



Interviews

Alien Encounters

Rana Hamadeh in
conversation with
Stephanie Bailey

In April 2013, Rana Hamadeh staged a performance (part of an ongoing project, *Alien Encounters*, initiated in 2011) titled *The Big Board, or... 'And before it falls, it is only reasonable to enjoy life a little'* (2013) as part of *The Magic of the State* (2013) at Lisson Gallery, London, curated by Silvia Sgualdini. The performance was inspired by Sun Ra's 1974 film *Space is the Place*, Oskar Schlemmer's 1926 diagram for *Gesture Dance* and Paulus Fürst's 1656 engraving of *Doctor Schnabel of Rome*. These reference were present on a large green table complete with gridlines on which Hamadeh mapped out stories, conversations, historical documents and other objects and artefacts – meteorite pieces from various parts of the world, for instance, or various coal scrip tokens used in the American South, as well as a plantation token used in

Guatemala – that worked together to produce a networked constellation of meaning and association, united by the themes of hygiene, immunization and quarantine throughout history. References included Achille Mbembe's text 'Necropolitics', which suggests that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides mainly in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. In this interview, Hamadeh discusses the performance in relation to her practice, and the idea of how to construct an imagined topography of the contemporary world order based upon the proposition of 'provincializing' earth.



Rana Hamadeh, from *The Big Board, or ...'And before it falls, it is only reasonable to enjoy life a little'*, 2013.

Courtesy the artist.

Stephanie Bailey: You said that this table, *The Big Board*, was an amalgamation of different performances in the past...

Rana Hamadeh: ...Not only that I have done in the past but also those I haven't done yet!

SB: ...which works with this idea of collapsing time and space both on the board and in your performance, given you jump from ancient Greece to the situation in Syria, passing through other times, spaces and historical references in the process. In thinking about these multiple layers, I wanted to first ask about the components that make up *The Big Board*?

RH: Firstly, this performance is part of *Alien Encounters*, which is a long-term discursive research project that serves as an umbrella for a continuously growing archive of performances, cartographic/choreographic projects and different sorts of artistic and theoretical gestures, ideas, collaborations and so on. The performance that you saw as part of *The Magic of the State* exhibition is just one episode in this expanding series.

Initially inspired by Sun Ra's film *Space is the Place* (1974), which proposes an African-American exodus towards outer space in response to racial injustice, *Alien Encounters* aims at reading such a gesture of 'falling off' the planet in terms of the contemporary conditions of injustice that we inhabit, embody and traverse today. The main departure point of the overall project is a desire to contemplate and further complicate the notion of 'alien-ness', where the alien is on one hand viewed as an outcast with regards to the law, and, on the other hand, as an extraterrestrial. Through bringing together elements, from science fiction film and literature, contemporary migration, capital flows, colonial legacies, mining and transport histories, cold-war aesthetics, as well as ideas on criminology, epidemiology and theatre, the project's episodes actually form a multi-faceted effort to think through the conjunctions and intersections of the legal and the spatial.

Regarding *The Big Board*, all the notes on the table, along with their relationships, are constituted through this particular attention to the entanglements of the legal and the spatial. For instance, the

map includes islands, quarantines, refugee camps, spaceships, hospitals, a hygiene school, boats, migrant detention centers, iron ore mines, political prisons and courtrooms. As a map, it serves as the stage, scenography and the space within which *The Big Board* performance takes place.



Rana Hamadeh, from *The Big Board, or ...'And before it falls, it is only reasonable to enjoy life a little'*, 2013.
Courtesy the artist.

SB: Regarding these ideas of 'alien-ness' and extra-terrestriality, and thinking about the relation between the term 'alien' and its many connotations, you talk about trying to avoid being 'in-between' when thinking about the state of 'alien-ness'...

RH: There is a moment in the performance where I describe a conversation I conducted in 2011 with four illegal immigrants from North Africa that I had met in Marseille, and whom I had later invited for an interview on board an inflatable boat near the coast. On the boat, we talked about the 'crack' or 'passage' that they had to survive within so as not to crash into that 'ground' we might call the law. This 'passage', I proposed in the performance, was not a condition of precarity, nor a state of 'in-between-ness', but a

passage of intensification, of the simultaneity of life and death – a passage within which one is apt to 'fall' all the time, while provincializing the sense of toward-ness where there is no ground to crash against.

This is the context where I indeed claim that the condition and space of the 'alien' is not a space of 'in-between-ness' or of hybridity. It is not to be confused with the 'other', either. Rather, it can be imagined as a cut, a black hole, a space outside the worldly, and thereby, outside the law. Yet again, when speaking of 'out-worldliness', one must ask: how is it possible to think of a space '*outside*' the law and '*outside*' the territorial imagining of the world, if the very language of the question is constituted through territorial tropes? Is it possible to think of the alien in non-relational terms, meaning outside its constitutive relation towards Earth? You are alien only insofar as there is an earth to be extra-terrestrial towards. And you are legally alien, only insofar as there is a law that recognizes its own discursive limitations when you address it. The term 'alien' poses some problems, paradoxes and impossibilities in this sense. These impossibilities attract me. But at the same time – let's not forget that my use of the term 'alien' throughout the performance and across the map is inconsistent. I would like to keep it so.

SB: So the idea of the 'other' is oppositional, while 'alien' supposes what one might call a dialectical relationship with space – the state, or the possibility, of being both inside and outside at once?

RH: I do find the term 'other' inadequate today to capture the webbed relations of radical exclusions and seclusions of subjects, languages, modes of living and so forth. This is because the 'other' is caught up in dual/oppositional relations rather than relations based upon virulence. Yet, I am hoping to construct a network of thoughts around the term 'alien' that is not based upon territorial

metaphors (such as insides and outsides). For instance, during the performance, *The Big Board*, I discuss the last scene from Sun Ra's film, in which we see planet Earth being destroyed at the same moment the spaceship carrying African Americans reaches extraterrestrial space – you can see that clip on YouTube. In reference to Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for *Provincializing Europe* (2000), I claim that the last scene of Sun Ra's film, somehow anachronistically suggests provincializing planet Earth itself.



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Courtesy the artist.

Both events proposed by Sun Ra – both this 'falling out' of Earth and Earth's destruction are simultaneous events that condition one another. This means the moment the African Americans' alien-ness, here understood with regard to the law, becomes literal, here understood with regard to extraterrestriality, is the moment they are disburdened from this alien-ness, since there is no Earth anymore to be alien towards. For, through literalizing their own alien-ness, Earth, along with its geographic and spatial discourses, and as a source of orientation, was provincialized. In this sense, it is a mode

of 'falling' that Sun Ra proposes. A falling with no orientation or sense of towardness; it is a queer sort of falling.

It is in this context that I bring the Syrian uprising into the question, for instance. I ask: what exactly do the Syrians taking to the streets against the regime really want? To claim sovereignty back from the state? Or are the demonstrations, similarly to Sun Ra's film, a sort of exodus – a collective desire by the people to literalize their own alien-ness in order to unburden themselves from it through the processes of provincializing the state and its machines; processes of queering orientation?

SB: Could you expand on this idea of provincializing the state, as well as the notion of queering orientation?

RH: Queering orientation does not mean being in a state of disorientation – i.e. being lost. Disorientation is only the negation of orientation, and is not a productive term in the context of my research. When we speak of queering orientation, we open up the possibilities to not only re-read spatial, political, historical discourses, but to reconstitute them through emergent and unexpected bodies of knowledge that are not immediately associated with these discourses, thus rendering these discourses perverse.

Let's have a look at the table once again. I consider the table, this open plane, as a curatorial proposal based upon this mode of falling I've been talking about. I consider the components all at once – temporal, spatial, historical, political, personal, vocal, reducible to meaningless letters, and so on. It is true what you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation regarding this idea of collapsing the hierarchies and divisions of time and space on the table itself using the items and the references I employ. In the performance, the stories resonate between the structure of the map

and its contents – at times journeying with the audience horizontally across the different constellations, and at times journeying vertically, deeper or shallower within each narrative. The hierarchies are not set according to chronology nor to distance and proximity, but rather to chance, to alphabetical orders, visual superimpositions, and some extravagant moments of theorizing.

For instance, I introduce the figure of the doctor at one point, which sways between the masqueraded plague-doctor in medieval Europe playing the theatrical role of a doctor in ancient Greece, which thus renders this doctor figure as an actor, and the Syrian doctor/dictator Bashar al Assad. That same figure of the doctor metamorphoses into Lady Justice, a prosecutor in a courtroom, a figure on which to project French colonial history in Africa, Colonel Gaddafi's voice, the letter D, and so on. The figure of the doctor becomes a subject that turns into a historical document, character or actor, who is then expanded into a voice, or reduced into an alphabetical letter.



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SB: I wanted to think about how you employ history as a way in which to construct meta-narratives when thinking about the items and references you make on the board. The figure of the doctor, for instance, as you said, is used to explore the wider notion of contagion....

RH: I am fascinated with the notion of contagion – all of course within the continuing discussion on alien-ness.

When I brought up the plague of Athens during the performance, I focused particularly on the fact that this plague has not only been historicized as a somatic illness but, more importantly, as a legal one. For as the disease swept away more than one third of the Athenian population, it resulted, according to the Greek historian Thucydides, in a collective sense of lawlessness – a form of legal apathy that required from the Greek city-state a firm and unyielding legal response. One level of this legal response was directed against women, who are said to have enjoyed a short-lived liberation from the tight bounds of Athenian society at the time. As a consequence of this liberation, a special magistrate had to be appointed by the city-state in order to control women's behaviour, maintain good manners among them, and restrain them from going outside their homes. This legal response to the epidemic was symptomatic of the law's inherent as well as constitutive epidemiological syntax. Women, in the eyes of Athenian law, did not necessarily bear the weaker bodies that were more vulnerable to virulence, but rather, they bore the weaker souls incapable of being morally resistant to the snare of the moral contagion. Women *became* the plague. They *became epidemic*. Their social liberation thus became the brewery of their (moral) contagiousness – the medium and the dynamic of their propagation. The social quarantine within which the Athenian women had been contained is

one example of how the politics of hygienification and immunization constitute the premise of legal discourse.

But then, we can draw a line from this historical moment towards recent events in Egypt for instance. As you know, women have been heavily targeted and systematically attacked in Egypt as part of what I call the state's politics of immunization. I make an association during the performance with a news item quoting Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Prime Minister Hesham Qandil as he addresses the issue of women's breast hygiene, diverting attention from one of the massacres that had been conducted by both the police and the Muslim Brotherhood against demonstrators.



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Courtesy the artist.

SB: Which somehow recalls what you mentioned in the performance about Gaddafi calling for the cleansing of the Libyan rebel 'rats' from Tripoli, a metaphor that calls for the extermination of a 'plague' or 'threat'...

RH: That's right. To understand the intensity of the violence against the people/population in the context of the Arab uprisings, one has to understand that blood-letting is after all the premise of the politics of hygiene. And hygiene, in medical discourse, is unthinkable outside the entire discourse on immunization. In Arabic language, there is much less difference between the terms 'resistance', 'immunity' and 'defiance' than there is in English. Is it possible then, that the hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens, Libyan political prisoners, and other Arab dissidents, recently slaughtered by the machines of 'resistance and defiance' were swept away due to such a linguistic proximity among the three terms? It is relevant in this context to know that the Syrian Ba'athist regime refers to itself as 'the fortress of resistance and defiance'. It is also relevant to know that Gaddafi also claimed to embody the anti-colonial spirit of resistance until his death.

Yet, the Arab history of totalitarianism is not in fact based upon the 'hijack' of the meaning of resistance as one might desire to think. Rather, Arab modern political history is a complex construct of actual moments of resistance that have ended up re-instating state power whenever 'disease'/ dissent was meant to strike. Resistance became a function of the state – or in other words, a technology of power through which the state could gain control of its immunological and 'defecatory' functions.

This is why I am more interested in the dynamics of contagion and infection instead of those of resistance. 'Infection', etymologically comes from *[in]+[facere]* which means 'to perform into something'. Resistance, in relation to the dynamics of contagion/infection, becomes a force and a technology of defiance that is essentially counter-performative and antithetical to what the general contemporary political discourse desires from this notion.

SB: Yes, it is interesting how you brought the plague doctor into Athens in your narrative. This idea of a spectre, and the spectre of the revolution as embodied in this mediaeval 'angel of death', so to speak. Thinking about 2011, there was indeed a problematic aspect to these revolutions in this sense, in that it was this idea of revolution, this spectre, which was being replicated to a certain degree. It is this idea of replication that comes out of what you had proposed in the performance, somehow – a spectre of 'revolution' or the 'revolutionary figure', for example, like a plague doctor from history being brought into the present, or even vice versa.



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RH: Correct. But allow me to make a distinction here between my complete and uncompromised advocacy of the Arab uprisings/revolts, and between the modalities of power upon which the representations of some of the uprisings have sprouted. The term 'revolutionary justice', used by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt when they were in power, and now by the army once again, is one example of this replication of the doctor's spectre that you just referred to. And this replication is why I am extremely taken by

the idea of contagion and doubting that of resistance. Michael Foucault tells us that where there is power, there will always be resistance. Taking this maxim literally, which Foucault warns against anyway, power and its resistance, seem to me two forces that can only desire once - that is, can only desire through the imagination of a state. Resistance becomes therefore a technology of power that can only function from within the factuality and for-granted-ness of the power it resists, but also, through its mimesis of this power.

This is particularly where I find the rhetoric of the Arab left incredibly problematic. There is, in my view, a structural alliance between the left and the Arab dictatorships that had once sprouted from nationalist ideologies. I find it problematic when one says 'sure, we are politically radically against Al Ba'ath regime and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah. *But still*, they are the only resistance left to us. And, we will always stand for the choice of resistance'.

SB: It's the 'but'

RH: This 'but'. Yes.

SB: That's the murder.

RH: Absolutely.

Dictators such as Muammar Gaddafi and Hafez al-Assad, for instance, who seized power in 1969 and 1970 respectively as a result of military coup d'états, gained their political legitimacy through promoting themselves retrospectively as the leaders of fictive, *popular* revolutions. Inspired by military-pragmatic versions of anti-colonial Arab nationalist ideologies as well as a variety of versions of Arab socialism, they promoted themselves as the embodiment of a resurrective revolutionary force committed to the

retrieval of the Arab *pure* and *healthy* 'self' from the tragedies of the colonial past.

When I speak of resistance, it is therefore important to be aware that I am not talking about the Western contemporary idea of resistance that finds its ethos in the French resistance.

SB: And in the performance, and through *The Big Board*, you make that connection between resistance and immunization...



RH: Sure. Roberto Esposito talks about immunity from both biomedical and legal discourses. He who is immune, according to Esposito, is who exempt from the risk that a community is exposed to. Immunity also implies untouchability vis-à-vis common law. In this sense, Bashar al-Assad, for instance, is immune because he is the sovereign. You asked me yesterday during the performance: how does the alien relate to the law? The moment you are thinking about sovereignty, you are thinking of law. The Syrian population, exposed to a risk that the sovereign imposes upon them, is a population of living-deads – aliens that are *outside* the sovereign's bubble of immunity. Their distance from the law while being

implicated in it, renders the term 'alien' both a legal and spatial category.

SB: This reminds me of the situation you recounted of the four men by the immigrant compound in Marseille – this moment was really about position in many ways. You talk about sitting on a boat together and rationalizing whether or not leaving a man for dead was murder – particularly when considering how keeping the man alive would expose the entire group to the police. The boat here becomes a stage of implication; an exercise of one's understanding of being in the world in relation to others. It also reminds me of how you talked about the theatre as a space of crime and justice at the same time...

RH: Of course, we have to reconstitute our understanding of crime here. When we speak of criminality on a wobbly boat, that is, in water rather than on land, we are certainly shifting our locus with regard to the law. Starting from here, the performance posits the question of narration: how is it possible to narrate? I start with a crime scene in which I had been implicated. And I end up speaking of theatre and the conditions of narration as a parallel crime scene. But also, I claim that theatre is a space to think of justice. For at the core of the conjunction between the domain of the law and that of the spatial imagining of the worldly – beside the lexicons of criminology and epidemiology – comes the question of representation: the law, seen as the *dramaturgy* of the 'real', and justice, consequently, as the degree to which one can access the dramatic means of representation; the degree to which one can access theatre. The Arab uprisings can be seen here as well as a theatrical event – a moment of negotiation, as violent as it gets, over the right to access the dramatic means of representation that are otherwise monopolized by the sovereign. Same goes for when I speak of illegal immigration versus the oppression of the

I guess it is this tension between real and staged vulnerability that generates that moment when everybody feels implicated in a certain crime: perhaps the crime of theatre.

SB: Which is why you can't leave! This reminds me of your story of Marseille, being in this situation, and not knowing what to do, but you stay there.

RH: That's right.

SB: Thinking about this, I wanted to talk finally about implication, which is an idea that comes up repeatedly in this performance – implication in the notion of resistance, contagion and positionality, which you somehow impose also on your viewers through this kind of 'theatre of implication', which you mapped out with the incident in Marseille. I am also thinking about how you quote Gaddafi calling himself the 'resistance' during the 2011 protests in Libya, which of course deteriorated into civil war. In *The Big Board*, you respond to Gaddafi by asking how he might then resist against himself, since he is a dictator who posits himself as a revolutionary. This reminds me of one statement on the table used for the performance – 'Resistance as the Politics of Immunization and the Hygienification of the State.' I wonder if you could expand on this idea of resistance – or lack thereof – as both a historical and a meta-historical condition of society?

RH: I have recently written a text on resistance upon the invitation of Federica Bueti from journal *...ment*, in Berlin, edited by Book Works, London. The text brings together most of what we have been discussing in this conversation, and it ends up, uncannily enough, with a response to your question. Funny how this feels synchronized!

In the text, I claim that the Arab history of totalitarianism is not in fact based upon the 'hijack' of the meaning of resistance as one might desire to think. Rather, Arab history is a complex construct of actual moments of resistance that have ended up re-instating state power whenever 'disease' or 'virus' was meant to strike. The question that I try to pose is not whether resistance is a force that can or cannot re-invent itself. The question instead is whether resistance can be a force or a technology that can reinvent power outside the desire for a state. Bearing in mind that a metamorphic virus is capable of rewriting itself completely, I ask whether it is possible therefore to invent a game of mutation by which 'we', as potential non-citizens, or as becoming-alien, exhaust the possibilities of the state and its laws, rather than the other way round? Here, again, I get back to my overall project on alien-ness, for I think that the term 'alien' could be a helpful tool to understand the possibilities and impossibilities of such an undertaking.

But, just as a final side note, it is important that we remember once again: I am busy with performance and theatre, after all. I see myself as an unjustifiably self-proclaimed 'theatre-maker', though most people would prefer to call what I do 'lecture-performance'. I see myself preoccupied with the possibilities of theatre, acting and narrating as a tool to physically and materially conceive of such notions as 'virus', 'alien-ness', 'resistance', 'the state' and so forth. I am trying to think about all the questions that I am posing, materially, through the understanding of rhythms, volumes, modes of resonance, propagation, symmetries and asymmetries, geometry, wave-forms, limits of the body, and so on. I think after our conversation it would be relevant to point this fact out.

Rana Hamadeh (b. 1983, Beirut) lives and works in Rotterdam. Hamadeh is a performance and visual artist who is interested in a curatorial approach within her artistic practice. She works on long

term discursive research-based projects that involve different levels of collaborations, and that are presented to the public in the form of lecture-performances, audio/text based installations, mind maps, and public/documentated conversations. She initiated in 2008 and 2011 two ongoing research-based projects, 'GRAPHIS N°127' and 'Alien Encounters', under which she has been producing different art works, publications and texts. Her work has been presented at Beirut, Cairo (2013), The Townhouse Gallery, Cairo (2012), Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2011/2008), Beirut Art Center, Beirut (2010), Teylers Museum, Haarlem (2010) and New Museum, New York (2009). She is currently auditing within the Curatorial Knowledge PhD programme at Goldsmiths University, London.

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Stephanie Bailey is Managing Editor of Ibraaz. She has an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College, a BA in Classical Civilisation with English Literature from King's College (both University of London), and a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design from Camberwell College of Art (University of the Arts London). Currently on the editorial committee for Naked Punch, her writing has appeared in publications including *ART PAPERS*, *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, *LEAP*, *Modern Painters*, *Notes on Metamodernism*, *Ocula.com*, *Whitewall* and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.