

Interview

New Kids On The Block

Randa Mirza in
conversation with
Amira Gad

The New Kids On The Block (2013) is Lebanese artist Randa Mirza's most recent work, which to this date has never been presented before. This piece is the result of the artist's work, which began in October 2011, when she started working as an interpreter for Laure Stephan, a French journalist collaborating with Le Monde. Mirza started covering the Syrian revolution and its repercussions on Lebanon just when the 'Arab Spring' had reached Syria. Throughout that year, she found herself increasingly reporting the deeds of the Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups, which used to play a very marginal role in the political life of Lebanon prior to the Syrian uprising. She also covered how the Lebanese Sunni groups were instrumentalising the Syrian uprising in their struggle for political gains in Lebanon. Throughout this interview, Mirza tells of her personal experience of working alongside a journalist, taking a critical eye on the journalistic formats and approaches in relation to her work.

Randa Mirza
The New Kids On The Block, 2011-2012.
Armed bodyguards surround the headquarters of certain Islamic organizations and the homes of some Islamic leaders in Tripoli. (picture: Sheikh Dai al-Islam's bodyguard's cell phone.)
Photograph.
Courtesy of the artist and Picturetank.



Amira Gad: Can you tell me more about how your project *The New Kids On The Block* (2013) came about?

Randa Mirza: I met a French journalist in Lebanon, Laure Stephan, who works with Le Monde. I was looking for a job at the time so I suggested to accompany her and take photos for her but she was more interested in having an interpreter, someone who could translate from Arabic to French. And so I started working with her: For one year I followed her through her research and missions. During this period, I was making a lot of pictures though I didn't have a clear idea then of what I wanted to do with them.

In any case, I was very interested in her approach that is much closer to field work. It also offered me the possibility to enter areas of politics in Lebanon, which she was covering, that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to 'enter' or encounter otherwise. She had the method, the interest, the contacts, the technique, and the address.

AG: Can you tell me a little bit about Laure Stephan's method and how this shaped her understanding of what's happening and so the stories she covered?

RM: She was very interested in fieldwork, collecting information and formulating her analysis in that way. As an example, during the first mission we did at the Lebanese-Syrian border, there was news that the Syrian army had bombed the north of Lebanon and entered onto the territory. It is at such key moments and key places where you find the protagonists that you need to talk to.

AG: And is the correspondent then also responsible for providing the narrative for the stories that are covered? Have you seen it change

from being on the field with her to how it has been publicized? I'm sure they edit to some extent, but I'm wondering to what extent the narrative and the angles are changed.

RM: I've read the articles after our fieldwork and I can assure you that this journalist is very worried about translating word by word the impressions she had and what she felt on the field. I read every single article that was publicized as a result of our fieldwork. In fact, I think her talent as a journalist is her ability to summarize and formulate it into one angle. I was just overwhelmed after a day of work, and much information to be processed.

AG: And as such I think there's much to be said about this experience you've had and how it transpires in your work. Though, after a whole year of working on the field, I would like to ask you why you chose the angle of covering the Syrian revolution's repercussions in Lebanon and not in Syria itself for instance?

RM: We tried many times to go to Syria and there are two or three possible ways. One is smuggling, accompanied by someone from the Syrian Free army. The other one is by applying for a visa. Though we tried many times, we didn't manage. You could also try to go to the border and pretend to be stupid or a tourist. As a Lebanese I would've been able to enter but she is French and wouldn't have been able to. This option was not very interesting as there were a lot of risks that I was not ready to take. But we entered bits from time to time, but only on border parts, because it's still very easy to enter. There is no real border. We would enter for a few hours and leave again.

AG: And this choice of the angle that was taken with your project *The New Kids On The Block*, do you feel that it says something about the long socio-political history between Syria and Lebanon?

Randa Mirza
The New Kids On The Block,
2011-2012

Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Chahal at home in Tripoli. Dai al-Islam founded the Salafi Movement in Lebanon, the Islamic Association for Guidance and Charity and The Holy Quran Radio. He operates a wide number of mosques in North Lebanon where he preaches weekly in favor of the Syrian revolution. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Picturetank.



RM: For me *The New Kids On The Block* doesn't talk about the revolution in Syria, it talks more about the connection between Syria and Lebanon, and how what's happening in Syria is completely affecting today's Lebanese political scene and what's happening in Lebanon in general. It's an undeniable disaster that everyone is interested in covering but Syria is not isolated from the geo-politics of the Middle East. I was interested to show that there is something happening in Lebanon that is connected to what's happening in Syria, and that it's boiling, big time.

AG: That it's part of a greater context...

RM: Yes. Syria is not isolated, it's not an island, and Syria has a big impact in the Middle East. I'm trying to make people understand that Syria is the fall of the Middle East as we know it. Or as we have known it lately. Syria these days is so bloody, so bloody. I would wake up smelling blood. When I started, in October 2011, it looked more like a revolution. In fact, it was a revolution. Today a lot of people, including me, are having problems to pronounce the word 'revolution', wouldn't you agree?

AG: Yes, I can relate to this...I want to go back to what you mentioned about your coverage of the Syrian uprisings's repercussions in Lebanon and your choice of focusing on the Lebanese Sunni Islamists. Can you elaborate on this choice and tell me more about what else was part of your coverage that is not made visible through your project? I also wonder if by choosing one specific angle, there wouldn't be the impression that you're not covering the 'complete' or showing the 'full' story?

Randa Mirza
The New Kids On The Block,
2011-2012
A counter-demonstration in downtown Beirut, organized by the Syrian regime's supporters in Lebanon, took place on the same day as Sheikh Ahmad Al-Assir's demonstration in solidarity with the revolution in Syria. The demonstrators bashed King Faisal's portrait accusing the Saudi king to fuel the conflict in Syria by supporting, financially and militarily, the Syrian rebellion and the Sunni fundamentalist groups fighting in Syria. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Picturetank.



At a certain point, I had so much material that it was difficult to narrow it down. I had two stories at the beginning: One story focused on refugees, how they entered Lebanon, and what kind of situations they were faced with in Lebanon. The other story is the one I focused on in the end. This angle was interesting for me because the Sunni Islamists are people I didn't usually encounter in my life in Lebanon. It was also interesting for me to understand how they were working on an international and local level.

You also asked why I didn't make a full story. Actually, I had been trying to edit all the material that I had made during that year and construct everything that had happened then. It eventually became apparent to me that it wouldn't make sense to cover everything as 'events' but that I could indeed hint at them in a broader, more visual way through the photos.

AG: I believe the choice of the word 'event' is an interesting one. This brings me to a question I had about the time aspect in your project, which began in October 2011 and which is only coming out now in April 2013. Why now and what happened since? Why did you choose not to release your material throughout your work with your colleague?

RM: To publish it throughout this experience would've been relevant if I had published it through a newspaper, which I tried but they were not accepted as such. I also didn't have a clear vision of how and what I wanted to do with my material yet. A journalist has to go into the field and submit an article within two days. For me, it was also interesting not to be under the pressure of being commissioned an assignment and having the luxury of taking some distance with the work I was doing.

AG: To have the distance to construct these stories basically, or the narrative that you wanted to establish throughout this project. You said that your images were not accepted to be publicized along with Laure Stephan's articles, what do you think this tells about the type of images you have produced? In other words, what kind of differentiation do you (or not) make between the work you made and the journalistic coverage that your colleague has made of these events?

RM: I would say that it is the time and pressure aspects that come into play here. I didn't have a vision or hypothesis when I started this, just like I didn't have a client to whom I had to submit my stories to. That's a great freedom and it's also something that allows you to be more relaxed and look in-depth at what you want to do. A very important point is that when I finished my story after a year, and I submitted it to Le Monde, I was told that it's a very interesting reportage, but they don't have the right format for it, because they are actuality (actualité) or news – identifying itself in the 'moment'.

AG: And in that way that's also the difference that you were telling me about in terms of your colleague's work as being a coverage and yours as a reportage and time really being a determining characteristic between both of them. Even though what you're covering is of actuality, it's not actual enough.

RM: When you're working in news, if you don't go and work on your story immediately after your field work and send it right then, or within two days, your picture is expired.

AG: It's interesting to see that images can have an expiry date on them. One could also argue that with projects such as yours, a reportage, there is a sense of continuity between the narrative that is told with the images and their accompanying captioning...

RM: For me, it's the beginning of the story.

AG: Would you say that in this sense there is more freedom in the art field to deal with such subject matters and present coverage like yours?

RM: Yes, definitely! For me, it was also a way to make sense of the one-year experience I had.

AG: How do you think that the format and methodology adopted with your work actually creates a commentary on journalism in general?

RM: I would say that the main point here is what is 'newsworthy' and that journalism does not accept long-term reportage of the sort.

AG: If this project is reportage, can we expect a continuation of it? And should you present this work in an art context, to turn it into an art installation, would you be presenting the angles that aren't shown with *The New Kids On The Block*?

RM: Yes, I would dig into my archive and look at other aspects that could be presented within that context also keeping in mind with how the socio-political situation has developed since. But I wouldn't continue this type of fieldwork anymore.

AG: How do you perceive your role and position as an artist within the framework of this project? How do you position yourself in this in a way of actually being a mediator, but also an interpreter, through your images and your captions between the work that you did, the experience you had with the journalist, and then now, in making this public?

RM: For me, I think the importance of this is that when I did that work, I was not an artist, it was not as an artist. I admit that I think journalism lacks creativity. I don't think that I did any artistic work in

Randa Mirza
The New Kids On The Block, 2011-2012
Since June 2011, Sunni Islamists in Tripoli have started organising weekly demonstrations every Friday after prayers, in support of the Syrian revolution. The number of demonstrations has increased with the conflict. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Pictoretank.



this, except that I am an artist and that I don't want to be a journalist, which is very important.

AG: One question I didn't ask throughout this interview yet is about the title of your project, *The New Kids on the Block*. Where does it come from?

RM: When I was a teenager, I had a poster of the boy band New Kids on the Block in my room. For me, the Islamists are the 'New Kids on the Block' of Middle Eastern politics. I mean, they are gaining weight and today it's a big question about where we're going. Also, Islamists are always represented as men. It was important to focus on this male aspect of Islamists in my title.

AG: How do you relate (or not) *The New Kids On The Block* project with your other work and I'm particularly thinking of *Beirutopia* (2011), which looks at Lebanon since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 and also is questioning the 'devenir' of the city.

RM: I don't relate it to my other work, but it's in my interest of understanding Lebanon and my reality, because as an artist I say that I'm interested in questioning my socio-political gender reality. I think that there has always been an autobiographical element to my work.

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 Blicke 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*.