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# CULTURE IN DEFIANCE: CONTINUING TRADITIONS OF SATIRE, ART AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN SYRIA

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*Culture In Defiance: Continuing Traditions of Satire, Art and the Struggle for Freedom in Syria* is a new exhibition on show at the Prince Claus Fund Gallery in Amsterdam. Carrying on the fund's preoccupation with studying culture's influence in inequitable social conditions, the exhibition, uniquely curated by a series of non-conventional exhibition makers, seeks to study the influence of satire in contemporary artistic practices emerging from Syria during a period of deep social change.

The project opened with an emotional speech from featured artist and the fund's laureate – the political cartoonist, Ali Ferzat – who detailed his exile from his native Syria after having been attacked publicly for his work. The artist's subversive political cartoons, as well as the bold dissidence evident in the rest of artworks on display, however, tell a different story. It is a story that finds humour and irony in the darkest of human situations.

Having their gallery debut in *Culture in Defiance*, is young Syrian art collective Masasit Mati, whose episodic puppet show, *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*, creates a lacerating and hilarious portrait of Syria's Ba'ath establishment. While Aram Tahhan – who curated the exhibition alongside Malu Halssa, Leen Ziyad and Donatella della Ratta – discusses the significance of theatre in Syrian society in the accompanying publication, Halasa was quick to point out to Ibraaz *Top Goon's* uniqueness. 'Its level of satire is not traditional, since under Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad, there have been draconian laws about lampooning the leader. This level of satire is unique to what has been going on since the uprising'. What follows is a summary of the exhibition by Ibraaz's Contributing Editor Amira Gad and a statement from Masasit Mati's anonymous director Jameel, explaining the collective's creative motivations, in both Arabic and English.



Masasit Mati, *Top Goon – Diaries of a Little Dictator Season 2*, 2012, still from video. Courtesy of the artists.

The group Masasit Mati believes that art can function as a weapon against oppression. When censorship and freedom of expression are constraints, what approaches and tools are left for artists? *Culture in Defiance: Continuing traditions of satire, art and the struggle for freedom in Syria* is a group exhibition that posits how satirical art forms can play an important role in Syria today.

The exhibition – also accompanied by a bilingual English-Arabic publication – brings together artists and collectives that have used artistic practice as a means of expressing and commenting on Syria's oppressive system. Also included are prints from newspaper satirists, political posters, songs from a revolutionary hit parade, and photographs of graffiti works emphasising the non-violent creative dissent of the ongoing Syrian revolution.



Masasit Mati, *Top Goon – Diaries of a Little Dictator Season 2*, 2012, still from video. Courtesy of the artists.

Poignantly, many participants in the exhibition are anonymous, fearful of reprisals by the Syrian authorities. One such example, presented as part of the exhibition, is the video series *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*, a finger puppet show presented by an unknown collective known as Masasit Mati, who distribute their episodic videos lampooning president Bashar Al-Assad via YouTube and social media. With *Top Goon*, this group of ten young Syrians utilises satire and caricature – hiding their characters behind masks in the same way that its director, 'Jameel', also appears masked in public – as a way of concealing and sharing their political views. Such non-violent resistance, and the power of culture, are recurrent themes in the exhibition and in the accompanying publication, where journalist Leen Ziyad (a pseudonym) writes about 'revolution as carnival', a movement towards regime change manifested as a performance or a festival-like atmosphere, in which chanting, singing and choreographed routines feature as part of the demonstration-turned-free-for-all-party.<sup>[1]</sup>

As this exhibition suggests, artistic and creative approaches are being appropriated as a different kind of activism. Indeed, as Christa Meindersma, director of the Prince Claus Fund asserts: 'At a time when the international community remains stymied in its response to the ongoing protests in Syria, *Culture in Defiance: Continuing Traditions of Satire, Art and the Struggle for Freedom* gives a voice to Syrian people living under extreme duress. Ever since the protests began over a year ago, people have used art,



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illustration, song, cell-phone cinema, theatre and dance to protest non-violently and reclaim public space from the state'.



Masait Mati, *Top Goon – Diaries of a Little Dictator Season 2, 2012*, still from video. Courtesy of the artists.

It can be difficult to maintain criticality about artistic practices in the midst of political upheaval. Nevertheless, satirical approaches by artists represent a unique form of cultural expression that can function positively for wider society in Syria and beyond. The works included in the exhibition *Culture in Defiance: Continuing Traditions of Satire, Art and the Struggle for Freedom* are testaments to the creative efforts of individuals during the street protests and the clampdown that ensued, which has only pushed citizens to find alternative approaches for dissidence.

[1] Ziyad, Leen, "Revolution as Carnival", in Exhibition Publication, pp. 40-41

The revolution in Syria began on the 18th of March, 2011, with calls for freedom in one of the most important public markets in Damascus. Since that day, which has forever changed the face of Syria, an energetic pulse has returned to a country that has lived in fear and secrecy for more than forty years. Under these new and exceptional circumstances, many young artists have actively gone out into the streets to partake in the upheavals and agitate for change. Theirs are cries for freedom and a civil state, for democracy, justice, and dignity. Hence, we decided to search for mechanisms that could reflect what was happening in the country, especially after the acts of extreme violence committed by the authorities towards these claimants of freedom. As such, the idea of a 'puppet theatre' came about as a creative and entertaining way of speaking the truth, without the fear of one's true identity being revealed. The act of hiding behind a mask also allows us to express a wider range of human emotions and expressions.

Why was the artist collective Masasit Mati formed and why did we start making art? Art is one of the most important expressions one can wield in the face of tyranny. In the absence of a free media, a work of art can influence, participate and engage in urgent discussions in a hermetically sealed country. As a group using simple methods, we want to say that we stand together with the people and their desire for freedom. We want to shed light on the massacres and injustices. In the spirit of Syrian street comedy, we began making dolls, creating characters, and writing scripts that would turn the frightening dictator Bashar Al-Assad into Bisho, a sensitive, hesitant, fearful, and laughable character. The security apparatus' terrible goon is represented in the character of Chabih, a struggling stutterer, while Samir is a marginal character whose strength lies in his capacity to influence others. Finally, Souad, or the 'Rose of the East (Mediterranean sea)', is an activist for change and the implementation of a democratic state.

Since the beginning of the uprising, citizens have been responding to violence and fatalism with singing, dancing, laughter and optimism -- refusing to resign to tyranny, even in the face of death. From an artistic point of view, our focus lies in the issues and ideas that have emerged both from the street protests and also on the Internet, i.e. on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media; namely, the ideal of civil protest, its ability to topple a barbaric regime and create a civil state, and the use of these various new media tools for the (safe) dissemination of ideas that can bring our society out of the dark. We want to encourage transitional justice, tolerance, democracy and a civil state and to destroy the glory of the dictator, perceived as one who cannot fail, make mistakes or be compromised. We use comic critique for these purposes, and laughter as a framework to carry these ideas, especially given the country's current violent and bloody circumstances. Our basic desire is to give people a space for catharsis through comedy. The street protests were the first source of inspiration for scenes in the works. For instance, our parody of a speech made by the character, the dictator, references Bashar Al-Assad's last public speech – a speech where he refused to acknowledge the existence of an opposition, feigning denial. We tried in other scenes to convey the dynamics between different parties and the rebels, some of which were inspired by true stories and which embody the essence and causes behind the revolution in Syria. The idea of forgiveness, justice and the remembrance are all explored in our episode, 'The final chapter in hell'.

We have received positive responses to our work and as a result, we are thinking about a new episode in the series entitled 'Chabih the First: Diaries of a Dictator' to continue the debate, and to reiterate our commitment, our refusal to succumb to fear, and our desire to finally turn the page of the regime's tyranny in our country for good.

بدأت الثورة في سورية 18 آذار 2011 بإطلاق بعض الصبايا والشباب نداءات الحرية في أحد أهم اسواق دمشق ومنذ هذا اليوم تغير وجه سورية الساكن وعاد النبض لهذه البلد التي كانت تعيش موتا سريريا منذ أكثر من اربعين عاما. في هذه الظروف الجديدة والاستثنائية كثير من الفنانين الشباب لم يترددوا في النزول الى الشوارع للمشاركة بالتغيير. كانت صرخات الحرية والدولة المدنية والديمقراطية والعدالة والكرامة من أهم ماميز هذا الحراك السلمي والمفاجئ. لذلك توجب البحث عن آليات تعبر عن مايجري في سورية، وخصوصا بعد ما أظهره النظام من عنف شديد تجاه المطالبين بالحرية، فجأت فكرة "الدمى المسرحية" كاسلوب ابداعي ممتع وأمن حيث يستطيع الممثل الاختفاء وراء قناع، وفي نفس الوقت يقول مايريد دون خوف من اكتشاف شخصيته الحقيقية ودون سقوف يحد من حريته. وايضا لقدرة هذه التقنية على التعبير عن أدق المشاعر الانسانية وما تعطيه من مزاج ساخر وعميق.

لماذا تشكلت فرقة مصاصة مته؟ ولماذا بدأنا العمل؟ إن العمل الفني وخاصة في هذه الظروف هو من أهم الاسلحة في وجه الاستبداد. حيث أن العمل الفني الجيد يستطيع التأثير والمشاركة في الأحداث لكشف ومناقشة مايجري في بلد منع فيه الإعلام مثل سورية. أردنا كمجموعة أن نقول وببساطة أننا نقف مع رغبة الشعوب في التحرر والخلاص وإحداث التغيير الذي تنشده وقلب صفحة الاستبداد إلى الأبد، وكشف هول ما يحدث من مجازر ومظالم. بدأت مرحلة صناعة الدمى والتفكير بالشخصيات والعمل على الملابس وكتابة اللوحات وكان التركيز الاساسي ان تحاكي هذه اللوحات شخصيات معروفة لدى الشارع السوري بقالب كوميدى ساخر وان تكون الشخصيات الملابس والاكسسوارات في نفسي روح هذا التوجه " فتحول بشار الأسد الدكتاتور الخيف إلى بيشو الشخصية المترددة الخائفة والمضحكة، والجهاز الامني المرعب المتمثل بشخصية الشبيح إلى الأخرق المتعثر، وسمير الشخصية الهامشية إلى شخصية فاعلة قادرة على التأثير، وسعاد او وردة الشام إلى الناشطة المؤمنة بالتغيير والدولة الديمقراطية... الخ" وهذا تحديدا ما فعله الشارع السوري في مظاهراته الاحتجاجية حيث قام بالرد على العنف بالسخرية والغناء والرقص والضحك كإشارة منه إلى رفض الموت ومواجهته بالحياة. اما من الناحية الفنية كان التركيز على المواضيع والافكار التي يتم تداولها في الشارع وعلى صفحات الانترنت "فيس بوك، توتير وغيرها" مثل فكرة الاحتجاج المدني وقدرته على أسقاط نظام همجي كا نظام الأسد، الدولة المدنية وتكريس هذا المفهوم وطرحه كطريق يوصل البلد إلى بر الأمان. العدالة الانتقالية، المسامحة، الديمقراطية والدولة المدنية. تحطيم هالة الدكتاتور الذي لا يخطئ فقد تحول الدكتاتور في بلدنا إلى آلهة معصومة عن الغلط ولا يمكن المساس بها وهذا ما فعلناه بالضبط تحطيم هذه الصورة التي جهد النظام على رسمها طوال الفترة الماضية. واستخدمنا الضحك والكوميديا الناقدة لتحقيق هذا الغرض وكإطار لحمل هذه الأفكار وخاصة في ظروف العنف الدموية التي تشهدها البلاد. فكانت الرغبة الاساسية لدى المجموعة إعطاء فسحة من الراحة للمتلقي من خلال الكوميديا. طرح الافكار الكبيرة للنقاش بشكل جذاب وبسيط بعيد عن التعالي و إعطاء الامل للمتابعة في الاحتجاج السلمي حتى النهاية. كان الشارع وما يحدث فيه هو المنهل الاول لكل افكار ومحاور اللوحات. كامعالجة خطب الدكتاتور والسخرية منها وخصوصا بعد مقاله الدكتاتور السوري في اخر خطب له حيث رفض الاعتراف بوجود معارضة له، فهو إلى هذه اللحظة ينكر كل ما يحدث. حاولنا في لوحات اخرى نقل بعض الحوارات التي تحدث بالمعتقلات بين الجلادين والثوار وهذه الحوارات مأخوذة عن قصص حقيقة تعبر عن جوهر قيام الثورة في سورية واسبابها " حلقة التحقيق"، مخاطر الثورة السلمية على النظام ونقاش افكار السلاح والعنف حلقة " سلمية سلمية" مرحلة ما بعد سقوط الدكتاتور وفكرة المسامحة والعدالة وهذا ما حدث بالحلقة الاخيرة مثلا " الفصل الأخير في الجحيم"... الخ. تم التجاوب مع العمل بشكل كبير جدا لذلك كان التفكير بسلسلة جديدة من مسلسل " الشبيح الأول يوميات دكتاتور صغير" لمتابعة النقاش والحوار وإضافة صرخة رفض للقتل والإجرام وطي صفحة الاستبداد في بلدنا نهائياً.





## About the author

**Amira Gad** is Associate Curator at Witte de With, Rotterdam, where she has worked since 2009. She received a Masters in Contemporary Art from Sotheby's Institute of Art, London and a Bachelor of Liberal Arts & Sciences from the University College Utrecht. She recently co-curated *Short Big Drama*, a solo exhibition of Angela Bulloch at Witte de With and was assistant curator for *All about us*, a solo exhibition of Miki Kratsman at Ursula Blickle Foundation, Kraichtal. Gad was a jury member for *Been Out (vol. 1)*, an exhibition lab for young contemporary art organised by Bohème Précaire in cooperation with 2010LAB.TV and *You All For My Act*, an exhibition organised by the Rookies MA at Showroom MAMA, Rotterdam. Gad has been involved in the production of several publications on contemporary art including the artist book *One Day* by Susanne Kriemann, *Rotterdam – Sensitive Times* by Lidwien van de Ven, the catalogue *All about us*, and contributed to the publication *Source Book 8: Edith Dekyndt* and *Source Book 10: Angela Bulloch*.