and Minds* (2003), he traces the origins of P.S.



Marhaba Tata, *In a Family of Hearts and Minds*, 2003, DV video frame grab.

Westmoreland's belongings to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which is depicted in the home movies recovered from the rubble. Here he learns that the father of P.S. Westmoreland worked for the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation, a diplomatic project that was to foster relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Following this lead, Tata discovers a familial relationship between Olan Mills and US General William Westmoreland, who led the American war in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968 and then served as US Army Chief of Staff until 1972. For critics, General Westmoreland is often accused of escalating the war in Vietnam under false pretenses. This piece makes an inter-textual reference to Peter Davis' 1974 film *Hearts and Minds*, in which General Westmoreland says on camera that the 'oriental' does not value life as highly as do the Americans. Tata locates the parents of P.S. Westmoreland, Olan and Eugenia Westmoreland, now residing on a golf course in central Texas. Here, he confronts them about their past in an escalating series of interrogating interview questions. And yet, the film

removes the questions, thus eliminating the context for answers that at times seem confrontational and at other times nonsensical. Bordering on documentary, but always infused with fictional elements, Tata's representation of these people inscribes them within over-determined ideas of conspiracy, of which they claim no direct knowledge. While he interrogates the meaning of a diplomatic mission and the ubiquitous presence of American expatriates living in the Middle East, one cannot help but be struck by the ordinary ways in which these individuals talk about their experience.

I met with Marhaba Tata when I was doing my fieldwork in Beirut. When he learned my name, however, he became instantly excitable and seemed rather suspicious. Westmoreland is certainly a unique enough name to stand out among the Smiths and Joneses, so this correlation between my identity and this P. S. figure proved too coincidental for Tata to accept at face value. He refused to talk to me more about his project and said he had to leave quickly for another appointment. After this encounter, Tata refused to take my calls and when I saw him at Al Madina Theatre he acted as if he had never met me. I later learned that he was telling people that the CIA, presumably referring to me, had interrogated him and demanded the return of the bag and its contents featured in his films. It was unclear what the CIA would want with these childish objects. Could Marhaba Tata's interest in these objects and their ability to create fantastical conspiracy narratives also be motivating the CIA? Of course, the evocation of these objects as sensitive material could be read another way, but Marhaba Tata did not seem interested in re-embodying P.S. Westmoreland as a child swept up into cosmopolitan geopolitics. As such, this child remains a ghostly figure in Tata's productions, only appearing in archival footage.



Marhaba Tata, *Objects of Oppression*, 2001, DV video frame grab.

Marhaba Tata's subversive ideology runs deeper than merely experimental art, he has also been accused of assuming a false identity. In a recent copyright infringement case, the Tata Group sued Marhaba Tata for falsely associating himself with the industrial magnate, Ratan Tata, who runs the Tata Group. It seems that Marhaba Tata's claims to be related to Ratan were initially ignored as a harmless prank, but the Tata Group was forced to take legal action when Marhaba Tata's true identity was allegedly linked to a radical American academic. The Tata Group's reputed connection to this rogue figure had mired the company's ambitions to acquire the Jaguar and Land Rover car companies in accusations of anti-Israeli sympathies. The outcome of the case required that Marhaba Tata stop making claims that involved the Tata Group and family, but could continue to use Marhaba Tata as a pseudonym. Looking into these court documents, I made a startling discovery. The courts identify Marhaba Tata as one 'P.S. Westmoreland' - the figure he was supposedly investigating in 'The Post Script Project'.



Marhaba Tata, *Objects of Oppression* (VHS), 2001, DV video press materials.

By now the reader should be rather suspect about this narrative and the accompanying documents referenced herein. Indeed, Marhaba Tata and P.S. Westmoreland are imaginary as are the conspiracies and structures of feeling that they inhabit. Though these characters are my creation, the structures of feeling are not. My point here is to elucidate the way fictional characters become believably real when placed within these structures of conspiracy and suspicion.

My rationale for this fabricated research is three-fold. First, it is an attempt to parody the aesthetics of ficto-criticism recurrent in Lebanese experimental documentary, which asserts new methodologies for analysing histories of violence by appropriating mundane archival objects and imbuing them with a radical affective force of fabricated narratives. Second, I utilise this narrative to draw attention to the way taken for granted personal histories reverberate with over-determined historical narratives, and yet, by playing with the frequency of this reverberation, narrative can ultimately critique cross-cultural representation and geopolitics through the retelling of the mundane as it intersects with the imaginary. And lastly, I create this project to assert a self-reflexive critique of my position within a public to which I claim intellectual authority. Since the subjects of my research already scrutinise this problematic relationship, this endeavour aims to take ownership of my own troubling positionality, as an American researcher working in the Middle East, in order to redefine the terms of this scrutiny, and to open myself to my research subjects in a way that does not retreat into a confession of identity politics, but instead attempts to articulate the affective forces of doing fieldwork in a complicated political terrain and to think about how these forces crystallise in the making of particular ethnographic imaginaries.

In conclusion, I return to the epigraph that started this essay. Hal Foster's now dated essay, 'The Artist as

Ethnographer', launches a powerful critique of artists whose art employs a 'pseudoethnographic' practice, but spares little ink in also condemning anthropologists with 'artist-envy'. [6] Inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay, 'The Author as Producer', Foster redeploys Benjamin's 'productivist' argument to situate a critique of artists appropriating ethnographic frameworks. For those artists who have appropriated ethnography within their practices, Foster's critique is three-fold. Firstly, he suggests that these artists presume that 'the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation', which presumes that the site of political transformation is 'elsewhere' among the 'cultural other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural'. [7] Building on this, the second assumption that Foster critiques is the idea that 'alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture'. [8] And, thirdly, that the artist must be one of these cultural others in order to fully access this 'transformative alterity'. [9]

While I wholeheartedly endorse a critique of this set of assumptions, I fear that Foster reifies these constraints based on his own set of assumptions about ethnography, positionality and disciplinarity. The space of this essay does not allow me to fully grapple with the nuances of Foster's argument, however, a few comments are in order. Firstly, Foster relies on an antiquated notion of ethnography that most anthropologists now rigorously scrutinise. Anthropology does continue to grapple with the questions of difference, but not as naïvely as Foster assumes. Secondly, the authority of the ethnographer is fraught with various forms of contestation as should be the artist engaged in social critique. My narrative of the fictitious artist Marhaba Tata should help us begin to question this paradigm. Lastly, rather than fixating on the notions of artist-envy and ethnographer-envy, which works to police disciplinary borders, I am interested in methodological borrowings across these vocational structures. To be clear, with this ficto-critical rendition I do not situate myself as an artist. To do so would take for granted the various structures of legitimisation that practitioners from the Middle East and across the global south must constantly negotiate in order to access the global art world. To acknowledge these is not the same thing as legitimising them, but to ignore them would be to dismiss the 'background' parameters mentioned at the beginning of this essay. In other words, for the relationship between artists and anthropologists to be most productive, there needs to be greater sharing of our respective practices, theoretical concepts, and methodological toolkits.

[1] Foster, Hal, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in *The Traffic in Culture : Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, edited by George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, Berkeley: University of California Press, (1995): (p.304).

[2] Scheid, Kirsten. "What We Do Not Know: Questions for a Study of Contemporary Arab Art", *ISIM (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World) Newsletter* 22, (2008): 14-15 (p.14).

[3] Scheid, Kirsten, 2008, p.14.

[4] Tata, Marhaba, Personal interview, Beirut, (24 October 2005).

[5] Tata, Marhaba, "Program Notes", in *(Un)real Film Festival Catalog*, Beirut, (2005): (p.16).

[6] Foster, Hal, p.304



[7] Foster, Hal, p.304

[8] Foster, Hal, p.304

[9] Foster, Hal, p.304

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About the author

Mark R. Westmoreland is a professor of anthropology at the American University in Cairo. His research explores the social and aesthetic worlds of contemporary Arab image-makers. He is currently completing a book about experimental documentary practices in Lebanon entitled *Catastrophic Images*. His new research interest explores the aesthetics of cell phone videos made during the Egyptian revolution and how the exchange of these cellular images contribute to new political collectivities. And he is also working with the Arab Image Foundation on an initiative to identify photographic collections across the region. He recently served as the programme director for the Cairo Documentary Festival and has initiated a series of critical initiatives on documentary and art in the Middle East. He has worked on documentary and oral history projects in India, Ethiopia and Texas, and is now collaborating on a documentary about the social history of violence in one Egyptian Delta village.