



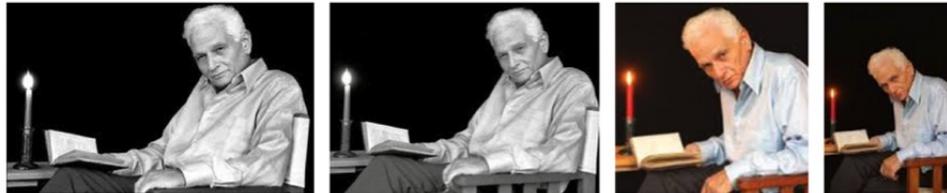
IBRAAZ

Platform 007

ESSAYS

We, the Intellectuals

Oraib Toukan



'Jacques Derrida' taken by Joel Robine on Derrida's emblematic white chair.
From Oraib Toukan, *Google-gazing, ongoing, on representations of the intellectual*.

In 1993, BBC Radio 4 invited Edward Said to *The Reith Lectures*, an annual broadcast lecture by a public intellectual. For his contribution Said delivered a six-part lecture entitled *Representation of the Intellectual*, in which he asserts that the intellectual is necessarily a disturber of the status quo, living in dissent, and often an outsider to place or institution.[1] Said's contribution was, in many ways, a self-reflexive gesture; a commentary on how an intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty of representation, and one that cannot be 'co-opted' by the institutions of government, academia, or corporations – including that of the BBC.[2] His lectures looked to shift the notion of the intellectual away from its historical pile of definitions, towards one that actually analyses 'the image, signature, the actual intervention and performance'[3] of the intellectual.

But if intellectualism is indeed an 'intervention', as Said suggested, how does it get performed and embodied by the institution of art, and what visual traces does it leave behind through images that get

institutionalized as signatures of protest? And when hegemonic structures and the intellectual opposition become part of the same camp in anti-colonial movements, what implications does the critique of institutions then take? A lot has been written about the intellectual – about defining what an intellectual is and often declaring the intellectual dead. In fact, the very concept of the intellectual has finally been democratized – everyone is Antonio Gramsci's intellectual insofar as we continue to participate in the production and circulation of ideas. In this text, I have chosen to draw a parallel between what we do as artists – as political agents and contemporary beings governed by a certain order of performativity and precariousness – and Said's grammar of intellectualism as image, as intervention, and as the voice from the 'margins'.

To intervene is to violate. It is to insert oneself into a context with the hope of correcting it. Knowing the context of one's intervention – embracing it and tastefully moving along with it – is a form. In a 1997 reading by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in Amman's Royal Cultural Centre, Darwish was interrupted by a chant from someone in the audience: 'Long Live his Majesty King Hussein the Great!'.^[4] The poem being read was *Salute to Ritsos*, a tribute to the Greek communist poet and activist Yannis Ritsos. Darwish simply cleared his throat with a firm 'ahem' and moved on to his next verse. 'In Pablo Neruda's home, on the Pacific coast, I remembered Yannis Ritsos', he read. 'I said: What is poetry? He said: It's that mysterious event, it's that inexplicable longing that makes a thing into a spectre, and makes a spectre into a thing.'^[5]

Flash-forward to now and a 'Long Live the King' interruption today would certainly cause a writer to pack up, leave, reject, refuse and decline invitations from the institution thereafter. There are simply more cultural institutions to choose from – more thinkers, more artists, more spaces, more patrons, more of everything, really. So personally unloading the weight of enlightening an ignorant man among our audience is easy: we simply delete him. Moral authority has been democratized. Anyone can speak truth to power; besides, power knows the truth. One therefore does not have to wait for Adonis to decry brutality; one simply needs self-confidence, in public. Flawless articulation of outrage on social media using brief, sharp, highly selective words is a skill. The difference is an easier facility to 'undo'; to refute, recant, and retract from the original utterance at lightning speed. But paradoxically, accountability has never been more traceable either. We no longer need to wait for an obituary to clearly see choppy institutional positions throughout someone's trajectory. A Facebook timeline can show this.

Take, for example, Susan Sontag who in 2001 accepted the Jerusalem Prize for literature from then Mayor Ehud Olmert – just a few years before he was wanted for war crimes in Gaza as Prime Minister of Israel, and three years before Facebook was born. Very few held Sontag

accountable (or even knew). Ironically, Sontag accepted the prize at the very moment Olmert had a proposal on his desk to shut down Al Quds University, which was headed by Sari Nusseibeh – whose release from prison Sontag had petitioned as a board member of PEN American Center ten years back with Edward Said and others.[6] Compare that to the Egyptian existentialist Abdel Rahman Badawi, who accepted the Mubarak prize for literature by merely sending his wire transfer details.[7]

Knowing the context of one's intervention feels all the more important when you stand at that artificial 'lesser of two evils' crossroads. Left if you prefer to legitimize your practice and lifestyle before a miraculously elected corrupt interrogator with an Islamist dogma planning his future theocracy. Right if you prefer to answer to a neo-colonial intelligence officer (that is a closet Islamist at heart), on the payroll of a criminal western regime, entitled both to the horrors of his job and to have you answer to his condescending questions in full patriarchal order. This black and white image devoid of transitions or in-betweens was consciously (and cautiously) constructed long before 2011; a crossroads built by the establishment, protected by its educated, and bizarrely believed by its cultured. It is one that unconsciously winked at advanced capitalism and its eradication programme not simply of our own ideas, 'but the very notion that there could even be a serious alternative to the present.'[8] See, my friend? Now look at Da3esh[9].



'Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial: talking about a revolution' by James Westcott.
The Guardian, 23 March 2011.

In March 2011, Saudi troops and Emirati police were deployed to Bahrain to help suppress pro-democracy protests. A day later, Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial had their public openings. Outside the Sharjah Museum, where Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohamed al-Qasimi was opening the Biennial, a small group of artists assembled holding A4 sized banners with the names of Bahrainis killed in the protest.[10] Looking at an image

of this public action in *The Guardian* a week later, I was bewildered as to why I could only see a parody of protest – a re-enactment even of a strike scene from Jean-Luc Godard's 1972 film *Tout Va Bien*.^[11] The awkwardness of the picture distracted me from the urgency of the issue at hand – especially for those of us who did participate in the marathon programmes of that Gulf art week, with ambivalence and directionless despair at the contradictions and our possible implicitness within them.^[12] Was it the framing of a mere six protestors that stood there? That cropped arm facing the protestors with a cigarette, taking in the spectacle? That 'look and feel' of internationalism?

When one stands with a sign, one is looking to convey the sign through its signifier – in this case, printed A4 papers. To protest is to use the body to signify the sign of such an action, with a body that is under its own institutional regulations. To resist, in turn, is to make sacrifices at the same time as signify the performance, the *act* of refusal itself. Resistance is therefore different to protest. That is not to say that peaceful protests are not threatening. One merely needs to count how many youth have fallen dead or injured from live ammunitions in peaceful protests in the past three years. The problem with the *Guardian* picture therefore, may not be its inability to deliver what is trying to point outside of itself (withdrawal from Bahrain), but the challenge of representing protest itself, outside its performative qualities. Not to mention that it affirms semi-fictional ideas of 'an art world' (tote bags, tasteful shoes) – one that is even farther apart from public ideas that a homogenous 'Left' exists.^[13]

So how do you picture protest without failing what it's trying to represent? The recent hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners, on indefinite administrative detentions in Israeli prisons, is a case in point, precisely because it is difficult to access images of the prisoners in the act of protest. Instead, we are left with the imagined image of bodies decaying in on themselves, pupils dehydrating to the point of blindness, fingers and feet numbing down to bricks: 125 subjects potentially turning into objects, precisely to be qualified as living beings. There is no aesthetic to protest here – just 'salt and water', the international solidarity campaign that became of it, and one that built on their only source of nutrition.^[14] In June 2014, while the government of Israel was debating the torture practice of force-feeding (nasal tubes, sedation injections, restraint chairs), the prisoners sent out a written letter calling for commercial disobedience in solidarity with their protest. Every store in Ramallah closed down. To close down a city without a single official photograph, by creating a public understanding of an image instead, is implausible in the age of thriving party poster rivalry in Palestine, especially for the condolences of martyrs.

The prisoners are grievable, to use Judith Butlers' term, because they forced their bodies into becoming sites of autonomy without the representation of protest, but with the act of starvation itself – how it acts

out, rapidly progresses, and overwhelms. [15] How flesh and bones can seemingly claim rights, and practice self-determination, when the intellect fails us. We can understand without seeing for a change. We arrest in our minds what we cannot apprehend: the idea of someone wilfully starving himself, to receive a trial date. The recent poster campaign for the hunger strike of the prisoners, featuring animated mug shots,[16] was trying to add an aesthetic dimension to all this; to an 'un-representable' people, those beyond figuration. To an abstract idea: to salt and water. To bodies deemed ineligible to the basic right of a trial, or a future, because they are administrators for political parties like the Marxist-Leninist group, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, among others.

I do not mean to compare activism in the arts to more heroic formats, or to its cruellest forms, I am trying to conceive what the embodiment of our interventions are, what we leave behind as visual traces: traces that in themselves migrate, and become institutionalized as signatures of protest. Categorically, the best response I heard to the Sharjah sit-in was that this kind of protest is 'just not our style'. There is an aesthetic to protest, as Hito Steyerl once suggested, or to 'picturing and politicking' as Simon Sheikh expanded, and it simply did not look like this.[17] An image of people in their masses might have looked more authentic to TV-dinner Marxists; or perhaps a black and white portrait of a writer editing his monthly journal behind a mid-century desk, under a four-metre high ceiling in Beirut. But alas, this response gets further complicated by a recent picture perfect Kodak moment; that of 2014 Birzeit University graduates each carrying '#Water_and_Salt' on A4 papers for the group picture of their graduation ceremony in solidarity with the prisoners.

A rejection of that 'style' might simply be an aversion to the very idea, that a body can be used to create image-events. Or it might be a refusal of the notion of refusal itself – in the sense of distance and dissent from the (seeming) authoritarianism of institutions. Or its antithesis: a melancholia for that explosion of 'institutional artists' – the literati who sought to join, form, and found the institutions of self-governance and party politics, in the name of freedom. An artist I greatly admire once summed up his admiration for Darwish in passing: 'Mahmoud Darwish was a poet, with a driver paid by the Palestinian National Authority, to honourably transport him to and from his private office at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, to make poems'. It sounds caustic, but it was said with admiration[18]

Many examples abound: painter Ismail Shammout was a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) before he became Palestinian Director of Arts and National Culture in 1965; the novelist and poster artist Ghassan Kanafani was a spokesperson and a writer for the Marxist Leninist movement of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1967 until he was assassinated by the Mossad; cartoonist Naji Al-Ali joined the Arab Nationalist Movement (and was barred a few times too many for lack of party discipline[19]) before he too got assassinated, and

so on.[20] Kanafani once summed it up by saying: 'My political position springs from my being a novelist. In so far as I am concerned, politics and the novel are an indivisible case and I can categorically state that I became politically committed because I am a novelist, not the opposite.'[21] Yet the paradox of the 'Institutional Artist' becomes bewildering when a Palestinian state is built retroactively, as opposed to freed, and on terms that would have been unacceptable to many of its deceased intellectuals.



Still from an archival interview with Mahmoud Darwish.
Mahmoud Darwish Foundation.

In 1988, Mahmoud Darwish wrote the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, Yasser Arafat read it, and Edward Said translated it from Arabic into English. In effect, this handsome beginning instituted the state of Palestine as we have come to know it today, one that eventually ripped the independence project out of its civil strengths to neo-colonial states of freshly printed logos, letter heads, and personal indebtedness to anything that smells like security. Darwish, like many others, refused to participate in the state as a liberation project and accordingly resigned from the PLO in 1993 following the Oslo Peace Accords. The problem to some was that he rarely renounced the regime either (maybe because he was spared witnessing what has recently become of it).[22] In an interesting scene in Simon Bitton's 1997 film *As the Land is the Language* Darwish recalls how Yasser Arafat offered him a position as a minister and how he expressed his refusal:[23]

Arafat: 'What harm did it do when Malraux became a Minister of De Gaulle?'[24]

Darwish: 'There are at least three differences. France is not the West Bank and the Gaza strip, the circumstances of Charles De Gaulle are not the circumstances of Yasser Arafat, and Andre Malraux is not Mahmoud Darwish. But if it happened that a state of Palestine became a great state like France, and Yasser Arafat became Charles De Gaulle, and if I reached Malraux's stature, then I prefer to be Jean Paul Sartre'.

So what, then, becomes of such gestures, institutionalized without ever being fully institutional? When does the artist living, eating, breathing the national struggle get institutionalized into the very fabric that is being critiqued?[25] And most importantly, are these now oft-cited accounts of Palestinian revolutionaries forcing this whole period in to an impenetrable canon of histories of legend and lore? A canon that can deter from the equally present moment of incredible despair and propitious change? A canon that may chip away at having arrived at that polemical moment of speaking of art and artists, alone, outside of the literati, or intelligentsia, for a change, and aside from the pressures of national responsibility?

Luc Boltanski argued that the connotation of the word 'institution' itself has always been that of a 'repellent', a negative. Indeed, prison systems were the institutions studied most widely, for so long. He stresses that our thinking of institutions has been confined to the original Durkheimian premise of institutions as 'social organisms that govern social behaviour for some general social purpose'.[26] The actual discourse of domination and power only entered the conversation on institutions in the 1960s and 70s.[27] But that discourse, in turn, went hand in hand with national liberation struggles. So by the time Benjamin Buchloh describes the work of artists working in and around the critique of institutions in his salient 1989 essay 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions' the two-word phenomena of 'Institutional Critique' that followed surely couldn't have stemmed solely from a relation to modernism, self-reflexivity, and the museum-as-site.[28] Clearly, anticolonial histories in the world over-influenced the thrust of dissent, and the language and aesthetic of rebellion, which fell on the institutions that Haacke, Broodthaers, Asher, Buren, and many others intervened in. So where exactly would that critique be situated when institution building went hand in hand with artists working within national struggle and anti-colonial movements? And where would that critique lie in light of Frantz Fanon's 'native-intellectual'-type heroes whose interventions have been exhausted, transfigured, and appropriated to their last standing order?

The problem might be that the word 'institution' itself is indeterminate: it seems to be everything, anything and everywhere – sometimes it's brick and mortar, sometimes it's a way of thinking, sometimes it's ideology, sometimes it's social norms and practices, sometimes it's social organization. This is because an institution is a ghost. It is an apparitional

experience of an apparent knowing of a huge inanimate object around without their being visible or material manifestation of it, merely a huge circus of emotions one feels towards that perception (admiration, condemnation, affection, aversion and so on) until bang, it gets institutionalized. For example, the young inimitable guerilla, Yasser Arafat, institutionalized into a museum project and, in turn, into mugs, caps, and key chains to generate income for a museum – never mind the institution of struggle, state, head of state, or marriage at 61 years of age that he instituted some 10 years after fleeing Beirut as a guerilla fighter.

This essay is based on a lecture entitled 'We the Intellectuals' given at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Nürnberg in July 2013 organized by Heike Baranowsky and Judy Price.

[1] Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 13.

[4] Halfaween, 'Mahmoud Darwish Tribute to Yannis Ritsos', online video clip,

DailyMotion, 4 December 2008 http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x51nn6_mahmoud-darwish-tribute-to-yannis-r_news.

[5] Paraphrased from one of many translations of this poem: 'In memoriam, Mahmoud Darwish', UniVerse http://www.universeofpoetry.org/palestine_darwish-tribute.shtml.

[6] Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, 'Sontag in Jerusalem', *Counterpunch*, 22 May 2001 <http://www.counterpunch.org/2001/05/22/sontag-in-jerusalem/>.

Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair go on to say: 'We recalled Sontag's constant trips to Sarajevo and asked readers to imagine her gibes at an author travelling to Serbia to get an award from Radovan Karadzic in the name of intellectual freedom.'

[7] Khalid Almubarak, 'Abdur Rahman Badawi', *The Guardian*, 19 August 2002 <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/aug/19/guardianobituaries.obituaries>. See also: Yoav Di-Capua, 'Arab Existentialism: An Invisible Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization', *The American Historical Review* 117.4 (2012).

[8] See the first page of Terry Eagleton's wonderful commentary on the abolishment of the intellectual in the capitalist project: Terry Eagleton, 'Death of the Intellectual', *Red Pepper*, October 2008 <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/death-of-the-intellectual>.

[9] Da3esh is the Arabic reference for ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

[10] James Westcott, 'Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial: talking about a revolution' *The Guardian*, 23 March 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/23/art-dubai-sharjah-biennial>.

[11] *Tout Va Bien* is all the more relevant because Godard, in effect, set out to show how group dissonance looks like against those who govern means of production. A set up that is very similar to the (ill and oft) cited contradictions of showcasing with cultural institutions in the Gulf that are, more often than not, government extensions.

[12] See analysis of this in: Hanan Toukan, 'Boat Rocking in the Art Islands: Politics, Plots and Dismissals in Sharjah's Tenth Biennial', *Jadaliyya* website, 2 May 2011 http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1389/boat-rocking-in-the-art-islands_politics-plots-; Ghalya Saadawi, 'Post-Sharjah Biennial 10: Institutional Grease and Institutional Critique', *e-flux* Journal, June 2014 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/post-sharjah-biennial-10-institutional-grease-and-institutional-critique/>; and Tirdad Zolghadr, 'Shades of No', *Wdw Review*, June 2014 <http://wdwreview.org/desks/shades-of-no/>.

[13] See Ariella Azoulay's recent works on the language of revolution such as: Ariella Azoulay, 'The Language of Revolution— Tidings from the East', *Critical Enquiry*, http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/the_language_of_revolution_azoulay/.

[14] 'Int. Campaign for Palestinian Prisoners in Israeli Jails #Water_and_Salt', Palestinian Return Centre, 9 May 2014 <http://www.prc.org.uk/portal/index.php/2013-08-16-11-18-4/3298-int-campaign-for-administrative-palestinian-prisoners-in-israeli-jails/3298-int-campaign-for-administrative-palestinian-prisoners-in-israeli-jails>.

[15] Thank you to Judith Butler for her remarkable employment of the word grievable in *Precarious Life* as well as her claim that some deaths will not be understood as lost if they are not first qualified as living in her text 'Indefinite Detention' (and as summarized in her next, equally poignant book, *Frames of War*).

[16] See: <http://samidoun.ca/2012/05/facebook-profiles-share-solidarity-with-striking-palestinian-prisoners/>.

[17] Hito Steyerl, 'The Articulation of Protest,' *republicart*, September 2002 http://republicart.net/disc/mundial/steyerl02_en.htm; and Simon Sheikh, 'Positively Protest Aesthetics Revisited', *e-flux* Journal 20 (2010).

[18] Additionally, while discussing Mohammad Malas's film *Al-Manam (The Dream)*, 1987), a friend confessed that in 1993 she dreamt that Mahmoud Darwish was sitting on the beach in Haifa: 'What are you doing here?' she said to him. 'I've come to write a song for Zehava Ben,' he replied. Zehava Ben was an Israeli pop singer who sang *Peace And Love* in Arabic and Hebrew in the 2005 Eurovisions among many popular songs. At the time my friend interpreted it, that if Darwish ever embraces the language of peace then we too might have to.

- [19] See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handala#Handala>.
- [20] Of relevance here is: Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, 'The History of Arab Modernities in the Visual Arts Study Group', <http://www.speakmemory.org/uploads/KristineKhouri.pdf>; and Ala Younis *Tin Soldiers* (2012), 19.
- [21] Adel Al-Atawneh, *Who Shall Command the Skylark Not to Sing? The Poetics of Love, Hate, and Hope in the East and West* (Mustang: Tate Publishing & Enterprise, 2010), 39.
- [22] For an interesting analysis of PA neoliberal ideology under the shields of risk aversion see: Raja Khalidi, 'After the Arab Spring in Palestine: Contesting the Neoliberal Narrative of Palestinian National Liberation', *Jadaliyya* website, 23 March 2012 <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4789/after-the-arab-spring-in-palestine-contesting-the->
- [23] From Simone Bitton and Elias Sanbar's 1997 film *Et la terre, comme la langue*.
- [24] Thanks to Hanan Toukan and Abed Azzam for referring me to this scene.
- [25] And when does the Institutional Artist become Hassan Khan's critique of the Corrupt Intellectual?
- [26] Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. Gregory Elliot (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).
- [27] Ibid.
- [28] Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum* 44.1 (2005).

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