

Reflections on the Transformations of Palestinian Art

Tina Sherwell. Head of Contemporary Visual Art Program, Faculty of Art, Music and Design, Birzeit University (Palestine)

The Palestinian art of the last decades appears inevitably conditioned by the history of the country's occupation, which is why it has emerged as a form of expression and creation for the defense and protection of national identity, even when Palestinian artists work in many and very varied settings, often in the diaspora. Although in recent years, the opening of new art teaching and exhibition centers, exchange programs with other artists and technological tools has greatly improved the situation of Palestinian artists, there are still many obstacles that hold back and determine their work, such as the difficulties of mobility and dissemination, the shortage of buyers and the dependence on financial patronage. Currently, the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has added even more difficulties to the situation of these artists.

The last forty years have witnessed significant transformation in the geopolitics of Palestinian art. From the outset we need to consider a definition of Palestinian art by recognizing that it is not art that is specifically created in one place but that, owing to the history of dispossession and diaspora, Palestinian artists can be found all over the world. Thus, Palestinian art necessarily starts from multiple sites of enunciation, and inevitably is influenced by site and location. For the purposes of this article, I will mainly focus on art of Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, while touching on the production of artists based in various other locations around the globe.

If we cast our eyes back to the period of the 1980s in the Occupied Territories, artists' testimonies suggest that their main preoccupation was the articulation of cultural iden-

tity and its re-affirmation to the public. Art was deeply intertwined with the defensive stance and protection of national identity in the face of occupation. Artists held a deep-seated belief in their role as the vanguard of cultural identity, and that their responsibility was to support the people in remaining steadfast to traditions. This materialized in art works that provided the public with identifiable symbols of the homeland. This ethos that dominated art making took place in the face of an alienating modernity that was transforming the landscape of Palestine and the structures of society as the need for livelihood drew villagers into becoming a pool of manual labor in Israel.

The stringent laws of occupation came to bear heavily upon art production, as the underlying policies of occupation were the denial and erasure of Palestinian cultural

identity. This was a time when holding up a Palestinian flag would lead to imprisonment, when art works came under the same jurisdiction as political leaflets and when exhibitions would be closed by the occupying military authority. For example, until recently no formal art school existed in Palestine, there is no national art academy, or national art museum. Under occupation, art and agriculture were programs that were not recognized in higher education institutions, according to the accounts of the League of Palestinian Artists. Many Palestinian artists living in Israel have studied in Israeli institutions while those living in diaspora have studied in their countries. The result therefore is a multitude of trainings and ethos on art across the generations, and the work of Palestinian artists has grown and developed in various locations. However, the absence of recognition of Palestinian identity meant for many artists that this subject was a central issue to their practice and an important way of articulating their identity. Therefore, during the years of occupation, manifestations of cultural expression met with harsh reprisals. The holding of exhibitions needed permission from military authorities, while paintings were confiscated and books banned. Hence, affirmation of their cultural identity was a central focus of the work of artists in a context in which there were no galleries, museums, art schools and challenges for the circulation and dissemination of art. Artists also faced the challenge of being cut off from the wider art world and peers in neighboring countries.

In this context, art exhibitions were temporary and makeshift, and were often held in schools or local community halls. Participation by the public was taken as a sign of national patriotism and an affirmation of identity, and, judging by accounts of the artists, numbers were high. The public also had their expectations: art was to present to them a celebration of their national identity and the sorrows and

plight of the Palestinian people. While few people could afford to purchase and collect art, it circulated through posters, which enabled its dissemination across the community. Artists of an older generation speak of the sanctity with which posters were held among the community. Posters functioned in a way not dissimilar to Benedict Anderson's discussion of the importance of print culture in fostering the formation of the "imagined community" of a dispersed nation of Palestinians, whether living under occupation or in diaspora. The focus was predominantly on the Palestinian public and on showing an international public the other side of the political struggle.

As no art schools existed in the Occupied Territories, artists studied in neighboring countries of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, when opportunities were available and travel was permitted

The main organizing body in the Occupied Territories was the League of Palestinian Artists, who would at times receive support indirectly from the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Their work was characterized by group exhibitions in which less emphasis was placed upon the individual artist than on the importance of encouraging cultural production and included many "untrained" artists. As no art schools existed in the Occupied Territories, artists studied in neighboring countries of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, when opportunities were available and travel was permitted. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that Al Najeh University and Al Quds University opened up art programs, and 2006 before the first art academy was established. Artists therefore were often self-trained or managed to take short courses run by other artists. Artists and the League attempted to build bridges to the outside, and exhibitions that were organized overseas were predominantly in political



Graffiti in Bethlehem (Soléa Bulfone).

solidarity with Palestinian artists and group exhibitions of Palestinian art. Palestinian artists also attempted to build relations with Middle Eastern countries as they were isolated from developments and debates of art in neighboring countries and the region. The majority of artists under occupation declined to be represented by Israeli galleries or participate in museum exhibitions, although in many cases this could have been a road to success. What was of significance was a series of annual exhibitions jointly organized by Palestinian and Israeli artists with a supporting manifesto calling for the end to occupation. While Palestinian and Israeli artists did join forces in a public outcry against occupation, these initiatives slowly dwindled as they were increasingly capitalized upon for

political cosmetics, and the artists and art works became secondary in the events.

It is worth pointing to the changes in the cultural landscape of Palestine in the early 1990s, with the establishment of several NGOs whose specific remit was to work in the field of culture and the visual arts, and in various cases were in fact founded by artists themselves. In addition, universities also developed programs for the study of art and exhibition venues. In retrospect, these organizations that have grown in number over the past decade provided a marked shift in the cultural landscape. They took on different roles, hosting solo shows for artists, documenting Palestinian art, creating websites, producing publications, promoting contemporary and avant-garde practices, creat-

ing bridges between Palestinian artists inside the green line and in diaspora, creating links between international artists and Palestine, organizing international exhibitions of Palestinian art, hosting international artists, creating residency programs, and facilitating the work of international curators. In time, these institutions have become cultural mediators and set the agenda for cultural activities through their strategies and programs.

At the same time, with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, many artists saw that their role in being the vanguard of national and cultural identity shifted, hence one witnessed a rise in solo exhibitions and artists exploring individual themes and concerns in their work, which for many practitioners was informed by the political context but did not revert to the use of the established visual iconography and popular symbolism of identity representations of previous decades.

At the same time, with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, many artists saw that their role in being the vanguard of national and cultural identity shifted

Artists began to move away from what had been the predominant methods, forms and issues, with the symbolic representations of homeland or nationalist content, to a more indexical representation of place. Painting and sculpture had been the dominant modes of expression but this began to shift with younger generation artists, who began to use photography, video and installation, and experiment with performance. With a lessening of a direct political agenda in art practice over the mid-to-late 1990s, as well as of the need to create national representations, younger artists in particular began to engage with more complex investigations of questions of identity and location. More in parallel with international

tendencies and tropes, it would be the work of these artists that would later come to the foreground and become of interest internationally. Today we can find Palestinian artists exploring a wide range of subjects in their work, personal and sexual identity, collective memory, questions of location and place, longing, nostalgia, the limitations of nationalism, visual symbolism, exile diaspora and the meaning of home, ideas which are explored through a wide range of forms, such as photography, video painting, installation, and film.

A pivotal factor of change in the Palestinian art context has been the role of curators interested in art from the Middle East, which has grown from 2000, and Palestine has become one of the stops on the “international curators trail” to the region. Numerous curators made their way to Jerusalem and Ramallah to discover for themselves the contemporary art scene. Palestinian art was drawn into the geopolitics of the art world, as international opportunities opened up for artists through participation in exhibitions, projects, residencies and biennales, but the interest in the region followed trends in the art eco-system and in retrospect was short-lived. In addition, there was a particular interest from regional collectors and auction houses in the work of Palestinian artists that provided support for artistic practice during the last decade, but the Covid-19 crisis has seen a serious decline in this avenue for artists.

Artists’ organizations that were established in the 1990s are seriously dependent on donor funding and their work is often determined and defined by funding trends. With the current Covid-19 crisis, they are facing incredible challenges to their survival in all areas of the cultural sector, visual art, theatre, performing arts, dance, and film. Funding is a factor in art production as local and international exhibitions have production costs of varying

sizes. This provides local and international artists with the opportunity to do work that may not otherwise be possible or to create to participate in curatorial concepts of exhibitions and have their work seen. The opposite is of course the case for artists who are not chosen to participate, so curatorial practices factor into the production and visibility of art. However, it is not the case that all art is reliant on this avenue since numerous artists continue to do work without production costs and without visibility in exhibitions. Yet it is essential to note that these funding opportunities, whether through curated exhibitions or applications for different grants now available to artists from the Middle East, has significantly enabled the production and visibility of the work of Palestinian artists.

Despite the expansion in organizations that support and enable contemporary art practice, the visual arts are still hampered by many aspects of the local context, in particular occupation

Yet, despite the expansion in organizations that support and enable contemporary art practice, the visual arts are still hampered by many aspects of the local context, in particular occupation. Artists are cut off one another through the labyrinth of checkpoints and partition walls. For example, an artist from Bethlehem cannot travel to Jerusalem, artists in Gaza cannot leave the Strip or engage with their local peers, and artists are also separated from their counterparts living in Israel. Palestinians need visas to travel to almost every country, while those resident in the West Bank cannot travel through Israeli airport but have to go

to neighboring Jordan to travel from Amman airport. The ability of international exhibitions to travel to Palestine is incredibly complex and constricted by occupation. Palestinian artists are cut off from neighboring Arab countries and art scenes and dialogues there. While there have been more opportunities for travel in the last decade, and internet and a wide range social media and virtual platforms have enabled artists to connect to one another, isolation still prevails.

There are many challenges faced by the art sector, such as absence of infrastructure and staff to support the development of the full potential of the visual arts as a professional sector, absence of financial support for art practitioners' work and research, and lack of work opportunities for them to support themselves. There is a notable absence of critical writing and general discourse about art. There is continuous and inherent insecurity in the institutions that rely heavily on donor support for their survival, which means organizations survive on temporary and short cycles of funding, confining and determining their activities, and there is only a small art market with a few commercial galleries. However, Palestinian art is now recognized in the wider international art world, with artists participating in biennales, international exhibitions, residency programs and art fairs. They are prominently visible among artists from the Arab world for their excellence and many have been the recipients of grants and prestigious awards. The opportunities available for young artists in the international context are far more widespread than in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but there are considerable challenges for those who attempt to sustain their practice, particularly in these times.

KHALED MOUZANAR PRESENTS

كَفَرْنَا حَوْم

CAPHARNAÛM



PRIX DU JURY
FESTIVAL DE CANNES



UN FILM DE
NADINE LABAKI

ZAIN ALRAFEEA

YORDANOS SHIFERA

TREASURE BANKOLE



WILD BUNCH



Capharnaüm, de Nadine Labaki.