

**Review of *Palestine c/o Venice: Collateral event of the 53<sup>rd</sup> International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia*, Ed. Salwa Mikdadi (Beirut: mind the gap, 2009)**

Over the past ten years we have witnessed a number of publications, predominantly out of Europe and the U.S., dedicated to the subject of contemporary art from the Arab world and its diasporas. What remains lacking, however, is a substantial body of scholarship dedicated to the history of modern art of the region. In other words, the roots of the contemporary have yet to be examined. The consequence is the assumption that contemporary art in the region is a novelty. Unfortunately this holds true for those working abroad and, at times, even among those living in the Arab world. Dispelling this myth is the most significant contribution of the essays published in the exhibition catalogue for *Palestine c/o Venice*.

The foreword by Salwa Mikdadi, one of the first curators of modern and contemporary Arab art in U.S., sets the tone for the catalogue. Outlining her agenda and goals for *Palestine c/o Venice*, Mikdadi stresses the historical and contemporary significance of Palestinian participation at the Biennale. Not only is it a first, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the chosen framework for the exhibition aims to challenge the assumption that Palestinian art derives its strength from a position of victimization. Certainly an exhibition platform premised on the paradigm of the nation state is a structure that automatically excludes Palestinians in their current state of occupation. And whereas exhibitions of contemporary non-western art, particularly in the context of biennales, often are accused of being didactic political lessons, artists Taysir Batniji, Shadi HabibAllah, partners Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, Emily Jacir, Jawad al Malhi, and Khalil Rabah instead choose to broadly explore the intersection of art, audience, and geography without relinquishing attention to the complexity of the current socio-political Palestinian context. Moreover, the essays by Mikdadi, commissioner Vittorio Urbani, curator Jack Persekian, curator and critic Adila Laidi-Hanieh, and art historian Tina Sherwell unearth a longer history of art in Palestine and its overlaps and divergences with global contemporary production.

Urbani's *What If?* is a personal reflection on the contingencies of dislocation and the role of art within this nexus of possibility. For Urbani, exhibitions and the curatorial choices they require are far from neutral. Rather than an "act of protest," however, *Palestine c/o Venice* represents "an act of optimistic reconstruction," one that must insist on an awareness of reality and one that in the Palestinian case has been "disrupted and almost frozen by delayed justice," (7). This leads Urbani to question the "heavy, postcolonial heritage" of the Venice Biennale that is national representation. Yet in an unresolved paradox—one that deserves more attention—Urbani notes both the history of cross-cultural interactions informing a city like Venice and the contemporary opportunities for such meetings that develop out of the Venice Biennale (his collaboration with Salwa Mikdadi, for instance).

Perkesian also critiques the structure of the Biennale, arguing that it serves to comfort those involved by the mere fact that they are 'doing something.' He begins by ruminating on the gap between the subject and viewer, a distance that prompts the simultaneous and apparently paradoxical responses of empathy and inactivity. This launches Perkesian into a discussion of his experience and accompanying disappointment setting up the Palestinian Department of Visual Arts in the Ministry of Culture during the nineties. Despite Perkesian's acknowledgement that he risks "the pitfall," of "confessional mode," his text unfortunately reads as a justification on why he no longer works in Palestine.

The remaining essays by Mikdadi, Laidi-Hanieh, and Sherwell take a more historical approach and are therefore the more substantial contributions to a scholarly discourse. Mikdadi's essay opens with an explanation of the title, "Palestine c/o Venice," a reference to the postal system that she aptly considers a metaphor for Palestine's colonial history: the seemingly perpetual inability for one to mail a letter to and

from Palestine proper with a Palestinian stamp due to a series of foreign occupiers, dating from the Ottoman Empire to contemporary Israel. In other words, Palestine is accessible only via a mediator. She then discusses post-Oslo changes in art (a media shift from painting to installation; the presence of international curators in the region; the growth in the number of NGOs institutions and art academies; the move from the isolation of the artist's studio to the community's engagement in the public sphere) before situating the Biennale projects within a local and global context.

Laidi-Hanieh also presents a historical outline of Palestinian art in different media (painting, film, literature). Moving from the 1960s through the 1987 Intifada to the post-Oslo period, she charts the influence of these radical socio-political shifts on artistic production and reception. She concludes by characterizing the case of Palestinian art with a paradox: "an anachronistic, unique, post-colonial colony that despite its small size, obliteration from the map, and relentless destruction and isolation, still manages to inspire its artists to create a diverse and vibrant cultural expression, which has shaped modern Arab culture and is now celebrated internationally," (22). With this observation, Laidi-Hanieh distinguishes Palestinian cultural production from Franz Fanon's paradigmatic analyses of a post-colonial revolutionary art due to its continuing occupation. At the same time, she refuses to consider this socio-political context as one that stifles art.

Sherwell's "Intimate Landscapes/Dissected Terrains," is of the most interest to art historians as its focus on one genre allows the author to theorize art's role in shaping a community through a shared perception of the land. Moreover, she employs careful formal analysis of particular works to trace the changes in how the nation is produced via art (from the female figure as representation of homeland in paintings from the 1980s to an empty suitcase, void of identity markers, in Khalil Rabah's work from 2002). Her essay concludes with an equally intriguing discussion of how the Palestinian works included in Biennale participate in this longer history.

The catalogue's minor disappointments (from grammatical typos to content repetition) do not detract from its overall contributions. Together, the essays offer a timely commentary on state of contemporary Palestinian art and its scholarly discourse, one that has the potential to both provoke unproductive empathy and make substantial contributions to critical discussion on art and politics.

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