

Interview

A State of Exception

Mario Rizzi in
conversation with
Dorothea Schoene

Since 1999, Italian artist and filmmaker Mario Rizzi has used film-based media to present works decidedly anthropocentric in nature. His work gives voice to the marginalised, underprivileged and, in particular, to refugees. After *Out of Place* (Best Artist Prize in Sharjah Biennial 2005), a six-screen video installation narrating the life of second-generation emigrants in Paris, Rizzi shot *impermanent*, which was selected for the Berlin Film Festival 2008. In this short film Ali Akilah, a 96-year-old Palestinian doctor living in Amman but born in Lifta (a Palestinian village whose territory is now part of west Jerusalem), narrates the story of his life. The work, filmed together with the footage for a larger six-screen video installation entitled *neighbours*, is a reflection on the 'state of exception', a concept

Mario Rizzi, *Al Intithar*,
2013, film still. Courtesy
the Artist & Sharjah Art
Foundation.



developed by Giorgio Agamben that views the suspension of the juridical order as the normal paradigm of government in the policy of modern states.

'A state of exception' is an apt description for the situation Rizzi depicts in *Al Intithar (The Waiting)*, his most recent film, which premiered in the short film competition at the Berlin Film Festival 2013. A co-production with the Sharjah Art Foundation, Rizzi filmed the life of Syrian refugees at camp Zaatari in the Jordanian desert over several weeks, from September to November 2012. *Al Intithar (The Waiting)* is the first part of a trilogy – *Bayt (House)* – that reflects on the emergence of a new civic imagination through the stories of individuals in Malaysia, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Syria. Through these films, the artist explores the relationship of the inner and outer connotations of life from various angles, the relationship between private and public engagement, the intersections of individual lives and the different events that form common histories.

Mario Rizzi, *Al Intithar*,
2013, film poster.
Courtesy the artist &
Sharjah Art Foundation.



AL INTITHAR

a film by Mario Rizzi



Dorothea Schoene: You work primarily with film as your artistic medium. What significance does this particular material have for you? What possibilities and opportunities does it offer?

Mario Rizzi: I studied Psychology and Photography. Together with my early photographic research, I began producing what are known as 'relational art' projects, in which the artist creates a frame, but the artwork is the product of a collective participation so that the idea of authorship is more dispersed. I think this was a fundamental step in my growth, but at some point my language evolved into a more personal one. Both photography and relational projects are ways of 'importing'. I wanted to work with the lives of people, but I didn't want to freeze them. I felt the need to tell stories, to build a storyline out of real events, like a narration. The medium of film therefore was a logical one for me. In a talk about my work a Turkish curator said that I am like one of these medieval Italian storytellers who travelled from city to city. I like this comparison. This way of storytelling and narrating is also a way of building bridges.

DS: How do you narrate?

MR: At first, I preferred to visually intersect the life events of my protagonists on multiple screens. Little by little I discovered how enriching it is to build a single narrative. The turning point was at the Istanbul Biennale 2005. Then, the budget wouldn't allow a multi-screen installation and consequently I concentrated on the idea of a single film. This was an inspiring challenge, which very much satisfied my creative wish of structuring life events on a new narrative plot. The starting point of a new storyline is usually a genuine curiosity of mine, and is completely free of presumptions or expectations. Sometimes it could be an unripe concept, which will be polished and enriched by further readings and research. My on-site approach is very personal: it is typically initiated by infiltrating the world of my protagonists as a person, not a filmmaker, and by explaining the characteristics and the risks of my work and of the medium I use. By doing so, I eventually create a dialogue and an intimacy with them, by which I am perceived no more as an outsider, lifting inhibitions and permitting the protagonists of my film to play out their life before the camera. Knowing the 'other' is a process of endless approximation, which never reaches an objective reality. This movement of research and understanding serves as the dynamic springboard for the story to be narrated. As a matter of fact, I feel much more objective and free in a world that I am discovering rather than in my own native world, where I would be naturally biased. As a rule, I begin working on a new project by reading different sources, which often stand for opposite opinions. Then I need to spend long periods of time in the context where I will be shooting my film.

DS: Does narrative need language?

MR: A narrative can develop in different directions, but it needs a lexicon in the sense that if you simply juxtapose images without creating a semantic structure, you don't get a story. Silences are

also language, as are empty spaces in a written text. If there is a difference between cinema and video art, it is probably this search for narrativity in cinema while the aesthetic quality of sole visual images may sometimes be sufficient in a video art piece, particularly when it is more experimental.

Mario Rizzi, *Limina*,
2008, installation view.
Courtesy the Artist.



DS: Where do you make a difference between cinema and video art other than the narrative?

MR: I am an artist, a filmmaker and a storyteller. The three things are one for me. The moment I focus on reality, this issue comes up of why documentary is considered a less important form than fiction. There is an interview with Alain Resnais where he says that 'cinematography is always documentary in one way or another'^[1]. For example, when you see De Niro acting, you could say that you are filming a documentary about his method of acting. And in Edgar Morin's words: 'There is one truth that cannot be captured in fictional films, and that is the authenticity of life, [...] a life that possesses aesthetic secrets within itself.'^[2] So, it is really about this aesthetic, which is the goal of my work.

Soviet Cinema of the *grande époque* and then films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) or *The Earth Trembles* (1948) tried their utmost to make certain individuals act out their own lives. But, although filmed on location and frequently using non-professional actors, these films were still based on a script. When it comes to my visual research, I refuse the idea of a fictional scenography or script, but try to preserve that particular irreducible quality that is the essence of real life, in particular the unpredictability emerging from a deliberate course of action. Reality is so surprising and so meaningful in itself that I can

[1] Quoted in *Positif*: <http://www.revue-positif.net/>

[2] Edgar Morin, 'Chronicle of a Summer: A Film Book' by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in: Rouch, J. *Cine-Ethnography (Visible Evidence)*, edited and translated by Feld, S, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp: 229-273.

create my own narrative thread inside of it quite organically. It is life itself that delivers my inspiration and stimulates my creativity. My authorship has never felt undermined by the absence of re-enactment or fiction in my films. In a larger sense, I believe that my films are also fiction, as I invent new timelines and juxtapose previously unlinked events. This is my way of creating a story. In *Al Intithar*, the focus is on how the narration of the revolutionary events happening in Syria can be closely entangled with the narration of the harsh life of the Syrian refugees in camp Zaatari and their hopeful waiting for an undefined event, giving them a reason to endure such pain. I chose a Syrian widow and her three children to be the main protagonists of the film, while I think that the growth of the camp is a kind of co-protagonist.

DS: Do you embed your visual research in an art historical context?

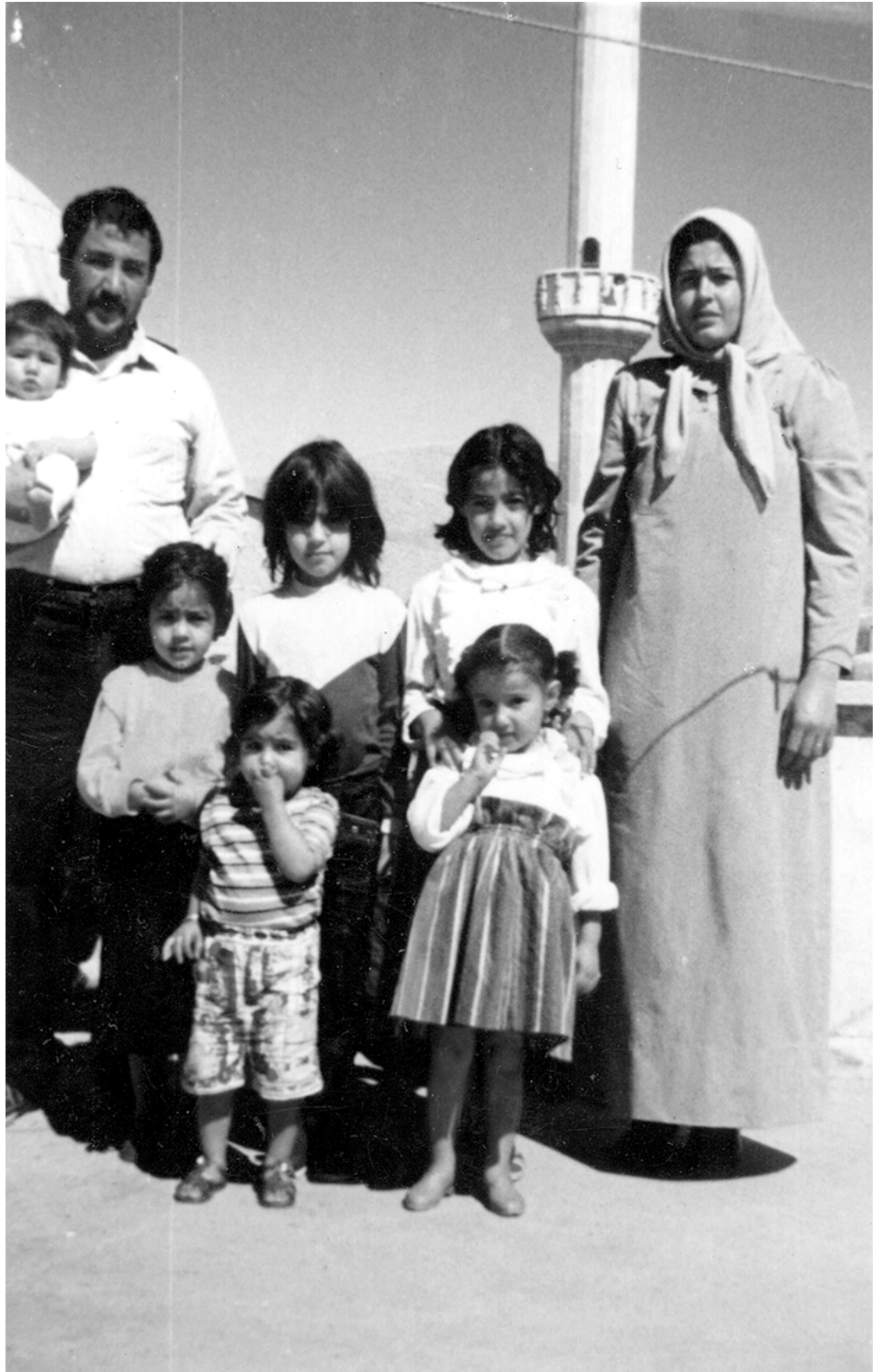
MR: I find that I didn't come to this way of expressing myself only out of an educated choice. My own upbringing, my own personal history, my classical and psychological studies, as well as both my interest in and 'exposure' to Italian filmic culture worked all together inside me. Even the themes I concentrate on, the underprivileged, the poor, the working class have points of contact with the stories told by Italian Neorealism. Adding to this is the fact that I believe that no artist today can isolate her or himself from active engagement in society.

DS: So it is more about inspirational sources than art history...

MR: Probably it is both. Let me exemplify by telling you more about the way I work. I approach a new social context with a loose conceptual map in mind and am completely open to play with the directions the project is going to take. For example, the film trilogy *Bayt* I am currently working on. I was inspired to explore the idea of the house by Anthony Shadid, who in *House of Stone* wrote that 'in the Middle East, bayt is sacred. Empires fall. Nations topple. Borders may shift. Old loyalties may dissolve or, without warning, be altered. Home, whether it be structure or familiar ground, is finally the identity that does not fade.' But at some point I felt that I needed to focus on the poetic intimacy of the house from a more personal and privileged viewpoint: the role of the woman in changing Islamic societies is the 'key' which inspires and engages me most. So, after reading so much on the uprisings that are radically altering the geopolitics of the region, I began reading again about the role of the women in these events and on how they are affected by or are contributing to them, with a particular interest in women's rights movements in Tunisia and Egypt.

What I absolutely never want to happen in my work is to look at things with 'Orientalist' or 'postcolonial' eyes. It is so enjoyable to learn how to walk in somebody else's shoes: an exercise of equilibrium and democracy, which western society is forgetting more and more. Understanding and respecting another culture is not in contrast with the fact that I express my own opinion without censoring myself.

Mario Rizzi, *Seven Finnish Identities*, 2001.
Courtesy the Artist.



DS: Often, your films show a very high level of intimacy with the protagonists. How do you ensure you do not cross the line between comfort and discomfort?

MR: This I learned through experience and perception. I am very concerned about this issue and I am very cautious when getting close to somebody's privacy, particularly when I film people who have no idea of the risks implied in the medium. I am also aware and very sensible about the fact that my long-term projects bring me to plunge into people's lives, often filling some gaps with my presence: that's why I never disappear after the project is completed, but always keep in contact with most of the protagonists of my stories.

DS: One thing is the protagonist of your films. But there are also the viewers, who you allow entry to intimate settings, as is the case in *Al Intithar*.

MR: I am aware that there is indeed a lot of voyeurism and a high interest in the lives of others. I use this to bring the audience to empathize with the characters of my films, but this also leaves me with a huge responsibility when filming. Before shooting, I always have long conversations with my protagonists in which I carefully tell them what I am going to do and I let them decide how far I can go. There are also ways to protect the real intimacy of a person without hiding something. In *Al Intithar* I wanted the public to get involved in and troubled by the appalling difficulties faced daily by the women in the camp: they keep the family together, find a solution to the lack of everything, but also have to cope with their being marginalized. The situation has been getting tragically worse in the last weeks: you probably heard how many cases of forced prostitution and of fake marriages of adolescent girls are happening in camp Zaatari.

DS: One recurring topic in your work treats the condition of what it is to be a refugee. Can you tell me more about some of these works? Is there something autobiographical in this choice?

MR: Being a refugee – uprooted, homeless, in the gap between two worlds – is indeed a recurring topic in my work. One of my films, *Limina* (2008), strictly deals with this issue. The film reflects on the series of hard requirements immigrants have to comply with in order to get European citizenship, while being taught how to perform in their new selves. The central event in this short film is the ceremony when they get their new passports in the town hall of a Dutch city and where the dismissive attitude of the city official already says a lot about the way we perceive foreigners in the western world.

Another project dealing with this issue was *Out of Place* (2005), which portrays the lives of 14 second-generation immigrants living in Paris, from a Kurdish to a Mexican to a Rom. So while *Limina* is more about the relations between institutions and individuals in this respect, *Out of Place* is about specific people acting out their sense of belonging. Often, as with *impermanent* (2007), the condition of being a refugee combines with a theme I am particularly sensitive about: the condition of being a Palestinian in or outside of their occupied land.

As for the second question, I believe that every artwork is in some way autobiographical. I never appear in my films, because they are not about me nor are they about my relation to the protagonist. But it has often been remarked that because I also never lived with my family and the problematic relation I had with my father, is reflected in the focus of my work, somehow: the need for a home, for a shelter. In 2002, for example, in the Helsinki City Art Museum, I built the *home in the museum* for a project I called *Seven Finnish Identities*: every room was a replica of one immigrant's real living space with their

mementoes, sounds, images, and smells of their house incorporated into the installation. In the Belarusian bathroom, there was a video of the actual procedure each asylum seeker goes through in a police station when she or he arrives to a European country. All this also reminds me of Edward Said, who wrote in 'Representations of the Intellectual' that the intellectual is always an outsider, an exiled, a refugee.

Mario Rizzi,
Impermanent, 2007, film
still. Courtesy the Artist.



DS: *Al Inthitar* was co-sponsored by the Sharjah Art Foundation. What role did they play in the process of your art production? And did you work with other art institutions in the region?

MR: I am happy to work with Sharjah Art Foundation, which, I believe, is growing to become a model art institution in the Middle East. It would have been nonsensical to create a film project in the MENASA region with western support, that's why I decided to apply for their Production Program Grant in 2012. SAF has been supporting me in many ways, even with an official letter of affiliation to foreign governments, without limiting my freedom of expression. It is not easy for a state-funded art institution in the Arab world to find the right equilibrium when it comes to themes connected with religion, socio-economic disparities and migration or the so-called 'Arab Spring', but I must say that they have always been quite open and flexible, as far as I am concerned.

In the past I also collaborated with Al Ma'mal Foundation and am always impressed by the very qualitative programming they are able to produce notwithstanding minimal budgets, a condition of separation from their natural public and the political/military daily constraints.

DS: What impact do you think large art institutions have on the development of art within the Middle East?

MR: There is a different weight with Middle East institutions. But more money doesn't necessarily mean better projects. I already told you of the amazing program of Al Ma'mal in Jerusalem with a tiny budget. When it comes to how to set the priorities for an art institution in the Middle East, there are very different approaches with very different outcomes: parachuting large Western museum institutions into the area is different from building a very large collection of established artists and very different from organizing a biennial of contemporary art that includes young artists from the 'periphery' and produces artworks by local artists or on site.

There are also examples of fruitful collaborations with Western institutions – like SAF is doing with PS1 and MoMA – while others may prefer to build cathedrals in the desert. Middle East institutions, who are doing good for the region, are those who are working in the context of the region, logically also opening a dialogue with artists from other parts of the world, but still implementing things locally. A second aspect is the consideration these institutions have for their audience and the idea of creating and nurturing a local audience. This is particularly relevant in countries where most of the population are immigrants, who simply have other concerns and worries than looking at art. Investing in this direction is definitely a must for the area.

These aspects are not at all marginal, particularly now. Globalisation has a different meaning than just creating a package which is valid everywhere. It doesn't mean that artists from the Middle East should go in the same creative direction as an Italian or a German for example. If this were to happen, it would cause the erasure of culture and development, it would take away the chance of artisans to work, of artistic hybridity to be expressed and the same nonsensical boredom would proliferate everywhere. Positive globalisation means that when I go to the Emirates, we have a common ground, an approximation so to speak. What is no longer missing is a common platform for discussion, when it comes to the art world.

Mario Rizzi is an Italian artist living in Berlin. His filmworks were presented – amongst others – at MAK, Vienna (2013); National Center for Contemporary Arts, Saint Petersburg (2011); Taipei Biennial (2008); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2008); Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans (2008); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007); Tate Modern, London (2007); Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel (2007); Istanbul Biennial (2005).

About the author

Dorothea Schoene is a Berlin-based art historian, curator and writer. She is the recipient of a Fulbright grant, a Getty research grant and a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange service.

She studied at the Leibniz College in Tübingen, Germany, at the University of Leipzig and at the University of California Riverside. Her publications on Contemporary Middle Eastern, American and German art have appeared in numerous art publications. In addition, she has contributed to edited volumes on museum and exhibition history, such as for the Städel Museum in Frankfurt in 2010. Schoene has worked as curatorial assistant at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to work on the exhibition *Art of Two Germanys - Cold War Cultures*, which was exhibited in Los Angeles and two German venues in 2009-2010. Currently, she is on the Academic Advisory team of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore for their upcoming exhibition of Islamic Art entitled *Pearls on a String*, which opens in Baltimore in 2014. Additional venues are Toledo, Ohio, San Francisco and Doha.