

**ART AND POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
FICTIONALIZED HISTORIES AND DELUSIONAL MODERNISMS**
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Agoraphobia and Claustrophobia, Barred, Block, City, Double Exposure, House, Heterotopia, Light and Skin, Mobile Virtual Gaze, Rooftop, Panorama, Panopticon, Post It City, Shelter, The Law of Purification and Ablution, Tower and Airplane, Ubiquity, Urban Desert, Utopia.

Lined up in the small flip page catalog published by *Block Magazine* for the exhibition *Double Exposure*, these words push and shove each other. They jump abruptly around between post modernisms and modernisms, places, processes, things, and conditions. Linked to specific works in a particular exhibition, this glossary and its definitions, establish a false factuality, a fictional guide. The word “block” itself is both a verb and a noun, both an urban structure and an act of exclusion. Words do not create a clear picture: layers overlap and intersect, leave traces, destroy one another, obliterate one another. Such a metaphor works well for the position of art and politics in the Middle East.



Walid Raad. Untitled and/or onlookers. 2005. Chromogenic print.
Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

When an artist lives the experience of war, the dilemma is how to visualize what Walid Raad calls a “surpassing disaster.” Based in New York and Beirut, Raad’s photographs with the title (We Decided To Let Them Say “We Are Convinced” Twice. It was More Convincing This Way.) is at the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle (November 10 2006– February 4, 2007). Raad enlarged and manipulated fifteen photographs, taken in East Beirut in the summer of 1982, when he was fifteen. They are part of the Atlas Project, a fictionalized archive. In this title, “we” is a collective of people who may or may not exist in a destroyed past.

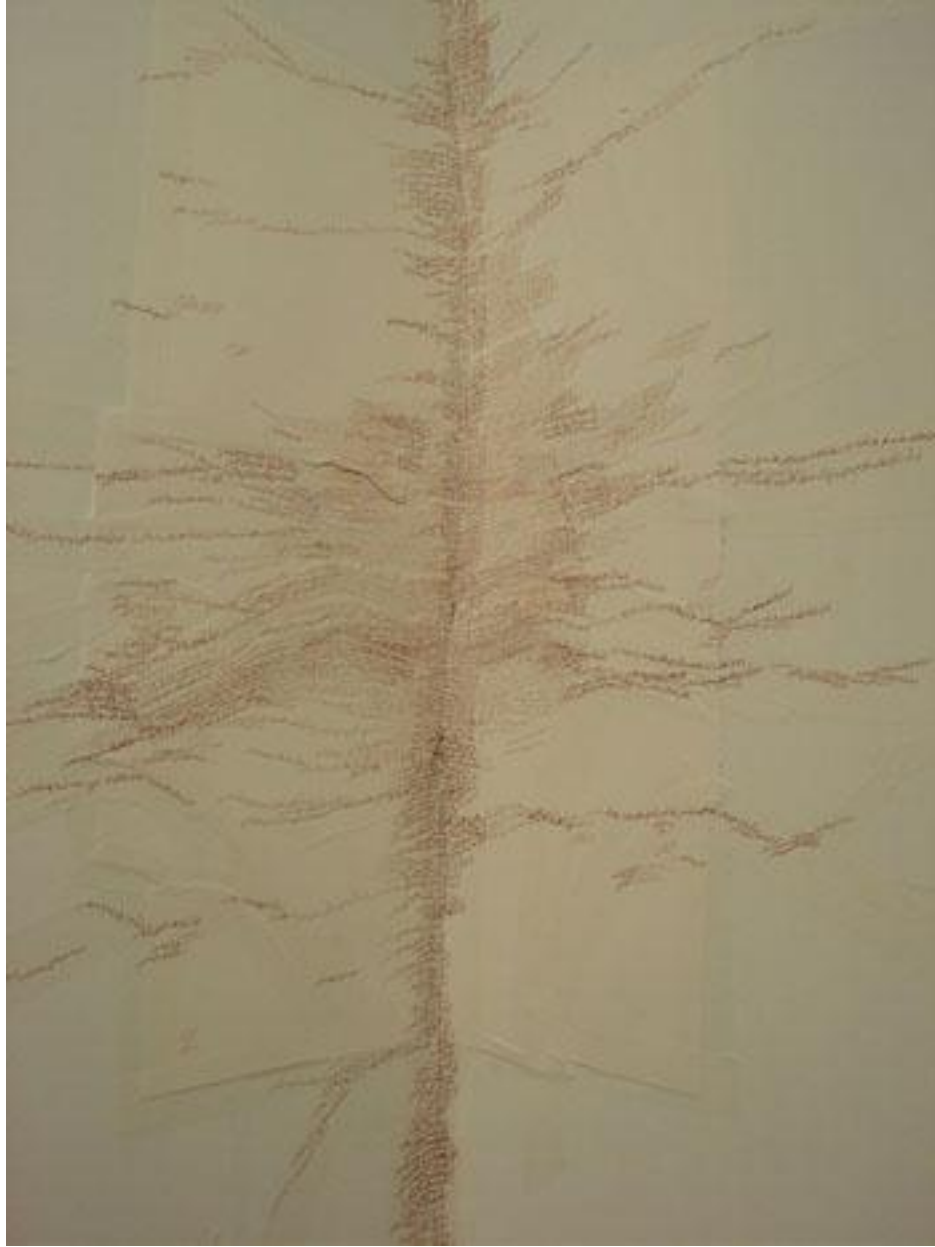
The photographs fill one wall of a two-story gallery. From a balcony above we are level with three photographs of smiling and sleeping young Israeli soldiers, resting in

front of their tanks before the next attack. We look down on four more rows of three photographs. In the lower left, middle class Lebanese men in shirtsleeves gaze at the sky. Descending to the lower level, we gaze up, like the men in shirtsleeves, at images of the sky filled with plumes from planes as well as at explosions over the skyscrapers of Beirut.

The photographs are pitted and deteriorated, scratched, covered with a snow like surface, hued with odds blues and pinks, all qualities that echo and reinforce the image of destruction. According to Raad, the aesthetics, not only of surface, but also of the gallery setting, enable the telling of the story. Aesthetics becomes the witness, the world, and the way of framing the catastrophe. Raad suggests that he and other artists working in Beirut produce simulacra and narrative fictions as the only way to fill the psychic hole of the endless war in Lebanon. It actually is a simulation, a trace from the destruction of Arab history and culture (that catastrophe now includes Iraq). It can only be part of a fictional narrative, for the truth is unavailable

In *Double Exposure: Middle Eastern Rooftops*, an exhibition at the Makor Gallery in New York City (Sept 10 – October 20, 2006) modernist building design, and particularly its rooftops, as places of light, open space, and dialogue, reveals another historical fiction. Working in performance, video, photography, sculpture, and drawing, these artists present the spaces of modernism in dark tones. Bomb shelters and metal barriers enclose and contain roof tops. Swiss artist Clauhde Hohl's late 1970s photographs of the modernist urban scapes of Cairo, Jiddah, Riyadh, Tel Aviv, and Tehran glow yellow, glimmers from a lost era. Iranian filmmaker Solmaz Shahbazi speaks to inhabitants of a modern apartment building in Tehran. They talk about loss of space, light, and movement since 1979 as the camera records their signifiers of bourgeois security like family photographs, art, and flower arrangements. Even darker is Anisa Ashkar's performance on the roof of an art gallery in Haifa about ritual purification. The performance looks more like a lethal attack as the artist covers a man hooded like a terrorist, with black pigment that looks like smeared blood. Instead of purity, there is contamination. Instead of peace there is violence.

Leor Grady's replica of a bomb shelter can argue for a (claustrophobic) preservation of illusions, but as Annabel Daou's declares in her drawing *In Lebanon We Have No Shelters* no such illusion is possible in Lebanon. Daou, originally from Lebanon, now in New York, was the only Arab who would agree to participate in *Double Exposure*. Her drawing using tiny red Arabic script seems to flow like bleeding veins from the corner of the gallery as if the walls are tearing apart. We hear a voice shouting in Arabic "Go to staircase, get away from window."



Annabel Daou In Lebanon We have no shelters, 2006 text drawing and sound installation with Greta Byrum, detail



Installation shot, *Made in Palestine*

Mary Tuma foreground *Homes for the Disembodied* 2000

Back right Samia Halaby *Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordon River* 2003

Back Left John Halaka *Stripped of Their Identity and Driven from their land*, from the series *Forgotten Survivors*, 1993

For Palestinians living in the West Bank or Gaza the delusions of Middle Eastern modernism are physically manifest in proliferating settlements, checkpoints, and a separation wall. Yet, creativity survives in the midst of violence, as seen in the exhibition *Made in Palestine* (The Bridge, New York City March 14th – April 22, 2006).¹ This historic show included seven artists living in the occupied territories of Ramallah, Gaza, and the West Bank, two in Israel, several in Syria and Jordan and some in the United States.

Emily Jacir's video "Crossing Surda, A Record of Going to and From Work," 2001-2003, documents her walk from Ramallah to Birzeit, filmed through a hole in her purse.² The 190 minute film across uneven terrain, with unpredictable disruptions, goes on and on, just like the daily life of Palestinians. For *Refugee Tent Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in*

¹ James Harithas, Gabriel Delgado, Tex Kerschen et al, *Made in Palestine*, Station Museum, Houston, 2003. 8.10,14 .For an account of the refusals of all major museums and galleries to show the exhibition see Jessica Wright, "Contemporary Palestinian Art: Moving in From the Margins," Arteeast.org, May 2006.

² Jacir initially was held at rifle point and her passport thrown in the mud when she filmed openly, *Made in Palestine*, 18.

1948, 2001, Jacir collaborated with over 140 people many of them Palestinian refugees from destroyed villages, to write the names of all the villages on the tent.

Mustafa al Hallaj's *Self Portrait as God, the Devil and Man*, 2000, 55 black and white prints on masonite, is a narrative of movement, displacement, and disruption. Adam and Eve, Sumerians, Babylonians, Masai warriors, and even Europeans, along with animals, birds, and fish are walking, riding, marching, dying, surviving.³

Freedom of movement is an impossible myth for Abdel Rahmen al Muzayen in Jenin or Mohammad Abu Sall in the Breijj refugee camp or even the prominent Suleiman Mansour in Jerusalem and Tyseer Baraka in Ramallah. Even more extremely confined are the artists who worked in the Ashkalan prison, Muhammad Rakouie and Zuhdie al Adawi. The range of materials and imagery produced in spite of so many restraints is extraordinary. Collectively, the artists address the brutality of occupation, death, loss of history, and displacement, but also resistance, survival and hope.

The most blatant example of the construction of fictions (both literally and figuratively) is the Israeli separation wall. As one scholar described it "Jerusalem's new wall has become a monstrous mockery of its historic walls. . . the new wall acts as a strangling noose for both its subject population and their lords and masters."⁴ The wall does not mark any international border, but rather a complex meander that constitutes a land and water grab. In the Fall of 2005 almost one hundred artists and writers reached across that separation barrier to create *Three Cities Against the Wall, Ramallah/Tel Aviv/New York*. The three exhibitions, and the catalog, form another imaginary history: the history of intellectuals dismantling political narratives by the sheer will of their ideas.

Artists in the three cities showed cartoons, videos, graphic images, paintings, prints, performance, collage, writing, poems, narratives, abstraction, realism. Suleiman Mansour painted the reaching, but still separated, hands of God and Adam from the Sistine Ceiling directly onto the wall.⁵ Mumia Abu Jamal, the African American journalist on death row, introduced his graphic novel "In the beginning was not 'the Wall' but walls. Walls around the heart, hearts shattered by the Hells of European holocaust, hearths broken and made cold by White Aryan hatred against the Jewish people. From this loss, desolation and death came a desperate people; so desperate that they waged a war of terror against the indigenous people of Palestine and the British, who ruled the land as a colony. The walls of war, of hate, of religion and of race were the steel bricks and mortar of a New Wall – an Apartheid Wall – A Wall of Exclusion."⁶

Three Cities Against the Wall is a model of collaboration by thoughtful intellectuals who counter the physical manifestation of a fictional boundary with acts of creativity. That is one way forward from the abyss of destruction and the delusions of modernism. As Edward Said declared shortly before his death "The role of the intellectual is to oppose power."⁷

³ The exhibition is dedicated to Mustafa al Hallaj who died in a fire in his studio in Damascus, Syria in December 2002 while trying to save his works.

⁴ Salim Tamari "Jerusalem Walls: Real and Imagined," *Homeworks II*, Beirut, Ashkal Aswan, 2003, 72

⁵ *Three Cities Against the Wall*, November 9, 2006, Voxpop, Brooklyn, 2005, 71,72.

⁶ *Three Cities*, 64

⁷ Emmanuel Hammoun, *Selves and Others, A Portrait of Edward Said* 2003. The film was completed very shortly before he died.