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**The Importance of Context: A Study of Laila
Shawa, Where Souls Dwell V**

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Candidate Number 47250

The Importance of Context

A Study of Laila Shawa, *Where Souls Dwell V*



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Introduction

Where Souls Dwell V (figure 1, hereafter *Souls V*), an embellished decommissioned AK-47 by the artist Laila Shawa, is the primary focus of this dissertation which aims to argue why context is of particular importance to the exhibition of this artwork. Shawa was born and raised in Gaza and is now permanently based in London, having also lived in Lebanon and Egypt. The series *Where Souls Dwell* began with a commission from *AKA Peace* in 2012, an anti-arms exhibition and subsequent auction. *AKA Peace* was the 2012 Art Project of Peace One Day, a non-profit organisation aimed at promoting Western awareness of global injustices. They provided twenty-three contemporary artists with a decommissioned AK-47 and the simple brief to ‘transform’ it.¹ These artworks propose an aesthetic challenge to the audience as the distance between weapon and artwork is disturbed because they are presentations, not representations, of an infamous assault rifle. Shawa’s decision to keep the form undisguised complicates this further.² Following the success of *Where Souls Dwell I* (figure 2, hereafter *Souls I*) Shawa received commissions for further editions. There are seven unique editions in the series and *Souls V* is the one remaining available for purchase. The editions were fashioned in a similar vein to *Souls I* (figure 2), but *Souls V* (figure 1) is perhaps the most extravagant and forthright of all due to the profusion of decoration.

¹ ‘Peace One Day: *AKA Peace*’. Available at: <http://www.peaceoneday.org/aka-peace-2012> [accessed on 7 April 2015]. The exhibition *AKA Peace* will be discussed further in Section One.

² Other artists in this exhibition also kept the form undisguised, which will be discussed in Section One.

In 2014, *Souls V* was exhibited in a Palestinian art exhibition in Beirut. Lebanese gallery owner and curator Mark Hachem of Galerie Mark Hachem (Paris, Beirut, New York) curated *Bridge to Palestine*, a collective show of seventeen Palestinian artists held at the Beirut Exhibition Centre, Lebanon, from 26th June to 3rd August 2014. Hachem claimed that the exhibition liberated Palestinian artists and aimed to ‘transform the wall that oppresses them into a canvas to communicate.’³ He further asserted that the artworks presented were all ‘charged with symbols [and] evoke the bittersweet taste of longing for something forbidden.’⁴ The displacement of *Souls V* from a Western anti-arms remonstrance into a Lebanese based Palestinian art exhibition ascribes misleading values to the artwork, which makes the consequent decision to use this as the press image of the exhibition questionable.⁵

One could assume the common principle of the promotion of peace in both exhibitions implies compatibility of perspective and intentions. This is too simple an assumption as it underplays the significance of the context of Lebanon and its involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as explored later. The artist was aware of the consequences this could have, and she disputed the curator’s decision to include this artwork:

Mark wanted it [the gun] irrespective. The gun had nothing to do with Palestine [...] this work just happens to go there because

³ Appendix A, i.

⁴ Appendix A, i.

⁵ See Appendix A, i-iv for press publications of the exhibition featuring this as the press image. Despite continued attempts, an interview with the curator of the exhibition was unattainable.

the curator wanted it, but it was not anything to do with what I think of Palestine, it's nothing to do with Palestine!⁶

This defensive statement by the artist will inform the discussion of the implications of displaying this artwork in the Palestinian context, and the effect this had on the audience's interpretation of the artwork. Section One will introduce *AKA Peace* and the broader symbolism of the gun in art, which will inform an analysis of *Souls V*. Section Two will discuss the aims and context of the exhibition *Bridge to Palestine* before assessing the artwork's role as its press image, and the broader issue of the effects of displacing this artwork from its original position.

⁶ Interview with Laila Shawa, Appendix D.

1. *Where Souls Dwell and AKA Peace*

The irony of taking the most devastating weapon in the world and seeing the reinterpretation of it through these artists' eyes into one of beauty or intrigue is a powerful catalyst for hope and peace.

Bran Symondson, *AKA Peace* co-founder, 2012.⁷

To allow an informed discussion it is essential to first contextualise the *AKA Peace* project and its aims. Bran Symondson, the photographer and ex-soldier who conceived the idea for *AKA Peace*, positions the crux of the project in the quote above: the transformation of a global symbol of man-made violence into a functionless art object so as to discourage conflict and to promote peace.

Symondson was acutely aware of the devastating power of the AK-47 having witnessed it first-hand during his time serving with the British army in Afghanistan. Here he served alongside the Afghan National Police (ANP), who had developed a subculture of homosexuality, primarily fuelled by heavy use of opium.⁸ Symondson returned to Afghanistan after his service to record this in a series of photographs, which resulted in the exhibition *The Best View of Heaven is From Hell* at the Idea Generation Gallery, London, 28th January – 20th February, 2011. The photographs focused on the intimacy of these men who were depicted not in battle but amongst bucolic landscapes of flowers

⁷ B. Symondson, Interview by James Mullinger, 25 September, 2012. Available at: <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2012-09/25/bran-symondson-ica-aka-peace> [accessed on 9 April 2015].

⁸ This is all the more scandalous due to the potential death penalty for homosexual sodomy in Afghanistan. See: 'Death Penalty Worldwide: Afghanistan'. Available at: <http://www.deathpenaltyworldwide.org/country-search-post.cfm?country=Afghanistan> [accessed on 8 April 2015].

and mountains (figure 3). They also captured the ANP tradition of painting and decorating their weapons with folk art and flowers (figure 4 and figure 5), which Symondson claimed was meant to 'beautify and soften their existence.'⁹ This was the main influence for the *AKA Peace* project.

Taking with him the decommissioned AK-47 displayed in his exhibition Symondson approached Jeremy Gilley, founder of Peace One Day, with the idea of using this weapon for an anti-arms industry campaign, which resulted in *AKA Peace* 2012. There are currently an estimated 200 million AK-47s in circulation worldwide, and it is the most produced gun in the world.¹⁰ It has become a universal icon of destruction and injustice and is instantly recognisable.¹¹ The exhibition ran from 26th to 30th September 2012 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, and was followed by an auction of the artworks at Philips de Pury, London. The artist Jake Chapman curated the exhibition, which featured a host of celebrated contemporary artists, including Damien Hirst, Antony Gormley, Marc Quinn, Nancy Fouts and Sam Taylor Wood. Gilley described the project as 'turning a weapon of destruction into a weapon of peace,' and Chapman claimed it was an 'audacious attempt to intervene against human injustice.'¹² To comprehensively contextualise the exhibition it is worth examining some of the other artists' contributions.

⁹ B. Symondson, 'The Best View of Heaven is from Hell'. Available at: <http://bransymondson.com/portfolios/the-best-view-from-heaven-is-from-hell/> [accessed on 8 April 2015].

¹⁰ 'AK-47 maker Kalashnikov gives rifles makeover'. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-30302261> [accessed on 8 April 2015].

¹¹ The symbolic nature of the gun in art will be discussed later on in this section.

¹² 'Peace One Day: *AKA Peace*'.

Jake and Dinos Chapman's contribution *Yin and Yang* (figure 6) is typical of their style featuring two infantile boys with erect penises for noses brandishing two AK-47s. The disparity of such a large weapon being in the possession of a child, an unfortunate reality which Symondson captured (figure 5), is emphasised here by their oversized t-shirts. The title 'Yin and Yang' refers to the Chinese philosophy of co-existing and co-operating negative and positive forces within the world, which could reflect the employment of this weapon by both sides of conflict, for oppression and for liberation.¹³ Antony Gormley similarly treats the AK-47 as an unaltered whole and presents it inside a human figure. He has suspended the gun within an outline male figure with the barrel forming his mouth (figure 7). The juxtaposition between the solidity and size of the gun and the thin frame of the human body that encloses it represents the fragility of life in the grips of this weapon. Nancy Fouts' *Look But Don't Touch* (figure 8) subverts the gun handler's destructive power as the plethora of spines inflicts as much pain on them as they do on their victim. The use of thorns, as opposed to flowers, counters the ANP tradition and therefore serves to harden the appearance of the gun. The physical restriction imposed by the spines renders the gun wholly inoperable, which supports the overriding aims of discouraging the use of guns.

This exhibition is not unique in its treatment of the gun as subject matter and the gun has been represented more broadly within the history of art. A small cross-section of artworks will be discussed to situate *Souls V* (figure 1) within this broader context and to demonstrate that, generally speaking, the gun has

¹³ See figure 17 for an example of the employment of the AK-47 for liberation purposes. This example is taken from the Palestine Poster Project which, during the 1970's and 1980's, adopted the motif of the AK-47 in their liberation posters.

been represented negatively in art and is employed as a symbol of war and conflict.¹⁴ Francisco de Goya's celebrated painting *Third of May, 1808* (figure 9) depicts the brutal massacre of Spaniards by their supposed allies France. The mechanistic killing capability of the gun is personified in the anonymous faceless killers, whose poses and clothing echo the gun in their bleak uniformity.¹⁵ The victim is illuminated in a Christ-like pose, which evokes martyrdom and sacrifice.¹⁶ The influence of Goya's piece on Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (figure 10) is clear.¹⁷ Manet has referenced the figural groupings of assassins, victims and mourners as well as the dehumanised assassination troupe. However, a key difference is the figure on the right in Manet's painting, who stands aside from the assassination with his gun raised. He is separated by distance and appearance; he has a different hat, different shoes, and he is the only figure whose face is visible, which gives him a human element lacking in the others. His downward gaze suggests contemplation and the barrel of the gun is cut off by the edge of the canvas thus disarming it. These elements work together to highlight the inhumanity of this assassination as the one distinctly human character is unwilling to shoot. In both paintings the depiction of the gun is in acts of violence, and the other elements of the paintings combine to insinuate injustice.

¹⁴ The topic of the representations of the gun within the history of art is surprisingly poorly covered, thus literature around the subject is scarce. Weaponry in art however has been covered. For an introduction, see R. Held (ed.), *Art, Arms and Armour: An International Anthology* (Switzerland: Acquafresca Editrice, 1979).

¹⁵ A. Leader, 'March 1814, Goya Paints *Third of May 1808: Execution of the Citizens of Madrid*' in John Powell (ed.) *Great Events from History: The Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900*, 1 (2007), 205.

¹⁶ Leader, 'Goya Paints *Third of May*', 205.

¹⁷ Leader, 'Goya Paints *Third of May*', 205.

In more recent years sculptural representations of the gun have taken the foreground, for example Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd's memorial to John Lennon *Non-Violence* (figure 11). The gun is cocked yet unable to shoot as the barrel is knotted. The symbolic power of this is due to the simplicity and universality of a tied knot. Since 1993, the knotted barrel has been the international motif for the Non-Violence Project (NVP), a non-profit organisation aimed at educating children in the peaceful resolution of conflicts (figure 18). Moreover other artists have replicated the knotted barrel, such as Tim Noble and Sue Webster in their contribution to *AKA Peace* (figure 12). In these examples the motif of a knotted decommissioned gun has been employed to educate people, to promote peace, and to discourage arms.

The Art of Peacemaking: The Gun Sculpture (figure 13, hereafter *Gun Sculpture*) uses decommissioned weapons and photography to promote peace and discourage violence. Amassed from over 7,000 deactivated weapons, one can walk inside the prison-like interior of the sculpture. A large photographic mural of victims and survivors of violence is displayed alongside the sculpture, which forces the audience to equate weaponry with mankind's suffering. A blackboard is placed alongside the sculpture and mural for visitors to leave messages, which has been described as 'a form of free expression and exchange to counteract the covert transactions by which weapons circulate.'¹⁸ The impact of this sculpture has been corroborated by major peace institutions that have exhibited this artwork, for example the Centennial Exhibition for the Nobel Peace Prize in Seoul in 2001, the United Nations

¹⁸ A, Boetzkes, 'The Gun Sculpture', 2010. Available at: <http://www.gunsculpture.com/text.html> [accessed on 8 April 2015].

Vienna International Centre, and the United Nations Headquarters in New York. As with the previous examples, *Gun Sculpture* uses the gun itself to discourage and undermine its use. The analysis of this small cross-section of artworks treating the gun as subject matter demonstrate how the gun has become an internationally acknowledged symbol of injustice and violence, which artists have engaged with to promote peace.

Like the sculptors and artists mentioned above Shawa appreciates the visual impact the gun has, and the retention of its form pays homage to the artworks discussed. The influence of Symondson's photographic series is also clear as the bright colours adorning the gun are directly borrowed from the ANP (figure 4 and figure 5). Shawa has described this artwork as a piece of jewellery, which mirrors Fouts' (figure 8) ambition to wholly neutralise the gun as a weapon by transforming it into an unusable object.¹⁹ However Shawa contrasts Fouts and the overriding ambition of *AKA Peace* by claiming that her AK-47 is not completely functionless and unusable, but its function has simply shifted from killing machine to female adornment. A feminist reading would be that Shawa has taken this typically male-associated, phallic weapon and emasculated it into a feminine object decorated with jewels and feathers.

This flamboyant style is archetypical of Shawa's unique style as characterised by her series *Disposable Bodies* (figure 14). The inspiration to this series was a failed female suicide bomber in Gaza, which Shawa watched on a televised news programme.²⁰ The use of feathers and rhinestones sexualises and

¹⁹ Appendix D.

²⁰ Appendix D.

fetishises the limbless, headless naked female torso, which reduces the female to its two conceived purposes in this culture: sex and death. Furthermore, the phallic sticks of dynamite reflect the male control over the female when reduced to this base existence. The initial visual appeal of the highly coloured and embellished artwork is undercut when one realises the subject matter, which unsettles the audience.

The title *Where Souls Dwell* refers to the ancient mythology that butterflies are the souls of the deceased returning to where they were killed.²¹ Following this mythology the presence of the butterflies goes further than representing the potential of death; it suggests the gun is death itself as this is where the souls have returned. The butterflies also represent the fragility of human life in conjunction with this machine, which corresponds with Gormley's *Silence* (figure 7). The evolution between *Souls I* (figure 2) and *Souls V* (figure 1) is marked by an increased extravagance. The basic decorative components remain the same but the later edition is much more embellished and covered. *Souls I* features a scattering of butterflies starting from the trigger and finishing at the end of the barrel, which quietly provides a *memento mori*. The mass of butterflies on *Souls V* arguably detracts from the original sentiment as it is overwhelmingly exuberant. This could be due to the commercial motivation, to make it more visually striking and appealing to buyers. This further demonstrates how Shawa's work has been shaped by its context within the Western art world, as well as the specific conditions of the *AKA Peace* project. Grounded in this context, one can begin to assess the effects

²¹ Appendix D.

of displacing this artwork into an explicitly Palestinian context by first contextualising the exhibition.

2. *Bridge to Palestine* and the displacement of Souls V

The location of Beirut geographically situated *Bridge to Palestine* in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as Lebanon has been intrinsically involved in the conflict.²² Lebanon was the most peaceful of the Arab-Israeli borders until 1975 when the fifteen-year civil war began.²³ The Israeli army became involved to 'calm' the situation, which culminated in the Israeli occupation of Lebanon (1982-2000). In this period the Israeli army targeted anti-Israeli organisations, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), as well as Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese military. The strength of the Iranian-supported Lebanese militia Hezbollah led to their withdrawal in 2000.²⁴ Lebanon is still home to millions of displaced Syrian and Palestinian refugees, which is severely straining the country's resources and minimising hopes of economic recovery and political stability.²⁵ Due to its warring neighbours Lebanon's history is thus plagued with war, destruction and death.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is too complicated to treat in brief so a few key works which have informed this dissertation will be noted instead. Martin Gilbert's book *Israel: A History* offers the most extensive and accessible account of the development of the state of Israel.²⁶ Although it is thorough and accurate his argument is slightly pro-Israel, particularly in his discussion of the

²² T. P. Najem, 'Palestinian-Israeli Conflict and South Lebanon', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35.46 (2000), 4006-4009 offers a concise account of Lebanon's history in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly the complexities of South Lebanon.

²³ See Appendix C for a map of Lebanon.

²⁴ See O. Barak, 'Ambiguity and Conflict in Israeli-Lebanese Relations', *Israeli Studies*, 15.3 (2010), 163-188, which offers a nuanced discussion of the more recent 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in South Lebanon.

²⁵ 'Lebanon profile – Overview'. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14647308> [accessed on 9 April 2015].

²⁶ M. Gilbert, *Israel: A History* (London: Black Swan Books, 2008 edition).

Likud and Benjamin Netanyahu.²⁷ On the other hand Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine* is explicitly pro-Palestinian and the concept that Palestine is a consciousness, therefore beyond physical nation-state boundaries, is of particular influence to this dissertation as it supports the aims of the *Bridge to Palestine* exhibition.²⁸²⁹

Impartiality is difficult when dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but Ilan Pappé achieves this in his text tackling the period 1947-1951, during which the United Nations officially divided Palestine and the State of Israel was proclaimed (1948).³⁰ His argument is convincing as he presents both sides of the conflict from the outset, for example how Palestinians refer to the year 1948 as the *nakba* (catastrophe), whereas Israelis regard it as a heroic victory.³¹ The original documentation available in Charles Smith's text, such as Churchill's 1922 and 1939 White Papers, simultaneously informs the reader and allows scope for individual interpretation.³²³³

Critical literature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tends to separate 'popular culture' and 'politics', which Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg attempt to

²⁷ Gilbert, "'Shalow, haver' – Peace, my friend' in *Israel*, 588-619.

²⁸ E. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (NY: Random House USA, Inc., 2003 [1979]).

²⁹ The discussion of the nation-state is of significance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the Internationalist approach to art history argues the issues of the nation-state, thus far no texts have addressed the Israeli/Palestinian question. For more information about the nation-state and its relationship to nationality, see: B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); A. Iriye *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

³⁰ I. Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1947-1951* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1994), ix.

³¹ Pappé, *Arab-Israeli Conflict 1947-1951*, ix.

³² C. D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Fifth Edition: A History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004).

³³ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 151, 157.

bring together in their edited collection of essays.^{34 35} Mark LeVine's theory that similarities between Palestinian and Israeli tendencies are visible in the press of the British Mandate period is of particular interest.³⁶

Having contextualised the political, historical and geographical location of Beirut the dissertation will now approach the exhibition itself, beginning with Hachem's stated ambitions:

The occupation has tried to limit the expression of Palestinian Art, identity and culture; *Bridge to Palestine* sets free those enclosures and [...] becomes the tool for very personal and compelling commentaries on Palestinian identity – individual and national.³⁷

Hachem proposes a key principle of the exhibition: to present artists' interpretation of their Palestinian and personal identity, meaning the main themes were memory and identity. Coupled with his claim that the artworks are charged with a 'bittersweet longing for something forbidden,' the quote cited by Hachem in his curatorial statement encapsulates the main sentiment of the exhibition: 'what was once yours is now against you.'³⁸ The artists are all Palestinian born although some are now based abroad, such as Shawa. Other notable artists included were Mohammed Al-hawajri, Samira Badran, Rana Bashira, Rania Matar and Steve Sabella.

³⁴ R. L. Stein and T. Swedenburg (eds.), *Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

³⁵ It is important to note that the essays scarcely concern the visual arts – they primarily deal with music, cinema, and the press more generally.

³⁶ M. LeVine, 'The Palestinian Press in Mandatory Jaffa: Advertising, Nationalism, and the Public Sphere', in Stein and Swedenburg, *Palestine, Israel*, 51-76.

³⁷ Appendix A, i.

³⁸ M. Darwish quoted in Appendix A, i. Darwish is a celebrated Palestinian poet.

Al-hawajri's *Inspired by Russian Wedding, Marc Chagall, 1909, Marriage on the Border* (figure 15) embodies the themes and aims of the exhibition. Al-hawajri is an interdisciplinary artist based in Gaza. This artwork is part of *Guernica-Gaza*, a series of digital prints of celebrated Western paintings which have been photo-manipulated with photographs taken in Gaza. A key advantage noted by Al-hawajri of the digital medium is its potential to cross borders, which is physically prohibited under the occupation.³⁹ This therefore supports Hachem's claim of liberating Palestinian artists from the confines of the occupation in this exhibition. The digital technique also allows a direct juxtaposition between historic Western life and current Middle-Eastern life. In this example Al-hawajri has superimposed an Israeli soldier who is stopping the marital procession of a young Palestinian couple (figure 16). The overwhelming size of the forceful Israeli soldier demeans the celebratory soldier from the Chagall original (middle foreground figure 16 and right mid-ground figure 15). However the husband determinedly steps forward in Arab dress whilst pulling his wife with him. The photographic elements serve as personifications of the oppression of the Israeli occupation and the resilience of the Palestinian people in the face of adversity, thus Al-hawajri addresses both memory and identity.

Taking into consideration the principles and the political position of *Bridge to Palestine* one can now assess the place of *Souls V* (figure 1) as its press image.⁴⁰ The press image of an exhibition serves two purposes: to represent the exhibition and to attract audiences. As representative of the exhibition,

³⁹ Interview with Mohammed Al-hawajri, Appendix E.

⁴⁰ Appendix A, i-iv.

what does this artwork suggest of Shawa's perception of Palestinian national and personal identity? By projecting the themes identity and memory onto this artwork the original meaning becomes distorted to fit the purposes of the exhibition. Shawa was aware of the potential misconceptions this could cause, and confirmed that these did occur:

if you're going to an exhibition that presents a state of conflict, and then you see a neutralised weapon, a gun which is supposed to kill [...] you see this Palestinian artist who has turned a gun into a piece of jewellery with butterflies on it, you would think 'ok, this person must be anti-war and, maybe specifically, anti-fighting for her country because I was told that by a couple of people since, who totally got distracted.'⁴¹

Shawa is right in labelling this a distraction as it is not a total misinterpretation; this artwork does have an anti-war message. But as a Palestinian artist in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to declare oneself anti-war suggests that one is unwilling to fight for the liberation of their country, a message Shawa did not intend. From this perspective although the core values of the artwork are not jeopardised the cultural context of the exhibition has exerted a negative impact on the reception of the artwork.

This points to the larger issue of the distance between artist intention and audience interpretation caused by cultural displacement, for which Umberto Eco's semiotic theory of aberrant decoding is appropriate.⁴² Eco discussed the relationship between 'sender' and 'addressee' and claimed one of the factors causing the divergence between intention and reception was cultural

⁴¹ Appendix D.

⁴² U. Eco, 'Towards a Semiotic Enquiry into the Television Message', 1972, 3-19. Available at: <http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=VoyMI8hDKI8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=umberto+eco+towards+a+semiotic+1965&ots=Y1CuLIF3Ro&sig=QBz5u6sqyM24Dk6LrjT0hJQtuJQ#v=onepage&q=umberto%20eco%20towards%20a%20semiotic%201965&f=false> [accessed on 9 April 2015].

differences.⁴³ Using this theory one can appreciate how the cultural differences between the original Western audience and the Lebanese audience would affect its reception.

A key cultural difference is the first-hand exposure the Lebanese audience have to the devastating power of the AK-47. This does not negate the universal symbolism of injustice and conflict of the gun. Rather it signifies a stronger personal bearing in Lebanon due to its history, and current state, of war and conflict. In this way the inclusion of the gun seems insensitive to its audience. Due to cultural differences and the separate themes of the exhibitions, the expectations of the audiences approaching these exhibitions would be completely different. The Western audience approaching the *AKA Peace* exhibition would expect representations of arms as it was an anti-arms exhibition, whereas the Lebanese audience approaching *Bridge to Palestine* would not anticipate a bejewelled gun in an exhibition celebrating Palestinian identity and memory. For the audience who had not seen the publications surrounding the exhibition, the gun would be shocking and would seem unfitting and inappropriate for the messages of the exhibition.⁴⁴

The fact that the artwork does not sit comfortably in the exhibition suggests that this image was chosen for the press publications not to represent the exhibition but to attract an audience. The potency and provocative nature of the image mentally stimulates people, which would entice them to the

⁴³ Eco, 'Towards a Semiotic Enquiry into the Television Message', 4-5. Eco cited four causes of aberrant decoding, but cultural difference is the only one appropriate for this dissertation.

⁴⁴ It is important to acknowledge that these are speculations. Attempts were made to contact Galerie Mark Hachem in Beirut to confirm or negate these, but these attempts were unsuccessful.

exhibition. As an artwork in this setting it invites discussion and debate. The curator is Lebanese, therefore he would have made an informed decision based on what would attract his target audience.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Shawa is a recognised name in Lebanon both as an artist (having lived there for several years) and as the daughter of Rashad al-Shawa, a former mayor of Gaza (1971-1982). Therefore the inclusion of Shawa in the exhibition would attract audiences as she is a celebrated figure there. A final consideration perhaps informing this curatorial decision is the commercial aspect of this series. As mentioned previously, Shawa developed *Souls I* (figure 2) into a series when she received commissions, therefore confirming the appeal and selling potential of the artwork. These factors all suggest that more than anything the use of *Souls V* (figure 1) as the press image was a publicity stunt.

⁴⁵ Appendix D.

Conclusion

The principle objective of this dissertation was to explore the importance of context to the artwork *Souls V* (figure 1) as demonstrated by the exhibition *Bridge to Palestine*. The contextual approach to the genesis of Shawa's *Where Souls Dwell* series and the *AKA Peace* project informed the discussion of the role of *Souls V* as the press image in *Bridge to Palestine*. Although both exhibitions aimed to promote peace, the essay explored how the cultural nuance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the projected aims of *Bridge to Palestine* affected the understanding of *Souls V*. The dissertation has touched upon the wider art historical topics of the symbolism of the gun in art and the significance of a press image.

The concept of nationality was also explored, and is of particular importance when considering Palestinian art. I concur with Edward Said (1979) that to be 'Palestinian' is now more of a consciousness than a strict nationality due to the changing physical boundaries of Palestine.⁴⁶ The concept of curating an exhibition based upon the Palestinian nationality then seems incongruous for this situation. This in turn questions the wider implications of the curatorial tendency to separate nationalities in exhibitions, which Shawa contests.⁴⁷ The emphasis on nationality in curatorial selection has always existed, and an exploration of the current institutions employing an Internationalist approach

⁴⁶ Said, *Question of Palestine*.

⁴⁷ Appendix D.

to counteract this warrants further study, especially those treating the Israeli-Palestinian question.⁴⁸

The essay has demonstrated how the transposition of *Souls V* from *AKA Peace* to *Bridge to Palestine* was controversial, but that does not limit the significance to this one situation. It was the personal exposure of the Lebanese audience to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that engendered the misreading of this artwork as against Palestinian liberation. Notably this was the first Palestinian art exhibition to be held in Beirut for a considerable amount of time, yet the representation of Palestinian art in Europe has surged recently and the exhibitions are generally well received.⁴⁹ One could surmise that the physical detachment of the European people from the conflict allows a more objective appreciation of Palestinian art as art, and thus would not influence the reading of *Souls V* as an anti-liberation piece.

Theoretically, however, the cultural nuances of the location of its exhibition in Europe would still have an impact on the audience's reception of the artwork. Consider, for example, if *Souls V* were to be exhibited in Paris following the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Subsequent to the attacks, the AK-47 has taken on a stronger symbolic significance to the Parisian audience, particularly as cartoonists employed the motifs of the AK-47 and the pencil to demonstrate the disparity between satire and assassination (figure 19). The contextual

⁴⁸ An example of this the curatorial approach is the Israeli-Palestinian festival *Pélerinage en Décalage* ('Off the Wall Pilgrimage), which did not reveal the nationality of the participating artist (interview with co-founder and co-curator Kenza Aloui, Appendix H).

⁴⁹ There have been several Palestinian art exhibitions in Europe, notably the successful exhibition *Palestine: La Création Dans Tous Ses États* at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 2009 (interview with co-curator Djamilia Chakour, Appendix F).

history would modify the reception of the artwork again illustrating the importance of context in display. The study of context from this perspective could be applied to exhibition practice generally. Using this artwork as a platform this discussion could continue to assess the importance of context on a wider art historical scale. Thus although the subject matter of the dissertation is relatively defined, I believe it does have wider art historical implications.

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