



INTERVIEWS

Past Disquiet

Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri in conversation with Samah Hijawi

Samah Hijawi

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This interview follows on from the recent opening of the exhibition *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Exhibition for Palestine 1978*. The exhibition, which opened in the MACBA Barcelona in February 2015, is an archival and documentary show that takes the *International Exhibition for Palestine* of 1978 (organized by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Beirut) as the starting point for an extensive research project that unfolds networks of artists and activists working in the 1960s and 1970s across the world. The discussion explores some of the ideas and questions that came out of the project.



Arabic cover of the catalogue for *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, Beirut, 1978, published by the PLO Unified Information Office.

Samah Hijawi: The title for this exhibition, *Past Disquiet*, translates in Arabic to *thikrun qaliq*, which means a worrisome or nagging memory. These are followed by the words *ghosts* and *narratives*, which denote a sense of fragility. Meanwhile, the exhibition itself brings together a rich and exciting history, generously mapped out through reproduced archives from photographs, magazines, films and artworks that connect through overlapping and related histories. Why the precariousness in the title?

Rasha Salti: *Past Disquiet* is a documentary and archival exhibition that stages the outcome of a research about an exhibition that took place a little over thirty years ago, and falls under the large rubric of 'exhibition history'. Our research began with the catalogue of *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, which otherwise had no documentary traces in 'institutional' archives, only in the memory of the people who organized it, participated in it, or visited it. In other words, *Past Disquiet* does not re-stage the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, nor does it propose to display original archival documents. The 'raw material' we collected was, to a

large extent, a first-person oral history, replete with subjective affect, the trappings of remembering and forgetting, collected and recorded from individuals across countries, cultures and languages (including Morocco, Italy, France, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Japan). In the absence of access to documents, archives and an officially sanctioned narrative, the information culled from interviews could not be fact-checked. Moreover, a number of individuals who played a key role in making the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* are deceased. When we were struggling to craft the title, we wanted to acknowledge the research process as much as its outcome, hence this notion that you understand as a 'nagging memory'. With 'disquiet' (and the Arabic 'qaliq'), we intended to imply 'unsettled' and with 'thikr' we wanted to foreground the ambiguity of the word in Arabic that implies both uttering a remembrance and resurrecting from death or forgetting.

Kristine Khouri: While 30 years ago is a very recent past, it seems distant enough that it has been almost totally forgotten to many. The *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* is embedded in a world of artistic and museographic practices that have not been written formally in art history – and this is not even a question of north vs. south, or western and non-western scholarship. Soon after we began our investigation, we realized that we were unravelling a Pandora's box of histories from across the world – other exhibitions organized by artists, art critics and militants, around struggles for justice, like the struggle against apartheid or against the Pinochet dictatorship. Perhaps what you identify as a 'precariousness' is associated with the fact that many of the histories that surface in *Past Disquiet* are counter-cultural and run against the grain of established art historical canons. In a sense, we wanted to move beyond the fragility of marginalized histories and emphasize the persistence of their existence.

SH: The material on display throughout the exhibition offers several layers of intertwined or parallel narratives. Before we delve into some questions on these, I am wondering if you recall the starting point of this project. Is there a document or conversation that instigated the process; a starting point that lead you to this exhibition?

KK: Absolutely, and we wanted to emphasize that in the version of the exhibition at the MACBA by placing the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine's* catalogue at the centre of the display layout. If you recall, there is a video in the exhibition of a hand leafing through the catalogue's pages, projected on a screen that hangs at a notably higher level than any other item on display and cuts transversally across the space. The research started with the catalogue. When Rasha and I started working together as researchers and writers, she had a photocopy of the catalogue and had kept it for years, which she pulled out for us to look at.

RS: I had first encountered the exhibition catalogue at the library of Agial Art Gallery in Beirut years ago when I was doing research on Palestinian posters. Ezzeddine Kalak (a PLO representative in Paris from 1972–1978) had a collection of posters and his name appeared in a page of the catalogue. I made a photocopy and kept it. When Kristine and I started working together, it just felt like finally the time had come to elucidate the mystery of this massive exhibition that, for some reason, no one referred to as a milestone, even though its scale and scope seemed exceptional.

SH: The exhibition maps out a network of geopolitical 'oneness' that counters a hegemonic or otherwise binary history of art making. Never the less, this history is not a well-documented one in the region and is not the



Reflection of Ezzedine Kalak in artwork by Jacques Monory, at *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, Beirut, 1978.
 Photographer: Claude Lazar, Courtesy Claude Lazar.

generally marketed 'world art history' narrative either (this is not to dismiss the important contribution of thinkers as well as publications that contest these narratives). Which locations did you visit as part of your research that offered interesting connections to both the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, as well as the story of artists working in alternative and politically engaged networks around the world?

RS: The research surfaced an entire cartography of artistic and exhibition practices across the world, within the realm of the international, anti-imperialist, radical leftist solidarity. It was less a 'oneness' and more a network of politically engaged artists and militants, who mobilized their creative energies around the defence of a number of causes. From the beginning, our inquest was closer to detective work than conventional scholarly research and we travelled to several countries to interview a number of artists and individuals. But even at that scale, the geo-cultural paradigms that regiment our contemporary perception of art history were irrelevant. In France, we interviewed Brazilian, Argentinian, Palestinian and Syrian artists as well as French artists, who were involved in the 'museum in exile' in solidarity with Salvador Allende, the Jeune Peinture, or the Artists Against Apartheid, as well as the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*.

KK: The countries that one or both of us travelled to included Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Italy, France, Japan and South Africa. We were not able to visit Palestine because of the punitive measures against Lebanese passport holders visiting the West Bank and their stepped up enforcement in the past couple of years. It was a risk that we simply could not take, so we had to rely on friends (Khaled Hourani, Mohanad

Yaqubi and Sami Said) conducting and/or filming interviews in our place. But this is the most obvious illustration of the nature of the research – in every country and every city we were able to 'unlock' so-called doors (access people and their archives) because of the incredible support and intervention of researchers, writers, artists and art historians who supported us. In many ways, *Past Disquiet* is the combination of efforts of all these people and our gratitude to them has been an incredible driving force. We were in dire need of the material resources to cover the cost of travel, but the immaterial support of all those who conducted research, accompanied us, translated, gave us their time and energy, entrusted us with their stories and gave us copies of documents is what made the research and exhibition possible.

SH: The historiography mapped out in the exhibition is the artistic production within political frameworks from the Arab region and different parts of the world. What were the political conditions that instigated this direction in artistic production in the Arab region and the world in the 1960s and were there formal or informal organizations and platforms that played a central role towards the formation of politically engaged practice?

RS: Politically engaged practice has existed for centuries, from al-Jahiz to Goya. Even *A Thousand and One Nights* is an orally transmitted repository of subversive stories of resistance that defy absolute authority. *Past Disquiet* focusses on an era when, to cite from our introductory wall text, 'visionaries and dreamers imagined museums that incarnated the causes they were fighting for', with artists who believed that art is at the heart of everyday life and at the herald of political change, and with militants who believed that political change is impossible to imagine without artists.

KK: Even though we are looking at a very recent history, it was important for us to avoid the trappings of projecting our own contemporary interpretive framework onto the past. The stark contrast in language and political idioms was a concrete antidote. Militants and politically engaged artists around the world articulated their political identities in totally different ways and international solidarity was an important component of their subjectivity. This solidarity transgressed the Cold War bi-polarism in complex ways.

SH: From a wider perspective on the major political moments that follow the revolutionary period of the 1970s, the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there was a shift in world politics. In artistic histories this also created a shift in production from social communist aesthetics, to the neo-abstract movements coming from the USA. During these times in the Arab world, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990–91 was the first Arab country to invade another. In your presentation in Ashkal Alwan's Sweet Sixties conference in Beirut in January 2013, you referred to these as 'generational ruptures'. Can you talk about the period mapped out in the exhibition *Past Disquiet*, if indeed it was exemplary in some way, and what may have happened to indicate a rupture between artists working in the 1970s and those who emerged in the 1990s?

KK: We spent a lot of time imagining what the visitor to the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* saw and how the works inhabited the space of the basement of the Beirut Arab University. There were paintings, lithographs, etchings, drawings and sculptures. Almost all styles or genres were present: primitive or naïve art, abstract art, figurative, optical art, neo-realism, social realism, critical figuration. At that time, the radical left in Italy and France regarded abstraction as a bourgeois art, thus subservient to power and capital, while the



Exhibition opening of *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, Beirut Arab University, March 21, 1978.

Courtesy Claude Lazar.

subversive, counter-cultural vanguard in Morocco defended abstraction because the élite or establishment deemed naïve and landscape painting as the only 'authentic' Moroccan art. None of the artists from the Soviet block were anti-conformist, and subscribed to a form of ideologically orthodox 'social realism'. In other words, the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* is a very eloquent incarnation of the coexistence of the multiplicity or plurality of modern art practices in the 1970s.

RS: In *Past Disquiet*, this is one of the questions we could not address. We had to make choices and edit down the myriad findings and questions that the research surfaced. We refer to the version of the exhibition at the MACBA as '1.0' because, given the amount of questions that the inquest raised, we could imagine or stage a different version of the exhibition at every occasion we are invited to. Archival and documentary research-based exhibitions are essentially about interpretation; a showcase of historiographical questions and representations. One version of the scholarship attributes abstraction to the Cold War western camp and 'communist aesthetics' to the Soviet camp, but other scholarship challenges that way of writing modern art. In the 1970s, I would argue that the questions of the artist's political subjectivity; the position of the artist as author with a capital A (as

opposed to an unidentified voice in a collective); and the production, exhibition and dissemination of art in the public realm and the relationship to the market, seem to override the question of style, genre and language. This is definitely a shared thread that we foregrounded in *Past Disquiet*.

SH: In the book *Hiwar al-Fann al-Tashkeeli* which documents a symposium for Arab artists hosted by Darat Al Funun, Jordan in 1993, the Palestinian artist Suleiman Mansour talks about the the circumstances for artistic production, saying:

as you know we have been in the Occupied Territories for 25 years or more, and during this time our primary goal has been to draw/paint political issues that are clear and direct. [. . .] Throughout this time we would draw bars, fists, prisoners, confiscated lands and barbed wire through which we developed an encyclopedia of symbols. [. . .] After 20 years or so we started to feel that something was missing in us [. . .] and the Intifada in 1980 made me personally feel small and without the importance I had imagined as an artist leading masses to revolution. [. . .] My work did not have any meaning in light of the Intifada. [. . .] This granted me a feeling of freedom, through which to develop my own work as well as Palestinian art.

This quote indicates a shift in artists' attitudes and I am wondering if it is possible to relate this quote to fragmentation in parallel artistic strategies, tools and their engagement in political movements and causes in the region?

RS: The case of Palestinian art and artists is very peculiar, I am not sure it is possible to extrapolate from it to other movements, countries or cultural communities. On the one hand the reality of Palestinians living in Israel was different from those living under military occupation and radically different from those living as refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. However, if you are referring to the manner in which affiliation to an overwhelming political movement (or a revolution) translates into an imperative that overrides the nature of artistic creation or production, then indeed the question is universal. It is almost impossible for me to answer meaningfully, in general terms. Neither can I answer the question about the end of revolutionary movements as a sweeping statement or how that has impacted artistic practices. An entire system collapsed, a system sustained by artists and their accomplices (critics, gallerists, militants), where they formed their own collectives; exhibited art on their own terms, outside the market and institutions; and established their own 'museums in exile', which they also administered. The collectives were disbanded, the exhibitions stopped and institutions began to court them. The end of the Cold War and the onslaught of neo-liberal market capital decimated that counter-cultural, anti-establishment universe and, in many ways, wiped out its very traces from discourse and memory. Whether that 'alternative' universe contained the seeds of its collapse, or was too fraught with contradictions to sustain itself, I don't know. Is lifting the weight of a political imperative a form of emancipation? Can the market sustain emancipation?

SH: From the multitude of materials on display throughout the exhibition, the ones with little supporting narratives are the reproductions of catalogues of exhibitions that hang in the middle of the space. Yet these offer a glimpse into the aesthetics and subject matter of the works artists were producing during that time, which are essentially the foundations for both the exhibition of 1978 and, in due course, your research. It is also



Palestinian fighter looking at artwork by Claude Lazar at 15 May Exhibition, Day of the Palestinian Struggle, Beirut, 1978.

Photographer: Claude Lazar, Courtesy Claude Lazar.

alluded, from the reproduction of Abdul Hay Musallam's piece of two birds holding the key to the store room where the pieces were stored in Beirut, that there is another story related to the works themselves. If we were to play an image game around Abul Hay Musallam's work, what two other images would you place alongside Musallam's that have stood out for you throughout?

RS: We are fairly explicit about what we learned and what has surfaced on the fate of the works. To be frank, the question of finding the works was not really motivating. We address it because it would otherwise be the elephant in the room. If I were to select two images, then they would have to be from the black and white photographs that document the exhibition. Although, perhaps this is because they are the visual material that we have been working with to showcase *Past Disquiet* and I am unable to 'see' anything else at this stage.

KK: The reproductions in the centre of the space range from children's books produced by Dar al Fata Al Arabi to exhibition catalogue excerpts, as well as publications reporting in French and Arabic about artists and other exhibitions. They are meant to accompany and speak to the material on the walls in front of them: they were placed in relation to certain areas so that the viewer could delve a bit more into a context or a particular moment. If I had to place to images next to Abdul Hay's work, it would be images of some other works of his (which are not necessarily in *Past Disquiet*, many of which are on the subject of the Palestinian revolution, or fight against Pinochet for example).

SH: Loss is a present theme throughout the exhibition as in the section dedicated to the important role Ezzeddine Kalak, the PLO's representative in Paris who was assassinated in 1978, played in the exhibition, which alludes to the end of an era. Can a sense of nostalgia be avoided when presenting an archival and documentary exhibition?

RS: We wanted to avoid invoking nostalgia in our approach to paying tribute to PLO militants like Ezzeddine Kalak, Fathi Abdul-Hamid, Na'im Khader, Wael Zwaiter, Mahmoud Hamshari and Wagih Qassem, who seemed to be cut from the same cloth as militants and are under-acknowledged if not forgotten. Their approach to the struggle for the world to recognize that Palestine exists – that it was the object of a historic injustice and that it was reversing the course of that injustice by the sheer will of its people – was inspiring. They built grassroots solidarity and they mobilized poets, artists and intellectuals to take part in that struggle. This sort of militancy, especially among the Palestinian political class, no longer exists. The fabric of international solidarities that made the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* possible was woven in their hands. We felt it was absolutely necessary to recognize their accomplishment. Ezzeddine Kalak is foregrounded because of his direct connection to the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*. And I do believe that his ghost gently guided us when the road on which we walked seemed to lead to a dead end.

KK: Absolutely, and we hope a sense of nostalgia was not invoked in this show: it's a tricky line. I think that if viewers walk out with hope and see the possibility of change in the world, that is all we can ask for – not a reverence of a past but rather a history to revisit and learn from. Telling the stories of the way political and social engagement was intertwined in artistic and museographic practice is significant. Knowing that history may give space to and inspire new and alternative forms of exhibitions, museums and artistic practices today,

forcing people to reconsider the way museums are built and what these initiatives are inspired by, at a time when recognizing how power and capital play too significant of a role in art making, exhibiting, and the market today.

Read Samah Hijawi's review of *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine* [here](#).

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Samah Hijawi is a multi media artist, writer and curator living and working between Jordan and Belgium. Since 2005 she has collectively managed *Makan Art Space* in Jordan with Ola El Khalidi and Diala Khasawnih, and co-curates the on-going platform *The River has Two Banks* with Toleen Touq and Shuruq Harb. Her artistic projects have been presented in Darat Al Funun; the Khalid Shoman Foundation, Jordan, MoMA, USA, Beirut Art Center, Lebanon and Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Germany among others.

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