

Art in Public Spaces; 3 Projects
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Public arts have pushed their boundaries in the many parts of the world much earlier in the century than they have in much of the Middle East. Naturally this phenomenon is seen to reflect on several different reasons that point back to the discourse of visual arts in the area in the last century. However, the necessity for art to expand audiences, and to refuse the elitist stance that Modern Art has existed within in the past is - amongst many other factors- what has pushed arts into the public space.

Naturally, within the public space, a whole new experience for the artist and the artwork will emerge; the level of control over the work may be diminished radically. Also, where the participation of the audience is required (for the work to happen) naturally changes the status of the work from being a finished work presented - statically - to an audience, to a work that is born as a result of its presence in the public space.

The works cited within this paper were produced and presented in the city of Amman, Jordan. Naturally the specificity of Jordan's public is very much related to the work.

The specificity of the public space in Jordan

Ideas around cosmopolitan cities, and city demographics, social class, gender politics, and minorities are all topics in great discussion in formal and informal settings in many parts of the world. Identities are constantly changing, and issues around identity are pushing racism, and a newborn fanaticism to the surface to add a new face to how identity is defined in local contexts.

Jordan is a particularly unique country in the 'Arab Middle East' in that its politics, history and its identity is a closely linked with the political histories of Palestine, the formation of the State of Israel, regional Arab politics, and Palestine (West Bank) being under Jordanian authority from 1968 to 1988. These events, alongside the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the resulting expulsion of Palestinian / Jordanians (due to political standpoints of their respective leaders in siding with Iraq) resulted in mass influx of people into Jordan at intervals over the last 100 years. Arguably, today the percentages of people in living in Jordan of Palestinian origin range between 40 - 70% of population.

Integration has naturally become an issue for the masses, and has been affected by the different policies of the Jordanian government in inclusion / exclusion of the people of 'Palestinian origin'. These have resulted in the formation of a nation that has complex sense and interpretation of the 'self' and the 'other'. These ideas of difference are questioned on a daily basis by both people who's pre-Israeli / colonial existence narrates a far less confused and aggressive coexistence. These citizens in their dramatic historical narrative actually make Jordan a very precarious place. Governments acknowledge the reality, and enforce police-state behaviour and censorship.

Upon entering the public space, these issues all take part in the public participatory interventions. These projects are a commentary on broad themes of identity, belonging and their relationship with history.

The Projects

Disorientation¹

Disorient: Origin from mid 17th century French word *désorienter* "turn from the east"². Confuse as to his or her bearings. To confuse by removing / obscuring something that usually guides someone³.

What does it mean for a nation to be disorientated, to loose its bearings, its sense of direction? How does dislocation from a homeland affect a nation in their perception of their sense of belonging to a new homeland, which might not have been perceived as a permanent one?

How do internal politics in inclusion and or marginalization affect the attitude and the sense of ownership of citizens towards their present country?

Finally, how do people consider a country a homeland when they are constantly looking for a way to immigrate?

The project investigates this perceived notion of a transient state of existence of the peoples of the city of Amman and their desire to be elsewhere. Invariably, these 'other' places take the form of either a homeland, be it a 'stolen' one, or one left in search of work; or to another country that holds the allure of 'land of plenty'. Through memory, whether based on reality or an entirely illusive one, the work seeks to re-create the mental landscape of this 'other' place through the audience's active participation in the selection of images to form a collage of this vision.

The work travelled over three days to different parts of the city; Jabal Hussein, a lower middle class area, downtown Amman, and Al Wihdat Palestinian refugee camp. In each location, passer-by's is invited to bring together images forming collages of another place they would like to be.

"Ya Reit"⁴

"Ya Reit" is a project with Amman-based artist Hanan Khalil, and is part of a curated residency under the title '*No Condition is Permanent*'

"A state of living is based on developments continuously changing for the better. This ideology is deeply rooted in the psychology of human beings, having to believe in the positive, in the creative, in an organically growing order to improve life. Still, human beings are challenged to be flexible and innovative in order to react on changes regarding personal issues, social, economical, technological and political subjects. Individual experiences and conditionings have an influencing impact on these processes. Cultural and social heritage serves as a base... The stimulus to react will always be based on the desire to improve a situation, or at least to come to terms with it. Yet, for a lot of people it seems that conditions stay the same, embedded in a vivid circle of life. To which extent do individuals have an impact on their own situation and therefore, how do individuals influence their immediate surrounding?"⁵

Change is perhaps the word from which the work departed. Locally, the desire for change is strongly contradicted with an air of apathy. This can be loosely associated with fate as it is indicated and encouraged in the local religious culture. Therefore, *Fate* and *Change* share a commonality in the local context.

Fate is also used in colloquial Arabic referencing to destiny towards two very contrasting events; marriage and death. Both these occasions have traditionally and culturally been 'celebrated' with the public in tents as they accommodate large groups of people for the occasion. Hence, *Fate* and the *Tent* share a commonality in the local context.

The lottery, commonly known as *Ya Naseeb*⁶ was a platform found in the public space in which the dichotomy of striving towards change, and the restraining force of fate, was a 'space' in which the two ideas can be conceptually and satirically engaged. A play on words was used to entitle the work "Ya Reit"⁷

The project took place in the down town area of the city of Amman in Jordan. A mobile lottery stand entitled "Ya Reit..." with empty lottery slips were used to request the public to finish the sentence Ya Reit. The project took place over two days and involved the public's participation in writing their wishes on paper slips that symbolized the lottery ticket. Also some portraits were taken using a Polaroid camera and the same sentence was written on the bottom of their photographs. The third day the collected slips were hung in a tent so people could exchange each other's wishes.

The vast majority of people's wishes were around the idea of the return to a homeland and the freedom of Palestine. This is an important indication of the state of mind of the people that inhabit the public space of the city of Amman.

"Where Are the Arabs?"⁸

The ideology of a collective Arab identity is a strong and ever-present reality for modern day Arab citizens. This collective consciousness was born as a result of *Al Nasseriah* era (coined after Gamal Abdul Nasser the former president of Egypt from 1956 - 1970) who called for Arab Nationalism and attempted to unite the Arab countries. While in reality the dream was only realised briefly between Egypt and Syria, the 'legacy' of an Arab Republic lives on in the psyche of present-day Arabs, and places Gamal Abdul Nasser in the realm of the 'idol'. This is particularly apparent in public opinion that has disagreed with the political standpoints of their respective countries, creating a phenomenon of referring to the past with fondness, overwhelming emotion, and consequently somehow refusing to exist in the present-tense.

The longevity of the ideology of Arab unity is also one directly related to the occupation of Palestine by Israel. The relationship is formed as a result of the notion that freedom of Palestine is the responsibility of both the Palestinians and Arabs alike. This can be seen through the involvement of the Arabs in several (defeated) wars with Israel in an attempt to free Palestine in the past.

Since the death of Gamal Abdul Nasser, the 'unborn child' of Arab Unity has not been forgotten in light of the frustration and the conflicting values between the public and their governments. A questioning call 'Where are the Arabs?' is repeated consistently especially by countries in the Arab World that have been under attack and / or

occupation by foreign forces. These calls and questions to the absence of Arab unity, in an accusing tone from their callers, imply a falsely assumed apathy (seemingly by the called-upon) towards their fellow Arab brothers and sisters in distress.

While the complex relationship of this phenomenon can be discussed in more detail and depth, the focus of the work is more on the relationship of Arabs with history, reality, identity and with truth.

The work, entitled *Where Are the Arabs?* is a 20-minute speech based on a selected compilation of parts of public speeches that repeatedly call for Arab Nationalism and unity to form a Republic. Gamal Abdul Nasser gave these speeches between the years 1958 and 1967.

"We are gathered here to celebrate the anniversary of unity and the birth of United Arab Republic. What we celebrate today is not merely the birth of Unity, nor the birth of a great nation solely...The reality, my brothers, is that Unity was simply a popular demand that gained its freedom and rid itself from all traces of foreign control. It continued to pave its path, and declared this to its rulers... The region was filled with great hopes and dreams, but dreams are not achieved unless the path ahead was paved by the motivation to work, and there is no motivation without freedom.... Unity, my brothers, is the means that Arabs everywhere saw towards independence and freedom. Solidarity was the path that Arabs, in every Arab country, found to safeguard independence, to protect it from those looking greedily towards us, and protect it from the oppressors... The call that brought us here today is a call from God, and you are this call's soldiers, we are all soldiers for this call, all the Arab Nations are soldiers for this call. With these hearts, with these souls, with this faith and with the help of God, your call will triumph, the call of Arab Nationalism." ⁹

The work points out several difference ideas. The performance of a speech from the words of a historical 'idol' aims to trigger nostalgia. Simultaneously, it plays on the existing feelings of frustration in light of the disagreements of public vs. government opinions, as well as the realities of politics in the region. By referencing and engaging the past and re-placing it in the present, the work questions where history is positioned, archived, and processed. Simultaneously it makes note of this state of existing in the past and not the present.

Presenting such a speech in the public sphere automatically brings to question the role of public speaking in the civic space – or arguably the lack of.

While the work mimics (in some form) speeches given on TV by presidents, kings, rulers and persons of authority. In light of the doubt of the legitimacy of media, the work presents itself in a medium that pushes the audience to question truth, and hence their own confidence in a part of history which they hold onto dearly. In a sense, the work in its presentation today scorns its authority in the past.

In the structure of the speech where the whole is made up of a juxtaposition of parts of different speeches that repeat around the same idea, the work is also a commentary on the element of repetition. Repetition is used in the Arabic language as a form of emphasis; through the repetition of a word, a phrase or an idea. Yet, repetition is also seen to invoke boredom and numbness. This last aspect is emphasized with the duration of the work.

In the public space, the work is affected by the audience's reaction to it. Do they stay and listen to the whole speech or do they walk away? Do they have something to say about it? Would they like to try to present the speech themselves to an audience? Every time, the audiences' reaction brings a new interpretation to the work.

Conclusion

Artists' ability to research, contemplate, discuss and play with every-day issues in the public space also means that a wider audience is exposed to artists and their works. This is an important development in countries where on the one hand, the arts have maintained the elitist position towards their audiences, which limited exposure for both the artist and the general public. On another hand, engaging in public spaces has expanded the aesthetical interpretations that the artist employs in their work. This slow but important development needs the support of structures and art systems around the arts, from within their respective countries, so that art finds a new meaning in the civic arena.

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