Past Disquiet: From Research to Exhibition

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Past Disquiet: From Research to Exhibition

Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti *

Abstract
An exhibition of an exceptional scale and scope took place in Beirut in the middle of the civil war and today, its archival and documentary traces have been almost entirely lost. The International Art Exhibition for Palestine opened in the Spring of 1978, comprising some 200 works donated by artists hailing from nearly 30 countries, to be a seed collection for a museum in exile. This is a transcript of a presentation of the transformation of research into an exhibition format and a virtual walkthrough of the show Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978 at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), 2015.

Résumé
Pendant la guerre civile libanaise, une exposition d'envergure exceptionnelle eut lieu à Beyrouth au printemps 1978. Il n’en reste aujourd’hui presque aucune trace. L’Exposition Internationale pour la Palestine comprenait plus de 200 œuvres données par des artistes de 30 pays différents dans le but de constituer le point de départ d’une collection permanente pour un musée en exil. Ce texte est la transcription d’une conférence donnée par Rasha Salti et Kristine Khouri sur la transformation de leur recherche en une exposition, Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978 qui fut présentée au Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelone (MACBA) en 2015.

* Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti are writers and curators based in Beirut, Lebanon. They co-founded the History of Arab Modernities in the Visual Arts Study Group. They have researched and curated the exhibition Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978 at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona in 2015, and at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin in 2016.
In speaking about our research around the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, we would like to give you a guided visit of *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978*, the exhibition that we organized at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in February 2015. One of the biggest challenges that we wrestled with throughout research was to determine how to best tell the stories we were recording and collecting. Neither publishing an article, nor a conference paper seemed sufficient. We needed a physical space to share the myriad narratives, the multiple overlapping and interconnected stories and we have been very lucky to be able to do that.

*Past Disquiet* is an archival and documentary exhibition that displays and engages the outcomes of excavating the story of the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*. It proposes a speculative history of politically engaged artistic practices in the milieu of the international anti-imperialist solidarity movement of the 1970s. It weaves testimonies and recollections—narratives subjected to the trappings of memory—with documents found in private and institutional archives to incarnate a forgotten yet very recent history. The outcome of the research revealed a previously unexplored universe of networks between artists and activists, welded by solidarity and political affinities that superseded the art market and produced creative, counter-cultural and sovereign representations of ideals and principles.

The *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* was organized by the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) Plastic Arts Section of the Office of Unified Information. It was made possible because of the passionate commitment of a number of PLO representatives in several countries, as well as solidarity networks between artists and activists around the world who supported the Palestinian revolution. The exhibition presented the seed collection for a future ‘museum in solidarity with Palestine in exile’—and that’s what really significant about this exhibition—it was a starting point for something larger. This exhibition presented this collection and it was destined to be itinerant and travel until it could return to a free Palestine, with approximately 200 works by 197 artists from 30 countries.
The scale and scope of this exhibition was one of the first reasons that compelled us to investigate.

The exhibition was inaugurated in Beirut and the works travelled to Tokyo in the same year, in the month of June. A selection of the works travelled to Norway and another selection to Tehran in 1980-81. The works were stored in an apartment not far from where the exhibition took place. And in 1982, we fast-forward: the Israeli army advanced on Beirut and held the city under siege with the objective of forcing the PLO to leave. The building where the collection was stored was shelled, along with the offices of the Office of Unified Information where most of the exhibition’s paper trail would have been. All that remained of the exhibition’s story were the memories of those who made it happen and of those who visited it.

One must not forget that context in which this unfolded was that of the civil war in Lebanon. It was not an easy time for the country, let alone for cultural events.

Rasha Salti (RS): We are both interested in questions around the social history of modern and contemporary art in the Arab world. We have written a couple of articles, the outcome of research projects we had undertaken, but with this project, we quickly realized that the outcome might have to be different because the histories we were unearthing were overwhelming, almost impossible to reframe within the space of an article. Our inquest started with the exhibition’s catalogue. We found it in the reference library of a gallery in Beirut. The catalogue reproduces most of the artworks in the exhibition, and is bilingual. For the first four years we were working with a color photocopy. We decided to concentrate on the four pages Kristine is showing, namely, the acknowledgments pages and the list of participating artists.

The exhibition no longer had documentary traces in one site, or in the repository of an institution. It is however remembered by people. We first interviewed people in Beirut in 2010 and 2011, knowing that we could not expect anyone to remember an exhibition that took place in 1978, more than thirty years earlier, especially that people had endured the very hard years of the Lebanese Civil War. We collected stories and images (we photographed papers, documents, photographs and newspaper clippings), we filmed

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Figure 2: Exterior of exhibition invitation, International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978, Source: Mona Saudi.
whenever the person allowed us, and otherwise only made an audio recording and took notes. In 2013 we were introduced to Bartomeu Marí (who was at the time the director of the MACBA) and he invited us to present the research into an exhibition in the context of the museum’s programmatic interest in exhibition history. And basically, this is how Past Disquiet came to be.

Figure 3: English cover of the bi-lingual catalog for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978, published by the PLO Unified Information Office.

Our situation is singular: we are not affiliated to an institution, so we were pretty much on our own, and we both have compulsive tendencies. In other words, when we were collecting stories relentlessly and we fell into a never-ending spiral. The commitment to transform our research findings into an exhibition implied we had a deadline. It forced us to stop and be rigorous about what we were collecting and to think about it in a different way. Had we been researching a history previously studied and theorized, then our motivation would have most likely been about uncovering a counter-narrative, but our situation was quite different, we were delving into a history that is not yet been recorded, we were going into peoples’ homes, listening to their personal stories, opening up their boxes of souvenirs... We felt a sense of responsibility; people were giving us parts of their lives. We were the recipients of something very valuable and we wanted to share it with the audience at the MACBA and hopefully in other cities.

Figure 4: List of participating artists in English from the catalog for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978, published by the PLO Unified Information Office.

At the MACBA, the exhibition was hosted in a rectangular room where the entrance and exit were the same, a circumstance that imposed a dramaturgy and layout where the ‘beginning’ and the ‘end’ were side by side. One of the walls was curved, and its sharp curvature turned out to be a fantastic fit to the narrative layout of the documents on that wall. We had to identify three or four themes/motifs from the bulk of the
research, in order to organize the exhibition’s content and inhabit the exhibition space.

In conducting our inquest, we had been more like detectives, chasing clues without necessarily a scheme or argument. The catalogue was like our treasure map, and every time we found something or hit a dead end, we went back to its pages. Some threads that we followed assiduously, we had to give up pursuing after a while because they led nowhere. Dead trails. At the same time, a lot of our findings were simply coincidences, totally unexpected fortuitous surprises. Obviously, the pieces of the puzzle were not emerging in some sort of a rational, linear or sensical logic. The degree of haphazardness was confounding.

One of the exercises we resorted to, in order to peg a degree of coherence to the bulk of the research was to use tracing paper and make diagrams that mapped people, or events and the connections that linked them. These tracings kept getting more and more layered and more complicated. The layout of Past Disquiet invites people to follow documents and stories along one wall, but also if at any moment, they choose to cross the room to the facing wall they can draw connections with what they were discovering.

In other words, visitors could walk in the space clockwise or counter-clockwise, zig-zag and cross through the space, and the connections were still there. We resisted titling or naming sections, the experience had to be fluid. The stories we ‘staged’ are like the Russian dolls, one opens into another, intersecting, digressing, then intersecting again. We were guided by poetry, and the foremost poet that inspired us was Mahmoud Darwish [the renown Palestinian poet], and he has one of his last long poems is called In the Presence of Absence, and the notion of the presence and an absence is at the heart of the exhibition.

We used verse to punctuate an emotional effective poetic experience of each section, of each cluster of stories and images. Themes of ghosts, of un-written histories, a past whose traces are in memory or oral history, reaching into a very recent past that seems unreachable to a degree, were all important.

We worked with Studio Safar, a wonderful design studio in Beirut, on the exhibition design to whom our iconographic materials was not exotic. It was a question that worried us; we knew the risk of showing handsome fighters with afro hairstyles and Kalashnikovs and avoid the trappings of bohemian nostalgia for a ‘revolutionary’ past?

Figure 5: Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978, exhibition view, 2015, MACBA. Photo: La Fotogràfica.
Past Disquiet is an exhibition of stories, so wall text is key because it tells them. We weren’t showing a single artwork, rather documents, photographs, and other items that we were reproduced on the walls. We also fabricated video documents, which were montages of interviews we had recorded, as well as of archival material and of the documents we had collected. They became another site of telling stories. We had very few original documents, and most were digital facsimile. Usually, archival or documentary exhibition fetishize original documents, but our research is about something that was forgotten or lost, with scant or no trace at all.

The story of the Palestinian exhibition opened a Pandora’s box of histories, the International Resistance Museum with Salvador Allende, the Art Against Apartheid exhibitions, etc. Those histories may have documents but we only had access to copies of documents.

There is not a single vitrine in the exhibition and everything element is a facsimile that visitors could touch, come near, reproduce.

KK: It was also important for us to show that the documents weren’t precious in themselves, it’s the information they communicate, not the beautiful yellowing paper displayed behind a vitrine.

The exhibition space was rectangular, the most central element was the 1978 exhibition catalogue, so we placed it in the center of the space, as a projection of a video of a hand turning the pages. It is the only site where the exhibition’s art works can be viewed.

Our research unfolded rather curiously, as research does. We began with conducting interviews in Beirut, Amman, and Damascus. Rasha had met Claude Lazar in 2008 in Mons during another exhibition in which she was involved.
We were able to meet with him properly a few years later, in 2011, in Paris. When we went to see him he said: “I’ve been waiting for you for 30 years.” He had three boxes of material from the time he had spent in Lebanon: photographs, documents, newspaper clippings. Things that Margot, his wife, urged him to keep. This was the most valuable archive we were able to work with. It opened up the project beyond the 1978 exhibition. Claude’s story elucidated his links to Ezzedine Kalak, the PLO representative in Paris from 1972 to 1978 when he was assassinated. Kalak and Lazar had a deep friendship around Claude’s engagement with the Palestinian cause. In fact, Kalak played an important role in making this exhibition happen and enabling a project of this scope with the PLO, connecting with other people in Paris and around the world.

In trying to understand how this exhibition happened we were also curious to find out how the idea originated, and how it was envisioned to be the beginning of a museum for Palestine. We knew that Mona Saudi, a Jordanian artist who headed the Plastic Arts Section of the PLO’s Unified Information Office, was actively engaged in motivating people in Beirut and elsewhere. Claude knew of the International Resistance Museum for Salvador Allende, and had donated a work to that initiative and was connected to the group organizing it in Paris.

Back to *Past Disquiet*, the right hand-side wall tells the story of the 1978 exhibition, and much of material on display from the wall came from Claude Lazar’s archive. There was an invitation card, the artwork work is by Mohammed Chebaa (Morocco). An important artist who passed away last year, and two posters done to promote the exhibition (the first by Dia al Azzawi and the
second by Mohammed Melehi). Note the number of languages that the exhibition name is written in on all of that material. Until we had access to this material, we hadn't seen many images of the exhibition itself, only a few from press articles. There were images of artists at the exhibition, the GDR ambassador and another GDR representative. Some Arab artists, and a few European artists traveled to attend the opening, besides Claude Lazar, Gontran Guanaes Netto, a Brazilian artist based in Paris, and two Italian artists, Bruno Caruso and Paolo Ganna. A few of them stayed longer and organized a workshop. There were quite a few articles published, in addition to and round table discussions with the European artists. The exhibition was visited by a lot of people and travelled to other countries.

The apartment where the works were housed was shelled in 1982, during the Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut. We were told different stories about what happened after, some claim that some of the works were saved at the 11th hour, and others that works were sold. Abdul Hay Mossalem, an artist and fighter, made a work in commemoration of the Plastic Arts Section (which organized the exhibition and initiative), he placed the key of the storage apartment in the center of the piece.

RS: Nasser Soumi was part of the team in Beirut setting up the exhibition. He had also carried some of the works from Paris and from Morocco. Meeting him was critical for us because we finally had a first-hand account of what actually happened because the fate of the artworks is shrouded in controversy, rumor and speculation. Two years ago Nasser published the story in a very detailed and compelling letter, which he disseminated on his network and went viral. That was important for reviving the discussion about the fate of the artworks.

The projection of the catalogue separates the exhibition space in two sections, the first half is about networks, events, practices and the second is dedicated to the different individuals who played a key role in making the exhibition possible. We realized that Ezzedine Kalak’s contribution had been under-acknowledged, and a lot of people we spoke to asked us to correct the record. In reconstituting his story, we also realized that there was a generation of PLO representatives and activists who, like him, believed that the struggle for Palestine had to be waged also through the arts. The PLO representative in Japan shared this conviction as did the one in Morocco. There were others like too including Mahmoud Hamshari (Paris), Wael Zuayer (Italy) and Naim Khader (Belgium). We decided to pay tribute to this generation of militants to whom imagining political change without artists was impossible.
In that section we also dedicated space to the stories we tried to collect about the people who are acknowledged in the catalogue. There were art historians, gallerists and the artists.

The montaged video document contains bits and pieces of stories and photographs of Jacques Dupin, Ichiro Haryu, Toni Maraini, Max and Cecillia Clarac-Serou, to name a few.

KK: The next section is dedicated to artist collectives who were present in the exhibition, that we organize by country and region. On one end, there is the story of a Japanese collective, the Japan Afro Asian Latin American Artists Association (JAALA). It was an anti-establishment artist organization founded in 1977 by Ichiro Haryu, a radical art critic. JAALA organized exhibitions and events around ‘Third World’ struggles, including Palestine, but also, Korea and Vietnam. Next we address the Union of Arab Artists, an important organization of Arab artists comprising national artist unions, that organized the first Arab Biennial in 1974, in Baghdad, and the second in Rabat in 1976.

Arab artists convened and debated different issues including the Palestinian struggle, a central question to many of them.

RS: The Japanese artists who donated work to the 1978 exhibition were all part of JAALA, and the Arab artists were connected in these unions, and many of the French artists via the Jeune Peinture. Basically, this mapping of collectives and associations was behind the list of artists who donated work, and a major part of the research was unearthing it.

KK: Our research was basically focused on understanding what was behind the list of artist published in the catalogue. Instead of placing tables where people could consult facsimiles of documents and other exhibition catalogues, we wanted to occupy the space. We don’t know how effective it was, but in publishing reproductions of documents in the form of vertical, hanging banners, we allow visitors to walk around a labyrinth of materials. Their placement corresponds to documents on the wall facing each banner. Sometimes we hung parts of a publication,
like with the Moroccan cultural review, Integral, or children books produced by Dar al Fata al-Arabi a publishing house that worked with Arab artists and writers. What effectively occurs in this section of the exhibition dedicated to unearthing networks is that we start with the mobilization around the Palestinian struggle in Beirut and end up in telling stories of other struggles in the rest of the world.

RS: The 1978 exhibition was not the only activity that the PLO produced. The organization was endowed with the equivalent of a ministry of culture and a ministry of information, which had its own program of artistic and cultural activities. This is the reason we include the children’s literature publishing house, to show how much the political movement paid attention to mobilizing artists to producing a wide variety of things. It was also important to show how a political movement produced representations of itself and the struggle.

Figure 10: Poster for the itinerant exhibition, “Musée International de la Résistance Salvador Allende,” France. Source: Jacques Leenhardt.

KK: The next section was dedicated to research around the notion of a museum in exile. The 1978 exhibition was supposed to become a museum, and when we were exploring the genesis of that idea, we learned it was inspired from the Allende museum in exile. We also realized that almost at the same time, and almost the same network of artists, a museum in exile was established around the struggle against apartheid. And another museum in exile was established in support of the Sandinista revolution and the struggle of the Nicaraguan people. The overlap of artists donating works and protagonists setting up these museums was a very important story to tell.

We would like to end with a few reflections on 'politics of display'. The screens and wires are visible because we wanted this to emphasize the aesthetic of the naked document. We also didn’t want people to wear headphones. Exhibition visitors are confronted with a complex soundscape, the polyphony of voices and sounds, but we used directional speakers, and once a visitor is within an area near the speaker, the voices become intelligible. That too is a translation of our research experience; we had to parse through the polyphony of voices and oral histories.

Our last note on the curatorial process: the list of “Thank You’s.” In this type of exhibition, if it weren’t for the people who accepted to meet us, some gave us 10 minutes of their time, others gave us a contact, others allowed us to scan their archives for days and weeks staying their living room. In other words, this exhibitions is the work of hundreds, and we felt it was really important to underline that archival and documentary exhibitions are never made by one or two people, and not even a curatorial team, they are made by everyone who tells a story, gives an image, opens a door, or cooks dinner to bring people to encourage to tell stories. The generosity is remarkable. We try to reflect on and share the work and generosity of these artists who made these exhibitions. If we can try to reflect that kind of work, learn from it and inspire more of it, we hope that is what gets across to the viewers.