ArtəEast

Tarjama / Translation

Contemporary art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and its diasporas

ArtəEast

Tarjama / Translation

Contemporary art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and its diasporas

ArteEast
1178 Broadway, 3rd Floor
New York NY 10001
Tel: +1 646 375 5222
Email: info@arteeast.org

www.arteeast.org

Tarjama/ Translation

Queens Museum of Art
Flushing Meadows Park
Queens, NY
May 10-September 27, 2009

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY
August 21-October 24, 2010

Leeza Ahmady and Iftikhar Dadi, curators, and Reem Fadda, assistant curator

Satellite Programs:
Video and Film Screenings at:
The Asia Society, New York, May 17, 2009
The Chelsea Art Museum, New York, June 11, 2009

Design by Ali Cherri - www.alicherri.com

Copy editor: Amelie Cherlin

ISBN-978-0-9824725-0-7 (paperback)

First Edition: June 2009

Table of Contents

Foreword

Tarjama/Translation is another important milestone in ArteEast's dedication to presenting contemporary arts from the Middle East to international audiences. It approaches a central preoccupation and a common theme with broad significance within the region and its diasporas, rather than providing a panoramic, and thus fleeting, exposure to "Middle Eastern art." The exhibition focuses on the common yet complex theme of cultural, artistic and critical translation, while making connections between these artistic concerns on translation and other trends in contemporary art.

Tarjama/Translation has been in the making for several years and opens at an exciting time for visual arts from the Middle East, whose presence in major art institutions, biennales and other key venues has been growing. One of the tropes often used in the context of this flurry of exhibitions in the United States is the billing of art and culture as dispelling stereotypes and building "bridges of understanding," a trope further cemented in a June 2008 Brookings Institution report dedicated to the role of art in increasing cultural understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world.

The two pillars supporting each end of the bridge invariably refer to the U.S. on the one hand, and to a seemingly interchangeable set of constructions that include the Muslim world, the Arab world or the Middle East on the other. The problem with such a practice is not just that it often conflates Islam, Arab and Middle East, but that it willfully ignores the networks of ethnic, cultural, political and social links and intermingling within and across geographical boundaries and ultimately serves to construct the same barriers that are sought to be brought down. This too is a process of translation, aiming to impose one meaning where there are many, to homogenize a region that stubbornly resists homogenization, a region where ethnicity, faith and practice in the multiplicities of forms are just one element at play. Rather, ArteEast's emphasis is on lending a critical eye toward longstanding and organically developed relationships interwoven into the fabric of society, between societies and across regional boundaries.

Unpacking the notion of art and its role in building cultural bridges of understanding was a main concern for Jessica Winegar, who first conceived of the idea of curating *Tarjama/Translation* and to whom we are indebted for her original thinking and vision in sketching out the underlying concept of the exhibit. One of the main goals of our collaboration, and of ArteEast more generally, is not only to diversify the kind of art that circulates in the United States, but also to tackle the type of discourse that surrounds its presentation where "translation," broadly defined, plays a key role. Translation then further refers to the processes by which curators and art critics select works to be included in exhibitions, or instituted into the canon, which are in turn traded at art fairs and auction houses. ArteEast has always translated, but it also always tries to avoid reification of these binaries in all of its programs. As we swing on the pendulum between otherness and sameness, comparing and contrasting across boundaries, we hope in this exhibition to pose important questions about these aestheticized engagements and the processes of translation in their midst.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the immense knowledge and the dedication of our curators, Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi and Reem Fadda. Each one of them has brought to the exhibition a special set of skills and extensive expertise that have made *Tarjama/Translation* all the more rich and artistically vigorous. Sarah Malaika, our exhibition coordinator, worked miracles at keeping tabs on such a complicated logistical operation, for which we are thankful. I would also like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Salah Hassan for his engaging essay contribution to the *Tarjama/Translation* catalog.

We are grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with the Queens Museum of Art in presenting *Tarjama/Translation* and thankful to Museum Director Tom Finkelpearl, Curator and Director of Exhibitions Hitomi Iwasaki, Director of Public Programs Prerana Reddy, and the entire staff of the museum for their tireless efforts and contributions to making this exhibit come to fruition.

We are also grateful to Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University for including *Tarjama/Translation* in its exhibitions program for 2010, and wish especially to thank Frank Robinson, Director, and Ellen Avril, Chief Curator and Curator of Asian Art, for their enthusiasm and support.

Last, but not least, a special and heartfelt thank you to Pamela Clapp, Yona Backer and to the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, for their support and generosity.

Livia Alexander, PhD
Executive Director
ArteEast

Preface

Since the Queens Museum was founded in 1972, it has become the main cultural center in a site where culture is constantly in flux. According to the 2000 census, Queens County is the most ethnically diverse in the United States, and in more ways than one: More than half the households in the borough are led by people born outside the United States, and 160 languages are spoken here. Due to Queens' status as a way station where different cultures meet, the Museum sees itself as both a local and international cultural center. Our lives here in Queens are a collage of world cultures, and a model for the future of international cities. While the Museum does not hesitate to present community-based arts, it also mounts large-scale exhibitions, such as *Out of India*, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin*, and *ABCDF: Portraits of Mexico City,* that attract regional and international attention, often relating to one of the constituencies of this hyper-diverse environment.

In keeping with this tradition, we are proud to present *Tarjama/Translation*, an unprecedented exhibition that reshuffles social and geographical boundaries through the multivalent practices of translation. Alongside artists from Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey and Morocco, the exhibition also includes artists from Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, thereby unsettling the very notion of the "Middle East" or "Arab world." Approximately half of these artists work or practice in the United States or Western Europe, but the vast majority of their work has rarely, if ever, been seen by New York audiences.

Rather than geographical areas with unchanging ethnic and cultural characteristics, "Middle East" and "Central Asia" are here understood as complex points of exchange in time and space. Transnationality and exchange are historically associated with these regions, and many works in the exhibition suggest an updated understanding of these ideas as both local and global. The impossibility of translation; language and its role in the production of meaning; lost and fictional histories; monuments and collective memory; ambivalence and emblems of national pride; decadence and the information society: In their own way, these themes touch us all, and are especially relevant here in Queens. Yet, even as the artists of *Tarjama/Translation* introduce us to underrecognized geographical and cultural complexities, they delve into their own vivid experience, specific to their place and time, and relevant to global human concerns.

In the past five years, some of the most rewarding and successful exhibitions at the Museum have been collaborations. These have included a three-venue exhibition on the legacy of Robert Moses (along with the Museum of the City of New York and Columbia University) and a show on Gordon Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates* project (with Cabinet magazine and White Columns). We are happy to be collaborating again. It has been a pleasure to work with the talented curatorial team assembled by ArteEast: Curators Leeza Ahmady and Iftikhar Dadi, Assistant Curator Reem Fadda, and Curatorial Assistant Sarah Malaika. The *Tarjama/Translation* team has a broad and deep vision that we have found consistently impressive. It has also been a pleasure to work with Livia Alexander, whose active understanding of the complexities of the subject matter of the show in particular and of exhibition production in general has been a great contribution.

At some level, translation is the basic question of our globalized world. We are excited to see how the translations proposed or resisted by the artists in this show are read by our audiences.

Tom Finkelpearl
Executive Director
Queens Museum of Art

Hitomi Iwasaki
Director of Exhibitions
Queens Museum of Art

Tarjama: Not Lost in Translation

SALAH M. HASSAN

Many current exhibitions of art from the Middle East situate themselves on questionable grounds, either by framing the work as liberal/moderate "Islamic," or by focusing on the veil or another banal Middle Eastern trope. This suggests the unstated equating of Islam or the veil with the region. And post–September 11 developments have heightened awareness of the interconnectedness and disjuncture between the "West" and the "Muslim" world, evident in the choice that George W. Bush offered (more specifically to people of Muslim background): *You are either with us or with the terrorists*. This creates qualitative dichotomies between "bad" Muslims, who practice terrorism and who hate freedom (they hate "us," modernity and their women), and "good" Muslims, who are modern, secular and support U.S. foreign policy. As Mahmood Mamdani has argued, this premise is based on a culturalist approach to "Islam" that turns the latter into a transcendent category.[1] But "Islam" has no agency, and all Muslims don't speak with one voice. Moreover, this dichotomy is ahistorical: Not only does it absolve the West from nurturing "bad" Muslims, but it also glosses over the multireligious and multiethnic composition of the region itself, and indeed, forgets a much more complex history of anticolonial struggle, efforts by post-independence secular movements for democratic rights, human rights, gender equality and development.

We witness another paradox in the post–September 11 era—heightened interest in art of the region, despite the latter's demonization. Art historians or practicing curators of interest in anything "Islamic" and artists of "Islamic" background are suddenly faced with an unusually high demand for shows by museums and galleries across Europe and the United States. Islam is chosen as the primary prism through which the region's artistic output is presented, exhibited, discussed, even if it doesn't correspond to the political and cultural realities on the ground. How to explain such a surge of interest? Culturalist approaches to "Islam" not only apply to the political arena but also extend into art history and to the field of "Islamic art," as museums and curators scramble to show "good" Muslims or the positive aspects of "moderate" Islam.[2] However, recent essays by Jessica Winegar and Finbarr Barry Flood have argued that Western cultural discourses on Islamic/Middle Eastern art correspond to the "war on terror."[3] Both argue that such a surge in exhibitions is linked to public diplomacy post–September 11. "The desire to find art that shows the historical artistic achievements and modernity of Middle Eastern Muslims," notes Winegar, "actually ends up reproducing a religious framework such that their work is often interpreted with reference to Islam, whether or not there even exists a religious connection."[4]

Sponsored by major foundations, art institutions, museums, university museums and grassroots organizations, these exhibitions are numerous. Offering a kind of prophylaxis to the veil, gender inequality, violence and fundamentalist Islam, the picture that emerges in these exhibitions is, of course, selective not only in terms of content but also of genre, media and the subjectivity of the artists.[5] And although a few exhibitions and notably the artists' works themselves have afforded a more nuanced portrayal, by and large, curatorial interventions vis-à-vis contemporary art of the "Islamic" world represent numerous missed opportunities.[6]

It is extremely important today not simply to avoid clichéd framings of the region by

[1] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Pantheon Books, 2004), 18.

[2] For example, one would clearly not automatically showcase the work of Western European and North American artists and performers under a title such as *Christian Voices*. One wonders why a program titled *Muslim Voices* seems so unproblematic to American audiences?

[3] Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror." *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 651–681; Finbarr Barry Flood, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art." In Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*. (Routledge, 2007).

[4] Winegar, 653.

[5] Flood and Winegar have identified three trends: First, the focus has been on exhibitions that centered on the historical or ancient art of the Middle East, celebrating its past glory. The goal is well intentioned in showing that Muslims had a human and artistic side prior to the rise of fundamentalism and al-Qa'ida's anti-Western ideology. Second, in the performative and musical arena, the focus has been on either music that highlights Islam as a moderate and peaceful religion, such as Sufi music, or on musical styles perceived to be critical and antithetical to Islamic fundamentalism such as Algerian rai. Third, in the visual arts, and particularly in the contemporary art scene, the balance of representation seems to favor art of Middle Eastern women artists. More specifically, those artists whose works are viewed as critical of gender inequality in Muslim societies emerge as the most favored and most celebrated.

[6] One could cite exhibitions such as *The Veil,* inaugurated a few years ago in London; the recent incarnation of the Sharjah Biennial; *Dis/orientation,* organized by the House of World Cultures in Berlin; and the inclusion of projects such as Emily Jacir's *Material for a Film* or *Where We Come From* in major contemporary art exhibitions and in prominent institutions as examples of more careful approaches. This is also accompanied by a new regime of art criticism and publications by art critics and art historians from the region itself. The rise of art journals such as *Bidoun* and *Third Text Asia* are cases in point.

Islam/veil, etc., but to present a critical narrative related to such a historically complex and diverse entity variously called Middle East/Islamic world/Arab world. This remains a major curatorial challenge—even more so when Central Asian art is added to consideration. In a rapidly transforming and globalizing world, *translation* offers a key concept in navigating political and cultural discourses. In this regard, *Tarjama/Translation*, curated by Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi and Reem Fadda, offers a rich framework within which to address many of these gaps.

Translation here is seen not simply as a means of communication across language barriers but as a metaphor for cultural processes, for transnational identities, for new subjectivities beyond national spaces, and ultimately for a new vision of emancipation from old models of Eurocentric universality and constructed hierarchies, more specifically in the art world. As Hito Steyerl has pointed out, curatorial politics and politics of display in the context of art galleries and museums become part and parcel of translational processes.[7] *Tarjama/Translation* accordingly recasts exhibitionary practices pertaining to contemporary Middle Eastern and Central Asian art by seeking to address the regions' historical resonances and their emergent political, social and aesthetic landscapes. As Iftikhar Dadi has noted, *Tarjama/Translation* offers "approaches of visual translation for engaging with the complexities of our present era," which constitute the experience of artists of the region and its diasporas, "saturated with intense mediatized visuality." The exhibition is moreover distinctive for considering Central Asia along with the Middle East, encouraging viewers to examine the longstanding connections, but also key disjunctions, between the two regions.

Translation functions here as a means to assert the dilemmas of the self and society via performative acts enacted spatially or temporally. This is evident in many works in *Tarjama/Translation* that bring up issues of subjectivity, textuality, history and location for critical examination. Translation also provides a conception for a public sphere in which modernity, postmodernity and cosmopolitanism are continually restaged, producing a movement toward new imaginaries—so crucial for the Middle East and Central Asia, which are currently marked by numerous political and social impasses.

Artists participating in *Tarjama/Translation* share a number of ideas and conceptual strategies, but each is exceptional in the aesthetic practices through which they address key issues facing the self, the region and the world.

[7] Hito Steyerl, "Beyond Culture: The Politics of Translation," essay excerpted in http://translate.eipcp.net/concept/steyerl-concept-en

Translation as Significance

LEEZA AHMADY

Translation is basic to humanity's existence. We are distinguished by our brain's ability to translate thoughts into language. The human sensory system is intricate, conducting the stimuli we receive from the environment to the parts of our brain that process this information. Yet in the speed of our encounter with globalization, we are flooded with what contemporary Chilean philosopher Dario Salas calls "dead information"—dead because the average person cannot possibly process the quantity and velocity of stimuli he or she encounters every day.

If translation can be considered to be a method for processing information, it is the skill by which one set of information is connected to another so that it is comprehensible. More eloquently said, to translate is to render significance: the *meaning*, and the *importance* of something at hand. The desire for meaning is essential to human nature. Our identity as a species depends on it. Objects, places, images, sounds, etc., are merely bits of information unless we process their relevance in relation to our life.

The best contemporary artists are perhaps also the greatest translators. They create works of significance by transforming experience, perception and thought into acts and materials of communication. Artists scrutnize and use everything at hand—matter, culture, society, beliefs, and concepts—as material for translation. Time and again, they give us profound insights into matters that are sometimes beyond the limitations of materiality and skills. They are able to do so due to their tenacious effort in instigating inquiry.

Discoveries in the fields of linguistics, psychology and other sciences have not only greatly transformed our ability to communicate, but these disciplines also explain our need for communication. Yet there are realms of failure within the phenomenon of translation. Differences in cultures and inside each individual present serious barriers for communication. By challenging the conventional translation of texts, ideas and other norms from one language to another, from one value system to another, the artists in *Tarjama/Translation* proffer new prospects for empathy and understanding.

Tarjama/Translation is an unprecedented and timely exhibition bringing significant works of art from cities around the world (Cairo, Dubai, Tehran, Palestine, Beirut, Sharjah, Kabul, Almaty, Istanbul, London, Berlin, Paris, Gwangju and more) to the doorstep of New York audiences at the Queens Museum of Art, with satellite screenings at New York's Asia Society and the Chelsea Art Museum.

In this exhibition, translation occurs in multiple forms; sometimes conscious and other times as a byproduct of an artist's exercise. We hope that every work in the exhibition offers viewers an opportunity for expanding their consciousness. In this manner, the exhibit is a presentation of artists engaged in various acts of translation: reading between the lines, probing the obvious, and burrowing through the camouflage of appearances to contemplate matters of cultural specificity and universal relevance.

The works of Pouran Jinchi and Nazgol Ansarinia suggest that some things may be untranslatable. Their works pause the "automatic-pilot" mode by which we respond to certain authoritative texts. On a beautiful scroll that rolls down from ceiling to floor, Jinchi has painstakingly transcribed only the short vowels of a single chapter of the Qur'an to address multiple problems in translation. By deliberately excluding the consonantal text, Jinchi contemplates ritual itself as a medium for translation. The work is also a metaphoric reference to the experience of millions, who connect to God's words without understanding Arabic, the language in which the sacred Qur'an is written, and which is required for its recitation.

Ansarinia, on the other hand, dismantles another kind of language, the contents of a post-September 11 U.S. security report. By rearranging the documentís vocabulary as an alphabetized dictionary and breaking the ordering of and relationships between the words, Ansarinia calls attention to the processes of meaning production. The work is presented in a series of four books. Parallel to her treatment of the text within, the cover of each book illustrates a different arrangement of the elements of the U.S. Presidential Seal.

Other strategies for translating meaning are also deployed by artists in the show. Almagul Menlibayeva, Alexander Ugay, Lara Baladi, Akram Zataari, Wael Shawky and Yto Barrada, for instance, apply performance-based actions, fictive narratives, staged events and environments juxtaposed with documentary footage, historical and cultural memorabilia, and in some cases appropriation of works by forgotten or nameless artists, journalists, musicians and other significant individuals from the past and present.

Artists Esra Ersen and Rahraw Omarzad scrutinize collective social behaviors. As no one is born in a void, we are all subject to social programming. Esra Ersen's *I Am Turkish. I Am Honest. I Am Diligent* installation explores the administration of control and addresses the way identities are shaped and transformed in specific contexts or power structures. Her presentation in Queens builds on her previous work with

two groups of pupils, one in a school outside Münster in Germany and the other in Gwangju, Korea. These projects entailed that the children wear Turkish school uniforms for a week, and write down their own experiences while Ersen videotaped their various activities and interactions. Their notes were then transferred directly onto the uniforms. For *Tarjama*, the artist once again translates the transformation of identity and experience to New York viewers and school groups, by exhibiting both the uniforms and video footage.

In a series of mostly silent short videos, Rahraw Omarzad and other members of Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA) address a variety of subjects related to societal conditioning, including the effects of standardized education on the individual psyche. For *Tarjama,* the curators have installed CCAA's humorous and perplexing videos on a monitor inside a recycled security booth. Only one person at a time may enter the small booth to view the works. This spatial restriction and manner of presentation is a reference to the dire circumstances in which artists produce works in Afghanistan. It is also a celebration of these artists' creative and intellectual stamina to overcome those limitations in order to "create poignant responses to war, loss and recovery that speak equally of trauma and hope, paradise lost and found."

Some artists, such as Dilek Winchester, tackle the task of translation literally. In her work titled *Turkish Novel: On Reading and Writing,* the artist attempts to translate actual texts from the first Turkish novel that only a few generations ago everyone in Turkey could read. But now, almost no one can. Until 1928, Turkish was written with a version of the Perso-Arabic script known as the Ottoman Turkish script. In 1928, as part of his efforts to modernize Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk issued a decree replacing the Arabic script with a version of the Latin alphabet, which has been used ever since. Nowadays, only scholars and those who learned to read before 1928 can read Turkish written in the Arabic script.

Central Asia is famed for its turquoise-blue-tiled mosques, mosaic-filled tombs and minarets reaching towards the sky, reminders that a few centuries ago, Samarqand and Bukhara (Uzbekistan), Isfahan (Iran) and Balkh (Afghanistan) were artistic centers for the entire Islamic world. The color blue thus symbolizes the regionís past glory and dreams for the future. In their photo installation *Blue Period,* Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev question how power shifts from one appearance to another without actual substantial change. In their photo installation *Blue Period,* they ingeniously capture the transformation of Kazakhstan after the fall of the Soviet Union. Beautiful portraits of people, buildings, monuments, markets and grocery goods document the "country's peaceful and informal movement to replace Soviet red with the bright and hopeful color: turquoise blue." Like their Soviet predecessors, Central Asian governments use such symbols of pride to revive national historical memories in order to fashion new propaganda campaigns to legitimize and perpetuate their authoritarian rule. *Blue Period* is a poetic commentary on the theatrics and subtleties of change that asks: How much change in a society is organic? And how much is manufactured rhetoric?

Another common theme for artists in the show such as Mitra Tabrizian, John Jurayj and Farhad Moshiri is the effect produced by the enormous ocean of information channeled to people through popular culture. In particular, these artists take on the instruments of popular media: television, newspapers and the World Wide Web.

Daytime television has always been a subliminal host for highly desirable consumer products on the market; yet globalization has accelerated this phenomenon on a dazzling scale. Farhad Moshiri is the first Iranian artist to galvanize the international art market with million-dollar prices. He is also known for his masterfully ironic works that employ the amalgam of traditional Iranian art forms with those of consumerist globalized popular culture, prevalent in his country. In collaboration with Shirin Aliabadi, Moshiri reedits scenes from Iranian soap operas in a video titled *Tehran TV Disoriented*. Moshiri cuts out scenes from various contemporary Iranian shows, pasting them alongside scenes from shows of prior decades. The result is an odd and humorous *telenovela*-collage conveying how such seemingly innocent melodramas have become potent negotiators of social etiquette and indoctrination in society.

Farhad Moshiri's *Chocline* and John Jurayj's *Marine Barracks* provoke reflection about the age-old paradox of the sublime and the decadent in art. Edvard Munch's *Scream* and Andy Warhol's *Green Car Crash* are forever gripping due to our inclination to be spellbound by images that are both terrific and daunting. Explosions, dead bodies, suggestive horror narratives and other similar decadent subjects have strong sexual appeal in the frameworks of both high art and popular culture.

Selected from a series of paintings titled *Sweet Dreams, Chocline* is rendered by Moshiri using a cake-icing dispenser to sculpt the figure of a dead body on canvas with thick, colorful and delectably lifelike pigments in the shape of mini cupcakes. (Usually these kinds of cakes are served to guests in Iranian households on special occasions.) The body is outlined mimicking the dramatized chalk-

lined bodies portrayed in detective movies and television shows. The work is displayed on the floor to emphasize both the hypnotic and addictive nature of today's globalized economy of images.

As curators, we have attempted to stress certain key issues frequently omitted when considering regions as closed totalities—the often disregarded fragments that make up the whole. Connecting the Middle East and Central Asia, for example, is a way of bringing attention to the widespread confusion about what constitutes "Asia," "Central Asia" and "the Middle East" today.

Historically, Iran and Afghanistan were considered part of Central Asia. Despite the fact that they share a great many historical, cultural, linguistic and spiritual ties with the other Central Asian nations, they have been linked to or severed from them according to the political whim of superpowers. When the Shah was overthrown in 1979 by Islamic revolutionaries, Iran was suddenly plucked out of Central Asia and from then on, described as a part of the Middle East. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, only the five ex-Soviet republics (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) have been referred to as Central Asia. For many years, Afghanistan simply hung in limbo—nowhere in particular—until the events of September 11 shot it definitively into the Middle East, at least for a while. Recently it has been also referred to as being part of South Asia.

For many people, the fact that the Middle East is a vast territory within Asia is also surprising. In the United States, the term "Asia" conjures up China, Korea and Japan, and only very recently India. Some even refer to the Middle East as Western Asia. Still, vast areas of Asia remain missing from the picture. In addition, the media's addiction to sensationalist stories and the general ignorance and naïveté of policy makers end up influencing the cultural and geographical nomenclature of the Middle East.

These considerations have led us to organize an exhibition that questions these lines of division. We hope that the array of works in *Tarjama* demonstrate the difficulty of attempting to define such a complex and intricate phenomenon as the Middle East in a closed fashion. While regional references have their uses, all categories usually tend to narrow perspective. Moreover, the artists featured in *Tarjama/Translation*, like many successful artists in the world today, live and create works across many continents. Their profession requires that they travel incessantly. Thus they exist as modern metropolitan nomads. And a major reason for adjoining the regions of Central Asia and the Middle East in this exhibition is the fact that they are currently the most underrepresented artistic communities in New York, and perhaps in the world at large.

Tarjama/Translation is meant to serve as a small but important survey of works made by a group of extremely active and internationally recognized artists, each practicing an exceptional command of aesthetics and genres specific to themselves. Viewers are invited to reflect on the differences and similarities in the exhibiting artists' strategies and means of expression. They might notice, for example, that many of the Arab artists tend to use books, the Internet, newspapers, and other text-based artifacts in an archival and perhaps documentary fashion; interviews, conversations, speeches, etc., are also part of mainly narrative-based works. In contrast, artists from Central Asia—Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and including Turkey and Iran, are more image-prone, heavily relying on metaphoric means such as fantasy, ceremony, satire, staged performance and other deconstructive devices to make works that are equally engaging.

To understand the subtleties of such nuances, a more in-depth critical analysis of the two regions' particular intellectual and cultural heritage may be useful. Historically, the written language as a high art form characterizes the Arab world's aesthetic tradition. Central Asia, on the other hand, is embedded in centuries-old traditions of storytelling, street theater and weaving. But while specificity plays a role in most works produced by contemporary artists, all significant works of art must also have broader relevance.

All the artists, however, refrain from offering conclusive solutions. Most works are open-ended, with numerous markers and clues to help viewers decipher their own meaning. After all, the world is filled with agents and institutions trained to make definitive statements: the government, the army, the media, not to mention celebrities. Viewers are therefore encouraged to relate to the exhibition not just for how a work might translate an artist, place, culture or system, but what it communicates with regard to larger contexts and dilemmas of the world, and in artistic practice itself.

Significance, like gold, is hermetic; one must dig for it beneath the surface.

Translation and Contemporary Art

IFTIKHAR DADI

Tarjama/Translation maps an influential subset of recent work from the Middle East and Central Asia and its diasporas as a complex and dynamic translational undertaking. Not intended as a "complete" or even a representative exhibition, *Tarjama/Translation* nevertheless understands the work of translation as being multivalent, from the specificities of textual and visual maneuvers to the larger sense of revealing fissures of the self, community, site and temporality. The exhibition foregrounds how contemporary artists negotiate the continued dislocational force of modern historical formations and track newer dilemmas engendered by globalization. Translation includes the sense of movement and process, of marking multiple locationalities, of delayed temporal receptions, and of aporias of meanings and productive (mis)readings.

Readings engendered by *Tarjama/Translation* are not to be confused by the usual orientalist tropes in which much Western representation of the region remains mired,[1] and which have unfortunately charcterized even otherwise excellent recent exhibitions of contemporary art from the region.[2] *Tarjama/Translation* strives as much as possible to avoid the tropes of veiling, harem, violence, terrorism and the equation of an essentialized Islam with the region. This is not to suggest that questions of gender and sexuality, violence, and religious reformulations and the like are not important contemporary predicaments. Indeed, artists included in this exhibition render many of these dilemmas very visible. Rather, it is emphatically to claim that understanding the contemporary concerns of regions that are in fact deeply urbanized, highly mediatized and crossed by multiple economic, social and political faultlines of globalization are ill-served by recourse to monolithic orientalist clichés and instead require "new forms of translation ... for channeling the world's friction."[3]

The regions of the Middle East and Central Asia are overlaid by a palimpsest-like web of historic and modern connections, whose density can be traced to cultural exchanges and institutional developments during the 'Abbasid era (750-1258), the refinement of the Persianate cultural world of the late medieval and early modern period, and the political umbrella of the Ottoman empire that extended into the modern era. But as Lebanese artist Walid Sadek has perceptively noted, these labels are themselves broad and highy problematic markers papering over multiple faultlines: "I find the list of ... names such as Arab World, Pan-Arab Nation, Islamic World, Middle East, Near East, Orient, Levant, MENA, quite significant in its attempt to baptize a region. The mere repetition that defines this growing list of names is indicative ... of a lacuna that occupies the centre of a willful act of representation." Nevertheless, Sadek recognizes that the very insistence on attempting to characterize the region points to "a certain thickness, an insubordinate material presence that persists in exceeding that same act of representation."[4] It is precisely in this sense that the terms Middle East and Central Asia are deployed here, not as essentializing labels but as dense nodes in historical and contemporary transnational exchange networks.[5] They mark the sense of dislocation and displacement together with belonging and affiliation, and signify the persistent residue of lives and locations marked by crisis. Rather than being simply bounded by the nation-state framework, they mark the sense of regionality as *subnational* and *transnational*: a space traversed by migration of peoples, materials and ideas, in which 20th-century nationalist ideologies are increasingly on the wane.

Tarjama/Translation showcases works that deploy translation as *contemporary* rather than modernist. Modernism had largely eschewed engagement with the temporality of the present. Rather than inhabiting a particular social landcsape or engaging with immediate events, it offered instead metaphoric alternatives to the world outside the studio. By contrast, the sense of contemporaneity is immersed in a powerful sense of a temporality that encompasses the immediate present, but also extends over personal and social dilemmas condensed over the course of the

[1] For example, see Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Emram Qureshi, "Misreading 'The Arab Mind': The dubious guidebook to Middle East culture that's on the Pentagon's reading list." *The Boston Globe*, May 30, 2004. www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/05/30/misreading_the_arab_mind/. Accessed March 15, 2009.

[2] For a cogent discussion, see Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror." *Anthropological Quarterly*. Vol. 81, No. 3 (Summer 2008): 651-681. The recent Saatchi exhibition, which showcases some excellent work, has nevertheless been titled *Unveiled: New Art From the Middle East*. www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/unveiled/. Accessed March 15, 2009.

[3] Terry Smith, "Introduction." In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Duke University Press, 2008), 11.

[4] Stephen Wright, "Territories of Difference: Excerpts from an E-mail Exchange between Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz and Walid Sadek." In *Out of Beirut*. Edited by Suzanne Cotter (Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 63.

[5] Scholars increasingly recognize the transnational dimensions of these regions. Representative publications include Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed. *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (Routledge, 2005); Touraj Atabaki and Sanjyot Mehendale, eds. *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora* (Routledge, 2005).

modern history of the 20th century. The wrenching transformations wrought by the Turkish Republic that overthrew the Ottoman era; ongoing Palestinian dispossession for more than six decades; the failures of Arab nationalism centered in Egypt; the reinscription of nomadic Central Asia by centralized Soviet developmentalism and its subsequent passage in the post-Soviet era toward dictatorial regimes; personal, social and political struggles in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution; and the unimaginable human costs in Afghanistan and Iraq incurred in the last few decades are only some of the major events in recent history that continue to powerfully impact the present.

"The only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs," notes Terry Smith in a related context, "is that it may last for an unspecifiable amout of time: The present may become, perversely, 'eternal.' "[6] The larger movement toward contemporary modes of artistic practice has been quite rapid in the region.[7] Contemporaneity as an artistic modality, however, brings additional complications, both blockages and openings, in the works' legibility. The contemporary work of art, unlike modernism, resolutely offers no transcendence and no attempt to redeem events and crises into a metaphor. Rather, it insistently maps the multiple dislocations and antinomies in a region characterized by nationalist ideological fantasies and widespread political repression that persist despite their increasingly hollow status. In this sense, the contemporary work of art seeks to speak from a location in which hegemony is increasingly suspect, due in part to the intensified communication engendered by globalization, yet no ideological substitute is ready at hand to provide a sense of direction. Nevertheless, contemporary art also powerfully offers new ways of imagining the region, as located in-place, yet open to transnational exchanges, but without recourse to appeals to authenticity.

Translation has usually been understood primarily as a language-based operationóindeed the now superseded English word *dragoman* (based on the Arabic word for translation, *tarjuman*) was the offical title of a native speaker of Arabic, Persian and Turkish assigned to European diplomats and traders during the Ottoman era. In *Tarjama/Translation*, language and text remain important, but the exhibition offers approaches of visual translation for engaging with the complexities of our present era that is saturated with intense mediatized visuality. Apart from Ayad Alkadhi's paintings, the Arabic, Persian and Ottoman scripts and spoken languages offer Hamdi Attia, Emily Jacir, Pouran Jinchi, Sharif Waked and Dilek Winchester incisive textual and visual tropes. Rey Chow had argued that a translation between two terms, or a purely linguistic translation between two languages, cannot escape the problem of asymmetric power relations that structure our world, or cease looking for originary meaning. The advantages of a visual translation are precisely that by its mediating function it provides a third term that can bracket off these questions, and the visual maneuver now insists on the *coevalness* or presentness between the entities that comprise our era: "Once the coevalness of culture is acknowledged," notes Chow, "cultural translation can no longer be thought of simply in linguistic terms... [but] as the co-temporal exchange and contention between different social groups deploying different sign systems."[8] Strikingly, every artist in this exhibition rigorously explores their specific artistic formópainting, video, photography, etc., providing precisely such a series of mediating *third terms* for translating between cultures on the basis of artistic contemporaneity.

The work of artists in *Tarjama/Translation* is multidimensional and polyvalent. However, for the sake of a simplified analytical understanding, the themes of *self*, *community*, *site* and *temporality* may be identified here. Ayad Alkadhi powerfully examines the *self* in his paintings that draw upon the historical and modernist significance of the Arabic script in Iraqi art to address the dislocation of the Iraqi self in the current era. Farhad Moshiri considers the Iranian self as a mediated body with a lingering sweetness associated with it. A number of artists examine aporias of *community*, including Rahraw Omarzad, whose leadership in fostering collaborative artistic activities in Afghanistan in the face of violence and division translates social paralysis into a praxis-based modality. Esra Esren reterritorializes the meaning of

[6] Terry Smith, "Introduction," 9.

[7] Although diaspora artists such as Mona Hatoum have provided important precedents for some time. On contemporary modalities in the Arab world, see the review essay by Maymanat Farhat, "Circuit Breaking: New Approaches to Art in the Arab World." *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East*. Volume 4 (2009). www.contemporarypractices.net/index.html. Accessed March 26, 2009.

[8] Rey Chow, "Film as Ethnography; or, Translation Between Cultures in the Postcolonial World." In *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Columbia, 1995), 196-97.

Turkishness by transferring its supposed characterisics onto others. The displacement of geographies and the translation of *site* are evoked in the work of Gülsün Karamustafa, who offers an evocation of an underground women's fashion-based community in an otherwise faceless city. Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev track the movement of Central Asian architecture as it migrates from the Soviet sphere into a globalizing capitalist realm. And Solmaz Shahbazi shows us a key dimension to the region's architectural modernity that can no longer be distinguished from the "West." By her understated and reflective documentary work, she demonstrates the globalization of built form, and the placelessness of place. *Temporality*, an abiding referent in many artworks, undoubtedly spurred by the persistence of social and political crises the region has experienced during the 20th century, is poetically approached in Akram Zaatari's excavations and in Rabih Mroué's memory-based videos, along with the work of many other artists.

Every translation is *necessarily* incomplete, and as a meta act of translation, this exhibition makes no claim to the contrary. Indeed, an inadequate translation can and must be subject to ongoing critique, but the critique itself has no position outside the nexus of translation and has no choice but to offer a better translation as a substitute.[9] It is our hope that *Tarjama/Translation* will offer exactly such a provocation to its visitors and critics.

[9] I owe this insight to Naoki Sakai.

Tarjama/Translation:
Un/Layering Cultural Intentions through Art

REEM FADDA

The world needs more translation and less didactics. How can translation lay the groundwork for better cultural understanding? Can the project of translation be redeemed to provide emancipation from binary logic and hegemonic discourse? Can we escape essentialist and even racist discourse through mediation and translation? Ultimately, could the efforts of artists be seen as acts of translation in their intentionality? And can we understand the concept of translation as a conscious political act?

In *Tarjama/Translation*, our curatorial attempt was to redeem the project of aesthetics beyond national and identitarian specificity. The selected artists strive to link aesthetic and poetic developments with a broadly conceived politics. Issues such as historical memory, nation-building mechanisms, dispossession, the physical and psychological impacts of wars and selected internal conflicts are only a few topics that have been addressed by many contemporary Lebanese artists, such as Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, John Jurayj, Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige and many others. And in the Palestinian context, we increasingly see an analysis of belonging, identity, nationalism, diasporas, borders, land/geographies and narratives of conflict by artists such as Emily Jacir, Khalil Rabah, Sharif Waked, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti. However, artists' thematics are not exclusive to their location, but serve as the starting point of an investigation that has broader significance.

According to Walter Benjamin in his celebrated text on translation, "The Task of the Translator,"[1] two languages will always be set apart from each other. Each word and phrase in every language has a historical metamorphosis that we cannot disregard. Even with translations, time and distance serve to divide languages, but separateness calls on translation to be a redemptive force, but one that does not claim exclusiveness or higher truth. "Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?"[2] According to Benjamin, translation is the search of that common denominator, that "intention"[3] that is "pure language."[4] But what does Benjamin mean by these terms? The larger task of the translator approaches "original" notions of a Heideggerian understanding the world. Here we have an attempt at the translation of an intention, not a communication and redemption to an idea of a call for purity. For we could go as far as claiming that the purest commonality shared by all languages is that of existence. And the political force of that existence is to reclaim a larger understanding.

To this end, we may also recover the importance of Benjamin's injunction that a translator must expand her own language by means of the foreign language. The intertwining of languages is looked at through the lens of translation as a project of self-assertion and comprehension of our being. For this is where the purer language lies, in ourselves, amidst the many synonyms, anomalies and configurations of our realities. Literality and fidelity should be broken in translation. The world, its literatures, its stories are not meant for literal renditions. Benjamin spoke of the original language and its translation as fragments of a larger vessel, and said that translation should not block the light of the original language, but continuously allow for growth of meaning. If translation, according to Benjamin, is not merely communication, but a means of delving into the mind of things to retrieve the intention, then we may further claim that the ultimate aim of translation is to uncover, depict or transmit poetics. We begin to comprehend that art is not intended for pure communication, but that it transmits something that goes beyond subject matter. The only essentialist character art beholds, within this understanding, is that which retains aesthetics or poetics.

The work of the artists in *Tarjama/Translation* fluctuates between various points of departure and arrival, be it of places, spaces and geographies, intertwining harmonies of cultures, histories, times, societies and people. The artists do not merely communicate, but they also explore and build new dimensions to the word "beyond." They do so imbued with poesis, but not without lack of awareness of the political impact of their work. And a larger consciousness remains pervasive in their work. For their art is no fleeting experience—its ripples will allow comprehensions to diverge, cultures to flourish and come closer together, histories to grow and understanding of our world to deepen, all encapsulated in the bigger idea of translation. The artists use multiple layering schemes, be it visual references or historical, or cultural practices that lead

[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations: Essays & Reflections.* (Schocken Books, 2007), 69–82.
[2] Ibid., 74–75.
[3] Ibid., 74.
[4] Ibid., 74.

into each other. The intention here is to create a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of complexity. Its many strengths lie in its ability to heighten the referents it works from, and extract the essence that shines through with full force. Many of the artists in this exhibition follow this way of working, among them Lara Baladi, John Jurayj, Khalil Rabah, Sharif Waked, Michael Rakowitz and Emily Jacir.

In Lara Baladi's *Sandouk el Dounia,* we can see a box of boxes. It literally contains tens of images of photographic shots that Baladi has taken of performative subjects. She had spent months on end fabricating contexts, choosing "sets" and "characters," sewing outfits and taking a thousand photographs. Here stories, references and even myths create an intricately woven layered psychedelic narrative. We start with Dolly, her main character, who is wearing a white woolen sweater—a reference to Dolly the first cloned sheep that forever lingers in our memory—and a short blue skirt that somehow hints at the futuristic. Like all mythical characters, Baladi's Dolly is apparently born from a "higher level," which literally means, within this context, being delivered from a satellite dish. She goes on to create more of these *métissages,* these hyper-breeds and in betweens. Faeries, jinns, *ifreets*, mermaids, manga characters and even goddesses all become identities caught up in a polymorphous story. A new world of imagination vs. real is conjured. Even through this medium, we find that Baladi is capable of a fluid translation. She places the whole collage story within a large tapestry, transposing the art of photography on top of that of tapestry making. Tapestries have historically been used as renditions of larger documentation of times and happenings. Baladi seemingly wants to create a monumental visual transcript of stories of an un/real story of our era, transgressing geography and even concepts of time. Here the artist portrays the project of conflation between realms of the imagination and visual junk. This is a project of mapping, one that deflates codes of the visual to understand the surroundings and contexts that clearly point to the shaping of the psyche and perceptions of the self.

Sharif Waked has long practiced juxtaposing and intermingling references, especially historical and cultural ones, in a play of gestures and a rendition of new visualities and perceptions. In *Chic Point*, an ingenious piece of video art made at a crucial time for the Palestinians, when the coercive checkpoint was very prevalent, the artist redraws this visual reality by merging new codes: a) men's fashion shows, and b) Israeli military checkpoints. In the resulting combination, he creates fashion for Israeli checkpoints—all hinting at absurdities. In his calligraphic rendition of *Get Out of Here!*, Waked juxtaposes several layers of meanings and histories, referring again to this contact zone of the military checkpoint. He uses the old style of Arabic medallion calligraphy, the *tughra*, which had been primarily utilized in signage and originated during the Ottoman Empire. The specific design of the *tughra* he appropriates, known as the Diwani, references the imperial monogram of Emperor Sulayman the Magnificent. However, he uses the banal Arabic statement of "Yalla ruh min hon!" ("Get out of here!"), which is always (mis)pronounced by Israeli soldiers at military checkpoints in Palestinian cities, as a statement within the sign. This linguistic, cultural, historical encounter is no coincidence. Sulayman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) reigned over an empire that extended from Baghdad in Asia to Belgrade in Europe, to Cairo and Algiers in Africa, spanning Jerusalem and Damascus. He was known for being a patron of the arts and culture, himself being a man of letters, a military strategist, a great judicial expert and a protector of Jewish rights, for within his vast empire there had been many incidents of anti-Jewish sentiments that he denounced in a formal decree. Here his *ruh*, which conveniently translates from Arabic as "soul" besides meaning the verb "go," is summoned as witness, a witness of times of anguish, cultural strife and stagnation and practices of bigotry and racism.

Khalil Rabah's work negotiates monumentalities marked by time. His project has long been one that questions authorities and voices of nationalistic discourses. The markers and definitions of nations—be it their institutions, like museums, or mouthpieces, like the press—become like putty in this artist's hands. He makes museums and breaks them. His conceptual institution the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind could be in Athens near the Acropolis or it could be in Berlin, where it holds its fake 75th anniversary. The same museum celebrates a deal with the fabricated company the United States of Palestine Airlines. And that same Palestine would of course have a newspaper titled *United States of Palestine Times*. And two years later he will inaugurate a biennial in a pseudo state—Palestine—and then that same biennial will transgress geographies and negotiate permutations of nations entirely. The way Rabah insists on the continuum of his histories of place and objects seems contrived and yet at the same time genuine. The nation deemed "authentic" comes to be constantly interrogated with jolts of irony. What does it mean to sift through a national newspaper, such as the *New York Times,* juxtaposed with a place like Palestine? Rabah here is as interested in the

USA as he is in Palestine, bringing to our senses hegemonic discourses and all their fabricated permutations. He also seems to question the format and historical authority and autonomy of these adopted mediums: dictionaries, museums, newspapers, etc. The arena of fiction becomes a tool for navigation and investigation. However, one thing remains persistent, irrevocable, and unwavering: the unexplainable motive and drive to assert one's identity, but which Rabah keeps on questioning with equal force and strength. The undecided realm of the process of nation-building also provides a venue to project dreams, fantasies and illusions.

In John Jurayj's wide canvases we see streaks of color that range between the popsicle and the political in a disturbing yet alluring fraudulent "gaiety." The overdose of oranges and pinks hints at excess. The viewer cannot but feel captivated in a web of "sweetness." He draws the spectator in to reveal juxtaposed realities, places, times and even stereotypes. From one end, we see allusions to political upheavals in Lebanon, from the bombing of the U.S. marine barracks in 1983 to the remnants of the building that was witness to the assassination of Lebanese President Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Then we run into iconic art pop elements of reproduction such as Andy Warhol's. Lately, Jurayj has experimented with materials such as colored mirror—the color becomes deliberately embedded in the material. All the paintings on view here are thresholds or mirrors, whether he is using the medium explicitly or not. He explores his own identity through multiple narrations and variants that go from paradoxical political standpoints to multiple art historical referents. Where does the realm of the identity stand between the myriad contexts, politics, geographies, sexualities, societies and even ontics of perceptions?

Michael Rakowitz's *Return* is a long-term project in which he attempts to restore the import-export business of his grandfather, Nissim Isaac David, an Iraqi Jewish refugee, an enterprise that had ceased long ago. However, Rakowitz applies the business model to his current time, to "return" geographically and historically to more than one juncture. He chooses to import fresh dates from Iraq to the United States, to the shop that he had opened in Brooklyn. The video documentation of this social interventionist project records the process of "return" that the title so brilliantly captures. Translation can become a point of returning into realms and histories as a way of unraveling new codes and meanings. There is the constant reminiscence, which is dominant in the act of return. Can we ignore the fact that this piece was done at a time when Iraq was being ravaged by a war perpetuated by the United States? However, what remains the most poetic is how Rakowitz manages to easily anchor his project of cultural mediation to inundated codes of reference inherent in food: culture, nostalgia, import-export/Iraq-U.S., circulation, sharing and exchange. Here dates are the *golden* gold as opposed to the black. They are the forsaken industry. In Iraqi culture, dates are virtually sacred—thanks to their nutritional value—and even possess mythic status. When fasting, you break the fast with a date. Those same dates are found in many houses in Iraq as offerings in pots of hospitality for guests. Rakowitz tries to "revive" these traditions within an absurdly violent context, sharing handfuls and bags of sweet dates with strangers that become friends.

The work of the artist Emily Jacir makes for an appropriate finale for this essay, due to her ability to unmask layers and layers of political realities and "translate" them into tones of truth, of utter poetics. She utilizes translation as a complex formula for conveying realities and succeeds in various ways, capturing the human and emotive, while veering away from the essentialist, the didactic and the sensationalist. It would be much too mediocre to place this artist's projects in the specific realm of the Palestinian only. Palestine here is also a metaphorical playground of lost projects of cultural reciprocity, continuity and vivacity. Emily Jacir is on a journey to find them. This is evident in her well-known project *Where We Come From*, in which she documents only the realized answers of the question she asked Palestinians inside and outside their homeland: What could she do for them if she entered Palestine? The voices of the participants become a narration of a larger historical humanity, a story of deprivation at large and a redemption and fulfillment. She then set out on a three-year journey of delving into and reclaiming a parallel life of a deceased artist, Wael Zuaiter, assassinated by the Israeli Mossad. Zuaiter's obsession with translating *Alf Laila wa Laila* (*A Thousand and One Nights*) is reiterated a thousand times more with every attempt Jacir makes to narrate his story. The point that is always missed in *Material for a Film* is the cultural project that the translation of *Alf Laila wa Laila* stands for; the untold stories, the cultural and historical revival/survival and continuity, what it means

to encapsulate loss, and how we extend ourselves to the other through the mediation of the self. We have in our hands "material" for understanding the world better, yet we tend to overlook it. The artist shows us the way and walks us through it.

In *Untitled (Servees)* (2008), a site-specific audio installation in Jerusalem in front of Damascus Gate, which was once the center of the regional transport network of *serveeses* taxis with direct links to every Palestinian center, as well as Beirut, Amman, Baghdad and Kuwait, Jacir has *servees* drivers perform the calling of destinations from Jerusalem to these now impossible-to-reach locations. Yet the sound echoes the monumentality of the gates of an entrapped city. The sound piece becomes a historical monument in itself, and an aspiration that does not want to budge, a dream that cannot be revoked of the many places we can go to from here. For here existed the point of departure to a more extended world.

This all brings us to the piece on view in our exhibition *TRANSLATE ALLAH*, placed on the façade of the Queens Museum of Art. Here another monumentality is expressed—be it the museum and all it stands for, cultures or histories—to the word "Allah" that has been lost in translation, wreaking wars and havoc, and fabricating politics that claim "clashes of civilizations." Here the intention that should be absorbed is within the Word—that of the spoken authority of the word—and its unflinching capacity for rendering truths. It is no secret that Walter Benjamin was fascinated with how religions anchor themselves, from the very beginning, to the power of the word.[5] In this understanding of religion, it is illuminating to see how Jacir, the artist, allusively evokes that same power and voice of authority, for what higher platform holds the truth? Here it is important to highlight the context of the word "Allah": Allah is simply the Arabic word for God, and for Arabic speakers of all faiths—Islam, Christianity, Judaism and others— "Allah" precisely *is* "God." Five hundred years before Muhammad, Arab Jews and Arab Christians called God by the name Allah. And even today millions of Arab Christians use the word "Allah" in their Bibles, songs, poems, hymns, writings and worship, as they have been doing for over nineteen centuries. How has the history of this word been misconstrued; where has it been lost? In addition, Jacir obviously refers to the larger capacity of translation and the role of art and culture in bridging the fissures and healing chasms or overcoming "clashes." She intentionally uses the word "translate" in the affirmative, and as a verb, one that should move from intention into action. However, it is for us to comprehend the place where the artist stands; toward God, one that stands for a larger entity or concept who has the capacity to absolve us all.

[5] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*. Ed. M. Bullock & M. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 62–74.

Tarjama/ Translation curators

LEEZA AHMADY

Born in Afghanistan and raised as a young teenager in the United States, Ahmady is an independent art curator, educator, and a noted specialist in art from Central Asia. Ahmady has been designing unique gallery spaces all over New York, implementing innovative programs that welcome varied art forms. She is also Director of Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) at Asia Society, an annual citywide event showcasing artists at leading museums and galleries across New York City. She has traveled widely in Centvral Asia as part of her ongoing curatorial project promoting the largely unknown artists of the region in various international art forums, including the Venice Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. Most recently she curated *The Taste Of Others,* at Apexart in 2005, *The Paradox of Polarity: Contemporary Art from Central Asia* at Bose Pacia in 2007, *Parable of the Garden: New Media Art from Iran & Central Asia* at The College of New Jersey Art Gallery, and *I Dream of the Stans* at Winkleman Gallery, which traveled to MARTE Museo de Arte de El Salvador in 2008. Ahmady performs and teaches a combination of Afghan and Indian dance practices and is a founding member of two non-profit organizations: NURTURArt Non Profit (USA) and School of Hope (USA/ Afghanistan). She is an advisor to arts organizations in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, and the newly established Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA). Her writings have been published in *Asia Art Archive*, *Art Asia Pacific* and *Flash Art Magazine* among other publications.

IFTIKHAR DADI

Iftikhar Dadi is Assistant Professor, Department of History of Art at Cornell University. His research interests include modern South Asian & Middle Eastern art and visual cultures, comparative modernities, and postcolonial theory. His book on modernism in South Asian art is forthcoming from University of North Carolina Press in 2010. Recent essays include "Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2008); "Ghostly Sufis and Ornamental Shadows: Spectral Visualities in Karachi's Public Sphere." In *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia*, ed. Martina Rieker and Kamran Ali (Oxford, 2008); and "Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism." In *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (MIT, 2006). He co-curated with Salah Hassan, *Unpacking Europe*, an international exhibition of nineteen leading contemporary artists at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2001–2002, accompanied by a major critical reader co-edited with Salah Hassan, *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (Netherlands Architectural Institute, 2001). Iftikhar is also an artist who collaborates with Elizabeth Dadi. They have shown their work in numerous international venues, including *24th Sao Paulo Biennial*, Brazil; *Asia-Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Museum, Australia; *Liverpool Biennial*, Tate Liverpool, UK; Walker Art Center, Minnesota; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and Queens Museum of Art, New York City.

REEM FADDA

Reem Fadda is a Ramallah-based curator and art historian. She was Director of the Palestinian Association for Contemporary Art (PACA) between 2005-07 and worked as Academic Director to the International Academy of Art–Palestine, which she helped found in 2006, as part of her approach in broadening the perimeters of curatorial experience towards education. She has co-curated and has been involved in many projects on contemporary topics in the Middle East, especially those pertaining to architecture, space and geopolitics. These include *Liminal Spaces* 2005-08, and *Decolonizing Architecture and Ramallah Syndrome* that will be showcased in the Venice Biennial, 2009. She is the author of *Palestinian Women Artists: The Land = The Body = The Narrative* (2007). Fadda received her MA in Curating from Goldsmiths College and is currently awarded the Fulbright Scholarship to pursue her PhD in History of Art and Visual Studies at Cornell University, where her research focuses on contemporary aesthetic theory and practice of the Middle East.

catalogue contributors

Nurjahan Akhlaq is an artist and filmmaker who divides her time between London, Lahore and New York.

Waiel Ashry is an Egyptian writer and translator who currently resides in New York City where he studies Arabic literature at New York University. His first collection of stories *Sa'am New York [New York Spleen]* was published in Cairo in 2005.

Negar Azimi is a Senior Editor of *Bidoun*.

Shiva Balaghi is a historian who writes about visual culture in the Middle East; she is an editor of Middle East Report.

Steven Biller is editor-in-chief of *Palm Springs Life* and an independent curator and art writer based in Southern California. His books include *Alessandro Papetti: Blue* and *Betty Gold Retrospectiva*.

Martina Corgnati is a curator, critic and art historian based in Milan. She holds the chair of History of Contemporary Art at Albertina Academy of Fine Arts, Turin, Italy.

Sacha Craddock is an independent art critic and curator who lives in London. Curator for Sadlers Wells , co-curator for Bloomberg Space, she is the Chair of New Contemporaries, and co-founder of Artschool Palestine.

Media Farzin is an art critic and historian, and currently a PhD student in Art History at the City University of New York.

Salah A. Hassan is Goldwin Smith Professor and Director of the Africana Studies and Research Center, and professor of African and African Diaspora art history and visual culture, Department of History of Art, Cornell University.

Yahya M. Madra teaches economics at Gettysburg College and is an associate editor of Rethinking Marxism: A journal of economics, culture & society.

Laura U. Marks teaches at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, and is the author of, most recently, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (MIT Press).

Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic based between Rotterdam (NL) and the Middle East.

Hammad Nasar is a London-based curator, writer and gallerist. He is co-founder of the not-for-profit arts organization Green Cardamom.

November Paynter is an Istanbul-based freelance curator and writer, and Director of the Artist Pension Trust, Dubai.

Sherene Seikaly is Postdoctoral Fellow 2008-2009 in the Europe in the Middle East, the Middle East in Europe Program at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and Assistant Professor of History at the American University in Cairo.

Yulia Sorokina is an Independent Curator based in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Benjamin Tiven is an artist and writer.

William Wells is the Director of Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.

Elvan Zabunyan is a Paris-based contemporary art historian and art critic, she is Associate Professor at the Art History Department of the University of Rennes, Brittany.

captions

1 **Ayad Alkadhi** Iraq/United States, 1972
"I am Baghdad" Series, Nos. 11 and 12
2008-2009
Charcoal and Acrylic on Arabic newspaper on canvas
Each panel 48 x 48 inches (121.9 x121.9 cm)
Courtesy or the Artist

2 **Ayad Alkadhi**, Iraq/United States 1972
If Words Could Kill, From *Al Ghareeb* Series
2006
Photo collage,Acrylic, ink and pencil on canvas
72 x 24 inches (182.9 x 60.7cm)
Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph by Scott Gurst

3 **Nazgol Ansarinia**, Iran, 1979
Untitled I – Patterns series
2007
Digital drawing and ink on tracing paper
4 panels, 90 x 111 cm each
Courtesy of the Artist and Green Cardamom

4 **Nazgol Ansarinia**, Iran, 1979
NSS Book Series
2009
Printed paper bound with foil-embossed cover
21 x 29.7 x 2.5 cm
Courtesy of Artist and Green Cardamom

5 **Hamdi Attia**, Egypt/United States, 1964
Two Performances.Ram
2006-2007
Assemblage of images, text, video and audio clips
11minutes (5 minutes, 6 minutes)
Courtesy of Artist and Al-Masar Gallery, Cairo

6 **Lara Baladi**, Egypt/Lebanon, 1969
Sandouk el Dounia
Collage made in 2001. Tapestry made in 2008
Woven tapestry from collage of 10 x 15 CM colour photographic prints
650 x 790 cm
Courtesy of the Artist

7 **Esra Ersen**, Turkey/Germany, 1970
Stills from "I am Turkish, I am Honest, I am Diligent..."
2002, Video installation
DVD Pal, Mini DV 21'28", sound
Developed for Kwangju Biennial Korea

8 **Khaled Hafez**, Egypt, 1963
Video Stills from "Revolution"
2006
Single channel Video
Courtesy of the Artist

9 **Emily Jacir,** Palestine/United States, 1970
TRANSLATE ALLAH, 2003
Billboard
107 x 236 inches
Produced by the A.M. Qattan Foundation
Courtesy of the Artist and Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York, USA

10 **Pouran Jinchi**, Iran/United States, 1959
Tajvid Red (detail)
2009
Ink on paper
156 x 53 inches
Courtesy of Artist and Art Projects International (API), New York

11 **Pouran Jinchi**, Iran/United States, 1959
Alef Series (16 pieces)
Elmer's glue, ink, varnish on canvas
5 X 5 inches
Courtesy of Artist and Art Projects International (API), New York

12 **Pouran Jinchi**, Iran/United States, 1959
alef-A (red), Alef Series
2004
Elmer's glue, ink, varnish on canvas
5 X 5 inches
Courtesy of Artist and Art Projects International (API), New York

13 **Pouran Jinchi**, Iran/United States, 1959
che-CH (black), Alef Series
2004
Elmer's glue, ink, varnish on canvas
5 X 5 inches
Courtesy of Artist and Art Projects International (API), New York

14 **Pouran Jinchi**, Iran/United States, 1959
qaf-G (blue), Alef Series
2004
Elmer's glue, ink, varnish on canvas
5 X 5 inches
Courtesy of Artist and Art Projects International (API), New York

15 **John Jurayj**, United States/Lebanon, 1968
Untitled (Night Sky of Beirut, #1)
2009
Oil on linen
74 x 84 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

16 **John Jurayj**, United States/Lebanon, 1968
Untitled (Marine Barracks 1983, #4)
2008
Oil on linen
74 x 84 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

17 **Gülsün Karamustafa**, Turkey, 1946
Video Stills from "The City and Secret Panther Fashion"
2007
DVD, Projection
13 minutes
Courtesy of the Artist

18 **Almagul Menlibayeva**, Kazakhstan/Netherlands, 1969
Video Stills from "Queens"
2009
HD video, PAL, sound, colour, single screen
Commissioned by Queens Museum of Art
Courtesy of the Artist and Priska C. Juschka Fine Art

19 **Farhad Moshiri**, Iran/USA, 1963
Chocline
2007
Installation of 130 acrylic pastries
7ft x 4.5 ft
Courtesy of Josh Fink

20 **Rahraw Omarzad**, Afghanistan, 1964
Still from "Circle"
2004-2005
Video
Courtesy of the Artist and The Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA)

21 **Rahraw Omarzad**, Afghanistan, 1964
Still from "Re-opening"
2004-2005
Video
Courtesy of the Artist and The Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA)

22 **Rahraw Omarzad,** Afghanistan, 1964
Still from "Closed Door"
2004-2005
Video
Courtesy of the Artist and The Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA)

23 **Rahraw Omarzad**, Afghanistan, 1964
Still from "Sympathy"
2004-2005
Video
Courtesy of the Artist and The Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA)

24 **Rahraw Omarzad**, Afghanistan, 1964
Still from "From the World of Darkness"
2004-2005
Video
Courtesy of the Artist and The Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA)

25 **Khalil Rabah**, Palestine/USA, 1961
The United States of Palestine Times
2008
Newsprint, ink
22 x 15 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

26 **Michael Rakowitz**, United States / Iraq, 1973
Photographs from Video "Return"
2007
DVD
Courtesy of the Artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

27 **Solmaz Shahbazi**, Iran/Germany, 1971
Still from "Persepolis"
2005
Single Channel Video
Projection, 17 minutes
Courtesy of the Artist

28 **Wael Shawky**, Egypt, 1971
Video stills from "The Cave" (Amsterdam Version)
2005
Video (color, sound)
12:45 min, loop
Courtesy of the Artist

29 **Wael Shawky**, Egypt, 1971
Video stills from "AlAqsa Park"
2006
Video Animation
10:00 minutes
Courtesy of the Artist

30 **Mitra Tabrizian**, Iran, UK
Stills from "The Predator"
2004
DVD Film
26 min
Courtesy of the Artist, Photograph by Julian Burgin

31 **Alexander Ugay**, Kazakhstan, 1978
Still from "Cosmic Uncertainty"
2003
Video, 4:31 min
Courtesy of the Artist and Roman Maskalev

32 **Alexander Ugay,** Kazakhstan, 1978
Stills from "Bastion"
2007
Video, 5 min
Courtesy of the Artist

33 **Sharif Waked**, Palestine/Israel, 1964
Get Out of Here
2009
Stencil on wall
148 x 252 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

34 **Dilek Winchester**, Turkey, 1974
On Reading and Writing: 3 First Turkish Novels
2007
Paper, cardboard, mixed media
Courtesy of the Artist and ARS AEVI, Museum/Centre of Contemporary Art Sarajevo

35 **Yelena Vorobyeva & Viktor Vorobyev**, Kazakhstan, 1959
Kasakhstan. Blue Period
2002 -2005
Color photos
Courtesy of the artists

36 **Akram Zaatari**, Lebanon, 1966
Still for "In This House"
2005
video
30 min.
Courtesy or the Artist

VIDEO PROGRAM

37 **Yto Barrada**, Morocco/France, 1971
Stills from "The Magician"
2003
Video, color, sound
18 min
Courtesy of the Artist

38 **Bouchra Khalili**, Morocco/France 1975
"Mapping Journey 1", "Mapping Journey 2"
2008
4:30 min and 3 min
Video, color, sound
Courtesy of the Artist

39 **Rabih Mroué**, Lebanon, 1967
Stills from "Face A / Face B"
2002
Video, color
10 min.
Courtesy of the Artist and Gallery Sfeir-Semler
Production: Ciné Poème

40 **Khaled Ramadan**, Lebanon/Denmark, 1964
Comrade Alfredo Neri
2005
Video
22 min
Courtesy of the Artist

6 Variations
(on a Haunted Wood)

OPENING DAY PERFORMANCE AT THE QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART, MAY 10, 2009

Video by Mariam Ghani
Choreography by Erin Ellen Kelly
Score by Shahzad Ismaily
Text adapted from Dante, W.H. Auden & Forugh Farrokhzad
Performed by Erin Ellen Kelly & Yana Kraeva

The performance 6 Variations, developed collaboratively by Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, starts with a story of a haunted wood--a constantly recurring sign of the terror and possibility of the unknown. The performance traces this notion across three different texts from different times, languages and places, while simultaneously translating it across multiple mediums and bodies through video projections, movement, and music.

AYAD ALKADHI

IRAQ/USA, 1972

A figure hangs from a noose in a field of black paint, an arresting image with line after seemingly endless line of curious, white-painted Arabic calligraphy. Another figure, a body shrouded in white and set into a dark space bordered by a field of elegant calligraphy, lies anonymously in a coffin, never to receive proper burial. And a black-and-white painting of a handsome young man, presumably the Iraq-born artist himself, appears either intent or afraid to speak of his personal story as fiery orange and red lines of calligraphy stretch from one side of the canvas to the other, a gestural cacophony of words overwhelming his mouth.

The newest paintings by Ayad Alkadhi, whose earlier thick, carved calligraphic paintings celebrated Baghdad's rich cultural tradition, have flattened over the years and now respond to the U.S. war in Iraq–the tens of thousands of unreported Iraqi casualties, the looted and destroyed institutions and the tortured prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

The role of the artist in times of war, historian Howard Zinn wrote, "is to transcend conventional wisdom, to transcend the word of the establishment, to transcend the orthodoxy, to go beyond and escape what is handed down by the government or what is said in the media."

Alkadhi offers an incisive commentary on the Iraqi death toll, infusing and sometimes juxtaposing iconography of Near Eastern and Western politics and religion. He belongs to a generation of artists seeking to retain their ethnic identity while assimilating into Western culture. His use of Arabic newspaper on mixed-media canvases, as well as in his own calligraphy, connects traditional Arabic to the cutting edge of contemporary art. The collision produces powerful images that ultimately express the artist's perceived existence as a U.S. resident constantly explaining his thoughts on the war, Saddam Hussein and the U.S. occupation of Iraq. "I should be painting how I feel," he says.

"After Abu Ghraib, something switched. Part of survival is to detach. I thought it was an art installation, but it wasn't. I tried to justify the action of the Americans." By that standard, Abu Ghraib, he says, was "almost Disneyesque. It's the modern face of the Spanish Inquisition, when all humanity destructs and one can insult another just because of where they come from. It was so visually compelling."

The intensity of his subjects matches the sophistication of his final pictures, which are at once provocative, honestly raw and aesthetically magnetic. Viewers want to read and understand the calligraphy, all of which holds meaning.

Looser calligraphy (Arabic graffiti) and abstracted figures also distinguish Alkadhi's recent work. His earlier photo-based paintings and meticulous calligraphy were too exacting for the incomprehensible blur of so many casualties and atrocities in his homeland. Abstraction offers a measure of privacy, overdue consideration, even dignity.

Steven Biller

1

1

2

nazgol ansarinia

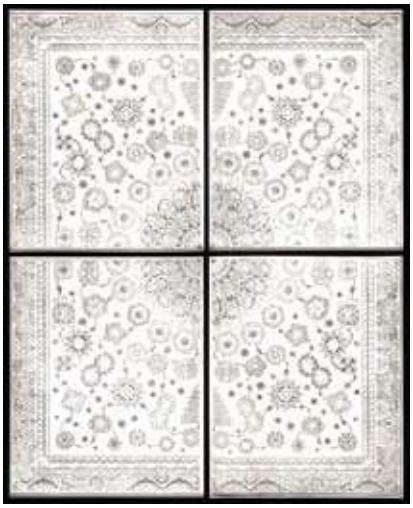
IRAN, 1979

How Things Work: The Practice of Nazgol Ansarinia

Nazgol Ansarinia's work of the past seven years examines the systems and networks that underpin her daily life. Born and raised in Tehran, she trained in design in London before completing an MFA in the U.S. and returning to her native Iran. These multiple trajectories, of geography and approach, inform her methods and the subjects of her explorations.

Ansarinia often seeks to reveal the "inner workings of a social system" by taking its components apart and putting them back together, to uncover assumptions, connections and underlying rules of engagement. Her practice is characterized by an emphasis on research and analysis that can be traced back to her background in design and engagement with critical theory. Her mode of working covers diverse media—video, three-dimensional objects, found street signs and drawings—and subjects as varied as automated telephone systems, American security policy, memories associated with a family house and the patterns of Persian carpets. Three series of works from the last three years—*Untitled (Do not give your opinion)*, 2006; *NSS* book series (2008); and *Patterns* series (2007–9)—highlight the uncovering of systems that is at the core of her practice.

In *Untitled (Do not give your opinion)*, 2006, she brings the language and aesthetics of public signs commissioned by government departments and dispensing moral advice to the city's inhabitants into the gallery space. This dislocation draws attention to



3

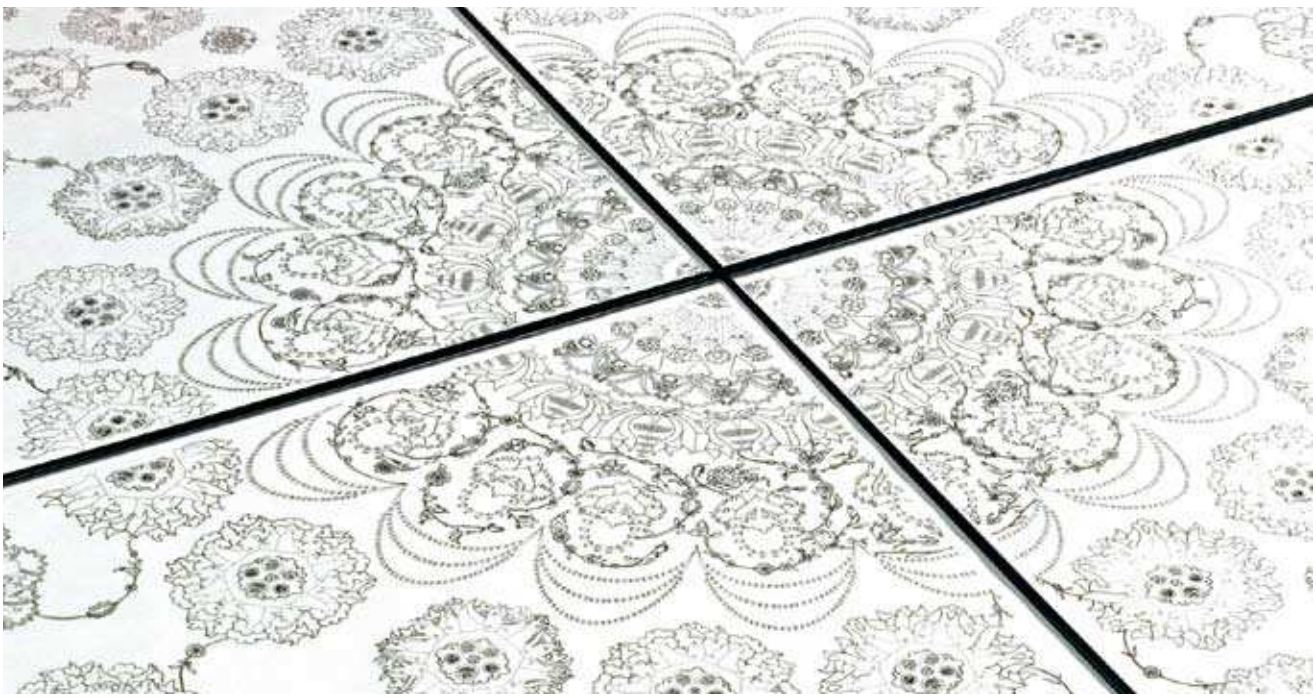
4

how these banal signs—brightly colored text in Farsi: be patient, do not lose hope, be afraid, do not boast, obey—function as aesthetic and moral wallpaper.

This mode of interrogating government-produced text is also reflected in the *NSS* book series (2008), in which the artist rearranges the contents of a U.S. security policy document into an alphabetized lexicon to break syntactical relationships and allow new meanings to emerge by drawing attention to the document's limited vocabulary with repetitions and emphases laid bare. She presents the work as a series of four books, with the cover of each book bearing a different arrangement of the visual elements of the U.S. presidential seal: a visual parallel to the treatment of the text within.

In her ongoing *Patterns* series (2007–9), Ansarinia embeds digitally drawn images of banal existence (a family on a scooter, an office worker drinking tea at his desk, wedding cakes) into the detailed and beautifully rendered patterns referencing Persian carpets. The works' seductive qualities shield the multilayered examination of life toward which they hint. By using the patterns and motifs of "traditional" Persian carpets with embedded imagery of contemporary Tehran, they serve both to update the Persian carpet and to draw a map of Tehran's social interactions.

Hammad Nasar



HAMDI ATTIA

EGYPT/UNITED STATES, 1964

5

Mistranslating the Untranslatable

Hamdi Attia's latest work can be read as a detailed study of the social and political implications inherent in the act of translation. In *Two Performances* (2006), he confronts seemingly opposing, but equally authoritative, cultural and political translations of the world by juxtaposing two influential cultural translators: Thomas Friedman, "the prophet of neoliberalism"[1] and Amr Khaled, "the Arab echo of neoliberal ideas after Islamicizing them."[2] Friedman translates the world for numerous ordinary American readers while Khaled does the same for many upper-middle-class men and women in Egypt.

While showing Friedman and Khaled's authority and influence, *Two Performances* demonstrates how similar their simplistic logic is. By splitting the screen into two windows, one showing either Khaled or Friedman, the other showing the audience and/or commercials (e.g., *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*), Attia questions this authority and makes them look like television entertainers. They are almost clownish figures, with Friedman repeating the same joke ad nauseam, and Khaled employing naïve logic to reach his audience. Both Friedman and Khaled become performers of clichéd discourses that translate the world into a binary of "us" versus "them": America versus the rest of the world for Friedman; Islam versus the West for Khaled.

Hamdi Attia uses preexisting materials, mainly footage from the Internet and commercials, reassembles them, puts them in unexpected contexts, and comments on them by editing them, arranging them in a particular order, and inserting intentionally mistranslated subtitles. He *plays* with appropriated narratives, with those who are considered some of its most popular figures.

Faced with, and freed by, the untranslatability of life, of the world, of the "real," artists and writers are left with already existing translations to work on, play with, distort and question. This is especially so in a neocolonial world where cultural translations (the interpretation of the other as backward or of entire regions as lawless) are used–as they have always been used–to legitimize empire-building, oppression and dehumanization. In such a climate, writers and artists like Attia are acutely aware of the process through which the world is rendered in art and literature, as well as in various political and religious discourses.

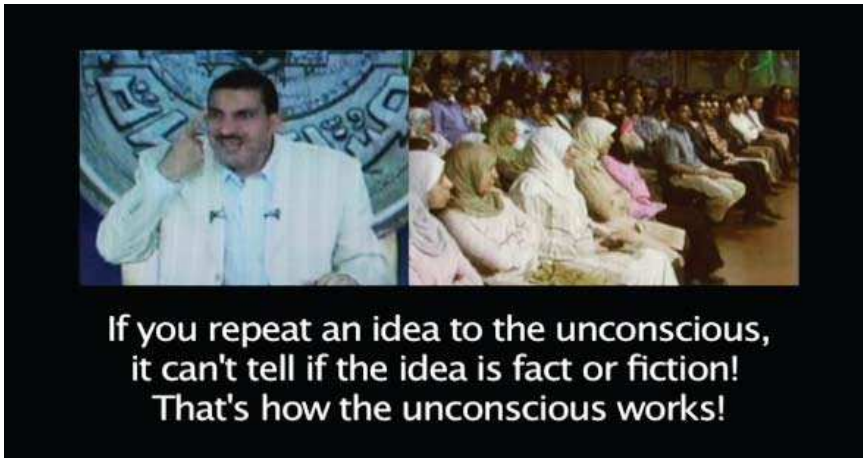
Attia, who grew up in Egypt and was one of the leading young artists in the Egyptian art scene of the early 1990s, belongs to a generation of Egyptian writers and artists known as "the generation of the '90s." Attia's relocation to the United States seems to have prompted a closer examination of the

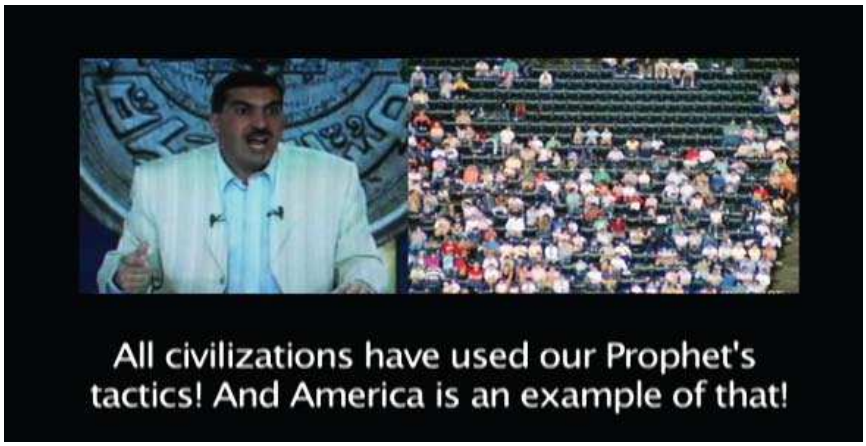
[1] Limoud, Youssef. "Between Thomas Friedman and Amr Khaled … An Interview with artist Hamdi Attia." [in Arabic] http://www.rezgar.com/debat/show.art.asp?aid=77188 All translations from Arabic are mine.

[2] Ibid

social and political significance of cultural translations. Like many recent immigrants to the U.S., Attia was certainly faced with the all-too-familiar issues confronting such marginalized people, including the pressing need to translate oneself to a different, and often hostile, context, and the urge to contest existing translations that tend to stereotype everything foreign.

Waiel Ashry





Lara Baladi

EGYPT/LEBANON/FRANCE, 1969

The audience is invited to immerse itself in the pieces Lara Baladi has created. Yet it is always up to the spectator to decide how much to yield to a work, or how many levels of interpretation to excavate.

In a recent interview with Gerald Matt, Baladi explains, "Most of my works question and challenge the history of image-making, both still and moving, and most of all the consuming of these images." Living in Cairo, a city whose photographic and cinematic representations are grafted in our visual memory—be they taken through a colonialist, touristic or other lens—is definitely a challenge for every visual artist. Completing each other's negatives, *Oum el Dounia* (2000; "The Mother of the World" in Arabic, and a common sobriquet for Egypt) and *Sandouk el Dounia* (2001; "The World in a Box" in Arabic) designate parallel universes. The former is about the openness of space: where earth and sky and water meet in the desert, and where there is an almost careless lightness; the latter is the claustrophobia of technology and the urbanized—dark and dense. This is Baladi's Egypt, *Oum el Dounia*, an iconographic *métissage*, wherein she combines hieroglyphic writing in the sand with the Arabic word for God (Allah), and at the center places the phrase, "I remember." The use of the latter phrase is an important comment on history and how memory is (mis)construed. *Sandouk el Dounia,* on the other hand, is a dark and cluttered game world with manga-like pop characters wielding a playful yet artificial sex-toy eroticism. At the center of the work, we find Baladi's "téta" ("grandma" in Arabic) as the primal feminine power Kali, the Hindu mother goddess associated with death and destruction, but also with time and change. Both this work and *Oum el Dounia* function as mosaics wherein every image makes up a grain of sand in the desert, or a pixel in the data sphere. The choice of collage as an artistic form reiterates a vested concern with image-making and how visual regimes work. There is a tension between the patched aesthetic of collages, which function as broken image shards, indicating a temporal cut and volatility, and the monumentality of constructing a timeless iconography and mythology. Seamlessly, Baladi leads us "through the looking glass" to "a glass darkly," where the perception of realities is scenographed into an extreme "performativity."

Detail

Nat Muller

Excerpt from "Images Towering Hope: Conceptions of Home and Time in Lara Baladi's Borg El Amal"
http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volume4/Borg%20El%20Amal.html

6

esra ersen

TURKEY/GERMANY, 1970

In her practice, Esra Ersen explores the transformations of individuals people and their codes of communication in the midst of local changes, and when exposed to other places. She works intimately with her subjects, who are often individually disconnected from general society, or form part of a subgroup whose members have created a sense of interrelatedness based on similar experiences. Such situations can result from shared difficulties, such as the process of acclimatization for immigrants, as seen in Ersen's video *If You Could Speak Swedish,* in which a group is formed by the need to learn Swedish in order to gain state residency. While this work focuses on spoken language and translation as a form of rehabilitation and obtaining social acceptance, in her video *Brothers and Sisters,* the Black community of Istanbul struggles against a more amorphous form of cultural mistrust by the local population, bred from historical stereotyping and lack of exposure to other cultures. On the other hand, by the glue-sniffing habit that they resort to in order to mentally escape their poverty, the young men featured in Ersen's work *This is the Disney World* have become misunderstood and disenfranchised by the locals. In all these examples, Ersen integrates herself into the group she is working with and earns the group's trust in a way that allows her to translate specific local situations for a broader audience.

For the work *I am Turkish, I am Honest, I am Diligent...,* Ersen works with a clearly defined group—a class of schoolchildren. She introduces a Turkish school uniform to the class, so that each child's daily habit of dress is reset within a different assigned structure. Adopting and wearing this alternative uniform creates a stronger bond between the classmates, as they share a new and specific experience, yet at the same time it separates them as a newly defined group from the other children studying in the same school. The project was initially developed in 1998 for a secondary school in Velen, Münsterland, in Germany, and adapted in 2002 for the 4th Kwangju Biennial in Korea. Ersen's video follows the children in diary form over the course of a week to explore the cultural connotations that occur when an alien set of codes is introduced. During their experience of adopting a new look and, to some degree, a new cultural identity, the children were asked to describe their impressions of their new situation, and their responses were printed directly on the articles of clothing. The video diary and the school uniforms are exhibited together as a visible testament to how people and places can be connected, and how such experiences are interpreted by a wider audience.

November Paynter

KHALED HAFEZ

EGYPT, 1963

"Every revolution comes with a bag of unfulfilled promises."

Khaled Hafez's three-channel video *Revolution* (2006) explores the failed promises of anti-colonialist revolutionary leaders, from the Middle East to Africa to Asia to Latin America. Divided into three parts—social equity, liberty and unity—the work asks: what happens when power changes hands? When social equity becomes militarism, when the free market makes people into wage slaves, when the fight for religious recognition turns to intolerance and fundamentalism, where do the ideals go?

In 1952, a group of military officers took over the Egyptian government. They promised to free the country from British rule, create a system of equal rights, distribute the wealth, unite different ethnic and political factions and create a functioning democracy. The people, like many in the Arab world who had endured the hardships of colonialism, were quick to believe the officers. Now, more than 50 years later, the promises remain unfulfilled: people are dependent on multinational corporations, there is a massive gap between rich and poor, national identity is strained by Islamic fundamentalism and civil war is always a possibility.

Khaled Hafez

8

emiLY JACir

PALESTINE/USA, 1970

Born in 1970 and living and working between Ramallah and New York, Emily Jacir has emerged as one of the most impressive young artists in the contemporary art scene. Much of her artwork, as several critics have noted, mobilizes the anxieties and instabilities of "place" by incorporating photography, performance, video, sculpture and installation. As T.J. Demos has argued, it is in her innovative use of neoconceptual strategies—photo-texts presentations, linguistic dimensions, task-based performance, statistical survey of responses, use of newspaper advertisements and the artist as service provider—that the exceptional inventiveness of Jacir's work is most evident.[1] Exile, a central theme in her work, has caused her to drift between mediums, "producing material dislocation, necessitating travel, and leading to collaborations with diasporic communities."[2] Most innovative in Jacir's work is her engagement with deterritorialization in artistic practices of the 1990s, drawing from the premise of site specificity central to conceptualist practice, and reconfiguring them in the context of the Palestinian narrative.[3]

Salah M. Hassan[4]

Perhaps seemingly the "simplest" work in the exhibition, Emily Jacir's billboard, *TRANSLATE ALLAH* instead offers a conceptual provocation that invites multiple readings. Is the Arabic word "Allah" to be equated with the English word "God"? Is Allah the name of the divine specific to Islam, or does it signify the divine beyond earthly divides and even beyond linguistic specificities? The Qur'an indeed references Allah in this latter sense, and asserts that any representational, delimited, or specific designation of the divine is tantamount to idolatry. This however, is not only a theological debate, but has real political effects especially in the wake of September 11. For instance, the BBC reported a speech in 2003 by Lieutenant-General William G Boykin, a senior US general, who "recalled a Muslim fighter in Somalia who said he had the protection of Allah against US forces. 'Well you know what I knew, that my God was bigger than his,' said Lt Gen Boykin. 'I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol.'" Here we have an exact reversal of the Qur'anic claims, and the "reality" and "bigness" of the General's God is pressed into service of US imperial interests, which embraces the notion of "freedom" domestically and internationally. Accordingly, "Donald Rumsfeld said he could not prevent military officials from making controversial statements. 'We're a free people. And that's the wonderful thing about our country.'"[5] It is a virtue of Jacir's work that she opens up this strange and urgent theologo-political landscape for reflection and critical examination.

Iftikhar Dadi

[1] T.J. Demos, "Desire in Diaspora," *Art Journal* (Winter 2003).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Excerpts from "Emily Jacir: To Sing Without Disturbing the Harmony!" In *Deutsche Borse Photography Prize 2009: Paul Graham, Emily Jacir, Tod Papageorge, Taryn Simon* (London: The Photographers Gallery, 2009).

[5] "US is 'battling Satan' says general." BBC. 17 October, 2003. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3199212.stm

9

Pouran Jinchi

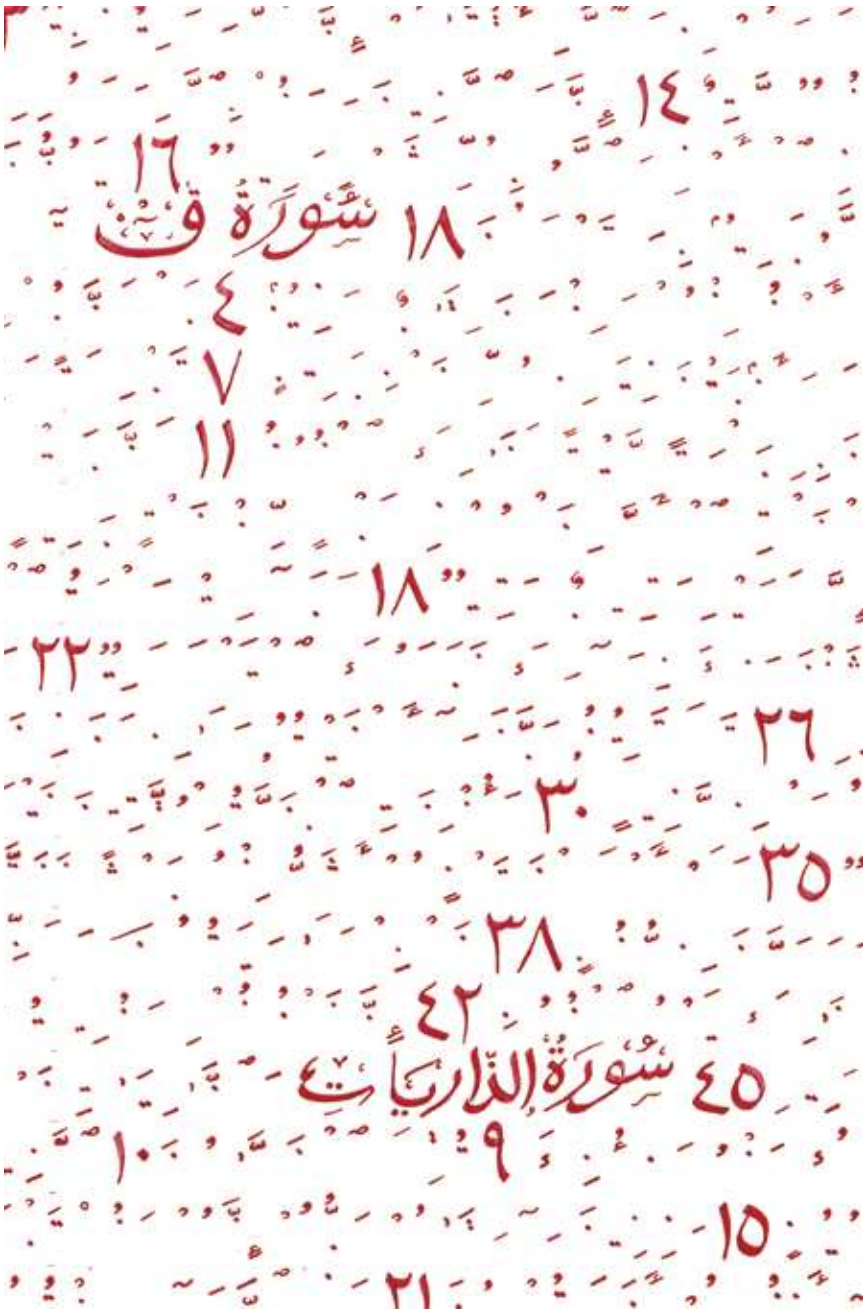
IRAN/USA, 1959

Pouran Jinchi's *Recitation*

The Qur'an, the Muslim book of revelations, is the subject of Pouran Jinchi's *Recitation*. Jinchi is a trained calligrapher, and frequently uses Persian and Arabic scripts in her paintings and drawings. Her compositions are based on letters and phrases from Persian poetry and everyday language, which become visual motifs as they are layered in intricate arrangements or singled out as symbolic forms. *Recitation*, however, stands apart from her earlier works in taking a religious text as its source material.

The Qur'an is the oldest and most sacred book of Islam, and has inspired calligraphic invention since it was first established as an authoritative text in the seventh century. But no matter how elaborate the calligraphy or illumination, the artist is forbidden from taking poetic license with the text itself. *Recitation* renegotiates this religious edict.

The "Tajvid" series, the main component of *Recitation*, is a group of large ink on paper drawings that unfurl from the ceiling to the ground. On these scrolls, Jinchi has copied out selections of the Qur'an by hand, producing a text that is faithful to the original in every way, but is missing all of the consonant letters. Only the guiding vowel sounds are left: These are the diacritical marks, or the *tajwid* (*tajvid* in Persian) of Qur'anic recitation. *Tajwid* is a system of stylistic rules that guides the reader through the conventions of Arabic pronunciation, intended to maintain the text's consistency through time, for readers from different language backgrounds. But in Jinchi's rewriting of the Qur'an, the lack of main consonant letters means that the text is completely unreadable. All that is left of the text are the vowel sounds, the chapter



titles, and the numbers that mark the end of each verse.

In *Recitation*, the Qur'an is presented not as text but as image; as the site of a painterly intervention within a system of signs and meanings. In *Recitation*, the Qur'an is as much an idea to be recognized and a form to be perceived as it is an actual text to be read. Through a single gesture of erasure, Jinchi brings focus back onto the visual pleasure of the religious text, while teasing apart the apparent unity of religious form. As she separates consonants from vowels, she also subtracts legibility from the "recitation." The Qur'an (whose name literally means "to recite") becomes a stand-in for its own identity. Yet Jinchi remains within the bounds of prescribed behavior toward the sacred Muslim text: Its authority has not been tampered with—it has been wholly displaced.

Within the history of Islamic art, legibility was often secondary in use of Qur'anic text, whether in lavishly illustrated manuscripts or in architectural ornamentation. In *Recitation*, Jinchi draws on the histories of the Arabic alphabet as abstract geometric shapes, and the Qur'an as a bearer of collective meanings. The rational system and minimal, repetitive forms of *Recitation* ask us to reconsider the ways in which any text—the Qur'an being a prime example—establishes a communicative relationship with its audience.

Media Farzin

11

12

13

14

JOHN JURAYJ

USA/LEBANON, 1968

A Special Kind of Wasteland: John Jurayj's Paintings of Beirut

The sun has gone under. The desert is at my mental door because Beirut is a special kind of a wasteland. It defies our means, belittles our intelligence, defeats the will.... Once this is said, its mystery unfolds, its beauty too.[1]

–Etel Adnan

John Jurayj paints landscapes of war-torn Beirut. His canvases feature ghosts of the city's bombed buildings—the destruction overlaid with drips and streaks of luridly vivid neon paint. Strife has scarred the city, torn asunder its historical memory, created flows of emigrants from its ports. By estimates, more Lebanese live in exile than in the country itself. "This is my concrete reality; I was born in America," Jurayj explains. "It is this diasporic distance that informs my art."[2] This interstitial space of exile creates a distance that permits "ways of seeing" that suffuse Jurayj's paintings.[3]

Exile produces complicated geographies that disrupt one's sense of place, shape one's identity, and color one's experiences. Despite the distance of time and space, trauma creates ties that bind. "Trauma is a productive experience," Jurayj told me as he walked me through an exhibition of his paintings in Chelsea in 2007. "I read the images of Lebanon from a space of trauma, an inherently emotional and personal trauma that creates a space—between myself and Lebanon, between myself and my father. They both remain, in a sense, inaccessible to me." Jurayj's cultural politics, then, are

15

[1] Etel Adnan, "Time Desire Fog," (2004). www.blithe.com/bhq8.1/8.1.04.html.

[2] Jurayj's quotes are from interviews with the author in December 2007 and March 2009. Much of my own thinking about art and exile, which appears in other writing, has been informed by my profoundly revealing conversations with Jurayj.

[3] The term is borrowed from Berger; see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972). Jurayj was born in Chicago to a Lebanese father and American mother (see artist's bio).

deeply personal. He is an Arab-American; he is an artist; he is a gay man whose father was born and raised in Lebanon. The weight of a war-torn homeland, of familial expectations, of different registers of masculinity bears down. Edward Said, whose work has deeply influenced Jurayj's art, spoke of the "need to reassemble an identity out of the refractions and discontinuities of exile…"[4] In a sense, Jurayj reassembles his identity in his paintings.

Jurayj mines photographs of Lebanon from his family albums and press archives. "My work is a translation of these images through different aspects of art history—abstract expressionism, large-scale landscape paintings." The formal aspect of his painting is referential, showing influences of Gustave Courbet and Gerhard Richter. "Courbet is a god to me," Jurayj says. "He showed the *materiality* of paint." Richter's formal experimentation stems from his own personal history—split between representational painting and modernist abstraction, each affiliated with the ideologies of the divided postwar Germany.[5] Jurayj's artistic approach embraces both strategies of painting. Through the layers of neon abstractionism, one sees the skeletal remains of buildings—the U.S. Marine barracks bombed in 1983, the site of the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, the buildings pierced by missiles in 2006.

This is Jurayj's concrete reality. Though he lives and paints in New York City, his gaze is directed at Beirut—and within the rubble, he has found its insidious beauty and his own sense of self.

Shiva Balaghi

16

[4] Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

[5] The influence of Richter on Jurayj became clearer to me as I viewed the excellent exhibition "Gerhard Richter Portraits" at the National Portrait Gallery in London in winter 2009. For an erudite discussion of the connections between form and history in Richter's work, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloch, "Divided memory and Post-Traditional Identity: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning," *October* 75 (Winter 1996): 61–82.

Gülsün Karamustafa

TURKEY, 1946

17

The work of Gülsün Karamustafa takes on sociopolitical issues with a subversive and flamboyant playfulness. A prominent artist in Turkey who has been working since the 1970s and has exhibited internationally, she has addressed global, national and identity issues through her work by the indirect use of metaphor and nuance. In *The City and the Secret Panther Fashion*, Karamustafa approaches translation by a witty use of feline camouflage.

Born in 1946 in Ankara, Karamustafa experienced political turbulence and rapid social change in Turkey in the 1970s and its aftermath, and this perhaps provides a motivating force for her work as a contemporary artist. She moves effortlessly across the media of video, sculpture and installation, and her works are polyvalent in their political, metaphoric or aesthetic import.

The video *The City and the Secret Panther Fashion* uses the rituals of dressing up and female adornment to maximal advantage. Offering an altogether new meaning to the phrase "sex and the city," Karamustafa's ensemble of female characters secretly meets in apartments where dressing up in the "underground" panther patterns becomes a subversive and pleasurable activity. The women dress up, invent new designs, photograph themselves, and eat

and drink—all indulgent and seemingly forbidden in the city outside—in this domestic space wonderfully described as a "paradise of panther pattern."

Karamustafa's scenarios are also reminiscent of the tableaux of orientalist painting, the legacy of which she has taken on in some of her earlier work. The excess and sensuality of the harem that the genre capitalized on are transformed into a kitsch paradise of female pleasure and narcissism that transgresses the exoticism of the male painterly gaze. The video is evocative of many readings, whether art historical, feminist or a commentary on taste; her work is rendered with a playful and clever directorial eye that nevertheless, opens up to larger issues regarding the quandaries of gender, domesticity, and the urban modernity of contemporary society.

Nurjahan Akhlaq

ALMAGUL MENLIBAYEVA

KAZAKHSTAN/NETHERLANDS, 1969

With her single-channel video *Queens* (2009) especially commissioned for *Tarjama/ Translation* by the Queens Museum of Art, Almagul Menlibayeva continues an ongoing investigation, examining the convergence of traditional and contemporary culture. In this project, Menlibayeva explores personal narratives of immigrants and their descendants who have relocated to the New York City borough of Queens from various regions around the globe, including Central Asia, Afghanistan, South Korea, Greece and Eastern Europe. Using the subway throughout the video as a symbol for their reality, she combines documentary footage of daydreaming and sleeping residents on the 7 train (sometimes referred to as the "Asian Express") with staged portraiture. Splicing scenes of private and public settings (a diner and a home), episodes of events (a wedding party) and accounts of individuals (Bukharan musicians, Persian painters and Afghani dancers), Menlibayeva translates archetypal stories into a shared ubiquity. While literally representing a single borough, in universal terms her work is a testimony to the idea that diversity becomes the foundation for a rich culture by keeping individual traditions alive.

Almagul Menlibayeva conceives mythological narratives based upon cultural traditions and the nomadic heritage in the steppes of her native Kazakhstan. She uses the industrial ruins of the region's communist past during the Soviet era,

scripting her characters into a complex visual tale. Often her work addresses the uprooting and dislocation of civilizations on a global scale, as in her single-channel video *Exodus* (2009). Most recently, Menlibayeva has been working with symbols of shamanistic practices, guiding the viewer into a dimension where ancient fears and desires play out the strength of a universal mythology. In her three-channel video *Kurban* (2009), Menlibayeva's female figures hover continuously between Aphrodite, Medea and Peri, a powerful inner earth goddess, part witch, part fairy, in early Persian mythology. Using Greek legends, religious metaphors and ancient Central Asian symbolism, Menlibayeva transmutes these mythological and historical accounts by assigning traditionally male-dominated roles to her women and their various engagements as Goddess/Priestess/Peri.

Courtesy of Priska C. Juschka Fine Art

Farhad Moshiri

IRAN /USA, 1963

Farhad Moshiri, an Iranian multidisciplinary artist and curator, lives and works in Tehran. Blurring the lines between kitsch, art and craft, his work includes painting, photography, sculpture and installations. Fine art, traditional craft and pop culture are all interwoven into ironic comments on hybrids between traditional Iranian forms and those of the consumerist and globalized culture widespread in his home country. Questioning the current cultural and political climate, Moshiri asks us to consider what it is that makes a work ethnic, traditional or even contemporary. Although his immediate point of departure is Iran, his art raises larger questions about identity and labeling.

(For a discussion of specific works in *Tarjama/Translation*, see Leeza Ahmady's essay).

Superficial Things That Matter

The first word that travelers encounter when entering Iran is the word WELCOME. It could very well be misspelled as welcom or wellcom, which signifies a willingness to share and integrate without sufficient cultural resources. Well-intended errors can be seen everywhere: billboards, restaurant menus, street signs and product packages. One unfortunate example can be found on a cleansing detergent named BARF, which means snow in Farsi. Another classic example is the logo and slogan of an ambitious soft-drink company visible on a colossal billboard on Modares Freeway in Tehran. It innocently reads as "ZAM ZAM, Aiming at the global market!" Coincidentally, the letters of Zam Zam in Farsi look like the Latin alphabet's pipi to Europeans, pronounced "pee pee" in English.

Despite all these mistakes, we feel a certain familiarity toward things American. "Of course I espeak Engilish. It's a natural gift and we don't need a dictionary or anyone telling us our mistakes." This bold naïveté is fascinating in the context of creativity as it acts as a fingerprint of a culture in the making. The new Tehran architecture, for example, is undeniably the truest representation of a generation coming to terms with its identity. This is a protean identity that adapts immediately, no questions asked. When the Tehran subway system was introduced to the public, the same man spitting, smoking and littering aboveground was suddenly a new man as he stepped onto the subway escalator down to the clean and modern world. A readiness to negotiate between styles and cultures, as unrefined as it may be, is particularly noteworthy in an Islamic country. This incredible willingness exists within and contrary to a governing Islamic system that has theoretically battled the so-called "Cultural Invasion" of the West for the last 25 years. Despite the fact that one third of the sandwich shops use McDonald's-like logos, there is still not one McDonald's Restaurant in all of Iran.

For better or worse, globalist visions are coming true where Iran will find more reason to hold on to its history and tradition. Perhaps a new harmonious dynamic will emerge from this globalist agenda. Stage one: We are enticed by the "seductive better," such as Hollywood, Nike, Starbucks, MTV, Nestlé and Armani. Stage two: The above-mentioned superficial things will strategically find their way into our minds. Stage three: We quickly start to show symptoms (see: WELCOME exhibition). Stage four: The outcome depends on whether you are optimistic or not.

I believe we are in the third stage, on the crossroads of history and the future, religion and nanotechnology, war and peace, love and logic. We are in a euphoric limbo with plenty of roads to choose from and we choose all, not wanting to sacrifice any one thing for the other. We want it all, even if it is superficial.

Farhad Moshiri

19

Rahraw Omarzad

AFGHANISTAN, 1964

Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA)

Rahraw Omarzad, an artist, publisher and professor at Kabul University, established the Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA) in 2004. He is the conceptual author of the works presented here in collaboration with his students and members of CCAA.

Through CCAA, Omarzad has been actively working with young artists in an effort to foster their sense of independence and individuality. Deconstructing their previous training is a goal, not only in rethinking how they make their art but also in rendering visible the various truths that are buried beneath the piles of media-manufactured issues facing Afghanistan. Through local and international activities such as workshops, seminars and exhibitions, CCAA renews artistic processes for artists in hopes of galvanizing a resurgent art community in Kabul. The center is an alternative to the continued antiquated teaching methods offered by the few prevalent institutions in Afghanistan.

In a series of mostly silent short videos, members of Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA) contemplate a variety of subjects related to societal conditioning, including the effects of standardized education on the individual psyche. Despite their specificity to Afghanistan's current situation, the videos are incredibly wide-reaching. They work as contemporary versions of poems, fables and other wise tales passed on from generation to generation in the country. In the tradition of the age-old iconic and fictive Sufi figure Mullah Nasrudin, each piece is a universal vignette depicting various moral, psychological and intellectual dilemmas.

Edward Winkleman's review of one of the works attests the above thesis well: "The issue of risk and turbulence during transition is treated most lightly perhaps in *Closed Door*. In the work, a young man seems to break through his innate fears of boundaries... by purposely taking the most inconvenient path throughout the city. Jumping over walls when he could easily walk through a gate, climbing into a bus through its back window when the door was easily accessed, he seems to move more assuredly the more difficult he makes his journey for himself."

Another piece, *Sympathy*, offers a sobering and humorous depiction of a lone shovel digging out dirt from the ground at the same time that twice the amount of dirt is being thrown right back into the same spot. The work is a beautiful metaphor about the entropic nature of life's natural and unnatural destructive forces related to people's internal psyches, or external environmental phenomena.

The body of work, *From the World of Darkness, Circle, Opening, Sympathy, Closed Door, Re-Opening, Hope, Two Dimensions, Sympathy I* (2004—2005), conveys a strong message to all young aspiring artists: When it comes to ideas, your means for expression can be very simple, yet have a tremendous impact.

For more information please visit:
www.ccaa.org.af

Leeza Ahmady

20

22

24

21

23

23

21

KHALIL RABAH

PALESTINE/USA, 1961

The story of a drop...

Palestinians plant 10 million trees over 225,000 acres

By Hitham I. Kayali

THIS WEEK IN PALESTINE: Its fruits gloss under the warm sunshine of April, hiding beneath the evergreen leaves, its fragrant cream-coloured flowers and graceful appearance is a symbol of peace, prosperity, dignity and love. A symbol of life, tradition and legacy ... a symbol of Palestine. With each of its sturdy stems and fresh green leaves that burst their way towards the bright blue sky, comes a story of life....a story of Palestine. For thousands of years our ancestors have been passing on this sacred tree, the Palestinian olive tree, with all that it symbolizes, to their children and grandchildren. Many stories were told under its shade, and perhaps one can indulge in its old greyish branching pattern to look for

25

Khalil Rabah, a leading contemporary Palestinian artist, has managed the most difficult thing for an artist: He has created a virtual space with a sense of logic and continuity, an artistic world that mirrors the absence, or presence, of place, space and opportunity in the real world. For a number of years now, Rabah has maintained the fictional "Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind," which exists in title, concept and intention alone. Rabah has recently taken his museum, in its varied manifestations, to Athens, Amsterdam and Istanbul. He often uses invented artifacts to occupy a mock museum that is to function as a substitute for a situation so deprived, so disrupted, so totally unlike any other.

In his fictive museum, Rabah uses the resurgence of research and the reclaiming of place and idea as much as the sense of loss. His work is subtle for, as an artist, his business is not to provide the guilty outsider with something they think they already know. In a way, the museum shows an exact account of research, a repossession of truth, at least, in a time when knowledge, excavation, memory and ownership have been cruelly denied and bulldozed. Attempts to reclaim space, knowledge and property, not to mention attempts at a normal economic, social and political life, may often be thwarted but, as this research and the artist's use of it proves, they will never cease.

A project in, about and of a museum mimics or deals with expectation, belief and authority. The structure is there, the tendency toward a belief in the academic might dominate, but still the job is almost already done. Rabah's structure within a structure is sensible and formal, an assured method for accounting and documenting what is not there as much what is. The project in a museum will have a certain value,

United States of Palestine Ti

TUESDAY, 24 APRIL 2007

By Nadira Araj
Talk Through the Sand 5

By Deborah Finestone
U.S. Bond Prices Rise On Weak Home Sales 14

The story of a drop...

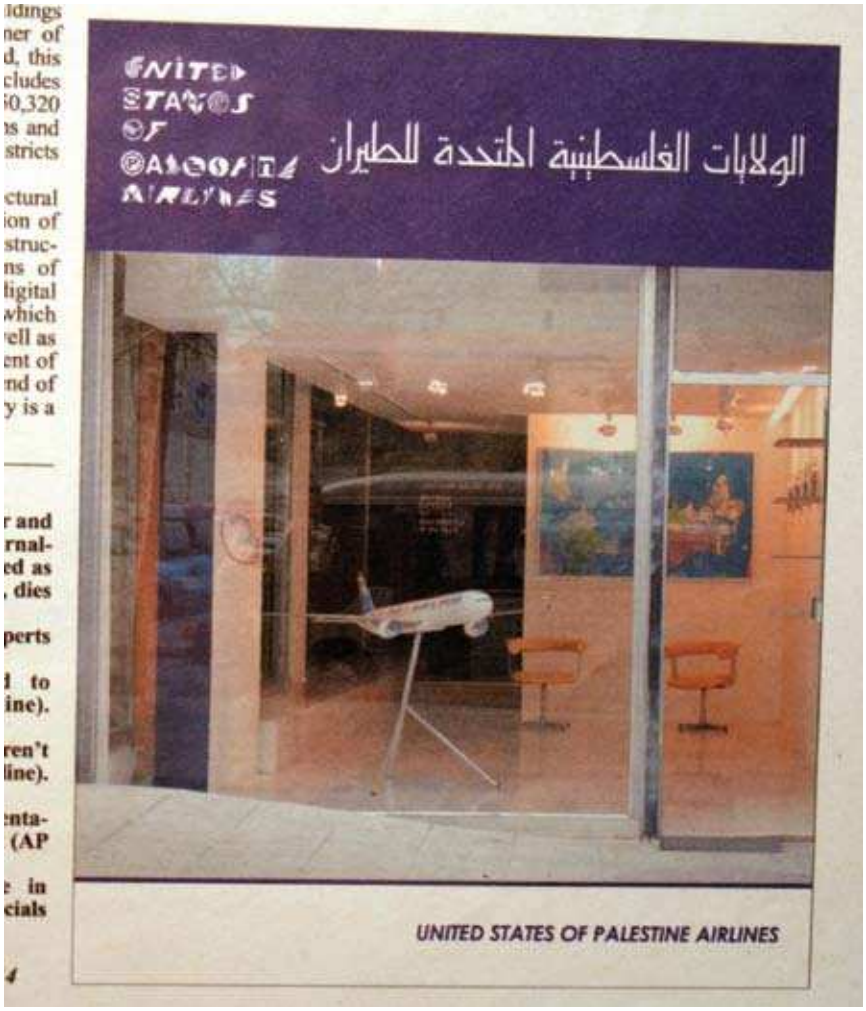
Palestinians plant 10

through association. Khalil Rabah cracks the final code as the virtual, imaginary museum becomes the equivalent of a canvas or the empty pages of a book. It is the conceptual basis for an ongoing manner of approach, thought and intrigue. Permutation, elaboration, emptiness, all cast there in this place that can only achieve freedom through virtual means, through the life of thought rather than material means. The question, for Rabah, is what to vary where, what to say when, within such a strongly established and understood structure.

For Rabah's next show, he will install the fixtures and fittings of the office of The United States of Palestine Airlines. Rabah uses the airline office, with its ubiquitous model airplane on a stand, to evoke a sort of nostalgic, perhaps never-to-be-realized, faith in the ability and right to travel. The map on the wall with its ever-expanding and far-reaching mesh of pointers encompasses an open world and represents thwarted hope.

Sacha Craddock

Excerpt from the article "Khalil Rabah: 50,320 Names"




Citizenship for Trees!

By Josef Chrsum, Laws of Nature

The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind has filed a lawsuit on behalf of five olive trees against the Canton of Geneva demanding the naturalization of these trees as Swiss Citizens.

The lawsuit was not taken seriously when the Museum first approached the government a few years ago. But now the situation has changed. The Museum has globally famous rights and immigration lawyers working with it as the human guardian of these trees.

The Canton of Geneva is appalled by the lawsuit and its spokesperson called it "ridiculous! The Canton of Geneva is protected by the Swiss immigration law states that naturalization

"The case is a classic case of racism against foreigners being naturalized as citizens, which is not an unusual issue in Switzerland that has one of the most rigid immigration laws in the world," said one of the Museum lawyers who herself has been hired by various governments to help draft their citizenship laws.

Another pioneer working with the Museum on this case is the leader in environmental law and an avid supporters of the legal rights of natural beings, he states that "this case is not only important on the level of equality and justice against racism and bigotry, it follows the past precedent of providing natural objects with the rights they deserve. Corporations are not individuals yet they receive rights of individuals

Canton of Geneva Immigration Office, 29 August 2008.

"The case is a classic

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

USA/IRAQ, 1973

26

Michael Rakowitz first came to the attention of the art world in the winter of 1998, when a project called paraSITE began appearing on the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Boston. It was a series of inflatable plastic homeless shelters, each one tailored to the individual specifications of its occupant—some had multiple windows, others a series of pockets for organizing belongings. One homeless couple, Artie and Myra, had Rakowitz produce a model with two connected rooms. What all paraSITE shelters shared was an essential architecture: They were designed to inflate by latching on to heat-exhaust ducts on the sides of buildings, swiping the escaping hot air and rerouting it to provide warmth for those living on the streets.

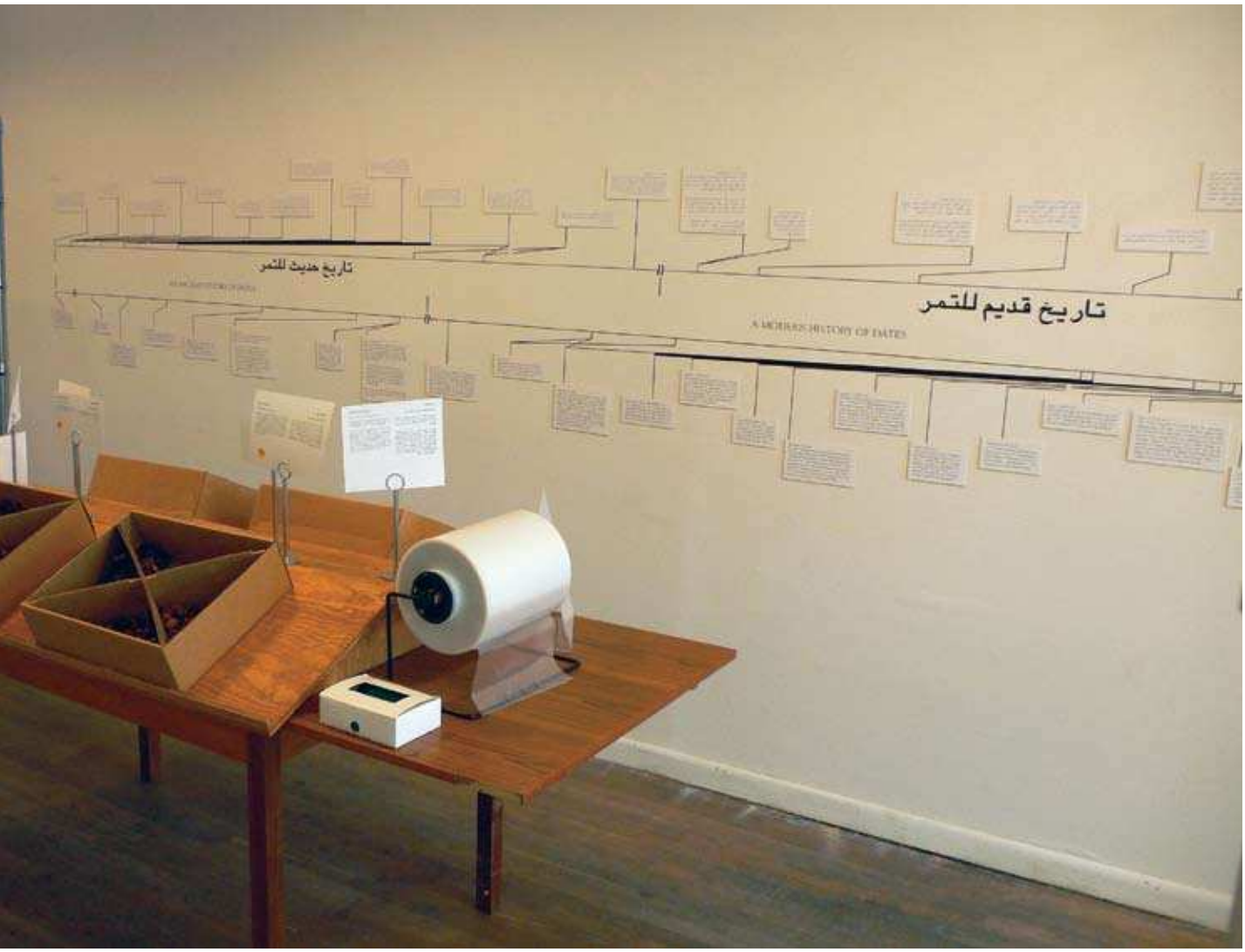
Born and raised in New York, Rakowitz has recently turned his attention to the country of his mother's family: Iraq. In a series of projects over the last three years, Rakowitz has reshaped our conception of Iraqi culture and of the damage that the war has wrought. In *Return* (2006), he revived the import-export business of his late grandfather Nissim Isaac David, an Iraqi Jewish refugee, as a multipart public project. Opening a storefront on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, Rakowitz offered his customers free shipping to Iraq and imported Iraqi dates for sale in the United States. The store was highly stylized, exactly replicating the logos and stationery of his grandfather, but with Rakowitz, the sole proprietor, engaging anyone who walked in off the street about the global issues of the day. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007) was a gallery installation at Lombard-Freid Projects in New York. In it, Rakowitz faithfully replicated the objects known to be missing or looted from

the Iraqi National Museum during the initial U.S. invasion, but he reproduced them in the cheap paper packaging of Middle Eastern import foods, or community newspapers, along with comiclike drawings explaining the history of Iraqi archaeology.

Rakowitz's work is informed by an idiosyncratic blend of performance, sculpture and graphic design; its activism is filtered through a highly aesthetic artifice. His projects, which weave together historical information and politics, are marked by a profound emotional depth.

Benjamin Tiven

Extract from "Art Matters," published in *The Nation* on September 19, 2007



SOLMAZ SHAHBAZI

IRAN/GERMANY, 1971

The Third World City, the fate of Tehran youth, the national holiday, the gated community. Iconic tropes? Perhaps—arguably ready-mades, effortlessly landing in the pages of *National Geographic* or, better, the niche documentary festival. Nonetheless, in these two video works, Solmaz Shahbazi refuses to give in to the age-old instinct to reveal, to demystify, to expound—subtly raising questions as to the entire documentary project as we know it.

Istanbul's ubiquitous gated communities serve as a point of departure in *Perfectly Suited for You*, a clinical look at the strenuously engineered domestic worlds that are increasingly the rule in cities throughout the world. In this work, at once a documentary project, a spatial project and an intensely psychological project, Shahbazi's camera guides us along, revealing the particularities of a time and space, but more important, providing a space to think about the ways in which many of us conceive of the slippery notions of home, community, inside and out.

Turning her camera to her hometown in *Persepolis*, the third video in a trilogy of works on Tehran, the artist sensitively captures hidden moments, suppressed secrets and memories of times long gone. Set in a mammoth bourgeois housing complex on the outskirts of this city, hers is as much a tale of Tehran as it is of how individuals situate themselves in relation to the grander narratives of history. The world as we know it, says Shahbazi, is found in the most miniscule details, the circuitous stories that trail into anticlimaxes, random arcana—and in that way, it exists first, and perhaps only, within the bounds of our own heads.

Negar Azimi

WAEL SHAWKY

EGYPT, 1971

In his installations, videos, photographs and performances, Alexandria based Wael Shawky tackles uncomfortable issues. His most recent work deals with the dichotomies and contradictions of social norms, primarily relating to culture and religion. Possessing an acute sense of the absurd, he raises questions about what is generally perceived as "normal" and "acceptable." Within this context, Shawky has explored a variety of specific themes that are often rooted in regional issues yet have profound international relevance—themes such as modernization, cultural hybridization and marginalization.

"In most of my work I have been aiming to construct a hybridized society. A system of a society in transition, a condition that is not clear, a translation. I see my role as that of the translators—this translation is heightened the closer I come to a system of an actually existing society," Shawky says.

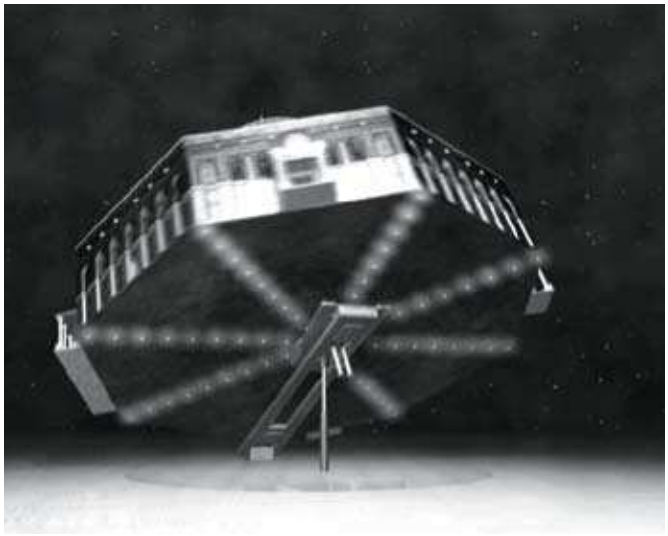
Shawky's videos such as *The Forty Days Road* (2007), *Digital Church* (2007) and *The Cave* (2004) bring to the fore contemporary clashes of civilization. The latter two present the artist reciting the Qur'an in incongruous circumstances—namely a European supermarket and a Catholic church. These films contain penetrating insights into history whilst being deliberately provocative. The resulting hybrid puts into sharp focus current global trends: attempts by the West to dominate desert cultures; commercialization and shifting economics; enforced development; and religious tensions in the modern world.

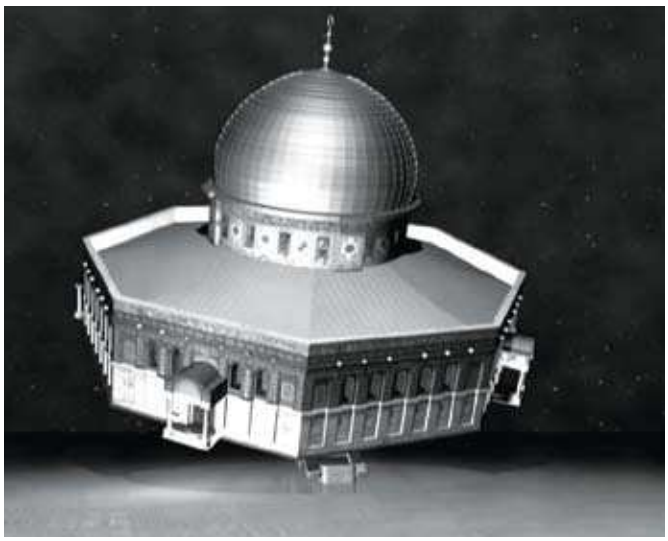
In his work *The Greenland Circus* (2005), Shawky uses the context of the circus, in particular its role as a container of "abnormal activity" and exhibitor of physical irregularities, to animate the symbolic role of freak-show entertainment used to attract and repel spectators' appetites while also compelling their voyeurism. The video becomes an examination of what is and is not acceptable and how these lines and rules are ever-changing according to seemingly random and unregulated shifts in space and time.

William Wells

28

In his computer animation *Al Aqsa Park,* Wael Shawky shows the Dome of the Rock on Jerusalem's Temple Mount as a merry-go-round that has come off the rails and with its lights flashing is rotating around its own axis. Jews and Muslims claim this holy place equally, as it is a site where the histories of the three Abrahamic religions intersect. By staging one of the central symbols of Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an axis of a regulated entertainment industry, the artist investigates the complex interaction of politics and religion, religious ritual and medial distribution.[1]





[1] *Medium Religion*. ZKM. http://www02.zkm.de/mediumreligion/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=100%3Awael-shawky&catid=34%3Akuenstlerliste&Itemid=53&lang=en

Mitra Tabrizian

IRAN/UK

30

Mitra Tabrizian was born in Iran, but has been residing in London for some time now. During the 1980s, she situated her art practice with reference to a number of exciting and innovative theoretical developments. These included poststructuralist philosophies, psychoanalytic and feminist insights into visual culture, cultural studies approaches to racial and social difference, and an incisive awareness of the complex effects of migration and exile on representation. Conceptual artists and photographers also began to offer critiques of the culture of advertising and commodity by seizing some of its codes and rendering them distanced, thus making the viewer aware that such representations are *conventions* inflected by power dynamics. Tabrizian brought these insights to bear on recent political imagery. By seizing its theatrical codes and turning them to show their constructed character, Tabrizian offered a subtle and compelling critique of the violence that propaganda imagery sublimates to its own ends. What is so powerful about Tabrizian's work is that she accomplishes this subtle distancing by a mastery of the slickness and precision of corporate imagery and advertising practices itself, rather than taking the easy way out by relying on lo-tech or kitsch imagery. Her dazzling translation of "capitalist realism" and of revolutionary imagery at a very high technical level renders her work uncanny and disturbing of conventional worldviews.

Tabrizian's artistic concerns are evident in *Predator* (2004), a short film about a

hit man who is tasked with assassinating a dissident writer. While the film appears to be similar to the 1983 film *Ferestadeh* (Mission) by Iranian director Parviz Sayyad, who is living in exile in the U.S., and also to any number of Hollywood action flicks, most notably the 1987 film *Predator* in which Arnold Schwarzenegger battles a mysterious and invisible alien, there are numerous differences between them. Tabrizian's *Predator* opens with the statement:

> The main characters in the film come from a fictional Islamic country; the English language is used as a device to allude to Fundamentalism as a transnational phenomenon.

Rather than speaking in a Middle Eastern language, the characters speak English, which serves to distance them from their "authentic" selves, and yet also globalizes the trope of terrorism. *Predator* proceeds in its narrative with a crisp and clean look characteristic of Tabrizian's style, pitched at a very high aesthetic register. Its spare dialogue and masterly editing are simultaneously gripping and distancing. We witness the unfolding of the plot, but at every moment we are also aware that we are watching actors playing a role. Tabrizian thus performs a double translation: Hollywood's "alien" is now Middle Eastern–looking, but the film also translates the humanism of the Iranian cinematic tradition while stripping it of its affect. It is precisely the avoidance of easy sentiment in Tabrizian's work—which partakes of sophisticated visual codes, yet offers no easy narrative redemption—that makes it such a significant artistic emblem of our contemporary dilemmas.

Iftikhar Dadi

Photographs by Julian Burgin

alexander ugay

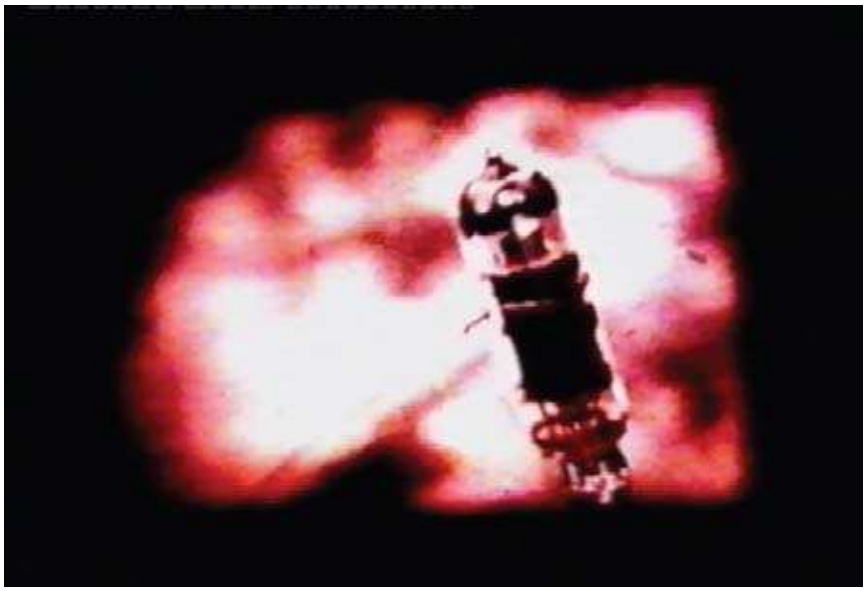
KAZAKHSTAN, 1978

Born in Kazakhstan and of Korean descent, Alexander Ugay is part of a new generation of contemporary Central Asian artists and has exhibited his work extensively in the region as well as internationally. He works in various media, including digital painting, photography, video-performance, and filmmaking. The weight of Central Asian history and how it continues to impact contemporary reality is a sensibility that pervades the artist's work. Central to his work is the use of memory and personal experience, realized in media.

Ugay studied in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where he cofounded with Roman Maskalev in 2000, the creative group, "Bronepoezd" ("An Armored Train"). The group makes experimental work in 16-mm film, using cameras manufactured in the former Soviet Union. The films are processed and edited manually, which gives them the look and feel of early cinema. This style has been called the New Romanticism, as it resembles and references the cinema of the Soviet avant-garde.

The topic of Ugay and Maskalev's *Cosmic Uncertainty* is the 1960s space race, a time when the Soviet Union had achieved a pioneering role in science and technology. Employing a humorous and absurdist narrative, and with a nod to the 1902 film classic *Journey to the Moon*, the work offers a critique of the absurdist policies of the Soviet Union, implying that these paradigms have continued well into the present.

Bastion continues Ugay's fascination with the former Soviet utopian ideals and their influence on future generations. This work deploys the image of Tatlin's Tower—a central symbol of triumph for the newly founded USSR, an era characterized by revolutions, wars and public cataclysms. The symbol of Tatlin's Tower also works on a personal level for Ugay due to his interest in the Russian vanguard and his reminiscence of the past. In this work, the artist combines several media, including Hi 8 video and a three-dimensional architectural model to simulate the Tower, which was in actuality never built. The reenactments and various media used by Ugay are all seamlessly integrated into an elegiac and poetic video.



31

Original text by **Yulia Sorokina**
Edited by **Nurjahan Akhlaq**

SHARIF WAKED

PALESTINE/ISRAEL 1964

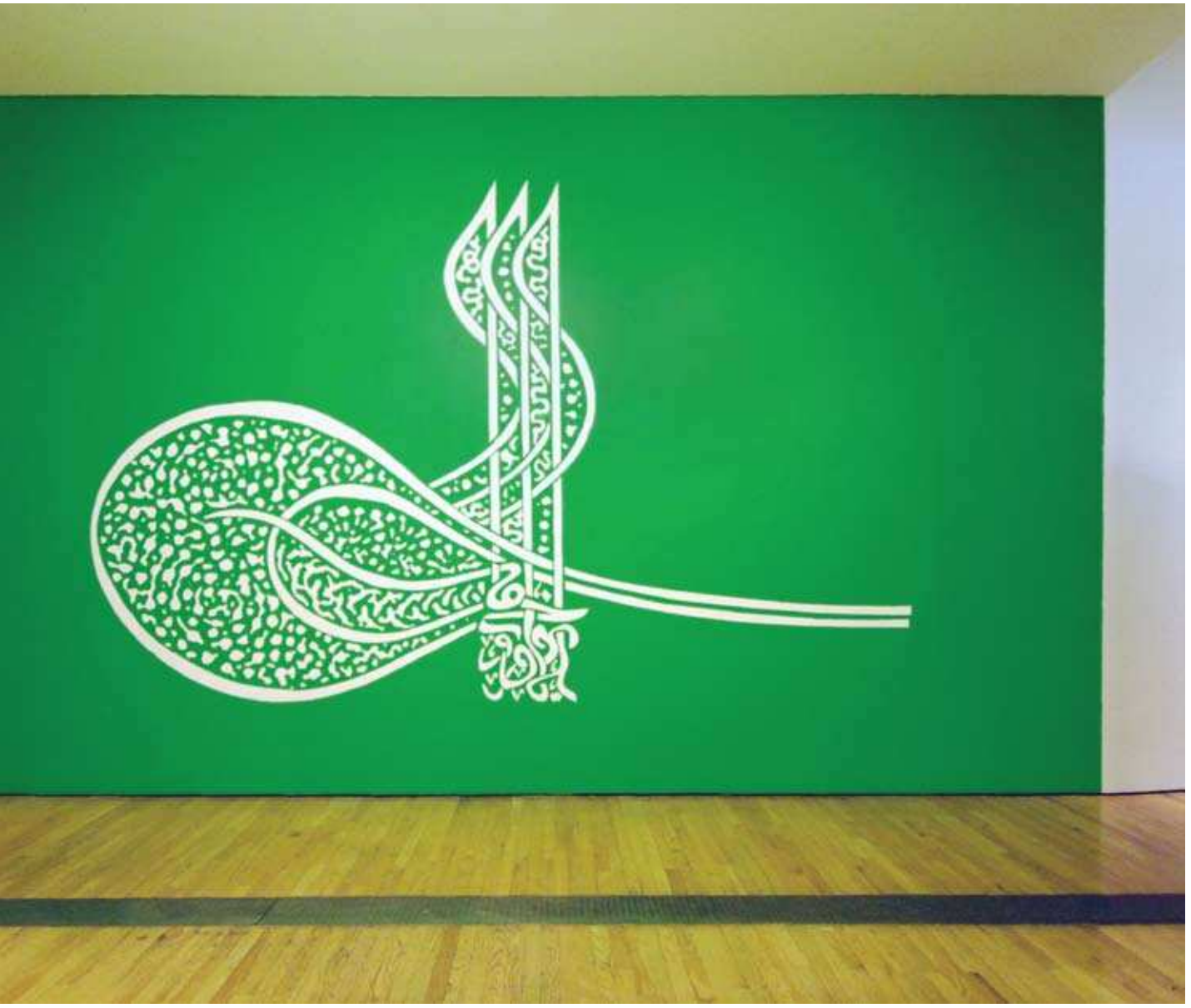
33

Sharif Waked takes Israeli soldiers' two most common directives in Hebrew-inflected Arabic—"Get Out of Here!" (*yalla ruh min hon*), displayed here, and "Your I.D.!" (*jib al-hawiya*)—and places them in the imperial monogram of the *tugra*. In combining the sophisticated written form of calligraphy with the banal colloquial, Waked brings Islamic art and the language of the checkpoint into an unlikely encounter.

The meeting point of this encounter is Sulayman the Magnificent's imperial monogram, or *tughra*, which was placed on all state documents, written decrees and coins issued by the royal court. Known for conquering large swaths of the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, Sulayman was also a patron of arts and architecture. In 1542, he restored the Dome of the Rock and built what today stand as the walls of Jerusalem's old city. Under Sulayman's reign, the Ottomans developed a complex form of calligraphy called *Diwani,* which found expression in his unique *tughra* that declared him "ever victorious."

Waked ponders linguistic transformations and deformations as he delves into the ovals, arabesques and vertical lines of this elaborate form of Arabic calligraphy. He explores the *tughra*, which literally means "enclosed garden," to reflect on the timeless conundrums of historical triumph and defeat and the loaded friction between aesthetics and power.

Sherene Seikaly



Dilek Winchester

TURKEY, 1974

34

Dilek Winchester's work "On Reading and Writing" takes its point of departure from the first three Turkish novels published during the late Ottoman Empire. Even though the books were written in Ottoman Turkish, they were printed in the Greek, Arabic and Armenian alphabets, respectively. Taking this practice as her point of reference, Winchester transcribes three short paragraphs that narrate the experiences of a little child as she encounters this grammatological difference for the first time. These short paragraphs are in Turkish, but they are transliterated in, again, the Greek, Arabic and Armenian alphabets and inscribed on three small, portable blackboards with white chalk. This installation immediately evokes the iconic photograph that depicts Kemal Atatürk introducing the Latin alphabet on a portable blackboard to a newly established Republic of Turkey (c. 1928). From the perspective of the official discourse, this iconic image has served to mark the Republican break from the Ottoman past.

The texts inscribed on the blackboards narrate the experiences of a little child who feels sad because she cannot understand the letters that her father wrote to her mother or is utterly surprised when she learns that not all children speak different languages at home and in school. In so doing, these texts reenact the trauma of the post-Revolutionary erasure of the multilingual past from the perspective of an innocent child.

Yahya M. Madra

[Excerpted from "Being in Neighborhood," *Contemporary Practices* Vol. 4 (2009) pp.190–195.]

Photograph by Atif Akin

Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev

KAZAKHSTAN, 1959

35

We became interested in "socio-coloristic" relations while traveling the south of Kazakhstan in 2002. As participants in the international project "Non-Silk Road," we visited several provincial towns. In the town of Taraz, our attention was drawn to decorative bas-reliefs with pictures of blue banners on one of the old administrative buildings. These banners used to be red. This blatant repainting of Soviet decorations was striking and provided the best possible illustration of the change in political epochs.

The state symbols that had been canonized by the Communists were now subject to total "de-sacralization." As the main sign of all things Soviet, the color red was repressed and replaced by other privileged colors all over post-Soviet space.

After the republic declared its independence, the Kazakh flag became blue. To be more precise, its color is what you call *kok* in the Kazakh language—*kok* means both blue and green. *Kok* also means "sky," while *koktem* means "spring" and *kokteu* means "becoming green." Fraught with meaning and symbolizing many things—the "Eternal Blue Sky" in Tengrianism, the *nauryz* pagan celebration of spring, the blue domes of the Islamic mosques, a dream of the inaccessible ocean's vast expanse—the color blue was accepted by the majority and entered the mind of the people as the best, most "appropriate" color. The people of Kazakhstan simply love the color blue. How can one otherwise explain all of this repainting, which almost seems like an obsession? Questions of color no longer arise: If something has to be painted, there is already a solution at the ready—the color *kok*. *Kok* is Kazakhstan's best-selling type of paint. Everything is painted with it: fences, kiosks, walls, benches, even the crosses on graves. The sphere of the color's use is as large as life itself. Objects from the "blue period" are everywhere, in the most varied places and in the strangest combinations. There is a feeling that you are living within a project, and that the Steppe is a huge expositional field that demonstrates a set of artifacts. The cultural strata, which have been accumulated here during the time of their development by man, are specifically perceived in this vein. Materialized in the "blue dream" of "eternal spring," the color blue has spread throughout the territory of Kazakhstan, adding some optimistic luster to the dim nature of our steppe.

In this way, it could be that society, in yearning for its bygone integrity, is reacting to the instability and the fluidity of the transitional period's changing situation. The aspirations toward unity are subconsciously realized through identificatory signs—color marks that do not only designate membership in a concrete community but also signify belonging to the "Divine," to Power.

This is a kind of a charm, "just in case"…

Yelena Vorobyeva

akram zaatari

LEBANON, 1966

Akram Zaatari's *In This House: Diagram with Olive Tree*

Akram Zaatari frequently uses the alchemy of the editing suite to enhance certain qualities of documentary footage. Solarizing, linearizing, digitally isolating and superimposing forms have served to conceal (such as the gay men in *How I Love You* [2001], who don't want to reveal their identity), to reveal implicit information (as in the silhouetted figures of water-bearers in *This Day* [2003]), and above all to reveal that the audiovisual image itself is not particularly replete with either experience or information. For Zaatari, the moving image obscures the world[1]: It is mute, it sees poorly, and it must be cajoled into expression. *In This House*, faced with a particularly dumb documentary image—"dumb as dirt," as we say—resorts to strategies that *recede* from the audiovisual in order to tell the story of the little white house (and the five-story shell behind it).

The question that has guided Zaatari's research for several years, namely the relationships between documents and history, of the Lebanese civil war and Arab history generally, leads ineluctably to abstraction. Imagine if it had been otherwise—if people could simply face the camera and tell the truth in whole sentences, if documents and artifacts immediately divulged their evidence, if every story corroborated the next. Then indeed, the movies could tell history. And *In This House* would be a heartwarming account of the meeting, after 15 years, between a Christian family and the secular Muslim fighter who lived in their house in the village of Ain el Mir for six years, safeguarding it when they were forced to depart. They would joke about the house's quirks, tour the garden together, unearth the time capsule containing a letter the fighter had buried in the garden, and perhaps shed a tear for the terrible history, now safely terminated, of the Lebanese civil war.

But history is not like that, and hence movies cannot tell history. Most of the characters in this story (believing perhaps in the veracity of the moving image) refuse to appear on camera. Because of this, and because the act itself, of digging for the time capsule, is not very photogenic, the event barely registers visibly. The texts, tones and silhouettes that compensate for the absence of the people, render the video barely visible—a line drawing, an abstraction.

Despite the constraints that render *In This House* practically aniconic, the video makes many observations of events that occur along the continuum between material and symbolic. At one extreme of the image lies an abstraction so refined that it is utterly imperceptible: the state in all its arbitrary power. And at the other extreme, descending into the audiovisual image—into the long shots of the gardener Faisal patiently digging a large red-brown hole with his pickax, now and then showing his tired face to the camera—is the earth. The earth precedes images and swallows them up again. *In This House* observes the space in which images arise innocently from the earth, like mint in asphalt, and he observes how the earth gets coded over, becoming imperceptible again in the network of political meanings that gather up the surface of Lebanon.

Laura U. Marks

[1] In fact, he seems to have more faith in the truth-function of still images, such as those in the archives of the Arab Image Foundation. See Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen," for a discussion of how photography, cinema and digital media promote different relations of coevalness between viewer and image. In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 135-163.

Yto Barrada

MOROCCO/FRANCE, 1971

37

Before the Strait of Gilbratar became a symbol of the European Union's protectionist policy towards North African immigration, once solicited, but no longer desired, it was the natural thoroughfare between Spain and Morocco, Europe and Africa. Once a point of departure for vessels setting sail towards limitless horizons, the Moroccan port city of Tangiers is now more like an immobile ship whose cargo of candidates for immigration is left to wander ashore.

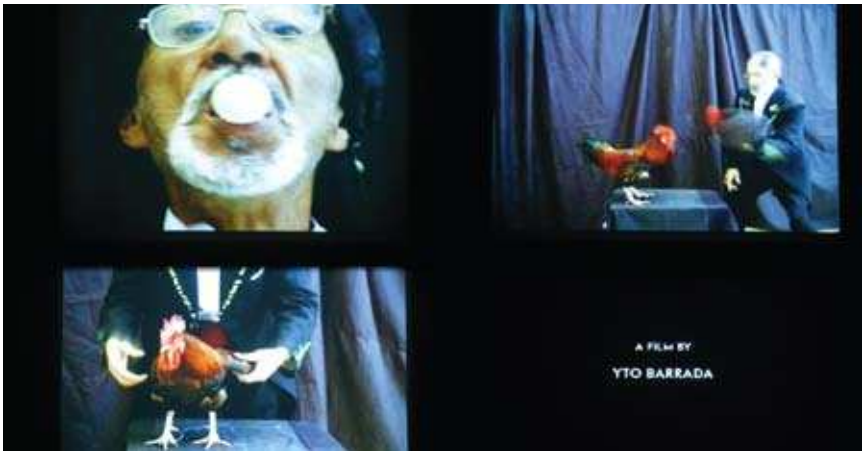
The Strait of Gibraltar, Tangiers and Tangerines permanent or temporary, inhabitants of the century-old city or recently arrived North African neighbours, are depicted by French-Moroccan artist Yto Barrada through photography and video, the former medium often emphasizing the already-stiffened condition of its subjects and the latter hinting at the distant possibility of movement through time and space.

Barrada however, produces more than just a photographic portrait or a moving documentary of a contemporary state of affairs. Instead, through a process of indexation of present phenomena and subtle references to a once more forthcoming past, she investigates the complex nexus of mythical, historical, and geopolitical connections that have created the contemporary now.

With magic, all the craftsmanship lies in controlling what is made visible to the naked eye of the viewer. "The hands of the magician are faster than the eyes of the spectator," explains Abdelouahid el-Hamri in Yto Barrada's *The Magician*. Filmed in the magician's courtyard, a makeshift stage framed by shabby black curtains, he performs the simplest of tricks with a gravitas that contrasts almost comically with his unkempt disposition. Barrada's compulsion to document is a compulsion to represent, bring back into visibility individuals all too often expelled from what is deemed representable.[2]

BIACS Foundation

[1] From *Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society* http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site_en/artist-pages/07_artist.htm


A FILM BY
YTO BARRADA

BOUCHRA KHALILI

MOROCCO/FRANCE, 1975

38

The *Mapping Journey* series consists of short videos by the artist Bouchra Khalili. Between 3 and 4:30 minutes is enough time to trace, with just a few pencil lines marking the surface of a map, the hundreds of kilometers traversed by several illegal immigrants in search of precarious employment. Without pretentions and in a direct manner, the artist displays her work, shot from a single vantage point in a documentary style. A close shot of a map slightly in relief, a close-up of a hand holding a marker and a masculine voiceover narrating without emotion the dangerous attempts to cross the Mediterranean and slip across borders, necessary steps for these men and women who, forced to leave their home country and to become outlaw nomads, meet their situation with an exemplary resignation and dignity. Just a few minutes and some lines of pencil to describe the terrible journey. Bouchra Khalili builds an accurate equilibrium between the spatial and temporal scales, allowing us to hear and to see these mapped journeys. This scale is also mental since it returns back to the moment of reminiscence when these men evoke, mixing Arabic and French, without pathos or judgment, the inacceptable circumstances that led to their forced exile. The hand that holds the pencil makes the map tremble. This hand dominates the image and, during these few minutes, visually shows the distance that separates, for example, Algeria from Italian and French cities, all the while maintaining, via the gesture and the narration, the illusion that destiny can be controlled. Therefore, the artist gives more than a topographical meaning to the journey—she purposely turns upside down and autonomizes the status of these men and women who, in their wanderings, try to leave the labyrinth that constitutes the finding of a land of opportunity, inevitably hostile when "immigration" is considered one of the worst problems in Western countries. It appears that, in the same moment, the hand that marks this itinerary is master of its own destiny, and the mapping journey becomes almost "planned"—a reminder of the double meaning of "mapping" contained in the title. Despite the horrors of these journeys where life hangs by a thread, it is with a formal refinement and extreme simplicity that Bouchra Khalili evokes this radical economical and cultural situation, giving us no possibility to escape. The exile here is a *sine qua non* political condition of our existence.

Text by **Elvan Zabunyan**
Translated from the French by
Salima Semmar


Mer du Nord
ALLEMAGNE
POLOGNE
FRANCE
ESPAGNE
MAROC
ALGERIE
MEDITERRANEE
I'm going to turn things around

RABIH MROUÉ

LEBANON, 1967

39

The internationally renowned Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué's performance, theater and video works deal with recent events in the troubled history of his country and are often controversial. (In 2007, the Beirut performance of his play *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* was banned.) His critically acclaimed *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003) takes the stories, rumors and accusations surrounding the disappearance of a civil servant as an occasion to construct a wide-ranging critique of journalistic practices and the mass media. *Make Me Stop Smoking* (2006), in which an examination of the artist's archival desires leads to a reflection on the effects of Lebanon's war, exemplifies Mroué's adroit mixture of formal inventiveness, existential drama, sociopolitical analysis and canny humor.

In 1990, he began putting on his own plays, performances and videos. Continuously searching for new and contemporary relations among all the different elements and languages of the theater art forms, Mroué questions the definitions of theater and the relationship between space and form of the performance and, consequently, questions how the performer relates with the audience. His works deal with issues that have been swept under the table in the current political climate of Lebanon. He draws much-needed attention to the broader political and economic contexts through semidocumentary theater.

From theater practice to politics, and from the problem of representations to his private life, his search for "truth" begins via documents, photos and found objects, fabricating other documents, other "truths": It is as if the work becomes a dissection table for the dubious processes of Lebanon's war society. With the accumulation of materials, a surrealistic saga unfolds, teasing out the proposition that "between the truth and a lie, there is but a hair." His pieces are an investigative performance in which the artist becomes a kind of detective, interested in using actual documents to understand how rumors, public accusations, national political conflicts and scandals act on the public sphere as shaped by print media. Mroué incorporates radical criticism, particularly in his video imagery.

Courtesy of Rabih Mroué


now I can combine
the sound with the picture.

KHALED RAMADAN

LEBANON/DENMARK, 1964

One thing should be clear from the beginning, even before we start watching: The one who watches is not the one who is in power. Khaled Ramadan realized that from the start, and even if he forces us, or at least tempts us, to watch and keep watching his videos, he himself cannot resist and warns us about the power of images, starting with his own.

Since the beginning, the Lebanese artist, curator, interdisciplinary media producer, documentarist (as his short bio states) and cofounder of the "Chamber of Public Secrets" project based (as he is) in Copenhagen, decided to work on the most controversial subjects, such as war, wounded people, massacres, Nazi-Skins' ideology and visions or, to make a long story short, anything the media talks about without saying anything, without really talking about it.

Media stereotypes and constant manipulation of the TV and even the wider Web audience come to be the real subject behind the scenes. The *translation* media operates. What do you want to see, look, think, be told and what you do not want to see, look, think, be told? This last is exactly what, most probably, Khaled Ramadan is going to show you. And he shows it with a great deal of irony, jokes at his own expense, some melancholy and some recent unexpected signs of a nice autobiographical attitude. These emerged, for instance, in one of his recent creations, *Wide Power*, selected for a prize in the last Cairo Biennale (December 2008–February 2009). Using an apparently old-fashioned "hiccups" rhythm that compromises the narrative of the story, the artist leads us through his life, as child, adolescent and grown-up, one picture after the other, in order to make us learn how and why he discovered the secret power of image-making without resisting it. How, in other words, he became himself.

Martina Corgnati

40

acknowledgements

ArteEast
Livia Alexander, Executive Director
Rasha Salti, ArteEast Creative Director
Salima Semmar, Programs Coordinator and Web Director
Danielle Jefferis, Director of Development
Sarah Malaika, Tarjama/Translation Exhibition Coordinator
Suna Kafadar, Programs Coordinator and Managing Editor ArteEast Online
Virginia Dickson, ArteEast Intern

Queens Museum of Art
Tom Finkelpearl, Executive Director
Hitomi Iwasaki, Director of Exhibitions/ Curator
Larissa Harris, Curator
Louise Weinberg, Registrar/ Archives Manager
Arnold Kanarvogel, Exhibition Production Manager
Erin Sickler, Exhibition Manager/Curatorial Assistant
Jodi Hanel, Director of Development
David Strauss, Director of External Affairs
Prerana Reddy, Director of Public Events
Lauren Schloss, Director of Education
Laura Groskinsky, School and Family Education Coordinator
Lou Acquavita, Facilities Manager
Tova Rothman Small, Curatorial Intern

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Frank Robinson, The Richard J. Schwartz Director
Ellen Avril, Chief Curator and Curator of Asian Art

special thanks

This exhibition would not have been possible without the support of the following:

Nominators
Bassam Al-Baroni
Jacques Assouad
David Elliot
Maymanah Farhat
Abdellah Karroum
Vasif Kortun
Beral Madra
Mona Marzouk
Hammad Nasar
Katarzyna Pieprzak
Jessica Winegar

AhmadyArts
Nurjahan Akhlaq

Asia Society
Sarah M. Barasch
Rachel Cooper
Anne Kirkup
Helen Koh
Rad Rahman
Yuri Sakamoto
Asian Contemporary Art Week Team

Chelsea Art Museum
Sam Bardaouil
Katie Dyson
Alana Esposito

Lenders
Alexander and Bonin Gallery
Al-Masar Gallery
ARS AEVI Museum of Contemporary Art
Art Projects International (API)
Brancolini Grimaldi Arte Contemporanea
Daneyal Mahmood Gallery
Green Cardamom
Josh Fink
Lombard-Freid Projects
Priska C. Juschka Fine Art

***Tarjama/Translation* Virtual Gallery**
Duygu Demir

Sponsors

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Mapping an influential subset of recent art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and their diasporas, *Tarjama/Translation* includes the work of 28 artists in a variety of media—drawing, installation, painting, photography, video. Contemporary artists are perhaps also the greatest translators. They create significance by transforming experience, perception, and thought into acts and materials of communication by scrutinizing everything at hand—materiality, culture, society, belief. The exhibition accordingly situates their practice as a complex and dynamic translational undertaking.

In *Tarjama/Translation*, language and textuality remain salient, but in engaging more fully with the complexities of our present era, the exhibition also focuses on approaches of *visual* translation across conceptual, temporal, and geographic borders. Translation here is therefore multivalent, from the specificities of textual and visual maneuvers to the larger sense of revealing fissures of the self, community, site and temporality. It foregrounds how contemporary artists negotiate the continued dislocational force of modern historical formations and track newer dilemmas engendered by a globalization saturated with mediatized visuality.

Curated by Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi, and Reem Fadda, *Tarjama/Translation* includes the work of:

Ayad Alkadhi, Nazgol Ansarinia, Hamdi Attia, Lara Baladi, Yto Barrada, Esra Ersen, Khaled Hafez, Emily Jacir, Pouran Jinchi, John Jurayj, Gülsün Karamustafa, Bouchra Khalili, Almagul Menlibayeva, Farhad Moshiri, Rabih Mroué, Rahraw Omarzad, Khalil Rabah, Michael Rakowitz, Khaled Ramadan, Solmaz Shahbazi, Wael Shawky, Mitra Tabrizian, Alexander Ugay, Sharif Waked, Dilek Winchester, Yelena Vorobyeva & Viktor Vorobyev, Akram Zaatari

Art3East

ISBN: 978-0-9824725-0-7
51995
9 780982 472507