

representing the unrepresentable: there is no arab art¹

How do you represent the unrepresentable, unrepresentable due to over exposure or, lack of exposure, effacement, omission, self and external repression, pain, or otherness. How do you represent that which has been drained of meaning, misrepresented to a point of over saturation, yet under appreciated and neglected to the point of absurdity. Is it futile to attempt such an endeavour.. maybe, is it advisable, perhaps not.²

Silence like time stretches eternal and when the Arab subject speaks who listens and with what preconceived notions constricting the interpretation of these words and images. We do not perceive without a massive amount of baggage informing or misinforming us, we are too far gone for that. It confirms the fact that we are true creatures of habit in that we insist on trying to fool ourselves that we can be 'objective', as if there was such a thing. As if there is a place where context is neutral or an equivalence of presence is in effect, or that there is a parity of voices with access to an audience.

We have many images for this place, this region and as many names, but none of them are accurate or adequate – the Middle East, Near East, West Asia, North Africa, the Magreb, the Levant, the Holy Land, the Arab world, the Muslim world, the Orient, and we have too few names for the people of these places. There is a certain violence in not naming (eg. non-recognition, or effacement..) as there is a violence innate in the limited naming (eg. *fundamentalist, insurgent, or terrorist*..) that we engage in. If you don't recognize a people they do not exist and are treated as such whether as individuals, community, culture, or nation. Naming can contain the essentializing nature of reductive parameters, recognizing us for being something that we are not, or have no intention of identifying with. We also have this place that has been over and under reproduced throughout its history by its *visitors*, along with a few privileged inhabitants, conquerors, *allies*, and those that are passing through or situating themselves on these lands for various parts of their lives. These representations are ours, like the image of ourselves that we

¹ "What once we were, never was, and what ever we wanted to be, couldn't, always being something to someone else, denied possibilities, and in this denial a little seizure, a little fissure here to explode a few concepts of our present and our present past. To face up to a history that is ours and never was, to develop a context for this face of history and to see it stop being what it was and continues to be." From: Salloum, J. (1996), *..east of here.. (upon arrival) in, ..east of here..(re)imagining the orient*, Toronto: YZY Books (catalogue for the exhibition).

² *We have taken so much for granted including the use of language and our local and global relationships. Framing, conceptualizing, grasping, and coming to terms with our lives as cultural workers and citizens of this wide world may seem more important now than ever. How do you position yourself in the midst of all this? Is your relationship to your neighbours different? Has our role changed. I mean, what makes us defend an agency in our work, an embracement of the social sphere or an engagement with politics that would make others want to do the same? On the other hand, what makes us want to run or shy away from it all? It is possible the two motives are the same.*

hold so dear to us we have constructed them knowingly or unknowingly so that we can concretize our aims and ambitions be they as simple as a supposed understanding, or as violent as occupation. We are implicated within these constructions, our histories (recent and past) are present there and our projections firmly entrenched. Whether we acknowledge this or not is not the point, trying to come to terms with the cultures of others' is an act of fiction as we are so far removed from being in touch with our own identities, or at least from being able to alienate ourselves enough to critically analyze how we are constructed. When the artwork arrives here, where do we put it and what do we name it, when the tangible realities are not immediately visible or when the political realities are received askew, when even the naming of it wreaks internal havoc and external bias, how can this work be perceived in the first place and subsequent to that. This is often presupposed in the work itself and in its perspicacious nature of moving between style and substance, and between didacticism and the lyrical. This relationship, these points of contact found in and about these works resonates with a precarious historical (un)/consciousness and a contemporary imperativeness. Immediately upon encountering the work we meet with our refusal of the work and histories that have been effaced, ideologies and strategies that have been refused and miscomprehended and the degree of encroachment that is allowed, the persuasion that is softened, the access denied. We are attached, a relationship developed over time. The terms of this agreement are never quite clear enough, who are we engaging with, what is really at play here, these dynamics underscore the space of alienation and familiarity of the work and its recipient. *Understanding* is not possible, the subject can never be *known* (if so, there would be no *other*) as far as the *western* viewer understanding the *other culture*, from an art exhibition, videotape or film program. The most we can ever hope for is some form of awareness of the situation on the ground, a reflection of some of the issues, a kind of empathetic response, and a sense of the subjectivities at stake. As viewers and consumers of culture(s) we need to challenge our existing assumptions, preconceptions and perceptions, to begin an engagement with the work presented or encountered. I would like to challenge research methodologies, traditional exhibition formats, and curators to reflect upon this, by positing representation itself as a politicized practice and to seek an appropriateness of means, to determine a mediating 'language' of transposed experience which incorporate the artists' and the curators' own strategies and means.

I curate from the position of an artist, viewing curating as a parallel and complementary activity to art production, extending my research, finding *subjective affinities*, and investigating how other artists approach their subjects/objects of study. I have curated for 22 years, for the last 12 years I have worked to provide an audience for a range of productions/practices of 'Arab' artists living in this (impossible to name) *region* for those outside of it, and more important, an exhibition context which includes artists (of any *origins/ethnicities*) from other regions of the world producing work about this region, '*the Middle East*' (for lack of a better moniker). It was and is necessary to show artists and works based on their own concepts, not packaged as a remnant from the Worlds' Fair expositions, where each country (or their sponsor's) procures a booth. The term '*Arab*' also has to be questioned. What is this construct and is it even relevant in the way it is used presently, or is it another form of appropriation..? There is a renewed (*neo*)*orientalism* at play, one could even call it a type of colonialism. It is increasingly more fashionable to have a token exhibition with an *Arab* or *Middle-Eastern* theme, usually one that avoids the complexities of subjectivity and identity outside of an indexical vein. How are you defining the subject and to what purpose is it being put? Do we all chose to be identified *prima facie* this way, is this our most important concern? Hardly, I would think. What is more significant is the overlapping and individual concerns of the artists.

The period immediately after 9-11 (up till the end of 2003), is one of a different ilk. At that time I was curating a series of projects under different versions of the title: '*in/tangible cartographies: new*

*arab video and film*³. The word 'arab' was used not without consideration, and not only to appease institutions needing something more tangible to grab onto. These requirements are comprehensible, but no less disturbing in their gross acts of generalization.⁴ During this period there was (and some could argue there still is, a certain need, an exigency to have representations from the *Arab* world visible, demanding a presence of their own and in opposition to the narrow stereotypical gaze that was/is presupposing them/us, denying voices, and attempting to inscribe identities for them and for us. As I wrote in October 2001;

*In the current climate of suppression and repression of any debate and dissention, discursive activities such that art can be, may be one of the few domains left for us to express unpopular ideas, resistance, and the complexities of our lives and the lives of those we choose to identify with. We need to protect our right to be self-inscribed. This is one arena that we should not give up on easily, this cultural sphere, these domains of discursivity. We have struggled for this space to call our own and it is one that we can still use to champion difference, to provide a heterogeneous engagement with the social and political realities around us, and to facilitate a means of contemplation that can counter the imposition of consent.*⁵

A considerable part of my role as a curator is filling voids and opening fissures, and at that time, immense amounts of material and a density of meaning was imperative. There was a necessity of excess required in a demand to be seen/heard/listened to, in the opening of spaces for other silenced or negated voices to emerge in all their complexity. With the seemingly unwieldy and endless threads of works (experiences, and perceptions) presented, I set the parameters so the audience could become part of the process, seduced, compelled and confronted, making decisions and in this manner being responsible for re-constructing their own cultural/political perceptions. These are politicized spaces where one is challenged to respond (or challenging responses), and one's *understandings* are confronted. These ruptures can be productive interstices where possibilities exist to encounter, engage, and act upon the forces that act upon us. We continually need to critically reflect upon our role in these acts of representation, the '*middle east*' is a site of production constructed in *our* collective and individual psyches. In the triangulation of histories and positions between countries, cultures and subjectivities, I build on previous (production and curatorial) projects of mine aiming to implode existing barriers, chipping away at the structure until it dissipates, skeletal then ephemeral (like ephemeralizing the concrete, or concretizing the

³ The original '*in/tangible cartographies*' exhibition was commissioned in 2001 by the *World Wide Video Festival*, Amsterdam, and Argos, Brussels (where it was titled: '*History of our Present*'), it included 39 films and videotapes from 29 artists in 10 hours of programs. Subsequently I updated and revised versions of the exhibition for the: Cinematheque Française, Paris; Caixa Forum for Contemporary Art, Barcelona; Saw Gallery, Ottawa; UCLA, Los Angeles (subtitled there as: '*sliding life through narrow spaces forced into (cracks) where rivers would not (yet) flow*'); Landesmuseum, Austria; Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley; Pacific Cinematheque, Vancouver; and Cinematheque Ontario, Toronto. In its last incarnation at the *Havana Bienal*, Cuba (2003), the title was changed to: '*tangible cartographies*'.

⁴ "We should pay attention to language and relationships to the social and political. Being identified as an *Arab* now has the same repercussions as before except they are heightened. The repulsion and exoticism of the 'arab' subject still exists side by side, collapsing into each other and swallowing 'us' with it. We cannot have an exhibition these last few years without having to relate it to 9-11. We are not allowed to. It is one of the first questions out of the journalists or critics' mouths and they demand an answer, one that fits into a sound bite that they can exploit to 'rewrite' you as being one of 'us', or one of 'them'." Jayce Salloum, *Fuse Magazine*, Toronto: "*everything and nothing*", or *art and the politics of "war"*, Vol 24, #4, 12/01.

⁵ *Ibid.*

ephemeral), identifying a space to locate *difference*⁶ in forms of articulating, of filling these (intentional and unintentional) gaps in representation, intervening in these spaces between spaces, messing them up with deliberated contentions then leaving them for others to clean up, refine, and reflect upon.

How do you represent the unrepresentable, unrepresentable due to facile coverage (made banal or sensational) - for instance how do you represent the Palestinian condition/state of being, to even write of this seems potentially damaging, as if there is one Palestinian condition exclusive to living under the longest military occupation in history, in a refugee camp, inside the 'red line; or in the dispersion, 'Al Nakbah' providing a common legacy and overwhelming encumbrance for all. The same can be said for the Iraqi 'tragedy, the Lebanese 'case', the Algerian 'situation' or any other over-determined geographical, cultural, ideological, or sexual categorizations. The categories themselves doing violence in the name of representation. Then how do you communicate the stories, the paths that have been taken, the lives lived to someone who hasn't lived them and farther afield, to someone who hasn't been near the lives that are represented, obliquely or directly.

Many divisions are all too often noted as fragmented, contentious, separate and detached, denied the allowance of diversity as exists in composite cultures. Within these works as within these cultures there are multiple points of access, places of entry and engagement with the issues being addressed. Artists shift *positions* for specific purposes, at times for specific publics with more vernacular or fluent 'readings' dependent on *language* and affiliation. The variety of audiences that this work expects reveals its broaching of communities, its blurring of borders.. The works that I curate – installation, painting, sculpture, photography, text, performance, film, video, new media - 'fiction', personal essay type work, and experimental documentary, also strategically blur and move between the distinctions of conventional genres, not for stylistic reasons, innovation, or technique, but in an attempt to find an appropriate form of representation for the issues and narratives⁷ they are tackling. Whether resurrecting one from the ashes of tradition or inscribing their own tendencies they carve out a *landscape* of their own. The personal often intervenes - the reflexive mirroring that takes place when the making of the object collides with the responsibility to the context of production, the histories involved, and the subjectivities inherent or alluded to. The resolution of these questions or positions is not always necessary, what is necessary is the questioning of each of our positions... investing in each others subjectivities, and *intersubjectivity*, speaking in collaboration/ conjunction, and speaking *through* our articulations and mediations that reflect the nature of the complexities and layers embedded in the reality of the work.

How do we know each other when there are vast distances and seemingly solid borders between us, even when there is an apparent proximity. Is there any sense of community or constituency outside or inside the regional. Beyond our immediate community is there an abstract community

⁶ Difference is articulated in and around the literal and metaphorical, as crucial social meanings rather than only as an extension of (an)other locale / space or subjective relationship. It is a dialectics of experience engaging a viscosity of substance.

⁷ There is a certain amount of circling around the subject, within the confines of how the *predicament* is situated. Cycles by their definition are joining and overlapping, revolving and returning, allowing us to come closer to knowing.. but only so close, filling in gaps at each turn, writing in the spaces, reading the past from the context of the present, rewriting and *speaking*.

that crosses borders and becomes translocal as the art world and other globalist industries insist upon. Is there something beyond the marketplace of objects, culture, and resources. There is a connective tissue formed/forming, fragile, prone to external and internal pressures and subject to dissolve at any moment, even disappearing before our eyes. If community is so difficult to establish and maintain, developing an audience is an equally severe task, a precariousness that links the act of curating to the art that is produced and seen.

A fluency and fluidity between art cultures exists even more than in the culture *at large*. Artists travel peripatetically outside of their regions, bringing back, leaving, and exchanging approaches to content and form. The artworks we see and curate display many examples of these connecting threads and the endpoints of their individualistic discoveries whether bouncing off each other or heading obliquely out on tangents, some having an apparent likeness, others having an apparent life of their own. None of this is coincidental, these relationships, these bodies of work, these pieces/their makers and the influences they have on each other. Still, we are divided, we live on variations of the same turf, the possibility of a debate on developing a pan-regional discourse of contemporary 'arab' art may not even be possible or desirable. The failure of Pan-Arabism haunts us, but also the fear of authoritative monoliths is all too menacingly present. Local discourses are possible and do exist. These 'pockets' of intellectual/creative sustenance serve to generate a level of production surpassing most communities in depth, breadth, and scope, that feeds off of each other and develops into sub-discourses, branches, or more discrete entities still related in dynamic and meaningful relationships such as the current scene in Beirut (recommencing in 1992) and the (post-1987 Intifada) production in and out of Palestine.

How do you represent the unrepresentable, unrepresentable because the rhetoric that has been overly employed to describe the regional events, conditions, and how we interpret them, is one that is familiar to our ears, an American or European one - an Israeli one, an unquestioned one, the point of view we recognize in the West as being our own. This is no accident, acknowledging those that speak and look like us as being our extension, withholding our sense of doubt, our distrust in the fabrications set aside because it is the language we know.

Living life, land, territoriality, loss, love, hysterias, the failure of justice, home, memory, metaphor, control, repression, power, occupation, neglect, rejection, resistance, youth, gender discrepancies, the body, sexuality, violence, ego, patriarchy, authoritarianism, representation, retrospection, fragmentation, displacement, exile, otherness, identity, struggles of self, will, survival, commitment, and responsibility are the dominant motifs in the works from these curatorial projects, their trajectories traced and tracked by the artists within pointed inquiries, counter narratives (see fn. 7), prosaic camouflage, cross directional and transgressive acts of production, sites of projection and fantasy, mimicry, recuperation, re-appropriation and the reconstruction of the real, the imaginary and the undecided, and the private and public, found in composite movements, singular subjectivities and a multiplicity of methodologies practiced. In lieu of being silenced and having one's existence ignored, challenged or obliterated these artists account for marginalized voices of experience, composing a history denied and substantiating a presence, a concrete discourse or bodies of work.

In leaving this behind.. titles that you may wish to utilize:

beginnings
cartes de visite
(dis)orientating the orient
the new colonialisms
breaking power
cartographies of presence
acts + demarcations
grounding sites
facing / framing locations
facts on the ground
breaking down the wall
confronting borders
from here to eternity
contingent geographies
denied spaces
discursive realities
dialogical interventions
displaced / displacing / displacement
(dis)engendering the 'orient'
ephemeral _____
history of the present
image and existence
in a logic of the senses
(in)tangible geographies
lessons of the future
making history
making matter
mapping our past
mapping the present
mapping the illusive
markers
marking the present / past
material lessons
out of time
out of place
pictures from afar
preclusions and presence
quotidian topographies
routes suspended
suspending images
tactile cartographies
to be continued (a suivre)
unidentifiable imaginings
visible _____ (realities)
what remains / what is gone
what is spoken / what is not
what is left

- Zahra 1 If I simply wanted to refuse, I would not be doing this interview. But if I don't do this interview, I cannot express this refusal.
- You put me in an uncomfortable position, because even this refusal you will use to your advantage.
- Zahra 3 Excuse me, but your question is arrogant. This arrogance is consistent with the West's relations with the Arab world.
- Zahra 5 Your question is actually an accusation. You are demanding that I behave well. I reject this demand.
- Zahra 6 Your question relegates me as either terrorist or hero. Why do you simplify the issues? ⁸

The central paradox when being viewed / when viewing or producing images of subjects, Zahra refuses to be constructed as a 'victim' and declares her agency to the audience. She states her position further and rejects the relationship of power that is imposed in the dominant representations that circulate between west and east, east and west, knowing that neither the *East* nor *West* are the monolithic entities that the other perceives.

- Zahra 235 There's something I reject, I reject considering the Lebanese people or other people from the Third World as a research laboratory for the West to analyze, how we live, eat, think, and behave, and whether we are legitimate or not in waging our armed struggle. As if the legitimacy of our struggle is a matter for the West or you to decide.

⁸ Zahra Bedran, from the videotape "Up to the South (Talaeen A Junuub), 60:00, 1993, Jayce Salloum & Walid Ra'ad.

Zahra 237 The most important thing though is this issue of being a research laboratory. Why should I become like a specimen, analyzed like a rat or a smoker for example? I reject this. But by talking to you today, by explaining my situation, I am not automatically refusing this position, and I am not trying to improve my image in front of foreigners or what have you. I am not after improving my world image. I'm quite satisfied with my way of life.⁹

How do you represent the unrepresentable, unrepresentable due to the history of its representation – as in how the image of a region has been fabricated for consumption elsewhere. This production of 'knowledge' and how it circumscribes the subject - the accounts of the invading crusaders (11-15th c.), the orientalist, 'intellectual' missions, (and pilgrimages to the area, the stories of 'The Arabian Nights (1001 Nights)' translated into French by Antoine Galland (1704)¹⁰, the engravers brought on Napoleon's flagship the 'Orient ' during his quest to conquer Egypt (1798¹¹), the colonial exhibitions at the World's Fairs.. - this continuity, a line unbroken by contemporary mass and popular media. Most media reporting carries on a façade of pretense in asserting claims of balance and objectivity, many institutions aim for the same, naïve positions, (oftentimes work isn't shown because of the overt politics of the material or because curators can't find an opposing voice to 'balance' it out), this is a very narrow and simplistic understanding of media, art, and representation. There is no such thing as 'objectivity' in this domain, you have to look to and through the subjective for whatever 'truths' you find. Balance has to be looked at in a greater context than what you are seeing at any one particular moment, we forget there is a whole history of misinformation, misrepresentation and blatant lies accepted as 'truths' in the West and elsewhere especially considering the history of the Middle East, and the recent aggressions there.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ “..in it Scheherazade is the young Persian woman who fights for her own freedom, an intellectual heroine who was able to transform her husband to the point of persuading him to give up his idea of killing her. In Galland's translation however, Scheherazade was reduced to a superficial, voluptuous image”, from the brochure accompanying the exhibition, “Harem Fantasies and the New Scheherazades”, CCCB, Barcelona, (Feb. - May, 2003).

¹¹ “By the end of the 18th century, Egypt had become the scholarly counterpart of those great landmasses that were then being claimed and explored by European settlers: unknown to herself, she was already well on her way to become a victim of the Enlightenment's conceptions of knowledge and discovery. In fact the first detailed plan for the conquest of Egypt was conceived not by a soldier but by a philosopher, Karl Leibniz, as early as 1670. More than a 100 years later, when Napoleon conceived of his invasion of Egypt, it was partly on the model of a scientific expedition.” from, *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh, p.82, 1992.

Is it enough to provoke sometimes and other times provide a meditative space claiming a calmness in the midst of anxious spaces or vice versa; a brief moment of anxiety, left floating, unresolved but intense in its suggestions and potential. It is a set-up in a way, polarities contesting each other to create an active space that the viewer can be placed in, a space that is questioning, unresolved, at times lucid, occasionally open, but open with anxiety and angst, pleasure, contemplation, anger, frustration, or sadness. There is a price paid in not heeding cautionary tales, breaking rules, pushing the conservatism and limits of institutions, providing layers of realities, correlating and contradicting dominant motifs - a price of denial and censure.

In spite of this the attempt to amass an exhibition is a leap of faith, not in preservation but in the belief that there will be someone to view it, that in this accumulation these histories will continue to live, that they will have an audience. The material itself has a sense of 'living', a presentness, a relevance, excerpts of life resting in their context of extraction. A collaboration exists with the curator and artist but also, with the viewer and the subjects. All viewing is incomplete though, in the sense of having seen all, but also in the sense that this *is* a living entity. The exhibition grows in stops and starts, mutating - making contact through the experience of the underlying subjectivities and the nature of the interstitial site.

Often artists occupy at least two positions at the same time being documentor and inscriber, surveyor and subject, both positions build and rely on each other to literally or metaphorically fill in where the other can't. This innate hybridity may appear seamless or could be exaggerated, in all cases the interconnectedness of both threads creates a specific integral space of a 'contextual objectivity' arrived at through the subjective responsibility to the issues and subjects at stake. These are sutured together by a conceptual underpinning, a nuts and bolts of logic developed for the moment, a dialectics of experience engaging a viscosity of substance. This brings together an intensely personal space with the intrinsic social and political site, different with each subject but with overlapping and overarching points of contention, correspondence, senses of place, notions of community, domains of discursivity, legacies of conflict and capital, disenfranchisement, and the ties of transnational concurrences. These projects are not about *difference* per se but about separateness and a connective web. I am not interested in the politics of identity (whose acts are exclusive and overly determined in themselves) but of subjectivity and agency, where we are placed, where we choose to position ourselves, and how the world acts upon us and how we act upon the world. This is an attempt to remain rooted in the examination of the production of culture, the agency of such, the confines and interventionist alleys, the re-thinking and re-positioning of subjects and acts to defy, coerce, subvert, disclose, decenter, distress and resurrect, resurface, reconstruct and claim, not once but always, for now, for this moment, to state it and then to acknowledge the realities affected. Many artists want to claim a space for fluidity of self, an identity that is determined contextually, a subjectivity that is unimpeded. Others seek to hold onto or regain a land, a nation, and the ensuing dilemmas that follow. The right to be self-inscribed spans a flexible local identity and the trans-local, the particularities of each, the movement between the two, the split and interconnectedness, and the usurpation of either. In this sense of interstitiality, between places/countries, cultures, times/periods/events, influences, politics, ideologies, fragments of narrative have a coherency and a positioning to question the grand narrative(s) that put/set things in order, they aim to deeply disrupt/interrupt unified notions of nationalism, empire, and identity. We are all transnational subjects, entwined globally, in assault, complicit with, directly or indirectly affecting all, at risk of being affected by each other, at anytime, by those we choose to identify with and those we ignore. The pivotal relationship is that of *an individual to community*. This is intrinsic to *all* types of indentifying. The acts of taking apart, building and dismantling to build again is more than an exercise in laying bare the

elements, process, and motivations of power and regulating bodies, it is an attempt to articulate the conditions that exist for a subject's individual life, and the forces that confront our individual and common realities. These explode and careen from the *person* to the political, to the banal, to the intimately exigent construction of nationalism(s), other ideologies, and their conjunctive subjective relationships. Subjectivity strewn between re-constituting and re-presenting the ephemeral and transitory demarcations in which it resides these *zones of being* are situated in the contested and conflicted notions of homeland, nation, diaspora, exile, travel, assimilation, refuge, native, and *other*. Confronted as standard or anomaly, the subject may choose to intersect, overlay, ameliorate, reshape, redefine, morph, hybridize, separate, erase, augment, or rupture these constructions. Fixing the temporal, space and time become conflated. A sense of the momentary (living between or during events) stretches from a point of being into permanency.

*These are some of the possible impossibilities of representing the unrepresentable.
These artworks, these films and videotapes..*

These works are interpretive, they have a voice and they enunciate, they speak from specific histories to non-specific locations, they are positioned between the memory of place, the political discrepancies of the present, and the historic and cultural permeations of the past, the lyrical is immersed in the conflicted, and the personal entwined in the political parallels of their wider realities. The dialectical relationship of the artist and the audience is highlighted, a conversation laid bare and layered between the conceptual, the fields of images, the suggested frames and the construction process. Looked upon closely, there is a locating, a site-ing, taking place that is firmly rooted. Paradigms can be broken down and made to be malleable - the immediate, local, and translocal can spiral to far reaching associations. These inquiries and provocations carry with them a chance for responses to be determined within a more problematized field. This is not just to counter what passes for information or representation by others, but to produce work - in whatever guises it takes, artworks, or curatorial projects - that challenges our perceptions, and reclaims and reconstructs an agency that is complex and self determining.

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