# ART AND CONFLICT

## Essays by
**Jananne Al-Ani**
**Bernadette Buckley**
**Michaela Crimmin**
**Malu Halasa**
**Jemima Montagu**
**Sarah Rifky**
**Larissa Sansour**
**Charles Tripp**

**Royal College of Art**
Postgraduate Art & Design

# CONTENTS

# HUMANITY
## IS NOT A
# COMPLETED
# PROJECT

# INTRODUCTION: REFLECTIONS ON ART AND CONFLICT

— Michaela Crimmin

Despite the plethora of peacekeeping efforts, this year has provided a sharp reminder that conflict is a depressingly and disturbingly ongoing feature of the human condition. The year that commemorates the centenary of the beginning of World War I will also be marked in history for the conflagration in Syria; killings in and the uncertain future of Afghanistan and Iraq; conflicts in the Central African Republic and South Sudan; the ongoing underlying animosities in Northern Ireland and the Balkans; Russia and Ukraine; the drone attacks in Waziristan; the Israel/Palestine conflict; the continuing presence of al-Qaida, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, Islamic State (ISIS) and too much more. Also to consider is the enormous military spend by the United States, and to a lesser but significant degree by other countries including the UK, China and Saudi Arabia. This is, as António Guterres says, 'a world where peace is dangerously in deficit'. This statement appears in a new report that has just announced that forced displacement has gone beyond 50 million people for the first time since World War II.[1]

Saturated by the spectacle of war fed to us daily in the media, appalled by the politicians who often so outrageously ratchet up xenophobia or civic antagonisms, disappointed by the failure of the 'Special Envoys' to resolve differences across belief systems, anaesthetised by our seemingly individual impotence, and side-tracked by the daily exigencies of our own lives, it is all too easy to duck an interrogation of why, in the 21st century, there are so many people kept busy as the proponents, the victims and the profiteers of war. Stanley Cohen reasoned that it was our lack of empathy and remarkable ability to turn a blind eye.[2] Others say it is the profound ignorance of history. Others again blame an overcrowded planet with limited resources.

And what of the responses? In this case, specifically with respect to those from the arts sector who are engaged with this difficult subject.

There are artists living in the everyday of war; artists who are part of a resistance movement and who use their art to challenge the dominance of despots; artists who join the peace movement; artists who have provocations and questions; artists who make observations or offer reflections; artists dealing with the trauma of war; artists rewriting histories; those who use art as propaganda; those who use art to bring people together. There are artists who are optimistic in their outlook, and others who are disaffected by the state of the world—'I am deceived by the past, tormented by the present, scared by the future'[3]—yet in either case make work that has powerful agency with the intent of provoking a response.

Artists who have received attention for addressing conflict in their work include Gustav Metzger; Lara Baladi; Wafaa Bilal; Willie Doherty; Omer Fast; Mona Hatoum; Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen; Dinh Q. Lê; Richard Mosse; Rabih Mroué; Imran Qureshi; Michael Rakowitz; Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin; Francis Alÿs; Eugenie Dolberg; Walid Raad; George Barber; Shirin Neshat; Mahmoud Khaled; Krzysztof Wodiczko; Regina José Galindo; Eyal Weizman; Khaled Hourani; Raphael Chikukwa; Emily Jacir; Rosalind Nashashibi; and, Tony Chakar, amongst many more.

Artists can be wary of labels, or being classified within a particular genre or subject area, and this is certainly the case with respect to the subject of conflict. So, for example, in Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades*, a three-part video series telling the history of the Christian campaigns from an Arab perspective, the artist offers profoundly fresh insights into a narrative and a history that those in the West have received from an entirely different viewpoint. These films, both delightful and terrifying in equal measure, are shockingly relevant now; they say much about war, but so much else besides. Or again, there is the phenomenal enterprise and determination of Rahraw Omarzad who set up the only centre for contemporary art in Afghanistan, offering courses, workshops and a place to work for young artists, but whose work is not defined or contained by the tensions of the Afghan situation. These are just two cases of the many initiatives that are taking place across the world both because of, and despite, conflict.[4]

However we try to define—or not define—the connections between art and conflict, destruction and war, the insights of artists are too interesting and too important to be denied more airing and debate than they presently receive. Attention when it does come is invariably piecemeal, and in the case of

the visual arts it is largely corralled within its own sector. In the United Kingdom, apart from the Imperial War Museum, whose contemporary art programme is long running, there are one-off exhibitions, PhD students delving into a particular practice, and artists focusing on a particular context, but there is scant exchange between the different activities.

Frustrated by the lack of attention given to artists, in 2011 a small programme of work under the title of Culture+Conflict was set up in the belief that the arts play a vital role among the complex, competing agendas related to armed conflict.[5] The initial aim was to gather information, show and debate work at a series of events, and generally to gauge people's interest. We found a recognition of the need for a more sustained, incremental knowledge base, with a growing number of people across a range of disciplines believing there is a strong case to be made for fostering a longer term, multidisciplinary, understanding of what it is that artists bring to the subject of conflict, and to amplify greatly the significant contribution artists are making. The initial activities of Culture+Conflict, and the preceding work by TJ Demos, Julian Stallabrass, Charles Tripp, Bernadette Buckley and others, provided the springboard to focus more intently on the role and purpose of art produced during and in the aftermath of conflict, and to do this by bringing artists and curators together with two other groups—academics and activists—in order to share

expert knowledge and to identify and air different approaches, perspectives, questions, values and methodologies.

Having identified a number of people working in Higher Education with an interest in both the arts and the subject of conflict, we held a meeting at the Royal College of Art. Professors from the School of Asian and African Studies, Goldsmiths (University of London), University of the Arts, the University of Manchester, the Courtauld Institute, University College London, the University of Nottingham, the Royal College of Art, and the University of Sheffield, among others, took no time to agree that there would definitely be value in something more than a one-off exchange. Rather than adopt a country-specific approach, their preference was to address the subject of art and conflict by using four single words as the starting points for discussion, identified as 'memory', 'satire', 'resistance' and 'resilience'. These were to be explored in four consecutive seminars and associated events, with international speakers invited to spark the debate with their respective practices.

With the backing of an Arts and Humanities Research Council network award, the subsequent discussions were hosted by a number of organisations: the Royal College of Art; Goldsmiths; the University of Manchester; the Institute of Contemporary Art; and Amnesty International. The papers in this publication represent the views of just seven of the many people who contributed to the events, either through formal presentations or as members of the network: Jananne Al-Ani; Bernadette Buckley; Malu Halasa; Jemima Montagu; Sarah Rifky; Larissa Sansour; and, Charles Tripp. Alongside these we are collecting online statements, images and transcripts of some of the talks by many others who participated in the seminars[6]: Adela Jušic, an artist from Sarajevo, talked about her work addressing the war in Bosnia directly formed by personal experience and memory, with a focus on the position of women in war, and the post-conflict transitional atmosphere in which she grew up. Born in Syria, Hrair Sarkissian showed photographs of urban environments and landscape that employ traditional documentary techniques to re-evaluate larger historical, religious and social narratives. His work also explores personal memories, drawing on his family's Armenian heritage, while inviting the viewer to consider the paradox between what is visible and the stories of the past.

Human rights activist Natalia Kaliada, co-founder of the Belarus Free Theatre, introduced some of the realities of working within the severe restrictions imposed on their productions. Ronnie Close, an Irish filmmaker currently based in Cairo, showed his work in exploring social issues and narratives, including a current project looking at the Al-Ahly

Ultras, an activist football fan group in Egypt who were involved in the 2011 Revolution and on-going street politics. Coco Fusco is well known for her work on the politics of gender, race, war and identity. Based in New York, her talk focused on work she has made about the employment of women as interrogators in Iraq, their sexuality exploited as a way of humiliating prisoners and of extracting information from them. She showed excerpts from her video *Operation Atropos* (2006), in which Fusco and her students attend a training course on how to withstand interrogation techniques. Curator and writer Malu Halasa, at the time in the process of co-editing a new book *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline,* an anthology of critical writing, fiction and visual-cultural essays, discussed the recent and current situation with respect to the arts in Syria.

At the final event UK–based artists Edmund Clark, David Cotterrell and kennardphillipps (Peter Kennard and Cat Phillipps) reflected on their different experiences: David Cotterrell as a 'war artist' in Helmand; Edmund Clark with respect to his visits to Guantanamo Bay and one of the UK Control Order Houses; kennardphillipps' response to the invasion of Iraq through work produced steadily over the past fourteen years. Curator Nat Muller introduced 'refusal' as a strategy; and Hossam Al Madhoun and Jamal Al Rozzi talked on Skype from Gaza with theatre director Jonathan Chadwick. Each speaker added new insights and illustrated the point that it is impossible to summarise artists' interests, or come to useful generalisations about the combined value they bring. More interesting were the new connections made, the new insights, the very different approaches.

It was clear from resulting feedback that the opportunities to listen, to look and to debate were welcomed.[7] What follows here are our own reflections as a result of programming the various discussions, and what should be said straightaway and again is that the shared discourse enabled the identification of questions, challenges, and interesting artistic practice, rather than definitive answers. The combined views have instead paved the way for further work, and have provided a structure for this, and a wealth of possibilities.

First and foremost, it was confirmed afresh that there is undoubtedly valuable and extraordinary work taking place in the arts addressing conflict, by individual artists and by cultural organisations across the world. What has also been convincing is that a significant degree of interest in the role of art in the context of conflict comes from people in many different areas, both within the arts, and beyond, including human rights workers, students, journalists, historians, civil servants, cultural theorists, funders, geographers and philosophers. However, what is apparent is that within each discipline there is extraordinarily little knowledge of each other's work, and even less of the work taking place in other sectors or disciplines. We heard from artists time and again that they would be keen to meet and discuss their practice with other artists and curators. For example, an artist who had returned recently from Helmand was curious to know of others' experiences in Afghanistan; or an artist researching the current situation in Syria would like to make contact with artists there. Similarly, people working, or who would like to work, with artists in NGOs were fascinated to meet counterparts facing similar challenges to discuss, for example, how to make an effective case for art within their own organisations, or how to locate artists that might be interested in certain contexts in which they were working. Academics, introduced to people working with the same interests for the first time, were patently fascinated to know more and to exchange their research findings both within Higher Education and beyond. Across the arts, academia and activism, people are interested in seeing the different methodologies employed.

While the words memory, satire, resistance and resilience proved a useful starting point for academics and activists, artists' practices were more resistant to being categorised. And there are undoubtedly uncomfortable and difficult questions about representation, art being used as propaganda, instrumentalism and artists in countries in conflict feeling coerced into making work that addresses violence for a Western market. As writer and curator Omar Kholeif said during an earlier programme of work for Culture+Conflict, there is an ongoing need 'to share

and exchange ideas about the way that contemporary culture is presented, mediated, distanciated, nurtured, annihilated, re-articulated, appropriated, dissolved and constructed'.[8]

So what of the oft-repeated question: what is it that artists can bring, especially to situations where lack of security, displacement, trauma, violence and sheer fatigue are dominant? Writer and critic Jean Fisher memorably raised a provocation at Documenta 11: 'Can art function as an effective mediator of change or resistance to hegemonic power, or is it doomed to be a decorative and irrelevant footnote to forces more powerful than its capacity to confront?'[9] Fisher would be the first to say that artistic freedom is paramount, and undoubtedly there are examples of external demands that have led to the subversion of artistic integrity and the diminishment of an artist's work. The depiction of conflict as sheer spectacle in a narrative of ruins and victims appeals to swathes of the art market. Even having 'conflict' as a title here is potentially uncomfortable given Western colonialism, and begs questions about representation.

In a recent edition of Third Text, Julia Ramírez Blanco writes of the 'artistic turn' in activism, paralleling the 'social turn' in art.[10] The tools of art have indeed been appropriated as a form of resistance in the recent revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa especially. So how firmly should lines be drawn between graffiti or cartoons on the one hand, and video installation within a gallery context on the other?

This question of value in art was answered in a number of ways by the people who contributed to the Art and Conflict enquiry, even if their definitions of art varied hugely—from Malu Halasa's and Charles Tripp's interest in the use of images in uprisings, to the tenacity of artists such as Edmund Clark seeking to undermine the stereotypes of both guards and prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, to the use of movingly personal memories by Adela Jušic in addressing the trauma of conflict, to the brilliance of Jananne Al-Ani's research and resulting imagery. If anything, the experience leads to a statement simply on the importance of taking a case-by-case approach, allowing for the many ways of seeing and accounting, and only then debating effect according to the shifting criteria that the complexity of the subject necessitates.

We discussed art as a form of resistance, more comfortably the domain of theatre than the visual arts; art that uses satire to poke and irritate hegemonies; art that looks back at experiences of war and suggests a different historical, and often more personal, reading. This openness has meant that art can be examined on its own terms, artwork by artwork, process by process, taking Claire Bishop's caution to avoid the pitfall of evaluating art first and foremost

they must do battle with the infidels who now lay siege to Antioch.

by its social purpose.[11] While we avoided a discussion about instrumentalism, this is obviously not to say that art does not have a powerful leverage. However many artists feel profoundly uncomfortable that they are being somehow asked to bring peace, or change the world for the better, or produce a quasi-shamanistic wisdom. And it is not easy to reconcile the often discursive, questioning, opaque and open-ended practice of art with the specific aims of NGOs and activists whose primary work is to bring food, security, peace and reconciliation. There is a frequent call for artists as communicators—to show the inhumanity of conflict, or the 'victims' of war as its primary purpose—and this can deny artists their best tool, that of the freedom to be unexpected in their approach. The best art is ambiguous, lateral, paradoxical; the less interesting art is worthy, preaching, linear and literal. Yet there are artists who are working in an extremely practical way. Bringing people from different belief systems together; running art schools in places of conflict, often opening their own studios and pulling in fellow artists to give free talks, or providing a space for experiment and exchange.

What is absolutely definite is that art continuously stimulates new debates and fresh reflection, and this is as true of art produced by Goya as it is by some of the art school students of today. As artist George Barber said at a recent event, 'art kicks off a few things; plants a few ideas'[12]; or as the critic Jonathan Jones has said, 'art could not stop the war in Iraq. It can influence how that war is

11

remembered.'[13] At least two of the writers for this publication denote images as a way of upholding values and countering the abominations of the regimes that are subverting the most basic of human rights. There is a shared and convincing affirmation that power, especially at moments when it is most contested, can be gloriously and continuously undermined by artists using the subtlest, or the most direct, of means.

As artist Wael Shawky reflects:

*'My interest is to create a shift in political events, because when we make this shift, we see things from a different point of view. For example, the assassination of President Al Sadat: I saw it as a child when I was watching TV. Everyone saw it. But, because the same cameras took some images of one event, they become like history—you see the same shots over and over again from the same angles. And this is it: this is the information we have. After seeing these images so many times, the event becomes something different—it loses its meaning. It becomes something else. So in order for me to understand this, I need to create a sort of shift in this image so I can construct a new realisation for it. That's why, when I decided to make 'Telematch Sadat' (2007), for example, I chose children to recreate the assassination. I retold the assassination using the same camera angles that were used in documenting the real assassination, but this time it was children running and killing and acting out everything as it is in the original video footage. I think that this shift causes you to analyse something again, and hopefully in a new way. And I think that this is also what is happening in the third part of 'Cabaret Crusades' and the theme of the Sunni and Shia schism.'[14]*

As we complete this publication, we move on to the next phase of work. A series of meetings will be held in a number of different spaces featuring artists talking about their work, film screenings, cultural theorists, historians, social anthropologists and others providing a range of accounts of conflict, and ample opportunities for further discussion. There will be a book, an international conference, and in the longer term we aim to complement the extraordinary work of the Delfina Foundation and Gasworks with additional opportunities for artists and curators to travel, to meet other artists and to produce new work.

## ENDNOTES

1    UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),
     *UNHCR Global Trends 2013: War's Human Cost*, 20 June 2014.
     Available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/53a3df694.html

2    Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities
     and Suffering*, 2000, Polity publishers

3    Quoted in 'Tate Modern announces new Director', e-flux media
     release issued by Artissima 2014 (Maurizio Cattelan, Myriam
     Ben Salah, Marta Papini curators), 10 June 2014.
     Available at: http://www.artissima.it/media/1402646556.pdf
     [accessed 30.08.14]

4    Professor James Thompson, based at the University of Manchester
     and lead researcher of 'In Place of War', is well known for his
     continuing reminder of art produced 'despite' conflict. Similarly
     Jonathan Watkins, curator of the Iraq Pavilion for the Venice Biennial
     2013, focused on art and the everyday, rather than art representing
     the spectacle of war.

5    Culture+Conflict website: http://www.cultureandconflict.org.uk

6    These are available on request from info@cultureandconflict.org.uk

7    An independent evaluation by writer and curator Jes Fernie with
     more detailed feedback is available upon request. In answer to an
     encouragement for frank opinions from network members and also
     people who attended the associated public events, the combination
     of different perspectives, skills, interests, agendas and knowledge
     met with unanimously positive remarks. Typical of these were: 'rich
     and thought provoking'; 'I learnt so much'; 'excellent insights'; 'made
     some great connections which have led to a collaboration and other
     possibilities for the future'; 'really refreshing to look at the work I
     do from a different perspective. Every presentation was a revelation';
     'I met the most fascinating people and all very relevant to my work
     and research'; 'the diversity of forms and focus were very enriching';
     'This area is still very small, considering the geographical impact
     and breadth of war and conflict, so it was great to meet with
     everyone in the hope that it (the programme of work) might expand'.
     Gaza-based Hossam Al Mahoun and Jamal Al Rozzi afterwards
     wrote: 'I want you to know that having this chance to talk about our
     experience from the angle that it is in a conflict area, made us realise
     things that we were not aware of which we were doing spontaneously.
     How conflict shaped our work, our messages, our style, our targeted
     audience, all these things we were doing without thinking at the time
     of doing it that the conflict had a big say in deciding it.'

8    Omar Kholeif in the preparation of a seminar organised by
     Culture+Conflict at the Delfina Foundation, London, 5 December 2012

9    Jean Fisher, 'Towards a Metaphysics of Shit',
     *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition* (Catalogue),
     Hatje Cantz Publishers, Germany, 2002

10    See Third Text website: http://thirdtext.org

11    Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso books, London, 2012

12    George Barber, in a panel discussion at Hackney Picture House, London, having shown his recent work featuring drones, 13 May 2014

13    Jonathan Jones, 'The Tony Blair 'selfie' Photo Op will have a place in history', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2013

14    Wael Shawky in conversation with Stephanie Bailey, *Ibraaz*, February Newsletter, 2014

# THE AESTHETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE: A LAND WITHOUT PEOPLE

— Jananne Al-Ani

*The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People* is a body of photographic and moving image work, which explores the disappearance of the body in contested and highly charged landscapes while examining the history of film and photography in relation to the technology of 20th century conflict. What happens to the evidence of atrocity and how it affects our understanding of the often beautiful landscapes into which the bodies of victims disappear are questions that the work attempts to address.

The starting point for the project was the story of forensic anthropologist Margaret Cox who spent time in Kosovo in the 1990s searching for a blue butterfly that feeds exclusively on the wild flower Artemisia vulgaris. Her interest in the flora and fauna of the region was driven by her mission to excavate the mass graves of Albanian victims of Serbian genocide, for wherever the soil had been disturbed and the nutrient levels increased as a result of decomposing bodies, the flowers and the butterflies could be found in abundance.

Cox went on to work in Iraq after the 2003 Gulf War, a conflict echoing many of the characteristics of the 1991 Desert Storm campaign, which was dominated by digital technology, aerial photography and satellite imagery. The depopulated, cartographic images produced during the conflict created a watershed in the history of war reportage and inadvertently revealed that the 19th century Orientalist stereotype of the region remained firmly embedded in the Western consciousness. The site of the conflict was shown to be a desert, an empty space with no history and no population—an idea also reflected in one of the most enduring and contested mythologies of the early Zionist movement, that of Palestine being 'a land without a people for a people without a land'.

16

The 'first' Gulf War engendered a number of significant theoretical responses. For Jean Baudrillard, not only had the population been obliterated from the picture but he boldly proclaimed that the war itself had not in fact taken place. It had been a 'virtual' war—a scripted media event. For Paul Virilio, with a longstanding interest in technology and war, it was the first 'total electronic war', broadcast live, via satellite. In *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1989) Virilio investigates the use of cinematic techniques in the military conflicts of the 20th century and in his earlier landmark essay, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980), he recounts how the film pioneer and illusionist Georges Méliès accidentally discovered how to 'disappear' the subjects he was filming when his camera jammed unexpectedly. By stopping and starting the filming intermittently Méliès realised he could make characters miraculously appear and disappear from the landscape.

During the development of the work a rich variety of sites were identified in the Middle East and the United States by carrying out a series of field trips and test flights and through extensive visual research in archives, among them the Air and Space Museum in Washington DC where I discovered the unpublished aerial reconnaissance photographs of the Western Front taken by Edward Steichen (1879–1973) while he was working for the Aerial Expeditionary Force during Word War I. These are strikingly beautiful images of landscapes obliterated by shelling and criss-crossed by trenches, but abstracted to such a degree as to have become exquisite and minimal works of art. I spent time in the archives of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut examining the work of early pioneers of aerial photography in the region, such as the French archaeologist Antoine Poidebard (1878–1955) who had a particular interest in Roman history and spent over thirty years working in Syria and Lebanon. I also discovered the extraordinary landscape photographs of the German archaeologist and Near Eastern specialist, Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948) in the Freer and Sackler Gallery archives. Herzfeld documented the vast and often bleak landscapes in which the sites he was excavating were situated, offering an exceptional contextualising record of the environment normally absent in more common, object-focused photographic records of archaeological artefacts and sites. The starkness of the landscapes shown in his beautiful sepia-toned panoramic prints informed the aesthetic of my large-scale film works, *Shadow Sites I* and *Shadow Sites II*.

In *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology & the British Landscape 1927–1955* (2007) historian Kitty Hauser focuses on the British landscape and the crisis over constructions of national identity in the inter-war period. The book charts
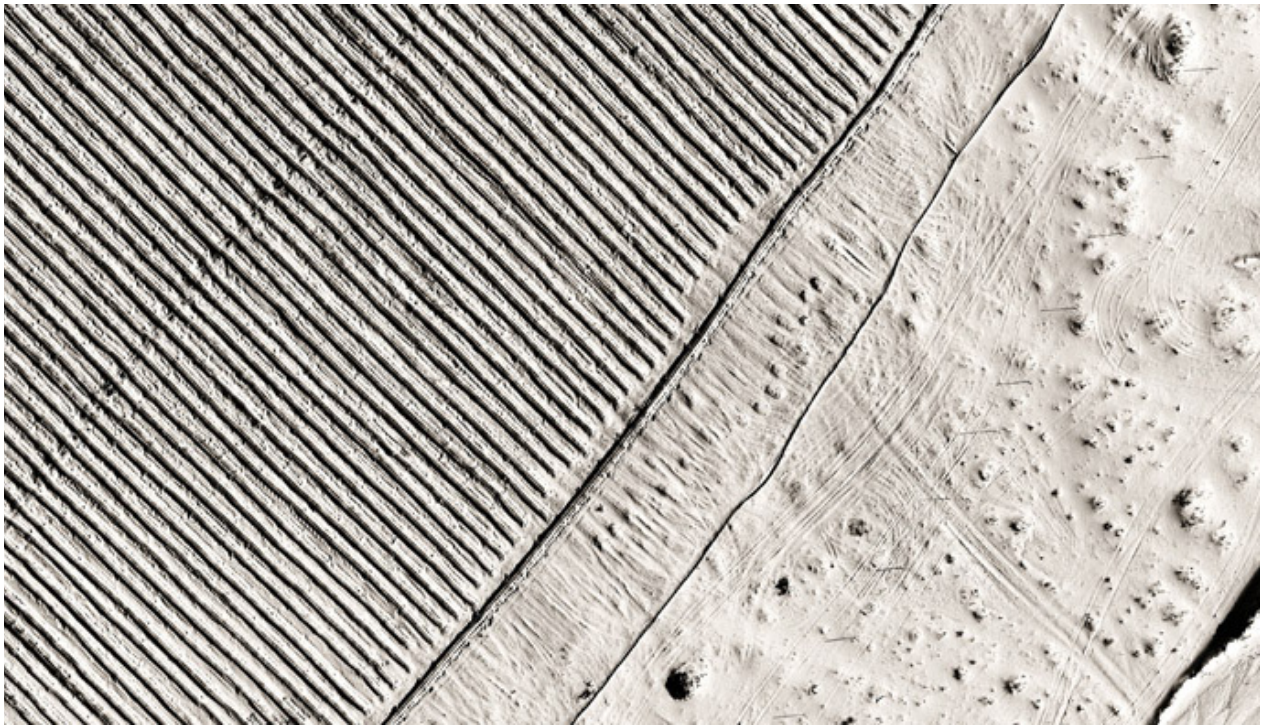
Above—

Jananne Al-Ani, *Aerial V*
production still from
*Shadow Sites II*, 2011

Single channel digital video

Courtesy the artist and
Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2011

Photo: Adrian Warren

the development of aerial photography and the field of aerial archaeology, which developed as a direct result of the discovery of previously unknown archaeological sites during aerial operations carried out in the course of the First and Second World Wars.

Aerial archaeology, like film and photography, rests upon the idea of a recoverable past and can be thought of like Freud's conception of the psyche. In his book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud compared early experiences embedded in the subconscious with 'a photographic exposure, which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture'. At certain times of the day, when the sun is low in the sky, the outlines of archaeological features on the ground are thrown into relief. Searching for such 'shadow sites' is one of the simplest methods of identifying archaeological ruins, which remain undetected when seen at ground level. When viewed from above, the landscape itself acts as a photographic plate where a latent image (the foundations of a Roman fort, for example) is periodically revealed as the sun passes over the site.

In 2008 and 2009 I made site visits to a number of locations in the Middle East including Mount Nebo, where Moses is said to have died after looking out over the Promised Land; The Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth and the border between Jordan, the Palestinian Territories and Israel; the Bronze age copper mines of Faynan; the enigmatic Nabataean ruins of Khirbat el-Moreighah; the Roman fort at Humayma and the well preserved remains of trenches dug by Ottoman garrisons around Ma'an during World War I.

18

In early 2010 I travelled to Jordan with a small crew of five, hired an aerial film specialist and a light aircraft. I wanted to adopt the relatively simple methods of the earliest aerial photographers who had worked with cumbersome large format cameras mounted on small biplanes. I focused on the south of Jordan because it sits at the centre of a number highly contentious and contested sites—just east of Israel and occupied Palestine, and sharing borders with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Although it is a relatively young nation state, historically it has been a major crossroads for both trade and warring empires and is incredibly rich in archaeological sites, many extremely ancient.

The single channel large-scale film *Shadow Sites I* (2010) was shot on 16mm film and is made up of a succession of vertical aerial shots, which dissolve one into the other in a rather hypnotic way. Replicating the point-of-view of a military aircraft or an unmanned surveillance drone, it scans the rich and varied traces imprinted on this landscape by ancient, farming, mining, archaeological and military activity.

In contrast, *Shadow Sites II* (2011) is made from a series of high-resolution aerial photographs rather than film. Dissolving from one image to the next in a long, continuous zoom, the film suggests the vantage point of a Predator drone or a cruise missile and replicates the action of 'locking onto a target' in anticipation of a strike. Its point of view moves *into* rather than across the plane of the image: zooming in, as if the camera itself is boring into the landscape.

19

*Groundworks I–V* (2013), a five channel video installation, further extends my inquiry into contested territories. Focusing on the landscapes of the southwestern United States, the work consists of four subtly animated aerial photographs shot on flights over the Sonoran desert in Arizona in 2008, including open cast mines, industrial farms and abandoned World War II airfields. The fifth element is a re-mastered edition of the 16mm film *Excavators* (2010) featuring a colony of ants building a nest in the sand.

Each of the five films is shown on a small scale and cropped, using a series of bespoke frames, in a range of geometric shapes including a square, circle and triangle, which reflect the outline of the sites while creating a further layer of abstraction. In addition to the ambiguity of scale in the films and the juxtaposition between the still and moving image there is also a tension in the installation between the 'microscopic' view on the ground and the long-distanced cartographic view from the air. The films recall video footage shot by fighter pilots in action, reducing those on the ground to an insect-like scale and allowing for the dehumanisation of their targets.

Showing *Groundworks I–V* alongside the *Shadow Sites* films provides a way to link signs of ancient and contemporary activities in the landscape and to pull the North American and Middle Eastern territories closer together, both literally and metaphorically. I am currently working on the outstanding element in the triangle of geopolitical relationships I have been exploring in the *Aesthetics* project, which will focus on the British landscape and, by implication, Britain's historic role in the formation of the United States of America and the modern Middle East.
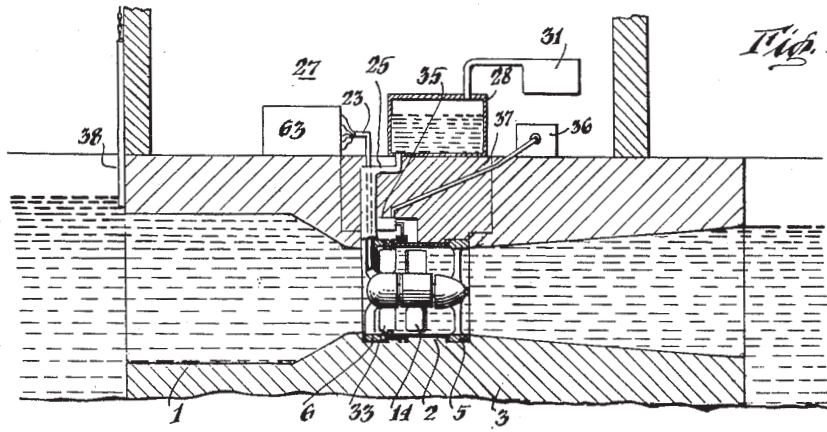
*Fig. 1*
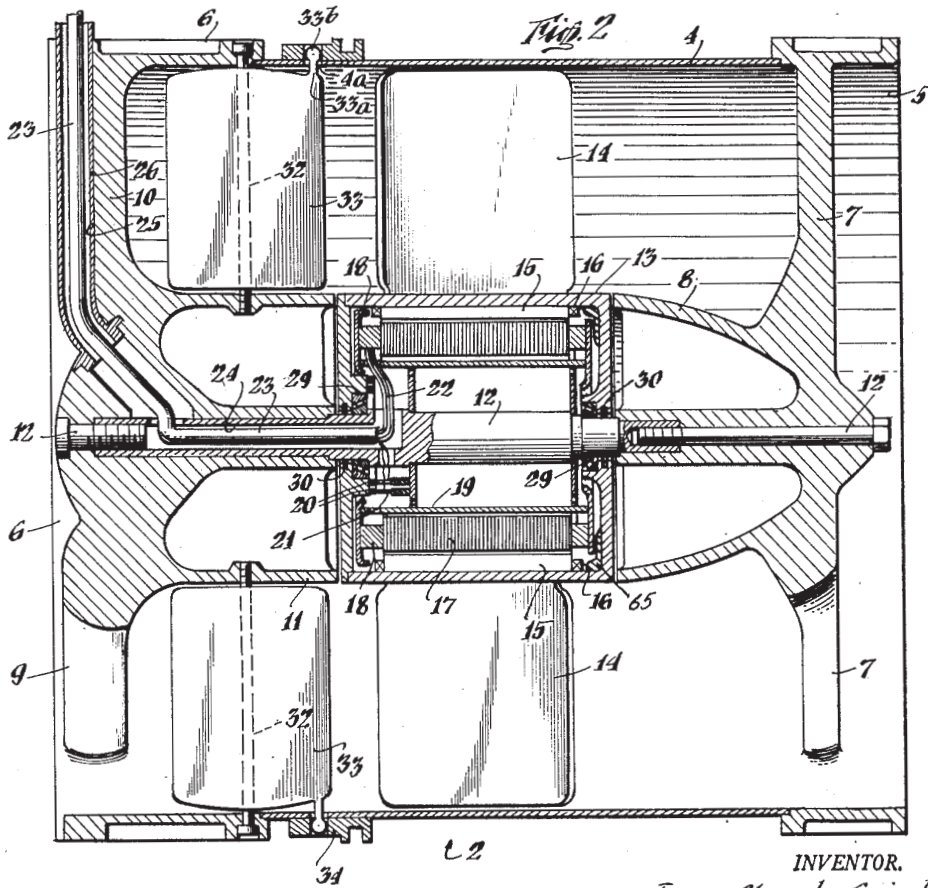
*Fig. 2*

INVENTOR.

Jean-Claude Guimbal

BY George H. Covey

ATTORNEY

# CROSSHATCHING: CULTURE+CONFLICT

— Bernadette Buckley

Culture+conflict describes not so much a structural coupling (to poach a biological term) as it does an assemblage (to borrow a now rather-familiar philosophical one)[1]. Let me say immediately, that the function of such a statement is neither to deliver a definition nor an explanation of either one of these terms but rather to put forward a more speculative, anti-disciplinary sort of suggestion. However, in order to explain the rationale for this starting shot, and before considering fully the vectors of its intended trajectory, it is necessary first (as is so often the case) to back-track onto some already well-patrolled terrain.

In the routine layout of most broadsheet newspapers, discussions of 'culture' and 'conflict' are normally confined to separate sections—usually with conflict at the front and culture somewhere closer to the rear of the paper. This kind of organisation of 'news' and 'ideas' should not be seen as the mere outcome of a pragmatic necessity to organise different kinds of entity for the purposes of 'clarity'. Rather, it is the result of what Foucault might have referred to as a 'dispositif'[2]—that is, a set-up[3], a kind of given-in-advance mechanism, which has the capacity to capture, control, manage, govern. In this view, 'knowledge' is (or has) been *arranged* in accordance with existing collective 'propensities'.

Such an arrangement is not necessarily made consciously or strategically, but arises as an effect of existing relations of power. Thus, to put conflict at the front and culture at the back, is to adopt, without necessarily intending to, a 'grid of specification'[4]—a loose system of co-ordinates which arranges discourses and practices spatially and does not easily allow for comparison across different kinds of phenomena. These *dispositifs* ensure that collective

propensities or normative assumptions as to the 'correct' relationship between in this case, culture and conflict, are inevitably re-played: thus the broadsheet reader assumes, without realising it, that culture and conflict are, for the most part, separate, or on those occasions when they are not, that they are, at the very least, separable from one another.

In comparison, 'culture+conflict' potentially indicates some kind of re-arrangement of 'collective propensities'. It is therefore worth considering for a few moments, the significance of this *new* re-arrangement (an apparent but not an actual contradiction in terms). The plus sign indicates a number of scenarios: on the one hand it intimates an existing differentiation between two separate or separable 'entities'. After all, if they were not separable, then there would have been no need for a plus sign to begin with. On the other hand, the plus sign also infers an addition, a shift towards a *de*-differentiation, which, while it continues to perceive the original 'orders' as 'different', offers the potential for some kind of com-position or ex-change or even inter-change between the two. And if this is the case, then by joining the two together with a plus sign between them, we also indicate, not least, that a *re*-differentiation has already begun. The simplest way of understanding this apparent paradox is to see culture+conflict as always already a form of becoming—a kind of assemblage—and importantly, a becoming that has already begun.

In order to elaborate this notion of an 'already-becoming', I would like to turn first not to philosophy but to literature— namely to China Miéville's novel, *The City & the City*, which takes place in the fictional cities of Besźel and Ul Qoma. Miéville conjures up a world in which these two cities 'grosstopically' (as he puts it) occupy much of the same geographical space: however, despite this, Bes and Ul Qoman citizens understand and perceive one another as foreigners who exist in a perpetual condition of almost-war with each other. Their dual/singular existence is made possible by the fact that from birth, citizens are taught to 'unsee' one another: that is to say, they exist side by side without recognising each other's existence—even when seeing each other through an area of what Miéville calls 'crosshatch'. In the logic of the novel, such 'recognition' is not only scandalous, but *illegal* and the proper limits of each city are maintained by deeply-held protocols of practice, the latter of which are overseen by a shadowy force known as Breach. In order to cross to the other country, citizens are required to undergo tests and 'acclimatisation' so that they can cope with the potentially traumatic fact of *unseeing* environs with which they are wholly familiar and seeing places that they

had spent decades determinedly not noticing. Order and visibility operate as moral registers that are maintained by the will to *unsee* that which lies beyond accepted protocols of practice. The design and operation of each city is such that the citizens of each continue to comport themselves according to prevailing practices. However, the borders between the two cities are more fragile than is generally acknowledged by their citizens and sometimes unseeing is difficult to sustain—as for example when the chief protagonist of the story, Inspector Tyador Borlú, crosses from his native Besźel (or Bes_el) and travels to Ul Qoma to investigate a murder. Here, Tyador reflects that:

> *'It was a busier city than Bes_el at night: now I could look at the figures at business in the dark that had been unseeable shades until now. I could see the homeless dossing down in side streets, the Ul Qoman rough sleepers that we in Bes_el had had to become used to as protubs[5] to pick our unseeing ways over and around. I crossed Wahid Bridge, trains passing to my left. I watched the river that was here the Shach_ein. Water—does it crosshatch with itself? If I were in Bes_el, as these unseen passers-by were, I would be looking at the River Colinin … I policed a music festival once, early in my career, in a crosshatched park, where the attendees got high in such numbers that there was much public fornication. My partner at the time and I had not been able to forebear amusement at the Ul Qoman passersby we tried not to see in their own iteration of the park, stepping daintily over fucking couples they assiduously unsaw.'*

So what if we too were one day to discover that the terrain on which we had been living, was already crosshatched with or occupied by the other? And what if the unseeing were to become not just seeing, but *doing* or even *being (with)*? What does the plus sign between culture and conflict *do* to each 'side' of the equation? Looking back over these few paragraphs, is it not possible to see in allusions for example to the 'opening shot', the well-patrolled 'terrain', the 'capture', the strategic 'arrangement', that some *opening* out onto conflict has already begun? This concept of the *opening* is an important one to which I will return below, but for the moment, I wish only to mark the sense of risk that it carries and to note that cultural practitioners for example, while prepared to buy into the notion of a one-directional ex-change between culture and conflict, may, even in the very moment in which fires are fuelled with conflict-laden metaphors, baulk at the idea of a bi-directional inter-change.

24

Surely, they might protest, it is the role of 'culture' if not to create the conditions of, then at least the hope *for* health and happiness for all? Isn't this why we are all here, rattling our plus signs? Or is it conceivable that such an assemblage, far from undermining the cruelty of conflict, might even serve to reproduce it?

Let's look at this from a parallel position. In a recently published series of seminars on the death penalty, Derrida tackles a problem that is analogous to that of the relationship between culture and conflict.[5] Here, Derrida is interested not in conflict per se, but in the death penalty. He begins by evoking a deliberately pathos-laden 'shot' of the scene of an execution:

> *'It is dawn, then. Early light, earliest light. Before the end, before even beginning, before the three blows are struck …'[7]*

To this description, Derrida goes on to add some cursory stage directions—a 'pause' or even a 'long pause'—as if to direct the pace of this imagined scene of execution. He then returns again to the dawn:

> *'this early morning of prisons, of all the places of detention in the world, where those condemned to death are waiting for someone to come either to announce to them a sovereign pardon … or else to lead them away …'[8]*

In such a manner, Derrida seems to suggest that opposition to the death penalty only redoubles the aggression inherent within it; that those wielding moral instruments of outrage end up only exciting their supporters with graphic descriptions of the very cruelty that they would seek to eliminate. Not only this, but as Derrida intimates in his discussion of Baudelaire's *Pauvre Belgique!*, such an opposition is guilty of 'well, guilt itself'[9] : who could deny, he asks, the existence of 'criminal drives that do not depend on being effectively carried out by passing into action … how many ways of killing can one count in our day-to-day and night-to-night lives, that do not need to put anyone to death in the legal sense'.[10] This *not-passing into action* is important and a subject to which I will return later in this essay, but first it is necessary to continue with this trajectory by showing how Derrida expands on Baudelaire's logic:

> *'I want to abolish the death penalty because I am afraid of being condemned, afraid of dying but also because I know that I am always in the process of*

*killing someone. I am sufficiently the victim and guilty of homicide to wish to be done with the death penalty, but this wish to be done with legal killing would testify, according to Baudelaire, to the fact that I am always calculating my salvation—as victim or guilty party, as guilty victim and so forth.'[11]*

In this perspective then, the call to abolish the death penalty is a call made by the guilt-ridden, those who are 'afraid for their own skins'.[12] Commenting on this discussion, Michael Naas observes that Derrida's task 'in the death penalty seminar is to show in each case how these concepts and practices … all form a system or a matrix, a structure or a structural ensemble'.[13] Thus, from this parallel position, we again encounter something like the pre-formed dispositive—the *ensemble*, in which the abolition of and support for the death penalty are not, it turns out, *opposed* to but rather, are structural and systemic *functions* of one another.

The implications of this kind of logic seem ominous: does it suggest that culture+conflict too must inevitably form part of the same system, one characterised less by any opposition and more by relations of mutual reliance and even amplification? It is important here however to note that an ensemble is *not* an assemblage; that while the former is form*ed*, the latter is still form*ing*, still becoming. Culture+conflict is not, I would propose, an ensemble but a kind of systemic flare (-up): a short-term, mutually destabilising *bursting*; a series of bursts between systems invested in different energies of time, agency, viscosity, speed, creativity and force. Who is in charge? No-one is its official representative or specialist. It is not even the case that culture ought to be seen as always already a form of conflict in itself. Neither is it the case that there exists some kind of empty space *between* the two, which could be identified as 'shared'. Rather the assemblage is a bursting in which that which has not come to pass, the becoming, has already begun.

Again, what is important to note here is that the *becoming* is never guaranteed to pass into actuality. It is as likely to become as it is to *not* become. And thus like the oft-cited Deleuzian 'lines of flight', the *becoming* may be less a space than a vector—one that may never be followed or realised or one that may gather in as many dangers as it does opportunities:

*'The assemblage that draws lines of flight is on the same level as they are, and is of the war machine type.'[14]*

The mutations which spring from this machine, as Deleuze and Guattari are careful to stress, though it 'in no way has war as its object' may yet produce

> *'… a thousand little monomanias [and] self-evident truths … giving any and everybody the mission of self-appointed judge, dispenser of justice, policemen, neighbourhood SS man … the system of petty insecurities that leads everyone to their own black hole in which to turn dangerous, possessing a clarity on their situation, role and mission even more disturbing than the certitudes of the first line.'[15]*

And so we are led to what may again appear to be a philosophical cul-de-sac. The becoming may not result in any actuality. Or alternatively, it may even result in a formation which is even 'more disturbing than the certitudes of the first line'. What must be noted here however, is not any particular change or outcome, but the importance of the *potential for change to occur*. In the burst, something occurs. Perhaps something is added, while something else falls away. Or perhaps something falls away while something else is added. And then perhaps there is another falling out and then a falling in and so on and so on until suddenly, it is not the ship of Theseus that we have before us (or in a more recent version of the myth, Trigger's broom)[16] but something entirely different: or something that, to use a common Irish expression, is *the same only different*.

The important point here is not what the assemblage might become but that the becoming has already begun. An *opening* has appeared; an inter-change can be imagined; and thus, though it does not yet exist, the becoming is under-way. The *opening* is the mechanism by which the future *exerts* itself upon the present. But while the opening itself—representing neither justice nor even escape—is not vast, its appearance is such that it makes it possible to re-imagine in advance (potentially to reconfigure and even to undo) that which is; to call into question on a fundamental level, why things exist as they do, why the world is this way and not that and why therefore it might not be *otherwise*. Thus are created the conditions for what Agamben (following Aristotle) might call 'potentiality' to occur.[17] And though it may seem that nothing much is at stake in the event of that which though it does not exist, in some way already exists, in fact, the opposite is true. What is at stake here is what Benoit Challand once called the very 'struggle for people's imagination'—the latter of which he also calls 'politics'.[18] *Potentiality* is the environs of this struggle. It is here that culture+conflict, in assemblage, operates—not on the

27

grounds of 'expertise', or 'knowledge' or 'awareness-raising' or any other oft-proclaimed rationale. 'Raising awareness' in particular, is often heralded as *the* purpose of much 'critical art'—this observation was noted for example by Rancière in his much-cited *The Emancipated Spectator*, wherein he claims that art's function is understood as being 'to create an awareness of political situations leading to political mobilisation'.[19] But, as Rancière goes on to warn, 'there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action.'[20] Here Rancière is right of course—there can be no anticipation of the effects of 'critical art'—but here also, it seems to me, he breaks off just short of reaching the crucial point. By seizing on the production of 'awareness' as the main purpose of 'critical art', he has grasped a red herring—a favoured strap line for exhibition catalogues and press reviews, whose function is simply to persuade us to visit a particular exhibition or to convince us that a particular artwork is 'important'. The point of the plus sign however is not that our (whoever our is) 'awareness' should be raised. The point is to understand that at the heart of all politics is the struggle for *imagination*. The plus sign is not a dispensable add-on, it is an imperative factor in any desiring-democratic arrangement. It reminds us that politics is too important to be left to politicians, or political pundits, or to activists for that matter. The present-future does not just happen. The becoming, as has been intimated here, has already begun. Imagination is the ground of potentiality—the mechanism through which that which has begun, will be inflected, or (more frighteningly perhaps) will *not* be.

Thus it is that this logic of potentiality operates at the crux of both politics and art. What prevents Bes citizens from seeing Ul Qoman citizens and vice versa is that their imaginations are such that they have become accustomed (acclimatised, trained, tested, disciplined, habituated) to unseeing the other. Collective identities are forms of *dispositif*—they provide frameworks within which the world has been and can be imagined in advance. Bes and Ul Qoman citizens do not *not* see one another, but they are taught to unsee—that is to imaginatively over-look the background seeing that occurs—thereby preventing their perceptions of each other from penetrating too deeply into their experience. Given the connection here between imagination and experience, it is perhaps not so surprising then, to find that Agamben's concept of *potentiality* resonates closely with notions of *experience*—in particular here there is an important and instructive parallel between

Agamben's account of 'potentiality' and Jean-Luc Nancy's

account of the 'experience of freedom'. This parallel is an interesting one to unwind in the context of an assemblage entitled 'culture+conflict', not only because of the significance of any notion of 'freedom'—that odd 'miracle of infinite improbability' as it was called by Hannah Arendt[21]—to an assemblage called culture+conflict, but also because of its significance to the notion of *experience*. Perhaps here an imperfect triangulation or a quadrangulation could be said to be in operation. 'Freedom' is not separable from the 'experience of freedom' and 'potentiality' is connected to this 'experience of freedom' via the *opening*. For *both* potentiality and the experience of freedom depend upon how and why the opening *opens*. As Nancy puts it, 'the opening does not open unless we let it open and we only let it open if we let ourselves be exposed in existence'.[22] [my italics]

It is the *exposure* of being, its capacity to risk itself, which allows freedom to be 'opened', 'activated', or potentially to *be*:

> '"Freedom" itself, in the spaciosity of being where freedom is opened rather than engulfed, proves to be generosity even before being freedom. It gives rise, in the exposure of being, to its own singularity always newly decidable, always newly surprised by its decision … It gives freedom, or offers it. … This taking place of something offers itself in the opening that frees places and the free space of time.'[23]

In this way then, *potentiality* leads us to the seeming oxymoron that Nancy calls the 'experience of freedom': the paradox appears because on the one hand, as he argues, 'there is no 'experience of freedom'', and on the other, 'freedom itself is experience'.[24]

Thus like potentiality, *freedom* both is and is not at one and the same time. It has the potential to be and equally, it has the potential to not-be. This demonstrates what Agamben stresses as a necessary 'point of indifference between potentiality and impotentiality'.[25] There can be no guarantees as to what, if anything, will be initiated by the opening. It is therefore perhaps not surprising to learn that the origin of the term 'experience'—in *peirā* and in *ex-perīrī*—once carried with it, as Nancy reminds us, a sense of *peril* and risk; experience necessitates 'the peril of the crossed limit';[26] or again as Nancy puts it, experience is 'an attempt executed without reserve'[27] by the pirate *(peirātēs)* 'who freely tries his luck on the high seas'.[28] For Nancy, the 'experience of freedom' is therefore only illicitly procured:

29

> *'In a sense, which here might be the first and last sense, freedom, to the extent that it is the thing itself of thinking, cannot be appropriated, but only "pirated"; its "seizure" will always be illegitimate.'*[29]

In this view, both *potentiality* and the *experience of freedom* present themselves (above all) as things that do not exist as actual things but that do at the same time, in some way, nonetheless exist. As 'facts' they do not exist, but as potentialities, they already have existence in thought. That which does not exist, already is:

> *'Freedom arises from nothing, with thinking and like thinking—which is existence delivered to the 'there is' of a world.'*[30]

Thus the notion of potentiality is linked to freedom via experience, since it is necessary, as Nancy argues, to allow ourselves to be '*exposed* in existence'.

Interestingly however, and despite starting from a very different position, Thomas Docherty appears to arrive at a similar conclusion when he claims 'culture … forces us to inhabit potentiality in [an] unsettling way'.[31] Culture *forces* us to turn towards that which we may never experience individually. Of course, Docherty does not in these passages discuss 'conflict'. If he had, perhaps he would have agreed that in this respect culture and conflict are the same (the same only different), since precisely this statement can be made about conflict—that is, that it forces us to inhabit potentiality in an unsettling way—our fears of, if not our direct *exposure* to conflict, forces us to realise that we are human—all too human. In this way then, both culture and conflict are capable of operating as *modalities* of potentiality—both having the capacity to burst in on us, or to burst us apart. And thus in the culture+conflict assemblage, even more than in the case of either culture *or* conflict, our old experience, our 'situatedness' is necessarily threatened, or exposed by the redoubling of the becoming-plural experience. The assemblage exposes our lack of experience as a limit, potentially to be traversed. Of course new experience can never be appropriated—it can only ever be 'pirated' and its 'seizure' can only ever be illegitimate. And such 'seizures'—what Svetlana Boym might call 'experiments in freedom'—don't need to find any agreement as to what this 'freedom' might look like: as Boym says, in a journey that now comes full circle, experiments in freedom have to do with the discovery of *potentiality*:[32]

*'In my understanding, otherness is constituent
of the very experience of freedom, of discovering
potentiality or inner plurality, or our capacity to
co-create in a world that might still surprise us.'[133]*

But while Boym associates these plural experiments in freedom with 'co-creation', Agamben is instead drawn to the notion of *de-creation*. Indeed, in the final section of his chapter 'Bartleby, or On Contingency' he again brings together several of the notions under examination here in his subtitle, 'The Experiment, or On Decreation'. As has been stressed above, for Agamben, *potentiality* is not only the realisation of something, or the coming to pass of something, but it is also the de-creation of something—it is all that might have come to pass but did not. There on the threshold between doing and not doing, being and not being, the assemblage calls into question the justification of what has been created, of what has been done—the justification for why things exist as they do, why the world is not otherwise, why some of what Derrida called 'criminal drives' and some of what passed into action and some did not. As Elizabeth Balskus says in her short essay on Agamben's notion of potentiality:

*'What we all know and yet constantly try to deny
is that we could have acted differently and the
current situation does not have to be as it is now.
In decreation, contingency is returned to all events,
causing us to remember that, along with the few
potentialities that are actualised, there are an infinite
number of potentialities that will never be and
yet will continue to shape and influence our lives.'[134]*

We flinch under the sting of such questions. Why and how has it come to be this way? And if culture and conflict operate not under a logic of opposition but merely of differential or as imagined here, under a logic of potential, then the questions we ask of them must also change. No longer will we rush to ask 'what is conflict?' or 'what is culture?'—both culture and conflict are something, in any case, other than that which they once were to us. And while this not to say that such questions will become unimportant—we must continue to grapple with them—it is better to see them as part of a series of becoming-questions, which give way to other questions which change what the questions ask. 'What?' becomes 'why?' becomes 'why not?' becomes 'what if?' Culture and conflict may be seen as different orders of experience—different scales upon which what happens can be weighed. But in a culture+conflict assemblage, it is not just that the 'weights'

normally placed on such scales are re-distributed, but that there is also the capacity for entirely different kinds of 'objects' to be placed there. Perhaps we might allow ourselves to see and to place there, that which we have previously unseen. This means that our 'own' experiences would become scrambled as something else is in the process of being formed; that what we have experienced is *already altered*, which is to say that it is the same only different and that that different is already there, even if it has not yet been experienced by us. What is being invited in here is the energy of potentiality—the conditions under which change occurs and the way that this concerns not just our experience of culture or conflict but also our experience of the very experience of what might be our world.

To tease out this point finally, I would like to end this essay with an example from Gilbert Simondon's work—the latter of which asserts the primacy of *ontogenesis*—that is to say, of processes of becoming over the states of being through which they pass.[35] The example which Simondon discusses— that of the Guimbal turbine—is relevant here, not only because of the way that it explains the role of potentiality in the moment of different functionalities or structures coming together, but because it identifies this synchronicity as something like the energy of *invention*. This shift from potential to experience, and then through the opening, to the experience of freedom, continues, this example will suggest, with another step or shift in a process of change which occurs in a series of potential connections (openings or imaginings). In this example, Simondon describes how the Guimbal turbine is immersed in a water-pipe in a dam wall.[36] The case is too long to be fully described here but it is synopsised in English and expanded on beautifully by Brian Massumi, whose description is fitting for the way that it brings several of this essay's themes together.

> *'In the case of the Guimbal turbine, it has to do with the potential for the oil in the turbine and the water around it to each play multiple roles. The water brings energy to the turbine, but it can also carry heat away from it. The oil carries the heat of the generator to the housing where it can be dissipated by the water, but it also insulates and lubricates the generators, and thanks to the pressure differential between it and the water, prevents infiltration. There are two sets of multi-functional potentials, one in the water and the other in the oil. The moment of invention is when the two sets of potentials click together … [the turbine] has achieved a certain operational autonomy, because the potentials in*

*the water and in the oil have interlined in such a way*
*as to automatically regulate the transfer of energy*
*into the turbine and of heat out of it, allowing*
*the turbine to continue functioning independently*
*without the intervention of an outside operator*
*to run or repair it.'[37]*

Not only does the assemblage have an operational autonomy but it also activates the potentiality of forces which otherwise would lie dormant until the moment in which the opening, a potential kick-start occurs. Such a moment, as Massumi goes on to explain in his description of the turbine, is 'an action of the future on the present' since before this event, there were 'two discontinuous energetic fields' of oil and water which were 'separated by differentials of temperature, pressure, viscosity and pattern of movement'.[38] These differentials he shows, do not simply disappear—they remain there but now alongside them there is also 'something else, which has leapt into existence'.[39] The process, as Simondon says, is 'one which causes the birth of an environment rather than being the result of an already established environment. It is caused by an environment which had merely virtual existence before the invention'.[40] Or, as Massumi puts it, it is only when the *relation* between the two fields is established that they are 'determined, by that very event, to *have been* the potential for what has come'.[41] So also it is with culture+conflict—a crosshatching that through a series of public encounters, would risk the unseeing of that which we routinely unsee in order to re-see our collective potential for re-imagining our world.

## ENDNOTES

1    The concept is mostly frequently associated with Deleuze and Guattari's work (primarily with Deleuze—see for example Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, Columbia University Press, NY, 1987, or Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, 2003.) Its influence in art and political theory has been profound and it is used in numerous works from Manuel deLanda (*Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Continuum, London 2002 to William E. Connolly (*A World of Becoming*, Duke University Press, London, 2011, to James Clifford and George E Marcus (*Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986). Marcus and Saka have helpfully synopsized the notion of the assemblage as the 'source of emergent properties of what Deleuze and Guattari call machinic processes'. Marcus goes on to expand on this as follows: 'Assemblage thus seems structural, an object with the materiality and stability of the classic metaphors of structure, but the intent in its aesthetic uses is precisely to undermine such ideas of structure. It generates enduring puzzles about 'process' and 'relationship' rather than leading to systematic understandings of these tropes of classic social theory and the common discourse that it has shaped … Assemblage is a topological concept that designates the actualisations of the virtual causes or causal processes that are immanent in an open system of intensities that is under the influence of a force that is external (or heterogeneous) in relation to it. Assemblages are thus the causally productive (machine) result of the intersection of two open systems, and their properties are emergent in the sense in which that concept is deployed in logic, that is, not part of, and so not foreseeable in light of, either one of the other system considered in isolation, but instead only discernible as a result of the intersection of both such systems … Assemblages are thus finite, but they have no specific or distinctive life-space; they do not have a specific temporality. Furthermore assemblages have no essence (nor does anything else in Deleuze's universe). The assemblage is productive of difference (non repetition). It is the ground and primary expression of all qualitative difference.' See George E Marcus and Erkan Saka, 'Assemblage' in *Theory Culture Society*, 2006, Vol. 23, No 2–3, p.101

2    The term, as is well-known, was used by Foucault in 1977 in his 'Confessions of the Flesh' interview to express configurations of relations that are connected to the 'thought' of government in solutions to problems of rule. See *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon, 1980, Harvester Press, Brighton, pp.194–5; 158–9

3    It should be noted that some thinkers are critical of the use of such terms as 'apparatus' as adequate translations of Foucault's notion of 'dispositif'. For example, Agamben claims that for Foucault, the term 'does not only refer to 'this or that' particular dispositor. It is more general … it is the network that is established between all these … the essential meaning refers to the disposal of a set of actions, means, discourses in order to cope with an urgency in order to obtain an effect or result. So it is, in a way, an act of management, or governing a concrete situation … I will call depository, 'dispositif' literally everything that has in some way the capacity of capturing, determining, orienting, intercepting, shaping, guiding, securing, or controlling the behaviour, gestures, opinion, discourses of living

beings or substances.' Excerpt from Agamben's lecture presented for The European Graduate School in 2005. Transcription available at http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/what-is-a-dispositif/part-2/ [Accessed 28.07.14]

4       Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 1972, p.42

5       In the context of Miéville's book, 'protubs' are vehicles from the other side.

6       Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty*: Vol 1, trans. Peggy Kamuf, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, p.2

7       Ibid. p.2

8       Ibid. p.2

9       Ibid. p.192

10      Ibid.

11      Ibid.

12      Ibid. p.187

13      Michael Naas, 'Philosophy and the Death Penalty: Two sides of the same Sovereign' in *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 50, Special Issue s1, pp.39–55, 2012, p.48

14      Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Athlone, London, 1987, p.229

15      Ibid. p.230

16      The ship of Theseus refers to a famous Greek legend used to describe a paradox that is subsequently discussed by Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Plutarch, Hobbes, Locke and many others since then. Plutarch's version of the legend is perhaps most famous: he describes the ship in which Theseus and the youth of Athens return from Crete and tells of how, as the ship's old planks decayed, they were removed and replaced, one by one, with new timbers. Plutarch questions whether the ship would remain the same if it were entirely replaced, piece-by-piece. The Trigger's Broom paradox comes from a BBC sitcom entitled *Only Fools and Horses*, in which Trigger, a regular character on the show, is a road sweeper, petty thief and long-time friend of Del Boy. In one classic episode Trigger receives an award from the council for keeping the same broom for twenty years, thereby saving council money. In what is now a cult clip, he boasts: "and that's what I've done. Maintained it for twenty years. This old broom's had seventeen new heads and fourteen new handles in its time." To which his confused mates reply "how the hell can it be the same bloody broom then?" From the 'Heroes and Villains' episode, 1996. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/onlyfools/quotes/quote11.shtml [accessed 20.07.14]

17      Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel, Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, 1999. It should be noted that for Agamben, 'potentiality' is a major, critical, but difficult to understand concept, to which he repeatedly returns in almost all of his major works. (See de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009, p.4.) Despite its obscurity however, as Elizabeth Balskus shows, it can nevertheless be related to three attendant concepts, the

latter of which offer some clues as to its intended meaning: these are 'inoperativeness, decreation and profanity'. (See here, Elizabeth Balskus, 'Examining Potentiality in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben' in *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 19, Issue 1 Spring 2010, p.159.) As Balskus points out, both Agamben and Aristotle read the potential as anything that is 'capable of not existing in actuality and that "what is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be".' (Bulskus quoting Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, p.160.) However, as de la Durantaye attests, Agamben's concept of potentiality emphasises the potential of to not be: 'this potentiality to not-be … is not to be understood as a privation, as an actual weakness or incapacity, for the reason that it is not to be understood in the context of actuality at all. It denotes the possibility for a thing *not* to pass into existence and thereby remain at the level of mere—or 'pure'—potentiality'. (Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, op. cit., p.5) In this way then, Agamben's potentiality includes not only all that came to pass but also all that might have come to pass and did not.

18    'Politics as Struggle for People's Imagination' Workshop Seminar at Birkbeck, University of London, 25–26 January, 2007. Cited in Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary*, Columbia University Press, NY, 2014

19    Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2009, pp.74–75

20    Ibid.

21    Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?' in *Between Past and Future* Penguin, London, 1979, p.170

22    Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988, p.147

23    Ibid. p.146

24    Ibid. p.169

25    Agamben, *Potentialities*, op. cit., p.270

26    Nancy, *Experience*, op. cit., p.87

27    Ibid. p.20

28    Ibid. p.20

29    Ibid.

30    Ibid. p.55

31    Thomas Docherty, *Aesthetic Democracy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006, p.xvii

32    See here Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010, p.2

33    Ibid. p.32

34    Balskus, op. cit., p.174

35    The example of the Guimbal Turbine (named after the engineer who invented it) is often mentioned by Simondon but perhaps his most famous iteration is that in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Aubier, Paris, 1958. Trans. Ninian Mellamphy at https://english.duke.edu/uploads/assets/Simondon_MEOT_part_1.pdf [accessed 12.08.14]

36   Gilbert Simondon, *Modes of Existence of Technical Objects*, Part 1, trans. Ninian Mellamphy, University of Western Ontario, 1980, n.p. at https://english.duke.edu/uploads/assets/Simondon_MEOT_part_1.pdf pp.58–60 [accessed 12.08.14]

37   Brian Massumi with Arne De Boever, Alex Murray and Jon Roffe, 'Technical mentality' Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon, in Gilbert Simondon, *Being and Technology*, edited by Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe and Ashley Woodward, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, pp.24–25

38   Ibid. p.25

39   Ibid.

40   Gilbert Simondon, *Modes of Existence*, op. cit. p.58

41   Massumi, in Gilbert Simondon, *Being and Technology*, op. cit., p.25

# MARTYRS OF REVOLUTION: ART AND MEMORY IN TROUBLED TIMES

— Charles Tripp

On 18 November 2013, to the sound of an energetic brass band, the prime minister of Egypt and his entourage arrived in Cairo's Tahrir Square to inaugurate a memorial to all those who had been killed 'during the 25 January and 30 June revolutions' (referring to events in 2011 and 2013, respectively). Placed centrally on the newly grassed over roundabout at the heart of the square—that had itself been the heart of the uprising against President Mubarak in 2011—a stone circle surrounded a square stone plinth suggesting the future installation of a more elaborate monument. The streets leading into the square had been sealed off by the army, ensuring that the ceremony took place in an eerily deserted square and allowing the waiting fleet of black limousines to spirit the dignitaries away once it was over.

Within hours of the public being allowed back in, the monument had been reduced to rubble. It was attacked by Egyptians angered by this blatant attempt on the part of the military-backed government to appropriate the memory of the uprisings and to use the power of the memory of martyrdom to shore up its own shaky legitimacy. Outraged by the presence at the ceremony of officers of the very forces responsible for most of the deaths that were being commemorated, the protestors not only broke up the stone monument, but made their own memorial by spraying graffiti stating: 'down with all those who betrayed the revolution: the military, the *filul* [remnants of the old regime] and the [Muslim] Brotherhood' and by placing a coffin draped in the Egyptian flag on top of the ruin.[1]

These events vividly illustrate the intimate connection between art and collective memory, as well as the power it is capable of generating. On the one hand, the Egyptian

39

government clearly believed that its own sponsorship of this monument would allow it to harvest the memories of the uprising that had mobilised so many millions of Egyptians and, in doing so, to position itself as the champion of revolutionary aspirations. On the other hand, the monument and its sponsorship encapsulated for many Egyptians all that had gone wrong since the uprisings of 2011. In doing so, it had the power to provoke a collective protest and an intervention that destroyed one artefact, replacing it with a very different kind of memorial comprising rubble, a reproachful coffin and accusatory graffiti.[2]

This was about a memory of conflict, but it was also a conflict about how this memory should be represented and who should have the authority to memorialise. The example shows the significance of an artwork and its capacity to throw into relief a series of necessary questions in the field of contentious politics. As a symbolic intervention, it places before the public an embodiment of memory, affirming some aspects, and inevitably omitting or downplaying others, and inviting people to align their own memories collectively, possibly even to refashion those memories in a way that tallies with the overall intention behind the artistic intervention. Such explicit memory work calls into question the authorship, the style and the aesthetic of the memorialisation, as well as its congruency with people's understandings of the event or the set of values it is seeking to embody.

It becomes a political action precisely because of its role in linking individuals, as sponsors, creators, consumers or participants in some aspect of collective memory, and a memory of conflict that may itself be contested. In seeking to communicate a version of that memory, it is both representing claimed shared experiences of a projected past and creating the possibility of common experiences in the present. The work of art thus plays upon, engages with and refers to common beliefs and imaginative forms, whilst also aspiring to provide a generally understood vocabulary for their expression. In doing so, it is drawing upon, and drawing up, conventions and repertoires of action, image and performance and establishing the grammar that makes artistic interventions understandable, deploying them as effective means of communication and mobilisation. In the sphere of memory work, this leads to a focus on their role in evoking and re-presenting memories of contention and of conflict through affect and its techniques, and also by suggesting the strategies that will carry the collective performance forward.[3]

At the same time, it is provoking people to think about memory in the context of power—not only the exercise of power that it may be recalling in some fashion, but also the power that lies behind the ability to appropriate and to

re-present a certain version of memory and, through this, to shape the dominant narrative for some time to come. It is an awareness of this power and its significance, as well as the dangers of its imbalance, that can be brought out so sharply through artistic interventions and can provoke such passionate reactions. Thus, artistic interventions to consolidate social memory in the setting of conflict cannot be mere nostalgia but are enmeshed in the construction, projection and sometimes consolidation of very specific forms of power. They underline where the community may stand in relation to the power of others, embodied in the memory of past practice, but they also hold out the mobilising capacity of action in the future, creating a sense of collective potential.

As such, they are capable of creating a heightened awareness of the rights that may have been infringed by the exercise of power. This is particularly the case in the memorialisation of martyrs whose most fundamental right to life itself has been violated, standing in dramatically for the rights of the community that they represented—or at least that they are said to have represented. In this respect, it is also important to think about the various ways in which those memories are themselves being constituted through different means of public performance and intervention. Thus, the means of reproduction, the settings, the images, the aesthetic and narrative forms, the very dramas of emplotment, of the ways in which particular stories are told and the artifice of fitting things together in ways that make sense to the target constituency, narrow or broad as that might be.[4] This was visible in the case of the Tahrir Square monument, from the perspective of the authorities and of those who resisted their imposition of sanctioned memory.

It was equally visible in memorialisation of a performative kind seen in the April 2014 demonstration by the relatives of those killed during the Tunisian revolution of 2011. Enraged by the recent release by the military appeals court of the few security force officers who had been imprisoned for their roles in the deaths of protestors in January 2011, the relatives of the dead and wounded marched on the parliament in Tunis, demanding redress. Their performances, whilst tapping into genuine feelings of loss and injustice, used banners, pictures, slogans and the white shrouds of the dead to evoke the memory of those who had been killed and the justice that was owed them. Through a form of performance art they were reminding their elected representatives, the Tunisian public at large and the international community of the violence of the state, and the sacrifice and the identity of the dead. This intervention went far beyond the verbal or the textual. They used their own bodies, as well as the images of the dead, to incorporate memory and to impress upon

those who witnessed it not merely a memory of violence but the contentious nature of the pursuit of rights and claims to justice against a complacent, even complicit, security establishment.

The nature, timing and staging of these interventions highlight the range of aesthetic techniques that have been used to draw attention to contentious issues between rival interests and different conceptions of the political. In these contrasting instances of memorialisation the questions of authorship—and claims to ownership—come to the fore, sharpened by the affective power of the visual, verbal and performative within the creative field. The fixed monumentalism of the Egyptian state project, and its transformation by popular action, as well as the moving performances and symbolic interventions by those demanding a different kind of memorialisation in Tunis, epitomise the differences between established power and popular memory. The art of the former tends towards the permanent, seeking to crystallise memory and to use it as a disciplinary device, closing discussion. By contrast, the art of the latter is fluid, changeable, taking into account the shifting forms of narrative and adopting the art forms that would allow multiple stories and perspectives to find expression.[5] In both instances, they oblige us to think about the plurality of the audiences and the conflicts within and around memory and its re-presentation. Art, in the widest understanding of the term, not only reflects the lines of contention between different segments of society and their memories but also embodies them, making them visible in the artifacts and performances produced.

## ENDNOTES

1    Marcus Symank, 'Army opponents break their silence', 21 November 2013. Available at: http://en.qantara.de/content/protestes-in-egypt-army- opponents-break-their-silence

2    In this they were following a pattern long visible in times of political upheaval—see Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Reaktion Books, London, 1997, pp.25–40, 63–79

3    Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding meaning in memory: a methodological critique of collective memory studies', *History and Theory* 41/2, 2002, pp.179–197

4    Jeffrey C. Alexander (with Jason Mast), *Performance and Power*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp.7–23

5    There are interesting parallels here with the nature and role of memory in postwar Lebanon—see Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, CUP, Cambridge, 2010, pp.5–28

# CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART IN AFGHANISTAN: 'AN ART OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING…'

— Jemima Montagu

*'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.'*
— Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*[1]

Czech novelist Milan Kundera often captured weighty ideas in light phrases. The statement quoted above—written during the repressive Communist regime in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s—has resonated for many people, across many borders. Today, for me, it seems to bear some unexpected resonance with themes of memory and resistance in contemporary art practice in present-day Afghanistan. This paper offers some reflections on themes of laughter and forgetting, memory and resistance, in a country that is still in a state of conflict.

Shamsia Hassani is one of several young female artists who have made international headlines in the last few years for adopting graffiti art as a way of protesting about women's rights, and the impact the war has had on women's lives, exacerbating cultural traditions of repression and isolation. Hassani uses the blue silhouette of the burqa to create a ghostly female figure which moves around the city, inhabiting places where women are usually unwelcome: public spaces, streets, broken buildings. Her images are often accompanied by a text or sentence of poetry. In one work, Hassani has spray-painted a female figure, sitting pensively on a broken staircase. On the bombed-out wall behind her is written:

*'The water can come back to a dried-up river, but what about the fish that died?'* The poem refers not only to the lives lost during war, but also to the way of life, and freedoms, that have been lost as a result of the decades of conflict. 'Every character in my artworks is me,' says Hassani, 'because my problem is the same as every other Afghan woman's. Our problem is not the burqa but the war'.

Afghanistan has been at war for over thirty-five years. Although most people no longer live alongside the fighting, eruptions of violence are a regular occurrence; the conflicts of the past have left their mark on every aspect of life. Yet, as it is often remarked, Afghans actually spend very little time talking about war on an everyday basis. Life goes on. Contemporary visual art, while not a prominent art form across the country, has a growing presence, particularly in the capital. International visibility and recognition for Afghan artists has also increased, evident in the entire section dedicated to Afghan contemporary art at Documenta 13 in Kassel in 2013, and recent published anthologies.[2] So what is the relevance of war and conflict to artists and the arts community working in Afghanistan today? Who is supporting the arts, and how has this affected art production? What themes have emerged in response to the experience of war?

Shamsia Hassani is a founding member of one of Kabul's most prominent artist collectives, Berang Association. She also teaches at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Kabul University and participates in many international exhibitions. But none of these things can be taken for granted. As a woman, working as an artist, and particularly a public graffiti artist, is a difficult and controversial choice. Hassani takes great care where and when she does her graffiti works, and sometimes paints or Photoshops her paintings onto photographs of urban scenes as a way of reaching places otherwise inaccessible. It is not acceptable for women to go out unaccompanied onto the streets, particularly at night, and the streets in the capital can be lawless and dangerous.

The graffiti revolution that erupted in Kabul was sparked by several graffiti workshops run by international artists and activists that took place between 2009–10. Several Afghan and international artists based in Kabul began to adopt the medium as a form of resistance, painting slogans, provocations and imagery across the city. They criticized corruption and the abuse of power, and presented images protesting women's rights. Like the many artists and activists who adopted street and graffiti art during the Arab uprisings in Spring 2011, it is the immediacy of the form, as well as its mass appeal and publicity value that makes graffiti attractive. Hassani has explicitly said that she was drawn to graffiti art because 'Afghan people have no chance to visit art galleries … and

if it is there for a long time, then people will slowly memorise it and it will be part of their everyday life … and they don't need a ticket'. The democratizing power of street art takes root in places where there are few places to see art, and even fewer places for discussion and dissent. But Hassani's point about 'memorising' is also important—street art is also a protest against forgetting, or ignoring, the truths of the world around them. 'Many forget the tragedy women face in Afghanistan,' Hassani explains, 'so that is why I use my paintings as a means to remind the people'.

There are risks, however, to adopting an art form for social purposes: it can easily be co-opted or instrumentalised. One Afghan-American artist closely involved in the graffiti arts project, Aman Mojadidi, was disillusioned by how quickly international donors attempted to absorb the creative potential of the nascent graffiti artists: 'I was trying to generate some genuine street art, but before it had even taken root I was contacted by a contractor for the American government working on a gender awareness project who wanted to use graffiti to raise consciousness of women's rights …'[3] For Mojadidi, if the project is commissioned, then the artistic freedom, the element of struggle and resistance, is compromised—despite the fact that there is a long history of artists collaborating or trading with other industries. For other artists, this kind of international support has been a critical factor in their success and determination. Many female graffiti artists have been quickly picked up by the international media, and invited to participate in exhibitions, and pro-women's rights events, all over the world. The story of young women fighting for their rights through art is obviously a media magnet. But has this been a positive or negative thing as far as the artists and their careers, both at home and abroad, are concerned? The international art world is notoriously snooty of instrumentalism, and so it is not surprising that the selection of artists for Documenta 13 included mainly expatriate Afghan artists, who already have an international reputation. The selection of artists born and raised in Afghanistan was small, and their representation weak. As Robert Kluijver, a Dutch curator and Afghan cultural expert, commented: 'How can a young artist develop when his very first works are shown in Documenta or the Venice Biennial, or are celebrated on CNN? How does this affect the expectations of other young artists? What about the older artists … ?'[4]

The overbearing presence of the international aid industry has not only influenced the work of artists across Afghanistan, but has also had some damaging effects on the arts infrastructure. Funding for arts initiatives since 2001 has been almost exclusively linked to projects to 'strengthen civil

society', 'advocate gender awareness', 'promote democracy' and other important but reductive clichés of international development. Women and children's art exhibitions have proliferated, as well as art projects about peace. Imagery with clear messages about the horrors of war, the problems facing women, and the destruction of heritage 'tick all the boxes' and are therefore easy to fund. It is much harder to find support for projects with intangible, unknown and possibly even critical, outcomes. Although this is not a problem specific to Afghanistan, it is exacerbated by the culture of dependency on international aid, and the lack of alternative sources of funding. This so-called 'infantilism' is well-known in the economic and political sphere, but is less acknowledged in the arts sphere.

The Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan, known as CCAA, offers a classic example. It is Afghanistan's only independent contemporary arts centre, offering courses in painting, sculpture, new media and film-making—when it has the funding. It was founded by Rahraw Omarzad, an artist, writer and curator, who is committed to supporting young artists. His work began as a refugee in Pakistan in the late 1990s, where—despite the extreme conservatism of that time and place—he set up classes in drawing, painting and sculpture for young Afghan refugees.

The issue of cultural history and memory is relevant here too. Omarzad writes of his concern that during this time, 'the younger generation would grow up without any knowledge of art … [which] would be a great loss for future generations and our national life.' Omarzad is motivated by a sense of duty to remind people of their own culture and history—a form of resistance to the policy of cultural obliteration, 'forgetting', advocated by the Taliban, who closed down the art schools, destroyed monuments and works of art, and punished artists.

In 2002, after the fall of the Taliban, Omarzad returned to Afghanistan and, with the aid of some seed funding, began to run classes and workshops in contemporary art, eventually founding CCAA that same year. His work began to attract the attention of the newly-arrived international community, which has—drip by drip—supported the Centre's workshops, but never offered any regular revenue funding, despite the fact that annual rent for their building is only $6,000 USD per year. As a result, the Centre has moved several times from one building to another, and is continually expanding and contracting its programmes according to funding. In 2006, at the behest of another new donor, it was obliged to focus exclusively on women artists, although this policy was later relaxed. Most of the prominent young artists working in Kabul today have spent some time at a course or workshop at CCAA. A recent publication states:

*'The main goal of CCAA is to provide equal opportunities for both men and women and to provide young artists the chance to express and improve their artistic talent as individual and creative artists, and implement a new way of looking at art in Afghan society as a vehicle for communicating peace, justice, democracy and civil society and to support sustainability and institutionalization of these beliefs in the light of Islamic and national values.'*

It is hardly the typical mission statement of most international art centres, but it captures the unique challenges facing such institutions in Afghanistan today. Though founded as a refuge and place to develop and support artists, it is also forced to exploit its potential to be a vehicle for social change. In doing so, it compromises artistic freedom, and the right of the artist to work independently of social and political ends. But with no state support system, a decreasing funding environment, and limited funds for anything cultural, CCAA is forced to be reactive to the desires of each new donor or patron.

Many artists and film-makers have fought against these compromises by founding their own independent groups or movements over the past few years. These artists, with access to the internet, are more internationally-focused than previous generations, and they are already presenting themselves and their work online. Groups known to be active now include Pul, Taasha, Kapila, Afghan Culturehouse (Khan-e-farhang-Afghan), RG (Revolutionary Group of Film), Jumpcut and Lajarvad, Third Eye, and Parwaz. Perhaps the most prominent, with a busy Facebook profile, is Berang Association (formerly called 'Roshd', meaning 'growth'), which was established by some of the finalists of the Afghan Contemporary Art Prize in 2009. This Prize, which I co-founded in 2008 while working for cultural heritage NGO Turquoise Mountain, has now had four iterations in six years, and attempts to be a stimulus and a platform for emerging artists. There may be room for some optimism about the coming withdrawal of international forces; although it may mean reductions in funding, there may also be new freedom for the artist community to develop without the overbearing influence of international donors.

Qasem Foushanji, another member of Berang, is both a visual artist and a rock musician. His work uses a range of media, and his attitude to life and art is characterized by a dark humour, another prominent aspect of contemporary art in Afghanistan. Although Foushanji—who also works under the name 'Dark Artery'—has worked with graffiti, such as for his installation at Documenta 13, his work does not offer

specific messages or present an easy critique. He describes his interests as being related to the darker sides of life, and the dichotomies of the every day. In his *Yellow* series of abstract ink paintings from 2010, it is difficult to resist seeing reflections of war—images of explosions, violence, the undoing of things. But it is the energy of the work, the action of his painting, and the experimentation, that is impressive. He seems to be enjoying what he is doing. It may be significant that Foushanji was born in 1987, and does not have childhood memories of the so-called 'golden years' of 1970s Afghanistan, before the civil war. He is therefore free from the burden of nostalgia, the memories of how Afghanistan used to be, which haunts many older artists. Instead, Foushanji seems refreshingly of his time. As a young man, currently receiving international attention for his artwork, and not restricted like his female artist friends and colleagues, Foushanji's work expresses a hungry, provocative, cocky energy.

A similar vein of dark humour—though very much tougher and more cynical—is found in the work of Aman Mojadidi, an Afghan-American artist who describes himself as 'Afghan by blood, redneck by the grace of God'. Born and raised in Florida, Mojadidi first visited Afghanistan during the civil war aged nineteen, but moved there in 2003 to help rebuild the country through NGO work. However, like many

50

Afghans who returned to their country soon after the Taliban fell, the early hopes and expectations for their country were later soured, as violence continued and corruption took hold. Using performance, film and photography, Mojadidi explores his two identities—American and Afghan—as well as issues related to conflict such as corruption, neo-colonialism, and the economy of war. In one series, Mojadidi poses as an American redneck in various locations across the city of Kabul—eating fried chicken, going to the barber, and as a bum, drunk at a street corner. In contrast, in *A day in the Life of a Jihadi Gangster* (2010) he creates a tableaux of himself as an Afghan warlord in various compromising situations, accessorized with what Mojadidi describes as 'conflict chic': a gold revolver hanging on a chain around his neck. Both series are raw and angry critiques of the unchecked abuses of power, and the exploitation of resources, that have taken place in Afghanistan over the past decades, both by the Afghan warlords and the 'Lords of Poverty'—the aid agencies and international governments.

In a poignant short film called *Payback* (2009), Mojadidi dressed as an Afghan policeman and stopped cars at a fake 'checkpoint'. Instead of asking for a bribe, he offers money back to the drivers as compensation for all bribes demanded of them in the past. Few accepted the money, scared that it was a trick or a trap. The film is funny but, in a very different way, expresses a sentiment something like the line of poetry in Hassani's graffiti work. How to address, redress, the wrongs of the past? Shown on a loop, the film suggests that 'payback' or restitution is an endless and impossible cycle. However, the act of remembering is itself a gesture against impotence, part of the struggle against forgetting.

Another powerful example of this struggle is the work of Mariam Ghani, an expatriate artist of Afghan-Lebanese origin, whose video installation *A Brief History of Collapses* (2011) was shown Documenta 13. Ghani describes her practice as operating 'at the intersections between place, memory, history, language, loss, and reconstruction'. In a major series of work, made between 2002–7, Ghani documented the post-conflict reconstructions of the city of Kabul in one-year increments: 'Each year I returned to Kabul, drove down the same streets, filmed the same neighborhoods, and recorded how the year had changed them. The footage from these three years of filming the traces of reconstruction on the surface of the city has now been shaped into a three-channel video installation, *Kabul 2, 3, 4*, where parallels and transformations can be traced across time and space'. Perhaps the most moving of the works in this series was an installation called 'Kabul: Reconstructions' (2002–3) where Ghani erected a UNHCR refugee tent in a gallery, Exit Arts, in New York. Viewers were

invited to come and drink tea with her, eat UNHCR standard issue biscuits, and discuss Afghanistan, while a video played in the tent around them. One sequence of the video follows the hands of Ghani's aunt as she makes *mantu*, parcels of meat or vegetables inside noodles, a traditional Afghan food. The movement of the fingers, the twisting of the pastry is lovingly, nostalgically observed, and preserved. While Ghani's methodology as a film-maker is to impose a rigorous, almost clinical, distance, this work brings forward the intimately-held memories of childhood family meals, and life in the kitchen with aunts and cousins.

'For those of us outside Afghanistan,' Ghani writes of this work, 'reconstruction comes to mean the process by which we piece together an image of this place and these people from the scraps of information gathered between the lines of mass media transmissions, the memories preserved in expatriate family stories, traditions and recipes, or personal communications from friends and family on the inside'. The fragility of identity, the danger of losing or forgetting one's past, is a critical focus of many expatriate Afghan artists—one could add Jeanno Gaussi or Lida Abdul to this list—and another example of the struggle of memory against forgetting, resistance to obliteration.

The importance of memory, and the fragility of identity, plays out in the work of two other Afghan artists Khadim Ali and Sher Ali Hussainy, but for very different reasons. These artists work in the idiom of classical miniature painting,

using this technique to play off traditional and contemporary subject matter. Their work has a strong sense of place and history, and is not preoccupied with trends in international contemporary art. Both artists also come from the Hazara ethnic minority, a group that was severely persecuted by the Taliban, and still suffers persecution in areas of Pashtun-dominated northern Pakistan. The Hazara are Shia Muslims, which link them closely to Persian traditions of culture and history, specifically to great works of literature such as the 11th century epic poem the 'Shahnameh' in the *Book of Kings*, which was written for the Ghaznavid Court in Ghazni, Central Afghanistan. This area is also the traditional homeland of the Hazara people but many fled, including Khadim Ali's family, to escape persecution. They escaped to Quetta, on the Pakistan side of the border, where Khadim Ali was born. His grandfather was a traditional 'Shahnameh singer', and as child Khadim Ali listened eagerly to the tales, projecting himself onto the character of the hero, Rustam. One day, many years later, he heard a group of young Taliban fighters shouting in the streets, 'We are the new Rustam!', in one word appropriating and desecrating his own self-image, as well as his treasured cultural heritage.

This experience has informed an ongoing series of works exploring his heritage and identity through the figure of 'Rustam', whom Khadim Ali depicts as a kind of demon. Khadim Ali began to paint demons obsessively, a form of self-hate and self-exploration, seeing parallels between the demons of historical texts and the Hazara people:

> *'The history of Hazaras have similarities with the life/character of demon in Shahnameh, as the demons were infidel and Hazaras in Afghan historical texts and court declared Hazaras infidel. The demons were living in high mountain caves. The Hazaras of Bamiyan were living in caves. The demons were rebel. Hazaras were rebel. I look at the demonisation of Hazaras positively as the demons also signify strength and power.'*

In Khadim Ali's works—which have moved from small-scale paintings to large-scale woven carpets—the demon-hero is gnarled, with beard, horns, potbelly, and Pashtun features. Contradictory symbols loom around the figures: shadows of AK–47s and hand grenades, as well as images of the great Buddhas of Bamiyan, another sacred inheritance of Central Afghanistan. Rustam sits, Buddha-like, or wrestles a rival demon. The many aspects of Khadim Ali's identity—the Afghan, the Hazara, the Shia, Rustam and the demon—all seem to be in battle with each other, the enemy both outside and within. Khadim Ali now lives mostly in Australia, though he travels

frequently to Kabul, where he has both taught and collaborated with fellow miniature painter, Sher Ali Hussainy. They have recently completed a new painting called *Transition* which depicts an enigmatic mythical scene. Surrounded by stylised lions pawing and raging at him, a reclining Rustam figure looks calmly into the distance, unaware of another giant lion leaping from above down onto him. Rustam's head has, like Janus, two sides: one the bearded demon, the other the expressionless mask of the sleeping Buddha. The lion, once the royal symbol of Afghanistan, may be interpreted here as a symbol of a nation which is in 'transition', a country which has been literally torn apart by its many ethnic, religious and tribal identities, and complex contested histories. The lions may be symbols of the many competing powers that are still tearing the country apart. The stylised forms of myth and legend offer here another means of drawing together past and present, interweaving the personal and the political into what Khadim Ali has called 'my collective historical portrait'.

This year, 2014, is of course a critical year of transition in Afghanistan, as the government ushers in a new president, and as international forces withdraw. Can the centre hold? Kundera's phrase about the struggle of memory against forgetting was spoken in the context of the dangers of the collective overpowering the individual. Perhaps Afghanistan today has the opposite problem; it is too fractured to reach any consensus. In the context of contemporary visual art, the struggle to remember is itself an ongoing act of resistance with both personal and collective value. The visual arts in Afghanistan in recent years have been under-funded, over-instrumentalised and too often neglected, and yet some powerful work has been produced. The process may be a necessary form of catharsis for the artists themselves, but their work also offers valuable insights to others—audiences in Afghanistan, as well as beyond its troubled borders.

## ENDNOTES

55

1    Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*,
     Faber and Faber, 1996 (First published in Czech 1978), p.4

2    *Untitled: Contemporary art from Afghanistan*, Fabbrica, Italy, 2014

3    Quoted in Emma Graham-Harrison, 'Art in the streets of Kabul',
     *The Guardian*, 24 February 2012

4    Robert Kluijver, 'Afghanistan in Documenta 13',
     review posted in June 2012. Available at:
     http://robertk.asia/category/exhibition-review/

# THE POST-APOCALYPTIC PRESENT

— Larissa Sansour

In my art practice, I contextualise present day Middle Eastern politics in futuristic projections such as sci-fi and the post-apocalyptic condition. As a Palestinian, I find it interesting how specifically Palestine functions as a microcosm for humanity's general fears of the future, our angst for the unknown and distrust of where our eternal quest for progress is taking us.

Despite the excitement this ubiquitous progress ignites, our culture is also paralysed by the debris of advancement, with any number of doomsday scenarios always on the horizon. This results in a perpetual state of excitement and angst, on one hand enthralled by technological, medical, scientific advances, on the other hand incessantly lamenting the social, political and environmental flipsides of our progress.

This paradoxical state of anxiety takes shape in suspended, projected, 'what if' spaces in my work—the tug and pull between utopia and dystopia.

The political situation in Palestine and the strain of Israeli occupation on the Palestinian economy and environment has long since brought about a post-apocalyptic condition in Palestine. People have learned how to be resourceful and find ways of living under extreme conditions, with freedom of movement, water resources and basic human rights all in short supply. This condition has led to the strangulation of agriculture, infrastructure and culture in general.

In my practice, the focus is on this accelerated state that goes in parallel with our universal fears. The interplay between the local and global is central.

In my 2009 video piece *A Space Exodus*, a first ever Palestinian astronaut, a female, is heading for the moon in a space shuttle. The film references Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Neil Armstrong's lunar landing. Upon landing on the moon, the astronaut declares: 'One small step for a Palestinian, one giant leap for mankind'.

The idea is to approximate the Palestinian experience to a universal one. The Palestinian problem is at the heart of world unrest in general, and therefore cannot be looked at as a local problem. It is the source of so many global challenges. A lot of international tension can be traced back to the Middle East and the regional alignment of power. Colonisation laws and tactics are still in effect in Palestine. How what is happening there is acceptable to the international community when it wouldn't be acceptable somewhere else continues to bewilder.

In *A Space Exodus*, the astronaut takes a few steps on the lunar surface, takes a leap and starts floating into space while trying to establish contact with Jerusalem, but all contact is lost. The piece, read in the most basic interpretation and on a biographical note, is a reference to my being born in Jerusalem, but not being allowed to enter the city for the past decade by the State of Israel due to my Palestinian nationality. The work also addresses Palestine's status as a prospective state. Under what conditions will Palestinians be allowed to have a state? Is it easier to reach the moon than to reach Jerusalem? Do Palestinians themselves have to resort to colonialist strategies to claim any kind of space suitable for a state?

*Nation Estate*, a 9-minute sci-fi film from 2012, continues on this trajectory and explores the very conceivability of Palestinian statehood. The film envisions the entire Palestinian state housed in a single skyscraper. The colossal building is extremely hi-tech and offers a new ease of movement and comfort for Palestinians. Each Palestinian city is replicated in minute detail on the different floors in the building: Jerusalem on the third floor, Jericho on the seventh, Bethlehem on the 11th, and so on. All floors are connected by elevators equipped with advertising panels. There is no longer a need to cross checkpoints. There are even floors with live-water replicas of the seas surrounding historical Palestine: the Dead Sea, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea—as well as museum floors devoted to the preservation and commemoration of Palestinian culture.

The piece is a satire on a present political situation gone askew. I myself grew up in the West Bank town of Bethlehem. Every time I go back to visit, I see Israeli settlements coming closer and closer, strangling the city from all sides and making it hard to travel outside of the city, even to other Palestinian cities. The state of Bethlehem is mirrored in most parts of occupied Palestine, which makes any attempt at envisioning a Palestinian state difficult.

With land for a state rapidly diminishing, it seems that any imaginable solution would have to be vertical rather than horizontal. *Nation Estate* is an absurd take on a very

tragic political reality that Palestinians are facing right now. The film ends in a panoramic shot revealing the Israeli wall and watch-towers surrounding this single skyscraper housing the entire population.

The *Nation Estate* building is very slick, minimalist and clinical. It is very much a cliché of what we understand the future to look like. This is a point in itself. I find it interesting how sci-fi is inherently retro, stuck in a limbo—not unlike that of Palestinian politics—predicting a version of a future not very different from that of early sci-fi versions in literature and film.

That is the paradox of forecasting. As soon as anything looks uniquely futuristic, it stops looking right. Every time I thought of making *Nation Estate* more contemporary or simply non-retro, it stopped looking like the future.

What I like about the use of sci-fi is that it always merges past and future. As Palestinians, our identity is eternally suspended between what was and what will be; we dwell upon the 1948 Nakba and look towards our future independence. Meanwhile, on the ground, Israel is busy expanding its settlements on Palestinian land and amplifying its reality in the present.

The *Nation Estate* building mimics a museum-like environment, suggesting that it is a place that houses artifacts rather than a real living organism. It taps into the shaping of identity and the point at which identity turns into a motto. In the case of Palestine, identity seems to always be coupled with resistance, and so the work questions what happens if that part of the Palestinian self-perception is taken away. It is a comment on identity politics; somehow when you are

involved in such a long struggle, your identity, and those things associated with it, lose their value and become clichés. They are reduced to non-functional symbols, exhibited artifacts, like the *keffiyeh* pattern, the olive tree, traditional embroidery, the symbolic key (to houses abandoned during the 1948 exodus), et cetera.

What can be seen as humour in my work is, I suppose, a sense of hopefulness. In *Nation Estate*, the humour is much more subdued and satirical, whereas in *A Space Exodus* it is a bit more in your face. There is, of course, an element of optimism in seizing power, taking control of your destiny, self-determination and a pure demonstration of human will, albeit in a fictional context. Still, a feeling of impotence permeates the work, but I think it is an impotence that not only covers that of the state of Palestinian affairs, but of humanity's inability as a whole to come to terms with its own advancement and progress when it comes to human rights or technology.

I am fascinated by how often reality ends up mimicking fiction, rather than the other way around. *Nation Estate* has a lot to do with early Zionist mythology. For example, the poster featured in the film reading, 'Nation Estate, Living the High Life', is based on a well-known and recognisable Zionist poster from 1936 that originally states: 'Visit Palestine'. Mythology played a vital role in the early years of Zionism, and I frequently refer to Jean-Luc Godard's take on this, where he says: 'Jews become the stuff of fiction; the Palestinians, a documentary'.

The infamous Zionist saying, 'A land without a people for a people without a land', was a completely manufactured, but entirely effective, myth. Actions on the ground mimicked this myth, and Israel continued over many years to remove Palestinians from their lands and replace their villages and farmlands with illegal settlements for Israelis only. For me, *Nation Estate* follows the strategy of building undeniable facts on the ground, grounded in myth, no matter how surreal.
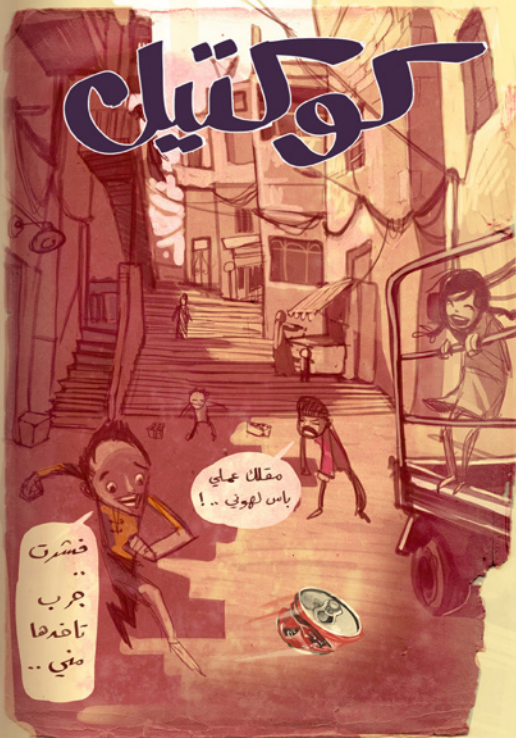
# THE ENGAGED BOOK

— Malu Halasa

My own theory about the importance of art and culture in conflict situations began to take shape in the early 2000s, while I was editing books and journals for the Prince Claus Fund (PCF) in the Netherlands.[1] This was during a time when contemporary art from the south, from countries like Lebanon and Iran as well most African nations, were completely ignored by Western art institutions. It was also very rare for academics working on these regions of the world to consider art and culture in their research. What could artists, writers and musicians from those places tell us that was not already known?

At the PCF, culture is considered to be like food and water—a basic human need. By engaging with people on the ground about their artistic endeavours, a new understanding could be gleaned, one that illuminated these societies and the aspirations of the people living there. Surely dialogue with those living in totalitarianism, strife and poverty could enlarge engagement and exchange, beyond politicians, armies and national borders.

In 2005, I left the PCF to concentrate on editing and producing books on the Middle East. At first I worked on an occasional series, *Transit*, which includes *Transit Beirut*, with Roseanne Khalaf, and *Transit Tehran* with Maziar Bahari. The *Transit* books marry a wide range of images—art, photography, illustration, cartoon, among others—with an equally broad sweep of writing—including fiction, memoir, reportage—to illuminate their cities and countries. These anthologies, co-edited with people who were living and working in those places, made for a challenging publishing format because they were full colour, lavishly illustrated, and carried writing that defied simplistic stereotypes.

I had hoped that these books would somehow change the debate about these countries or, better still, provide a platform for voices there to state their own cases, reveal their passions and be in control of defining who they are. That was

one of many impetuses behind the publication. A book is like a love affair—demanding, obsessive, sometimes even mealy-mouthed. Then it suddenly finishes and vacates one's life without so much as a by-your-leave. Future meetings come unexpectedly. At a Middle Eastern academic group last year, I was told that the titles I co-edited, a photographic monograph on the artist and BBC cameraman Kaveh Golestan and *Transit Tehran*, were cited as books that changed perceptions about Iran at the BBC. So something was working somewhere.

The latest anthology of Arab voices I have edited, with Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, is *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*.[2] Containing the voices and images of over fifty contributors, the book features work forged during the present day violence. In 2011, the family and friends of Sulafa Hijazi in Damascus were arrested and imprisoned. She started a series, *Ongoing*, that considered the situation around her through an artistic lens. She chose digital illustration because it could be hidden 'just in case' at the click of a mouse. The result is a series of powerful illustrations that question the sexual politics of war and Syria's militarised society. These images are an artistic prism, which magnifies the situation in the country today.

Khaled Khalifa is the country's best-known novelist and a recent recipient of the prestigious 2013 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Arabic Literature. His contribution to *Syria Speaks* is a haunting extract from his most recent novel *La sakakin fi matabekh hathihi al madina* (No knives in the kitchens of this city). The setting is a family in Aleppo where an unnamed incident in the fields near the house, an act or event that is deeply shaming to the victim, is never discussed. The effect of this hiding provides a layered metaphor for Syrian society at large; it describes how so many topics and state secrets still can't be discussed openly and safely in public. As I write with Omareen in the introduction to *Syria Speaks*: 'The ongoing past of brutality and disinformation bloodies [the country's] present.'

It was the written visual image, the graffiting of *'Ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam'* (*'The people want to overthrow the regime'*), and the reaction of the Syrian regime–the torture and arrest of the schoolboys who spray-painted it—that sparked mass demonstrations across the country. By contrast, the Tunisian uprising began with an act of self-immolation— admittedly also a protest, but not a cultural one. The Syrian children who scrawled the slogan on the wall probably did not see themselves as 'artists', far less 'cultural activists'. Nonetheless the Syrian people responded with an outpouring of creative expression. Perhaps the earliest indications that they were saying and doing the unthinkable were heard in the

witty satiric verses and barbs against Bashar al-Assad, sung by the chanters in the squares who inspired thousands. Their call and response and posturing recalled the *arada* traditions of male performance at weddings and other Syrian social occasions. When the regime put up roadblocks to stop the protests in Homs, people recreated their own version of the city's distinctive clock tower and paraded around that.

During these heady days of early revolution, artistic collectives formed. There were political posters made available online and downloaded and printed by activists on marches; editorial cartoons drawn and held up by people in a small village like Kafranbel; artists, theatrical makers, and writers made short creative art films that were doing the rounds on the Internet, some lampooning the regime and others pointed documentaries or art videos. These have all reflected some aspect of the revolution but what does any of this really matter when the country is tearing itself apart and the Islamic fronts have moved in?

The significance of creative expression during the Syrian uprising lies in the history of dissent during the forty-year dictatorship of the Assad family. Thousands of political dissidents have been jailed and civil society initiatives, the very practices that would attract the 'red eye' of the secret police, the *mukhabarat*, were, for the most part, shunned by people.

Their witnessing of a brutal history of incarceration taught them to keep silent. According to Syrian journalist Yara Badr, 14,000 political dissidents were detained in the 1980s, a decade of unrest against Hafez al-Assad that includes the 1982 Hama massacre, where between 10,000 and 40,000 people were killed. As for the figures for those jailed during the current uprising, Badr, who works for the Syrian Centre for Media and Free Expression (SMCFE), cites the unverifiable figure of 200,000.[3]

For the Syrian intellectual and dissident author Yassin al-Haj Saleh, prison or the threat of it has been central to the Syrian experience. He spent sixteen years in jail under Hafez al-Assad. The situation in the country had become highly politicised because of the incarcerations. In his most recent book, *Salvation O Boys!*, he writes: 'Prison intellectuals emerged from prison as intellectuals, whereas beforehand they were just members of their parties.'[4]

In an interview for *Syria Speaks* he goes on to explain that the 'impact of imprisonment, and tyranny in general, has been evident in Syrian culture since the 1970s. From that time, the idea of democracy and its accompanying political, legal and ethical issues have dominated the work of Syrian intellectuals. In literature and art, too, people began more concerned with issues of oppression, prison and freedom'.

Yet these works before the revolution were papered over by a regime, with the odd one allowed a public airing as *tanfees*—a way of letting off steam and preventing a social implosion. It was not only the regime that paid little heed to these cultural protests. Many supposed progressive figures in the west downplayed Ba'athist crimes, even though they knew of them, because they bought the myth that the Ba'athists were 'progressive' and a credible resistance to the west, Israel, capitalism and globalisation.

Inside Syria, the reality was very different. Culture there, maintains al-Haj Saleh, 'was subjected to constant siege and appropriation for two full generations' and 'intellectual, academic and artistic works were prevented from developing an important role in developing social consciousness'.

Against this backdrop, the wide-ranging prison memoir in *Syria Speaks* resonates. Badr has been jailed like her father. Her husband, Mazen Darwish, the SMCFE's director, remains in Damascus Central Prison. She describes her family's time in prison as 'lifetimes stolen'. The Kurdish journalist Dara Abdullah gives a gritty account of life in a communal cell in No.1 Khatib Branch in Damascus, with lurid descriptions of the decomposing body of a badly wounded man. Above all he targets the failure of human compassion. In her essay that took nine years to finish, the psychologist and writer Fadia Lazkani searches for a brother who went missing in jail.

I can remember the time and place when it became clear to me that a globalised history and pop culture bound us all together, whether we are Middle Easterners or American Mid-Westerners. I had gone to Beirut and given a lecture on Palestinian memoir in a time of conflict. My talk coincided with the first US drone attack in Yemen in 2002. The questions from the audience encompassed the current political climate as well as Vietnam. There was not that much that the Lebanese audience didn't know. Yet we knew precious little about them.

Since those years, the Internet, the superhighway of cultural exchange and research, has established an even farther-reaching connectivity between east and west. Even a country that was as strictly controlled as Syria was not immune. Take the new generation of Syrian illustrators, graphic designers and animators—some with backgrounds in fine art, advertising and film storyboarding—who had been avidly devouring Japanese *manga* strips online in English translation.

Comic strips had been a regular feature in the official Ba'ath Party children's magazines for decades. Since the 1970s there has been a highly metaphorical editorial cartoon culture too, best exemplified by Ali Ferzat, in the country's otherwise heavily censored press. However it was the Internet

that exposed the members of Comic4Syria, an anonymous comic strip collective on Facebook, to the power of comics to convey subversive narratives.[6] At the same time, these young Syrians were denying the regime its former absolute monopoly on storytelling by accessing external sources.

Their contribution to *Syria Speaks* tackles the unlikely subject of friendship in the conflict. It is one of two stories in the anthology with this theme. While the news and academics focus on sectarianism in Syria, some Syrians remind themselves and others of life before the conflict, when a commonality existed between the different religious and social groups. Such natural and unaffected bonds filled the alleys of Damascus and Homs, before their cities were divided into pro- and anti-regime areas, manned by gunmen and tanks.

In the story 'Chicken Liver', the artist Khalil Younes, behind the continuing pen and ink series *Revolution* 2011*, relates a fictionalised account of the phone calls he makes where he lives near Chicago every couple of days to his friend on the frontline in Aleppo. Hassan (a pseudonym) serves there in the Syrian army. The two of them may be on differing sides of the political divide but their lives are intertwined.

At the beginning of the revolution, a startling number of citizen journalists reported on the events in their country. Syrian activist journalists uploaded over 300,000 videos on the Internet. However after two attacks, Baba Amr in 2011 and the chemical attack the next year in East Ghouta, the number of people willing to risk their lives, to get their message out to an increasingly compassion-fatigued world, decreased. Interestingly, documentation and verification, essentially non-violent activities, are considered as a threat by both the regime and the foreign *jihadis* in the country. Last year there was a spate of kidnappings against Syrian nationalists involved in media, as well as against foreign journalists. Their cameras were literally treated as the tools of a spy. This targeting of Syrian activists directly copies the actions of the Iranian government in its arrest, detainment and torture of journalists and photographers in the aftermath of the disputed presidential elections for Ahmadinejad in 2009.

The documentation of reality is a dangerous practice, and many, many inspirational Syrian figures, such as the gifted filmmaker Basel Shehade (Bassel Shehadeh), have been killed for their efforts. Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué's *Pixelated Revolution* is a performance and lecture that explores the phenomenon of 'the double shooting'. A Syrian citizen journalist is filming the activities of a gunman or a

sniper. Then the gunman takes aim and kills the filmmaker. A camera of some sort clatters onto the ground and the recording and filming of an event, in this case someone's death, continues.

The Syrian revolution has been hard and dangerous. As a member of the anonymous poster collective Alshaab alsori aref tarekh (The Syrian People Know Their Way) explained over Skype, people are feeling "helpless" and "a kind of depression" has set in, but they still home the message and aesthetics of their highly politicised posters.

My contact at Comic4Syria echoes similar sentiments in an email. 'Syrians all round the world are going through a depression phase, which is normal I guess in times of war,' she wrote, 'I hope we'll be able to get out of it soon and continue our search for justice and freedom'. The collective has been working on a teen monthly magazine, the first issue of which will be published on their Facebook page within the next couple of days. She added, 'It won't have a clear political direction, but we are trying to work long term on building values and asserting the Syrian identity'.

The conflict in Syria has also given rise to artists who refuse to align themselves to either side and are still working in conflict areas.

Photographer Issa Touma is the curator of the country's only contemporary photography gallery, Le Pont in Aleppo. Despite persecution and confiscation of artworks, Touma's International Photography Gathering, founded in 1993, attracted thousands of Syrians and foreigners alike. Touma had his own problems with the *mukhabarat*. As Syria has started attracting international art attention, he has been openly critical of foreign cultural organisations in the belief that art should transcend politics.

This summer I received an email from him showing the damage to the Old Electrical Building, the site of his many exhibitions. Touma has been working in the regime-controlled area of Aleppo, and he continues his arts activism, despite the bombings and the violence by the Free Syrian Army and Islamic fronts.

For the past two years he has been working with young people in the city on a project entitled Art Camping. When they could, they were making installation and performance art in the streets of Aleppo. More recently Le Pont featured a postcard exhibition displaying messages for Syria from around the world.

Touma, whose own photographs have been included in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, has always been an integral presence in Syria's artistic scene. When I was

working on *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie*, he provided valuable insight and contacts. In that book, *Syrian Lingerie*, Rana Salam and I used the country's racy lingerie as a conduit to greater issues of intimacy, religion, fashion and design under dictatorship. Some of the religious families making the underwear and the photographers shooting the models are still there but even in 2006, they were forthright about prospects for themselves within Syria. "Our country does not belong to us," I was told.

For too long, the Middle East has been perceived as a place of on-going war and civil strife that can only be controlled by an iron fist. The voices and artwork in the books I've co-edited from and about the region suggest otherwise. By making and doing, the Syrian people claim back all that is being denied to them by the regime and the extremist Islamic fronts—their individuality and dignity— the universal belief in the right of a person to express him/ herself. Their culture and art are more than just dreams. Against a backdrop of sham elections and the roar of weapons, they are upholding the values that a post-war Syria will so desperately need if and when the rebuilding of the country begins.

## ENDNOTES

1    Prince Claus Fund, website: http://www.princeclausfund.org

2    For further information on the publication *Syria Speaks*,
     see website: http://www.saqibooks.co.uk/book/syria-speaks/

3    Syrian Centre for Media and Free Expression, website: http://scm.bz

4    Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Bilkhalas Ya Shabab (Salvation O Boys: 16 Years
     in Syrian prisons)*, Dar Al-Saqi, Beirut, 2012

5    Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud (editors),
     *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Front Line,*
     Saqi Books, London, 2014.
     Website: http://www.saqibooks.co.uk/book/syria-speaks/

6    Comic4Syria Facebook page:
     https://www.facebook.com/Comic4Syria/photos_stream

# DELUSIONS OF REFERENCE: IN DEFENCE OF ART (LONDON)

— Sarah Rifky

Exactly a week ago I arrived in Aspen, Colorado. A small town, a ski resort where money retires to the backdrop of beautiful snowy mountains at this time of year. Aspen is home to the Aspen Art Museum, a serious space that is committed not only to programme for its community, but also to provide opportunities for creation and for production. This was my first time in the United States, excluding New York. What struck me about Aspen was something very subtle. It was not just the friendliness, but it was as though some people would look at you, knowing. I don't mean knowing in the everyday sense, or knowing in the sense of information, or knowledge … just a deep-seated feeling that that there was something greater going on. Perhaps it was simply that people were not shy to look you straight in the eye, and express empathy, but perhaps it was more. When I walked into the museum, the staff would welcome and introduce themselves. It's a small establishment with a friendly custom. I walked into the gallery space and there was a show on by Amy Sillman. The gallery attendant, a young man with hair that flowed all the way down his back, Japanese features, approaches me. I later learn his name is Takeo. He reminds me of another friend. The resemblance is uncanny. "You're Sarah, right?" For some reason, I am compelled to complement

his pronunciation, and sing along rising slowly with my voice, stretching my vowels and plummeting to the 'm': "Yes, I am…!" "You just arrived didn't you?" In my mind, I had just arrived mentally. I had read somewhere that one's spirit takes three days to catch up with one's body when we travel above the clouds. How did he know I had just arrived? I drew out my yes … "Yeeees", I added a hesitant question so it would read more like this: "Yeeees?" He added "Did you have a good flight?" A courteous and simple question: "Yes! Thank you." Suddenly, his speech becomes more emphasising, almost pressured. "Did you read anything on the flight here?" I giggle, because I too know … I know where he is headed. He knows. He knows I had, I had just received a gift, from someone I recently met, honour and like. The gift was a beautiful book: perfectly bound, red, teachings of the Tao. Translated from Chinese to Arabic. "Yes, I read the Taoist verses, in Arabic," I responded. Not only that, but I was so excited about the book that I had restructured my entire lecture following the book's teachings. Takeo looked at me blankly, smiling a little he asks, "What do the first words of the book say?" His demeanor is theatrical, as though speaking a warning to a child on stage. He enunciates: "To speak of the Tao, is not to speak of the Tao". We held each other's gazes for a moment, I felt like I was divulging a secret. The tension is undone as he walks over to a painting that has an inscription on it. He asks: "What is the meaning of Lacanian?" This could have been an innocent coincidence, but it wasn't. In fact, I had originally been planning to structure my talk along the trajectory of Lacan's definition of psychosis, and trying to understand a term he introduces, namely, 'the foreclosure of the name of the father', but I was not able to grasp it. I tried as best to explain what I didn't know to Takeo. It wasn't that I didn't have time, but it simply wasn't the right time. My arrival here, at the Royal College of Art, was also endlessly postponed. I was supposed to arrive many months ago, September, and then again, yesterday morning, but regardless of how hard we tried, and we did try, my presence here was only meant to be now. So now, I am with you, mostly present, as a body, waiting for my soul to fully catch up, to be present, attentive, undivided, listening to you as I read. My body arrived last night, everything else is still in the air.

What I will share with you this morning is the equivalent of what happens between waking and sleeping, as I am holding onto that blurred state. Imagine holding two slides against a light source. What I am delivering is a blurred state between two texts. This text grows and reinvents itself, without settling into chapters or form. There is nothing that I have written that precedes what I will read to you today,

and I don't know what I will write after.

I would wake up in the morning and force myself back to sleep, continuously re-inventing the absurd details of everything I had ever experienced. My dream life would return to me in idle moments. I would catch myself off-guard, and out-of-time, standing in the kitchen, mesmerised as thousands of tiny black ants amassed around a drop of spilt coffee. The coffee was bitter. What were they flocking towards? And what did this remind me of? It reminded me of the past time of rallying and protesting: attempts at revolution. With a swipe of a dictator's hand, I would lift the sponge from the sink and with one stroke the entire colony of workers was gone. I look back at the sponge and I see a pattern of dead black ants, few still struggling to live, before I drown them in a stream of chlorinated water from the faucet. It had been weeks since the cold-water faucet had stopped working, and so to their dismay, their pain was doubled. The water was hot.

Why does it matter to take you as far as Aspen? And introduce you to Takeo? I am accused endlessly of magical thinking. Unstable thinking, wishful and animistic, there is no separation between things and people, imagination and the real. Somewhat privately, in the past I have been accused of unquestionably behaving like an artwork—not an artist, not a curator, but an artwork. And the more this state took over, the more things made sense, the more urgent it became to be removed from the so-called 'real world' as I was beholding it to be real. Through my years of dealing with artworks I can recognise one when I see one, but I still do not know how an artwork behaves.

From an exhibition by Anselm Franke—which I recently saw in several iterations, and which I regard as an evolving essay—animism is brought forward in its fullest form. The earliest historical narrative in the exhibition states that for Sir Edward Tylor 'animism' is a term that produces the 'correct' distance between matter and people, whereas for Freud, the term is a tool to discuss the correct border between the inner self and outer reality. The more I read Freud, the more I feel there is an 'us' and 'them'. This separation depends on the state. The state of mind. The state of government. My altered state. He speaks about the 'belief in the omnipotence of thought', and an 'unrestricted narcissism', that strives to withstand the unstoppable and relentless laws of reality by projecting wishful thoughts onto the environment. For Freud, animism and psychosis lie closely together: the distance and border between self and the world, subjects and objects, imagination and reality break down. And that is when and where, he says, animistic beliefs and magic correspondences appear to be confirmed. The symbol assumes full meaning over what it symbolises. I read this description affirmatively,

however, my body knows, there is a limitation to words. In psychosis, this thinking subject is no longer separate; therefore its narcissism is dissolved. I made a mental note to read *Totem and Taboo* in its entirety, not just Chapter 3. The text in the exhibition was in a display case. Out of habit, I pulled out my phone to take a snapshot of the reference, to look at later, but before I navigated to the camera, I noticed an update by someone on a Facebook timeline: Disbelief in magic can force a poor soul into believing in government and business.

Artworks are schools, and I learn from artworks. What I have allowed myself to do in reading this essay is to re-script elements that have come to exist in direct or tangential response to a shared set of concerns across the assemblage of four essays, two institutions, six dreams and three experiences, of which this is only one part. It is up to you—the paranoid listener—to come to your own conclusions, hopefully to find form for your own ideas of reference, to become a part of a growing case and community, in the defence of art.

-----

Author's Note:

I apologise for the abrupt ending of this text. I have omitted the aforementioned essay *Delusions of Reference: In Defense of Art* from this manuscript. The lecture was delivered at the RCA as part of the Artists' Responses to Conflict symposium on 8 April 2014. *Delusion of Reference* is a growing body of thinking and writing and it is an unstable work of writing for oral delivery. It exists continually in the form of readings, performances and lectures.

# ART AND CONFLICT IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

— Michaela Crimmin

Given the fact that armed conflict continues to take place across the world, and given that the arts have much to contribute to the understanding of conflict, to what extent are the arts focusing on the subject of conflict in Higher Education? Is this work segregated from other Higher Education initiatives, with respect to teaching and research? Do other sectors consider there is potential for collaborative work across disciplines?

From the beginning of the recent pilot programme, Art and Conflict (during which we have aimed to test these questions), there has been unequivocal support, first of all, from academics to get to know each other better and to share perspectives that have been atomised for too long.[1] In the course of the programme it has been demonstrated time and again that, while indeed there is mutual interest, together with a ready openness to explore possibilities for joint initiatives in the future, there has been a patent lack of connection and awareness of each other's work. As James Thompson, Professor of Applied and Social Theatre at the University of Manchester, said, 'we clearly have shared ground and I am sure that by coming together we can lever new possibilities for learning and understanding, and also activities'.[2] Charles Tripp, Professor of Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, believes that the exchange that has taken place over the last year holds the 'great potential to be developed into a sustained and path-breaking research project'.[3] A baseline, articulated by Tripp, is simply that a multi-regional and multi-disciplinary approach is key to an understanding of the larger social and political processes involved and

that by drawing upon a wide and varied pool of expertise, the illumination of the complexity of the issues can be significantly advanced. As he says, robust theoretical grounding is a means of disseminating ideas and practices that in turn may ultimately have an impact on those who work in, with or despite conflict. This ambition was endorsed by Professor Rahraw Omarzad, at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University, and the founding director of the Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan; by Tony Chakar, teaching at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts and University of Balamand, Beirut, whose work as an artist, writer and academic ponders the conditions of Lebanon following the so-called July War of 2006 and post-war, and the more recent situation of the Egyptian uprising; and many others including Professor Declan McGonagle, director of the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, who has had many years of experience working as a curator through the dark days of the 'Troubles' in Derry. What I know they would all say is that the arts are too often excluded from the table, hence our desire to amplify the distinct contribution that art has the capacity to deliver.

There is also undoubtedly the potential to stimulate new teaching practices to engage with the culturally diverse character of an increasingly international student body in UK universities. Many of today's staff and students have experienced conflict either directly or indirectly and are intent on exploring the theme more deeply. They have been affected either first or second hand by the revolutions of the Middle East and North Africa, the unresolved situation between Israel and Palestine, the post-traumatic conditions following the Rwanda and Balkans civil wars and the conflict in a number of African countries, amongst other past and current armed clashes.

Much is conjecture at this stage in terms of future possibilities, but what is evident is that there is important work taking place across the UK addressing conflict that has art either at its core, or as a stated interest from academics in non-arts departments. My colleague Elizabeth Stanton did some initial research so that we might consider the scope and scale of this work. Perhaps it is helpful here to summarise just some of the initiatives to give a sense of the extraordinary range of work by individuals in university and art school departments.

However, while of course there are academics in art departments doing research and teaching courses that in part address conflict, there are few with a dedicated focus on conflict. In large part I imagine this is due to the understandable wariness of confining art to a specific issue, which makes it difficult to assess the existing knowledge.

So for example, Dr Anthony Downey, director of the Contemporary Art MA programme at Sotheby's Institute of Art, also edits *Ibraaz*, a research forum on the Middle East and North Africa, which frequently features conflict as experienced and perceived by artists and curators in the region.[4]

Yet there are a number of people who do have a defined interest in the role of art and artists' perspectives with respect to conflict, with some of the key UK academics mentioned here (drawing on their own descriptions). At University College London, Dr TJ Demos, Reader in Modern and Contemporary Art, is 'investigating in particular the diverse ways that artists have negotiated crises associated with globalisation, including the emerging conjunction of post-9/11 political sovereignty and statelessness, the hauntings of the colonial past and the growing conflicts around ecology and climate change … where art figures in ways both critically analytical and creatively emancipating'.[5] Professor Julian Stallabrass, at the Courtauld Institute, like TJ Demos contributes to many publications and curates exhibitions that feature conflict; and he is also the author of the recent book, *Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images* which is a 'visual, theoretical and historical resource about the photography of war, and how images are used as instruments of war. It comprises essays and interviews by prominent theorists, artists and photographers and covers the urgent issues of the depiction of war, the use of images of war by the media, various forms of censorship, the military as a PR and image-producing machine, the circulation of unofficial images and the impact of the digital mediascape'.[6]

Mentioned earlier is Professor James Thompson, Executive Director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (www.hcri.ac.uk) and director of the 'In Place of War'[7] project at the University of Manchester, a research programme funded by AHRC and the Leverhulme Trust on performance and war. The aim is to research creativity in sites of armed conflict 'and has, over the past seven years, developed extensive international networks of creative artists making theatre, street art, music, spoken word and other performance in response to war'.[8] In addition, Professor Thompson has run applied theatre programmes and researched theatre projects in many countries that have experienced, or are experiencing conflict, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. This is of particular interest given the paucity of experience of many academics with respect to working 'in the field' in the way that is fundamental to NGO personnel. Teaching and supervising PhD students both at Goldsmiths and the Royal College of Art (RCA), Dr Ros Gray is a specialist

in militant and revolutionary cinema, its global filmmaking networks and the screen as site of radical gathering. Also at the RCA is artist and senior research reader Peter Kennard who, as one half of the art practice kennardphillipps, has been producing 'art in response to the invasion of Iraq. It has evolved to confront power and war across the globe. The work is made for the street, the gallery, the web, newspapers and magazines, and to lead workshops that develop peoples' skills and help them express their thoughts on what's happening in the world through visual means. The work is made as a critical tool that connects to international movements for social and political change'.[9]

Bridging architecture, art and the realities of the Israel/Palestine conflict is Professor Eyal Weizman, Professor of Spatial and Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths. Here in the Forensic Architecture research project, he 'has assembled a multidisciplinary group of spatial practitioners—architects, artists and filmmakers—to undertake research that gathers and presents architectural evidence with the framework of international humanitarian law and human rights. Our investigations have provided evidence for international prosecution teams, political organisations, NGOs, and the United Nations'.[10]

There are academics working in disciplines that are less obviously connected to art. For example, in the Department of Geography at University College London, Dr Alan Ingram is working on 'critical approaches to geopolitics and security. His research currently focuses on relationships between geopolitics, aesthetics and contemporary art practice, particularly in relation to the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq', staging a recent exhibition as a means of engaging the student body at UCL in the discourse. Charles Tripp's interests as Professor of Politics at SOAS 'include the nature of autocracy, state and resistance in the Middle East, the politics of Islamic identity and the relationship between art and power. He is currently working on a study of the emergence of the public and the rethinking of republican ideals across the states of North Africa'.[11] His focus on image making in this context is expanded earlier in this publication and serves to demonstrate one of the many research areas that are benefitting from a transdisciplinary approach. In the course of investigation, we have had a glimpse of the work that is happening across the globe, often coming across this at a recommendation of an international student or by relative chance. We have had long conversations with Tony Chakar, who like many academics brings his knowledge to conferences here in the UK, and crosses academic work with writing for publications. There is Professor Jill Bennett, founding director of the National Institute for Experimental

Arts and who previously founded the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. Her previous books include *Empathic Vision*, a study of art and traumatic events, one outcome of an ongoing interest in the application of art to current realities.[12] Ariella Azoulay teaches political thought and visual culture at Brown University. Like Tony Chakar she has the first-hand knowledge of living in a country that is no stranger to violence. As an Israeli she has considered partition and the endless subsequent peace talks that have spawned nothing in the way of peace. Her work is an ongoing investigation into how history is told through visual mediums—photographs, film, drawings, and other visual elements—and how these provide a level of detail and context not provided solely by the written word'.

I will mention just two universities in this run through. Firstly, Brandeis University in the United States which runs a 'Peacebuilding and the Arts' programme in their International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. This includes running a website 'for artists, cultural workers, coexistence practitioners, peace building scholars, and all who are interested in how the arts and cultural traditions can be crafted to bridge differences, mediate conflicts, and contribute to peace'.[14] The university works across divided communities, aggregating knowledge from their experiences and publishing the results, as well as providing training and running a virtual resource center.[15] Secondly, Birzeit University in Palestine operates in a very different and less privileged environment. The research activities in the Arts Faculty make for stark reading including as they do: national identity and psychological adjustment; gender and schooling; empowerment; violence against children; the documentation of demolished villages in historical Palestine; identity and democracy; land degradation and desertification; Palestinian nationalism; the Zionist movement; and finally conflict management and resolution.[16] Given this list, how can we say other than that there is an urgent need to connect and to multiply the work that is taking place? How can we be complacent?

So in conclusion, one of our many ambitions, inevitably contingent on funding, is to properly map the different courses and make them available to prospective students, grouping them according to aims and interests, both with respect to region and also to issues and themes. This resource will include a selection of international institutes that address art and conflict. We continue to welcome approaches from the many individuals and organisations that we have yet to reach, and thank all of those who have so very generously contributed to, and encouraged, our engagement.[17]

## ENDNOTES

1    Fifteen academics were involved in the initial planning of the pilot programme, each of whom address the relationship between the arts and conflict in their work. These included Professor Charles Tripp (Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS); Professor Julian Stallabrass (Courtauld Institute of Art); Professor James Thompson (School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester); Professor Oliver Ramsbotham (Chair of the Board, Oxford Research Group); and Dr Bernadette Buckley (Department of Politics, Goldsmiths, University of London).

2    Professor James Thompson and Ruth Daniel, University of Manchester, in a letter supporting the Art and Conflict AHRC application, dated 18 October 2012

3    Professor Charles Tripp, SOAS, in a letter dated 30 October 2012

4    Website: http://www.ibraaz.org

5    Description from University College London website: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/art-history/about_us/academic_staff/dr_tj_demos

6    Description from Photoworks, website: http://shop.photoworks.org.uk/products/memory-of-fire-images-of-war-and-the-war-of-images-julian-stallabrass

7    In Place of War, website: http://www.inplaceofwar.net

8    Description from the University of Manchester, website: http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/ourresearch/featuredprojects/inplaceofwar/

9    kennardphillips, website: http://www.kennardphillipps.com

10   'Forensic Architecture: a research project', published by the Centre for Research Architecture, Department of Visual Cultures Goldsmiths, University of London, website: http://www.forensic-architecture.org/project/

11   Professor Charles Tripp profile on SOAS, website: https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff36173.php

12   Jill Bennett profile on University of New South Wales, website: https://research.unsw.edu.au/people/professor-jill-bennett

13   Ariella Azoulay profile on Brown University, website: https://news.brown.edu/new-faculty/humanities/ariella-azoulay

14   Brandeis University Peacebuilding and the Arts programme, website: http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/

15   'Why do we need creative approaches to peace building?': Resource Center, Brandeis University, website: http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/about_us/ whycreative.html

16   Birzeit University, website: http://www.birzeit.edu

17   Contact email address: info@cultureandconflict.org.uk

# INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFLICT

— Bernadette Buckley

In a recent speech, delivered at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, British Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne made a public call for a 'northern powerhouse' —a collection of cities, which would be supported by a high-speed rail line between Manchester and Leeds.[1] The controversy generated by this proposed infrastructure over-shadowed one of Osborne's supporting points on the role of universities in the creation of such a powerhouse. Higher education institutions must, he argued, 'rise to the challenge and come up with radical transformative long-term ideas for doing even more outstanding science in the north—and we will back you'.[2] While Osborne's speech was intended as part of a larger 'rebalancing the economy' argument, it belied some obvious assumptions as to the role and comparative importance of different disciplines in the context of 'economic recovery'. For example, while calling for more science in universities, Osborne also went on to draw on economist Richard Florida's oft-quoted *Rise of the Creative Class*,[3] arguing that 'great cities' must compete 'for the creative class that powers economic growth' and, that we should therefore be mindful of the ways in which 'innovators and entrepreneurs are attracted to creative, cultural, beautiful places'.[4]

In such a context, any discussion about interdisciplinary agendas in Higher Education takes on additional significance. STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) are, to use Osborne's term, 'backed' by governmental clout—promoted and valorised as the necessary engines of economic growth and renewal. Culture on the other hand is relegated, so it appears, to a relatively minor role—namely to help beautify the cities within which 'serious' science is to be conducted and developed. In this context, an 'interdisciplinary' programme such as that of the Art and

Politics MA at Goldsmiths, or an undergraduate module such as 'Art War Terror', may well be viewed with suspicion. Do these agendas aim to wed (the admittedly 'soft') science subjects with their (even softer) cultural cousins? At a time when the role of knowledge, research and teaching in Higher Education is increasingly politicised and economically driven, so too there is swelling pressure to produce the pedagogies and agendas that will shape the future employees and builders of post-recession Britain. The appending of art to politics, or of art to war, might, to a sceptic, seem only to provide further evidence as to the already weakened state of arts subjects which, in this view, could be seen as less and less capable of justifying themselves 'for their own sake'. Alternatively, from a different but perhaps equally sceptical perspective, perhaps such programmes attest to the need for universities to (be seen to) offer opportunities for 'interdisciplinary' research, the calls for which have become increasingly urgent in recent decades (i.e. at a time when university agendas are driven as much by 'consumer demand' as by any of their thought-to-be 'traditional' aims like, say, the provision of opportunities for education and training at a 'tertiary' level or the advancement and dissemination of 'knowledge').

It is certainly true that programmes and modules that mix Art with Politics or War attest to an increased impatience with disciplinary boundaries, the latter of which, certainly in the view of this writer, continue to impose artificial, if still powerful, restrictions on all kinds of thought and practice. However, the thinking that occurs in interdisciplinary programmes of the kind that I am involved seeks more than a mere, generalised disciplinary regroupment. Rather, it attempts to grasp the importance of the university as an enduring, broad and necessarily dissensual community of thinkers and doers—one composed of students, academics and practitioners that speak, argue and act from highly diverse backgrounds. To 'mix' art up with other subjects is to recognise that despite their different points of departure and different sets of knowledge, the thought and skill-sets of disparate disciplines can nevertheless be harnessed to shared intellectual projects and agendas. Not only does this approach require that some form of 'epistemic justice' be invested in, wherein the hierarchies and power-relations between diverse traditions of thought and practice are disavowed, but also (and despite the enduring presence of disciplinary meta-narratives) it views the notion of disciplinarity as an open and permanent *question*. In so doing, interdisciplinary, or what I prefer to think of as *anti*-disciplinary approaches, collect and *demand* negotiation across dissimilar sets of intellectual and creative interests. Of course, by acknowledging the differences and

81

skill-sets that separate radically differing constituencies of thinkers and practitioners, such an approach does not ask that disciplinary languages be erased or unlearned. Rather, it relies on a certain generosity of spirit in which participants risk conversations that take them away from their inherited or accumulated 'expertise' and instead take as their point of departure some shared 'matters of concern'.[5] By encouraging 'collaborative battles' between thinkers and practitioners from different disciplinary traditions, this approach thus necessarily produces different sets of questions and practices, *in* addition to those normatively equated with particular intellectual and creative traditions.

For example, the Goldsmiths' Art and Politics course is a postgraduate programme that in any one year is typically comprised of students from Political Science, Fine Art, Curating, Design, Literature, International Relations, Sociology, Anthropology, Journalism, Law, Cultural Studies, Art History, Media Studies, International Studies, Theatre and Performing Arts, and so on. A student who has trained perhaps for several years in embroidery or in media design may well sit next to one whose studies has been almost entirely based around essay-writing. Such diversity brings logistical, pedagogical and ideological challenges in terms both of the scope of the fields that can be explored in the course of a single academic year, and also in terms of the substance and type of practices and knowledge which can be built upon during that time. It is all very well and good to say that we share 'matters of concern' but the very languages that we speak and the tools that we automatically reach for in our attempts to understand the world differ radically from one another. Those trained in political philosophy have for three years or more, sat and listened, talked and debated, written essays and taken exams. Their classmates may well have spent a similar length of time learning how to work clay, or how to bend their bodies, or to make film, or generate public events. In such an environment, patience, trust and generosity of spirit are the necessary pre-requisites to *any* discussion or learning objective. Learning and research can never be completely un-hasped from the various disciplinary handrails that we were taught to cling to whilst learning to think and express ourselves.

Despite these challenges, the anti-disciplinary approach is exceptional for the way that it uncovers gaps, holes and blind-spots that are built into individual disciplines. An anti- or trans-disciplinary arrangement of voices makes immediately palpable (audible) the biases that are necessarily built into any field that has been configured in relation to a particular set of concerns. For example, the divergences that arise, say, in the course of a trans-disciplinary 'debate' about 'conflict', are not just to do with the variety of 'information'

that a particular participant may wish to bring to bear on that discussion. The issue is not just to do with the 'matters of fact' that need to be attended to—nor indeed do they relate solely to any shared 'matters of concern'. In addition to these often very fundamental distinctions between established ways of understanding the problem of conflict, still more dissimilarities arise in relation to matters of expression, matters of affect and matters of cultural inheritance. The assumed-to-be 'scientific' facts of the matter need to be negotiated alongside equally influential *affective* 'facts', the latter of which though they are often less quantifiable, may be of equal if not of more import in the context of any named conflict. Different orders of experience, thought and practice are, in an anti-disciplinary framework, necessarily *made* to jostle against and engage with one another. One concrete example of this, in relation to the Art and Politics programme at Goldsmiths, might be in the way that students are expected to take part in 'battles', which are routinely organised in lieu of text discussions. Here students may be asked to take sides in relation to particular debates— that is to say, they are required not just to summarise or represent say Carl Schmitt's 'friend-enemy distinction' but to partly re-enact it in an embodied and often emotionally charged setting.[6] It is as if a temporary 'state of emergency' is declared in which the normative rules of the classroom are suspended while a battle ensues between imposed 'sides'. In this setting, we begin to understand—that is to say, we begin to *experience*—not just the theoretical and discursive dimensions of a particular conflict, but its affective and cultural dimensions too; the latter of which are brought into play as orders of experience that though not necessarily visible are nevertheless important factors in the understanding of any particular 'conflict'. In this context, people whose training has been concentrated largely on essay writing are able to co-opt and play with, perhaps for the first time in their educational experience, the strategies of artists, in order to differently inflect or imagine a richer understanding of a particular problem or situation. Similarly, those whose political views may not in the past have been rigorously scrutinised or challenged may now need to sharpen their critical tools, to 'do battle' with or exchange views with their disciplinary neighbours.

In such an environs, it is not just the case that erstwhile students of Political Science begin to see value in the strategies and insights of art and artists, but that the entire dissensual collective begins to understand politics as a trans-disciplinary site of creative and imaginative struggle. 'Conflict' has for too long been understood from the perspective of university modules run by Politics or History or even Philosophy departments, as something that, for particular

political or historical reasons, affects certain countries, classes or groups of people. Such an 'understanding' of conflict is produced and presented as a kind of intellectual puzzle—a discursive and an analytical 'subject', rather than one which must be approached and understood in relation to a variety of different affective, creative and *constitutive* practices of understanding. Effectively, by avoiding these latter mechanisms for ordering understanding, we confine our knowledge of conflict, encasing it in an acceptable discursive register, rather than risking a fuller exploration of it on emotional and affective levels. By exploring the strategies of artists alongside those of politicians, policy-makers and activists, students of all disciplines can come to a far fuller understanding of how conflict functions; how it is sustained or experienced; what its impact is; and, why it is or is not resorted to.

## ENDNOTES

1    See https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-we-need-a-northern-powerhouse. Accessed 19/08/14

2    Ibid.

3    Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic, London, 2003

4    Ibid.

5    See Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public' in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, ZKM/ Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, MIT, London, 2005, p.23

6    Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Rutgers University Press, Germany, 1927

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Jananne Al-Ani** is a London-based Iraqi-born artist and is currently Senior Research Fellow at University of the Arts London. With a focus on photography, film and video, her early works are located against a backdrop of larger historic, geopolitical forces while allowing occasional glimpses of personal narratives and family histories. She has an ongoing interest in the representation of contested landscapes filtered through the technologies of surveillance and reconnaissance in modern warfare. Solo exhibitions of her work have been shown at the Hayward Gallery Project Space, London (2014); Beirut Art Center (2013); Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC (2012); Darat al Funun, Amman (2010) and Art Now, Tate Britain, London (2005). She has participated in the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Sharjah Biennial 11 (2013); 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012) and the 54th Venice Biennale (2011).

**Dr Bernadette Buckley** is Convenor of the MA in Art & Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research interests cut across several fields including art, politics, philosophy and cultural studies. She has published widely in exhibition catalogues, art publications and journals. Key essays include 'Mohammed is Absent. I am Performing': Contemporary Iraqi Art and the Destruction of Heritage' in The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq, eds., Stone & Farchakh Bajjaly, 2010 (winner of the AIA James R. Wiseman book award); 'Forum: Art and Politics', in Postcolonial Studies, 2010; 'The Workshop of Filthy Creation: Or Do Not Be Alarmed, This is Only a Test' in the Review of International Studies, 2009; 'Terrible Beauties' in B.rumaria: Art Aesthetics Politics, 2009. She serves on a number of advisory boards and committees including Artraker, Tate Learning Research Centre, Tate Papers and Journal for Museum Education. She has worked on funded research projects for the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Arts Council England, En-quire, Heritage Lottery and the Wellcome Foundation. She is currently working on a book project entitled *Not Not Art Not Not Politics*.

**Michaela Crimmin** co-founded Culture+Conflict in 2011, a not-for-profit agency focusing on the role of the arts and culture within conflict and post conflict situations across the world. She is also an independent curator and writer; and is on the academic staff of the Royal College of Art (RCA) where she teaches in the School of Humanities. She was the Principal Investigator on the Art and Conflict programme of work that the Arts and Humanities Research Council award has supported and which has resulted in this online publication. Previously she was Head of Arts at the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) from 1997 to 2010, a role that included initiating and directing the RSA Arts & Ecology Centre, the inspiration and experience that led to co-founding Culture+Conflict. She coordinated the first phase of the 'Fourth Plinth' series of artworks in London's Trafalgar Square; directed the RSA Art for Architecture award scheme; and commissioned artists for Public Art Development Trust's pioneering work in the public domain.

**Malu Halasa** is a writer, editor and curator based in London. She is the author of the acclaimed Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline (2014), The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design (2008), Kaveh Golestan: Recording the Truth in Iran (2007) and Creating Spaces of Freedom: Culture in Defiance (2002). She also co-edits the occasional book series – Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations (2010), with Maziar Bahari, which includes Transit Beirut (2004) and Transit Tehran (2008). In 2012–2013 she co-curated three exhibitions in Amsterdam, Copenhagen and London on the art of the Syrian uprising.

**Jemima Montagu** is a co-director of Culture+Conflict and an independent curator, writer and arts consultant. She was a curator at Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and Tate Britain from 1998 to 2004, and later worked at the Arts Council in London developing the field of public art. She has written a book on Surrealist artists and writers (Tate 2002) and edited Open Space: Art in the Public Realm in London 1995–2005 (Arts Council England 2007), as well as a number of exhibition catalogues. From 2006–2009 she helped establish cultural heritage NGO, Turquoise Mountain, in Kabul, Afghanistan, where she initiated and managed a wide range of heritage and contemporary art projects, including co-founding an annual Afghan Contemporary Art Prize. She has worked with artists across the Middle East and South Asia, and curated an exhibition of contemporary art from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran that toured from Kabul to Islamabad and then to the Venice Biennale 2009, as 'East-West Divan'. She now lives in Prague.

**Sarah Rifky** lives, writes, talks, curates and teaches in Cairo, Egypt and elsewhere. She is the co-director of Beirut, an art initiative and exhibition space established in Cairo in 2012. She was previously Curator of the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cairo, and has taught at the American University in Cairo and MASS Alexandria in 2010. She co-edited the artist book Damascus: Tourists, Artists and Secret Agents. Her projects include Invisible Publics (Cairo, 2010), The Popular Show (Cairo, 2011), An accord is first and foremost a proposition (New York, 2011) and The Bergen Accords (Bergen, 2011). She is the founding director of CIRCA (Cairo International Resource Center for Arts).

www.beirutbeirut.org

**Larissa Sansour** was born in 1973 in East Jerusalem, Palestine, and studied fine arts in London, New York and Copenhagen. Her work is interdisciplinary, immersed in the current political dialogue and utilises video, photography, installation, the book form and the internet. Central to her work is the tug and pull between fiction and reality. Sansour's work has featured in the biennials of Istanbul, Busan and Liverpool. She has exhibited at venues such as Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Queen Sofia Museum, Madrid; Centre for Photography, Sydney; Cornerhouse, Manchester; Townhouse, Cairo; Maraya Arts Centre, Sharjah, UAE; Galerie Nationale de Jeu de Paume, Paris; Iniva, London; Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; Third Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou , China; Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark; House of World Cultures, Berlin, and MOCA, Hiroshima. She currently lives and works in London, UK.

www.larissasansour.com

**Professor Charles Tripp** is an academic and author specialising in the politics and history of the Near and Middle East. His main areas of research include the study of state and society in the Middle East, especially Iraq, and Islamic political thought. He is the author of The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East (Cambridge University Press, 2013), A History of Iraq (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He is Professor of Politics with reference to the Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London and a Fellow of the British Academy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Royal College of Art**
Postgraduate Art & Design

Arts & Humanities
Research Council

BRITISH
COUNCIL

culture+conflict

Xindex
the voice of free expression

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester