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# Ramallah Syndrome

Artistic responses to the question of Palestine

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Over the past 30 to 40 years, artistic responses to the question of Palestine have more or less followed the same path as the political

situation. They have moved on from a revolutionary cause (Jean-Luc Godard's 1976 film *Ici et Ailleurs*, Here and Elsewhere, with its footage of children in refugee camps training for battle); to a sad and intractable conflict (Emily Jacir's *Where We Come From*, a collection of wishes gathered, documented, enacted, embodied or left unfulfilled, from 2001–03); to a diagnosable but seemingly incurable syndrome (Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti's sound piece *Ramallah Syndrome*, 2009, about the delusions of normality that crept into the *de facto* capital of a phantom Palestinian state in the vacuum left behind by the failure of the Oslo Accords peace process).

These days, warmongering between Israel and Iran, the ongoing implosion of Syria and the ups and downs of the Arab Spring have made places such as Gaza far less visible than they once were in terms of sustained and engaged news coverage – and they've nearly fallen off the map in terms of art-world interest. But the question of Palestine is as urgent now as it was when Edward Said wrote his eponymous book in 1979. A handful of recent art projects suggest that 'Ramallah Syndrome', alongside other fragmentation conditions of its kind, have taken a turn for the worse, into the realm of the absurd and potentially unconscionable. As the British writer Guy Mannes-Abbott remarked in a recent interview with the curator and critic Shumon Basar: 'Ramallah, the prison-camp pseudo-capital, can't exist for much longer. We'll look back at it with fascinated horror soon.'

Since 1997, Mannes-Abbott has been working on a series of prose poems, short stories and aphoristic texts he calls 'e.things', shorthand for 'a thousand essential things'. The latest is the centrepiece of his beautiful new book, published this summer by Black Dog, titled *In Ramallah, Running*. Mannes-Abbott was in Ramallah in the summer of 2010, as a writer-in-residence at the a.m. Qattan Foundation. To

explore the hills of what he calls the “as-if” capital of an “as if” statelet’ and perhaps more importantly to test out the city’s limits – of movement, imagination, making sense – Mannes-Abbott took to running (and occasionally walking) to the bewilderment, delight and suspicion of almost everyone he met.

*In Ramallah, Running*, which he edited with the curator Samar Martha, features an introduction by Jean Fisher, texts by Adania Shibli and Najwan Darwish and artists’ projects by Jacir, Francis Alÿs, Olaf Nicolai and Sharif Waked, among others. All of these contributions lend the book depth, emotional resonance and a wicked sense of humour, notably Shibli’s excerpt from a novel-in-progress about a character hanging curtains and working through the bombing of a building next door. But it is Mannes-Abbott’s text that gives the book its lungs: ‘I am running in Ramallah. Running through, around and on Ramallah [...] I’m making Ramallah homely by running here, leaving some of myself out there, drawing into myself whatever is here [...] Despite its sweetly sophisticated humours this is not a place that can afford paradox.’

Mannes-Abbott’s writing is also as strong and painful to read as the work of two other writers he pays homage to here: Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani. In fact, the challenge he sets for himself in his book is to test out the meaning of a line from Darwish – ‘on this earth there is something to live for’ – in the one place on earth where it seems most ludicrous to do so. Yet something about the absurdity of the task adds weight and clarity to the meaning Mannes-Abbott finds.

Not far from Ramallah, in Amman, capital of the (affectionately) nicknamed Hashemite Kingdom of Boredom, the artists Shuruq Harb, Samah Hijawi and Toleen Touq are collaborating on a project that

also hinges on the absurd. Titled *The River Has Two Banks*, it's effectively a micro-residency programme for Palestinian artists, writers and thinkers with West Bank ID cards who have to pass through Jordan to access the rest of the world – the Allenby Bridge across the Jordan River is their only exit. Open to Palestinians travelling this autumn, the project invites selected applicants to extend their stay in Amman long enough to make a public presentation of their work at Makan, an independent art space with a beautiful balcony and a community-minded curatorial spine. However ingenious the humour, the residency calls attention to a more serious state of affairs – because mobility has become so difficult in the region, the links and affinities among artists who are neighbours, colleagues, friends, rivals and healthy competitors are falling apart.

Of course, no one does absurdity in the context of Palestine better than the artist Khalil Rabah, who, in the past two decades, has created an airline, a newspaper, a museum and a branding agency – all art projects constituting an elaborate joke doubling as tragedy. Performance is a major component of Rabah's practice, and so consistent is his presentation of the United States of Palestine Airlines, for example, or the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, that he barely lets anything slip as false or fake. But just as the everyday details are the most powerful in Mannes-Abbott's text, Rabah's oeuvre is filled with secrets, seemingly random facts and buried references to Kanafani and Darwish among many other examples of well tended if deliberately obscured cultural genealogies. It's as if the absurdities of these projects comprise a shell, which protects their vulnerable histories but keeps their imagination intact.