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Anthony Downey (ed.): Dissonant Archives. Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East

by Miriam Rosen

Making one’s way through Dissonant Archives is strangely reminiscent of archival research, with all of the sometimes contradictory efforts—open-mindedness, critical analysis, intuition, and selectivity, not to mention determination, patience, and an occasional dose of luck—that such an endeavour requires. Indeed, this hefty compendium devoted to “contemporary visual culture and contested narratives in the Middle East” brings together scholarly research, journalistic investigations, essays, project reports, conference papers, and several unclassifiable thought-pieces, plus two groups of “artists inserts”. Many but not all of these contributions come from Ibraaz (“revealing” or “bringing into view” in Arabic), an online research and publication platform initiated in 2011 under the auspices of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation. Four years on, it has now become an impressive multimedia archive of writing, interviews, and artists’ projects addressing a wide range of cultural issues in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond.

The idea of the book, explains Anthony Downey, editor of both Ibraaz and Dissonant Archives, “was for readers to dip in and out where they saw fit”. Along the same lines, his lengthy introduction (available on www.ibraaz.org) remains largely descriptive, although equipped with abundant references for those in search of context before beginning to dip. It might be argued nonetheless that the myriad of documents proposed essentially reflect three generic types of activities, which take specific forms in response to different regional and local imperatives (and this, as art historian Susan Babaie reminds readers in her essay on “The Global in the Local: Implicating Iran in Art and History”, in a region with a millenarian tradition of archives): rereading the archives, re-archiving the archives, and re inventing the archives. To single out just a few of the most stimulating examples, the first group could include art historian Rona Sela’s “alternative narrative” of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drawn from a rereading of Israel’s national photo archives (on www.ibraaz.org) and historian Lucie Ryzova’s incisive analysis of the uses and misuses of Egypt’s photographic heritage. Or, in a more personal approach, sociologist Mariam Motamedi Fraser’s essay recounts the chance discovery of an Iranian archive at the Bodleian Library and the political intrigues—past and present—surrounding the unpublished manuscript it contained (on www.ibraaz.org).

Amongst the “re-archivings”, writer Guy Mannes-Abbot’s fluidly wide-ranging essay “This is Tomorrow” (written for Dissonant Archives) explores artist Emily Jacir’s “ex libris” project (2010–12), a haunting portrait-like series of cell-phone photos showing books looted from Palestinian homes, libraries, and universities in 1948, and transferred as “abandoned property” to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. In a very different vein, the artist-critic duo Media Farzin and Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck offer an unconventional flashback to the Cold War era with “Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm” (2009–11), a painstakingly re-edited version of transcribed interviews and screen shots from a 1950s US talk show on foreign affairs (originally published in ArtMargins, online at www.mitpressjournals.org), just as writer Joshua Craze’s “Excerpts from a Grammar of Reduction” tries to “patch meanings out of absences” in the censored pages of CIA documents on the post-9/11 detention of suspected enemy combatants (see www.joshuacraze.com for the complete project).

As for the “reinventions”, the transnational Public Access Digital Media Archive (Pad.ma) provides an ambitious programmatic framework (and an homage to Walter Benjamin) with its “10 Theses on the Archive” (on pad.ma/texts), which finds an echo in the equally ambitious practice of Palestinian artists Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas, aimed, as they say, at “re-imagining the possibilities of the present”. Here, their “Incidental Insurgents: The Part about the Bandits” (2012–13), with its storyboard stream of images and texts, weaves in and out of time and space on the traces of the externally contemporary figure of the rebel (on www.ibraaz.org).

Overall, the wide range of perspectives, topics, and artists covered in Dissonant Archives makes questions of specific choices quite secondary. But one glaring absence cannot be overlooked: the history and memory of the Armenian genocide, which has given rise to many forms of archive-based initiatives. In Istanbul, for example, artist-researcher Tayfun Serttaş’s “Foto Galatasaray” project (2011–12) has restored, digitised, and “revisualised” the complete professional archive of Armenian studio photographer Maryam Şahyan (1911–1996) as the first part of a larger “Open Archive” initiative aimed at exploring relationships between archives, democracy, and transparency (see http://tayfunserttas.com; or works by artists from the Armenian diaspora, notably Mekhitar Garabedian and Akaterini Gissement, www.armenity.net).


This “oversight” is clearly unintentional in political or artistic terms—but it is, to my mind, symptomatic of a larger oversight concerning the difference between the spontaneity of an online platform and the more considered approach of an edited book. If, as Downey indicates in his introduction, the Ibraaz publication series is seen as a means of reaching new audiences, it is also a guarantee of material permanence—to paraphrase master archiver Walid Raad, let’s be honest, websites disappear. But reading, writing, looking, and listening are not the same on- and offline. The multimedia prowess of the Web does not necessarily “translate” onto paper, but the slower, more concentrated pace of the book offers other advantages for publishers and readers alike.

In the “translation” from Ibraaz, Dissonant Archives has missed out on several major opportunities. The texts, first of all, could have benefited from a good edit, not only to correct typographical errors but also to smooth out excess academic jargon. But a more serious “translation” problem, especially for an anthology devoted to “visual culture”, is the handling of visual material. The book is a case study in failed design, where many of the in-text images are token illustrations reproduced in (washed-out) black

Es wundert daher nicht, dass trotz steter Ge- setzesbrüche und Skandale – populistische Ge- pflogenheiten (Berlusconiismus) in den Massen weiter blühen. Wie die Korrespondentin der Wochezeitung DIE ZEIT Birgit Schönau schrieb, versuchte der Medientycoon sich die gesamte TV-Infrastruktur zu sichern: »Er hält das Qua- simonopol für Kataloge der großen museums und Ausstellungen, außerdem gehört ihm auch ein großer Schulbuchverlag, wie die u.a. auf Kunst spezialisierte Mailänder Mondadori Electa-Verlagsgruppe mit ihrer gewaltigen Marktkonzentration. Anfang Oktober kam es erneut zu einem Megadeal: Mondadori erwarb für 127.5 Mio. Euro noch seinen schärfsten Kon- currenten, den RCS Libri-Konzern (acht Verlage umfassend). Es entstand der neue Riese »Mondazzoli«. Berlusconi besitzt damit 40 % der Ver- 

Simone Donati: Hotel Immagine.

Mit einem Text von Daniele Rielli (ita./ eng.).
TerraProject, Florenz/Rom 2015. 128 Seiten, 14,8 x 21 cm, zahlreiche SW- und Farbabbildungen.
€ 32,– / ISBN 978-88-909573-1-4

blau mit Goldlettern. Ein kitschiges Lesezeichen, ein schmales Ripsband, welches verschmäht die drei italienischen Nationalfarben wiederholt, ist eingearbeitet.


Spectres of Yugoslavia

Dragana Jurišić: YU: The Lost Country

Oonagh Young Gallery, Dublin 2015

by Vesna Vuković

Let us start by stating a common but decisive argumen: any given artwork is always informed by the time in which it is made. So, for the artwork to be reflective of its own time, the author has to recognise her own historical situatedness, or the historicalness of her own speech as informed by its time. For the artworks that address historical topics, this should be twice as true.