



IBRAAZ PLATFORM 003 EDITORIAL: WHAT WAS LOST?

Anthony Downey

2 May 2012

In January of 2012, Ibraaz invited a number of individuals to respond to a question concerning how artistic practices negotiate institutional contexts, public spaces, and the ideal of civil society in the Middle East today. In doing so, we wanted to broaden this discussion beyond the region and engage in a debate about the pressures and demands placed on artistic practices within the instrumentalising logic that underwrites the reductive rhetoric of our revolutionary, neo-liberal, globalised, and late-capitalist milieu. We are pleased to announce that we not only had a significant amount of feedback on this most vexed of questions but received a variety of responses that ranged from supporting artistic practices that, successfully or otherwise, negotiated the exigencies of institutional, public and civil spaces, to responses that pointedly questioned the need (and, indeed, the inherent demand) for art to engage with such issues at all.



Sinisa Vlajkovic and Mohamed Somji, detail of *Substation 4*, Masfout, UAE, 2010, photograph. Courtesy of the artists.

Drawing on firsthand experiences from institutions and practices in cities as various as Beirut, Istanbul, Berlin, Cairo, London, New York, Jerusalem, Paris, Ramallah, Abu Dhabi, Yerevan, Algiers, Alexandria, Tunis, Marrakech, Rotterdam, Irbid, Rabat and Dubai, these responses add to a debate that goes to the heart of the relationship between artistic practices and their potential audiences, the co-option of contemporary art into forms of urban development and the privatisation of space (not to mention the antagonistic relationship that often exists between the two), and the contested role of cultural institutions and practices in developing civil society and spaces for debate and open discussion. All of which leaves us with an overarching question that we hope to pursue in future platforms: is there a 'common ground' of understanding to be found in the relationship of art practices to institutional contexts, public space and the development of civil society in the MENA region – and if there is, should we thereafter question any easy consensus in the formation of such a 'common ground'?

The questions raised in Platform 003 are taken up at length throughout our other sections. In an exclusive interview published here, Christine Tohme (founder and director of Ashkal Alwan, Beirut) highlights the need for organisations such as Ashkal Alwan to engage with the 'intersection between the artistic and the civic'.



Elsewhere, artist Nada Sehnaoui talks to Laura Allsop about the importance of reclaiming contested sites for the public, of involving the public in her work, and of navigating the often difficult paths involved in gaining access to public space. Jack Persekian, curator of the *Jerusalem Show*, which was launched in 2007 with the Al-Ma'mal Foundation, speaks eloquently of the importance of staging difficult works, including performances and interventions, by Palestinian artists throughout the Old City. Basak Senova's essay on re-occupying sites of occupation in Cyprus showcases a curatorial intervention that exposed the absurdity of the controls on a particularly beleaguered island and how 're-occupation' reactivated disused public spaces and made them public once more. This transformative element is taken up in Saba Innab's project on the city of Amman where she seeks to explore how 'the experience of place and places of experience withdraw into commodity signs promising the 'good' life", with market-driven priorities often closing down public spaces and privatising civic interaction.

Curatorial interventions into public spaces are given a further twist by Dictaphone Group's witty interjection into the dismal condition of public transport in Beirut. In their project for Ibraaz, they re-imagine a journey that could have been once undertaken in the city of Beirut but now lies in the dreams of the past. In an echo of the collective, collaborative scope promoted by Christine Tohme in her interview, Ali Benmakhlouf, a professor of philosophy at the Université de Paris Est-Créteil, recounts a picnic organised on the outskirts of Marrakech under the aegis of Dar al-Ma'mûn, the latter having invited the writer Driss Ksikès to talk about issues of public space and interconnectivity. Whilst dialogue and debate remained copacetic throughout this picnic, in another of our artists' projects presented here, produced by Egypt-born photographer Myriam Abdelaziz, the debate is far more raucous and indeed perilous. Presenting images from her series *Transition*, a body of work that examines the aggressive dialogue used by the various protagonists in the recent Egyptian revolution, Abdelaziz notes with perspicacity that the use of public space to express the disquiet and aspirations of an entire generation is aided by authorities who, in their haste to literally whitewash dissent by painting over graffitied walls, inadvertently provide clean slates for further politically-inclined graffiti.

The proscription of public space finds something of a counterpart in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's project *The Freedom of Speech Itself*, an audio documentary that examines the history and application of forensic speech analysis and voice-prints in the United Kingdom's controversial use of 'voice analysis'. Drawing on testimony from lawyers, phonetic experts, asylum seekers and Home Office officials, *The Freedom of Speech Itself* reveals the geo-politics of accents, and how such processes create newer and ill-defined states of exceptionalism when it comes to the rights of refugees. The question here is one for every society and – in what is admittedly a loose paraphrasing of Alain Badiou's work on the imperative of equality as a predicate rather than an ambition in the pursuit of universal human rights – it can be put thus: when we finally rid ourselves of the terms 'illegal immigrant' or 'economic migrant' and replace them with the terms citizen, man, woman, worker, son, daughter, father, mother, we might then, just about, be able to have a discussion based on equality rather than the prejudice of our current discourses about refugees.

Moving away from these assertions of artistic agency in events and debates concerning the social, public and civil spaces of intervention, Omar Kholeif sounds a warning note in his essay 'The Social Impulse' about the problems attending the increased interest in art from the region and the pressure on artists to create



works that not only respond to revolution but answer to 'Arab Spring'-themed exhibitions. Kholeif goes on to observe the ways in which artists are channelling their energies into grass-roots, artist-led initiatives that allow them a measure of independence both from the art market and its requirement that they comment on the political situation – and, ultimately, from the demands of the political situation itself. Could, Kholeif asks, the relationship between the 'open source' ideology in recent new media history and the proliferating 'share' culture of revolutionary dissidence have created a grey area whereby artists from Egypt, to name but one country, who work with new media as a resource are being asked to comment or subscribe to an artistic interpretation of the Arab uprisings? And this, for one, becoming the price of admission into the present-day discussion of art from and beyond the Arab world.

This question is further explored in Wafa Gabssi's interview with Michket Krifa on the problems of staging a show such as *Dégagements, la Tunisie, Un An Après (Oustings, Tunisia, One Year Later)*, a project that examined the revolution in Tunisia and artistic engagements with its legacy. As Krifa notes: 'I don't think an artist can be insensitive to what is happening in his environment; we are fed by society, our dreams, our fantasies, if we take all that away, what will the artist feed himself with? We live in a country where everything is political. We are anchored in everything that is social'. This point finds further purchase in Alice Planel's investigation into the conditions of artistic production in Algiers, a city still affected by the legacy of a devastating civil war in the 1990s, and the imminent need for scholarship on the subject of contemporary art in Algeria and across the Maghreb so as to further explore the tensions that arise – be they actual or imaginary – between the so-called traditional and the contemporary across the region.

One of the more emphasised elements that emerged in our essays and texts for Platform 003 was a sense of something having been lost over time and, thereafter, in need of re-discovery or resuscitation. The work of Sarajevo-born, Sharjah-based artist Isak Berbic explores the limits of representation in his recent images and in so doing investigates the overlaps of documentary and fiction alongside the re-emergence of elided histories. Similarly, Serbian-born photographer Sinisa Vljakovic's images depict the disintegrating urban landscapes of Lebanon, Syria and Dubai, and examples of an ephemeral, vernacular architecture that speak not only to another time but to forms of social interaction that for many have passed into memory.

The memory of burnt-out or closed cinemas and torn posters for films found in the debris of Gaza in the 1990s fuels Tarzan and Arab's reimagining of a contemporary Palestinian cinema in their extended interview here. Whilst Sheyma Buali's interview with Palestinian filmmaker Mohanad Yaqubi reveals an extraordinary story of serendipity and perseverance that resulted in the recovery of found documentary footage covering the first two years of the Lebanese Civil War. The footage was shot by the Palestine Film Unit (PFU) and was only rediscovered in Italy in 2011. Yaqubi has since brought these images back to life again to show the depth of Palestine's filmmaking history, its role in shaping Palestinian identity, and its ties to the wider Third Cinema movement. What unfolds here is a story of a specific form of 'militant cinema', in which 'reels were treated as ammo' and a narrative of commitment and circumstance in which images revisit a history once thought lost to the vagaries of war unfolds. To this, Yaqubi has added his own question: Was there more revolution in cinema than [in] revolution itself?



Revolution, in the form of idealism and space exploration in Lebanon, comes to the fore in an interview with Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige about their recent project, *The Lebanese Rocket Society*. In this frankly extraordinary project, the artists trace the work of Manoug Manougian and the eponymous Lebanese Rocket Society's launch of rockets off the coast of Lebanon in the 1960s. The project was halted in 1967, an ominous date in the history of the Middle East and the world as a whole, and has remained largely forgotten since. The expiration of the Lebanese Rocket Society, coinciding as it did with the Six Day War in 1967, heralded an end to a number of things, including the Pan-Arab ideal and the hopefulness once associated with space exploration. Were the two events linked – the technology of space exploration exchanged for the ordnance of militarism – or did they augur a more profound disillusionment that stills hangs over the ideal of revolutionary thought and idealism today? What, this project seems to ask, was lost? And how, more importantly, are we to resuscitate it?

The moment of reclamation and translation was and continues to be a perilous affair. Our conversation here with photographer Ziad Antar explores the processes involved in producing photography with expired film – some of it damaged, some of it only half-usable – whilst employing an obsolete camera. Defying the technological advances of digital photography, Antar engages with 'how images get eaten', or come to pass into archival contexts or, indeed, are physically consumed over time. In his most recent project, *Portrait of a Territory*, 2012, Antar turned his practice to the coastline of the UAE in an effort to depict its timeless outlines in the face of the unforgiving light – and, again, the vagaries of film stock and equipment – that reigns over the region, giving it both a feeling of visual homogeneity and yet a certain oneiric individualism.

Capturing the present, through obsolete means, could be a metaphor for translation itself. In her conversation with Ghalya Saadawi, Lara Khaldi outlines the genesis of a new project that aims to provide a working and 'living' open-access glossary of terms and ideas used in visual culture throughout the region today. Khaldi notes, pre-empting criticism of a glossary as a process of ossifying meaning, that the 'format and method can become strategies to avoid this stagnation of language and terminology'. Through an updated website, she continues, the glossary will seek to become a platform for a changing economy of terms, translations, perhaps even neologisms, rather than a reference for an absolute answer.

Translation and the vagaries of a past that is inevitably imbricated and invested in the present is also addressed towards the end of Franz Thalmair's interview with Slavs and Tatars, where the artists note that it 'is crucial to resuscitate the historical'. Noting Walter Benjamin's metaphor to describe translation as a form that 'touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux', the artists and their interlocutor note that 'what's interesting is that two notions often considered to be in tension – the steadfastness of fidelity versus the flux of freedom – are part of one and the same process'. This is perhaps a fitting quote to close on in this discussion of the demands placed upon artists in our far from temperate times and the continued need to support practices that often complicate and deconstruct the present certainties – be they ameliorative in scope or apocalyptic – in an attempt to search out new horizons of possibility and potentiality. As to what has been lost over the previous decades, as a result of a headlong rush into, if not acceptance of, the neo-liberal territorialisation of our innermost desires, the logic of late-capitalist dis-investment, and the disenchantments of revolutionary thought, only time will tell. What is certain is that it seems that art as a practice has been



increasingly invested with a revolutionary power all of its own, a power to imagine and reconfigure what can be seen, said and heard in our time, a power that renders it not only fit for the purpose of breathing life back into what were considered obsolete forms and ideas but to question the very ideal that this is what it should indeed be doing. Finally, if art can indeed document the present-day elisions of our time through the prism of multifarious and interdisciplinary practices and interventions, then surely it can reconvene a historical, public, civil, aesthetic and philosophical imaginary in our time. And if not, at least it can highlight the hubris in our attempts to do so.

About the author

Anthony Downey is the Director of the Masters Programme in Contemporary Art at Sotheby's Institute of Art. He holds a Ph.D from Goldsmiths College, London, is the Editor of *Ibraaz*, sits on the editorial board of *Third Text*, and is a Consulting Editor for *Open Space* (Vienna).

As part of the 54th Venice Biennale, he co-edited *The Future of a Promise* catalogue and has written essays for *Representing Islam: Comparative Perspectives* (2011); *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art* (2009); *Iran Inside Out* (2009); *Art and Patronage in the Near and Middle East* (2010); *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Potentialities* (2013); *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art* (2010); *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings* (revised edition, forthcoming 2011); *Cultural Theory*, edited by David Oswell (2010); and *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (2012). He is currently researching a book on politics and aesthetics (Thames and Hudson, 2013).