

Qalandiya International

NOVEMBER 21, 2012 *by Jennifer Higgie*



Objects by Khaled Jarrar made from concrete dust taken from the Israel West Bank Barrier for 'Disarming Design'

A few weeks ago, I travelled to Ramallah to attend Qalandiya International, the inaugural two-week biennial event that took place across Palestine and in Jerusalem from 1–15 November. The recent tragic events in Gaza and Israel reiterate how important it is to remember that Palestine isn't just a site of terrible and ongoing conflict; it's also a region that is extraordinarily rich in culture. Countless individuals and organizations are working hard in the region to promote and encourage non-violent forms of creative conflict resolution, from re-building villages to putting on exhibitions. I cannot stress enough the humour, resilience and lack of self-pity I encountered amongst Palestinians who live with a situation that most would find intolerable. As one Australian artist I travelled with, Tom Nicholson, wrote to me yesterday: 'It's shocking what is unfolding, and in some ways remote from all the pleasurable parts of our time there ... the extent of the violence now, the sheer number of targets taken out in that tiny strip of land, is difficult to figure in relation to the time we spent in Abwein, that evening spilling out in to the streets of the Old City outside the tile factory ... '.

On 5 November I arrived at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, Israel, at 3.30am. After being interviewed by Israeli security for about an hour (I got off easy – two women I know were strip-searched while others on the trip were held for hours without explanation) I found my sleepy taxi driver who had been booked to pick me up; he was unfazed by my lateness, used as he is to his passengers taking a while to get through immigration. It was so early in the morning that the new, wide roads were empty and we arrived in the West Bank in about an hour, zooming through a

moonlit landscape that reminded me of Australia; dry, lovely, and scattered with hundreds of new buildings and building sites. However, the reality for many people travelling to Ramallah – the de facto capital of the Palestinian Authority – is somewhat more complicated: these roads are not accessible to Palestinian ID holders; neither are they allowed to fly into Tel Aviv – the nearest airport to Ramallah – but must travel to Amman in Jordan and enter the West Bank via the Allenby Bridge, a journey that, despite being only 70kms, is dogged by checkpoints and bad roads and can take a whole day. I had only been to the region once before; I was reminded afresh how incredibly closely people live together in this part of the world, and how vast, despite their proximity to each other, the gulf is between their daily lives.

The taxi driver waved to a few soldiers but no-one checked my passport as we passed into the West Bank; if it weren't for the looming, shockingly Kafka-esque wall – the Israeli West Bank barrier – it would have been easy to assume that all is peaceful. In Ramallah – a lively town of about 25,000 people (which swells to over 100,000 by day) – the streets were quiet and the air was balmy.

The next morning I went to the [QI](#) press conference, held at the [Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center](#) (it's named after the Palestinian Christian educator, scholar, poet and Arab Nationalist). It's a NGO dedicated to the promotion of arts and culture in the region and housed in a lovely, sun-bleached 19th-century building. The sky was blue and the mood was buoyant; photographers and cameramen jostled for space among the journalists who had come together to report, for once, on something positive: a celebration of Palestinian culture.

Seven different organizations (all but one based in the West Bank) collaborated on QI: the [A. M. Qattan Foundation](#) ; [The House of Culture and Art, Nazareth](#) ; [International Art Academy, Palestine](#) ; [Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center](#) ; [Al-Ma'mal Foundation, Jerusalem](#) ; [Palestinian Art Gallery–Al Hoash](#) ; and [Riwag](#). Speakers from the various organizations described how the event developed from a desire to join forces and resources and form links across 'a fragmented geography' – a geography so fragmented, in fact, that many of the people involved in QI's various exhibitions, performances and talks in towns and villages across Palestine – from artists and organizers to writers, musicians and teachers – couldn't attend every event as they lacked the correct permits. Part of 'Gestures in Time', for example, is in the Old City of Jerusalem, which despite its proximity to Ramallah, is [out of bounds for Palestinians](#) unless they have an address in Israel.



Director of the Al-Ma'Mal Foundation and Qalandiya International, Jack Persekian

QI's remit is 'exhibiting contemporary Palestinian and international art, highlighting valuable architectural sites, and includes talks, walks and performances'. As Jack Persekian – Director of the Al-Ma'Mal Foundation and QI – declared, art, especially in this part of the world, is part and parcel of activism – and what constitutes 'activism' can take many forms. The title of the show is layered and loaded (to put it mildly): Qalandiya is the Israeli checkpoint that separates the West Bank from Jerusalem; Qalandiya International Airport operated from 1930 until 1967; Qalandiya refugee camp was established in 1949 by Jordan and is still home to over 10,000 people; and Qalandiya village, home to about 1500 people, is now split in two by the Wall. Thus, it's a word that has become a symbol of the isolation, segregation and dislocation that is integral to everyday life in Palestine.

Later that day, I visited [Riwaq](#), the Centre of Architectural Conservation in Ramallah and spoke to its dynamic director, Khaldun Bshara. He explained how Riwaq had been established 'to protect, utilize and promote cultural heritage in Palestine.' The organization is committed to job creation through restoration: so far, they have worked on 65 buildings in 55 of Palestine's 422 villages and towns, creating in the process 170,000 working days – a remarkable achievement in the West Bank, where [unemployment is around 25%](#) (in Gaza, it's around 45%, one of the highest in the world).

Khaldun spoke of the importance of what he called 'living values' – that once people have been trained on the job, they leave with employable skills, disseminate traditional building knowledge and 'most importantly, revitalize the historic centre of a village and reinstate it as part of daily life.' He then went on to explain the 50 Villages Project. Following the 2007 publication of 'Riwaq's Registry of Historic Buildings', it was revealed that 50% of the historic buildings in rural areas of the West Bank and Gaza are located in around 50 villages. Riwaq is now focusing on these villages in order to 'target improvement of services, infrastructure and living conditions of the public, private and surrounding spaces.' We were to visit one of the villages, Abwein, in a couple of days.

That evening a bus took us to Qalandiya village for the official opening. It was held in the courtyard of a huge, beautiful, 200-year old semi-derelict house, which the village is donating to a charity – possibly an orphanage. The atmosphere was abuzz with excitement; the moon was full and the air warm. Children ran about, and people from the art world mingled with locals and journalists. After a brief introduction to Qalandiya by Riwaq co-director Fida Toumahe, the village elder welcomed us with an impassioned speech about the history of the town; although his words were interrupted with a power cut he continued undaunted, shouting above the crowd to be heard. Fida translated his speech; it concluded: 'Welcome to our town. It is a town that is old and new and shows our connection to the land. We have been cut off from our natural connection to Jerusalem. We thank you for recognizing its importance.' He was followed by rousing traditional music and dancers, and then a spectral sound performance by Dirar Kalash over projections of historic footage of Palestine; a show of Khaled Jarrar's sculptures – which included a football made from concrete chipped from the security wall – and a screening of Nahed Awwad's documentary *Five Minutes from Home* (2008), which apparently focuses on 'the growing isolation of Palestinians in the last decades' but which I annoyingly managed to miss as I went for a walk around the village.

On the bus ride back to Ramallah I spoke with Jack Persekian and asked him about the decision not to include Israeli artists in the event – when I visited Tel Aviv a couple of years ago, almost every Israeli artist I spoke to was deeply troubled by their country's relationship with Palestine and was making it the focus of their work. He replied that the decision had been taken in order to make sure the event wouldn't be misconstrued as a normalizing of relations between Israel and Palestine. Until Palestinians have their rights restored, he explained, he is supportive of the cultural boycott.

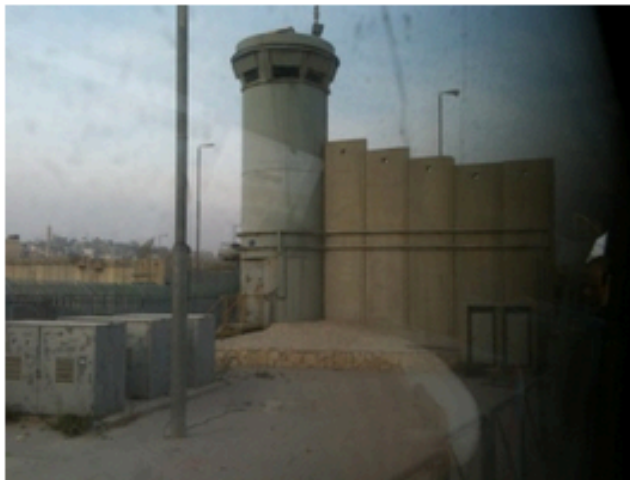
The next morning I went to The International Academy of Art in Ramallah to talk about [Disarming Design](#), the brainchild of Khaled Hourani – artist, director of the art school and force behind the brilliant [Picasso in Palestine project](#) – and [Annelys de Vet](#) (a graphic designer and head of the design department of the Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam). (The project is also supported by [ICCO](#) – the interchurch organization for development cooperation and UNESCO.)



Majd Abdel Hamid, *Hourglass* (2012)

The idea behind the initiative is ingenuous and joyful: 40 local artists and craftspeople have been invited to create a collection of useful objects that will be available to buy online from anywhere in the world (Annelys said that they could take a long time to arrive but that, in itself, echoes the Palestinian reality). They stress that 'every product should somehow reflect upon the current situation so that each design will tell a story'. We were joined by artists Khaled Jarrar and Majd Abdel Hamid, both of whom have made objects for the project from the wall: I was particularly taken with Majd's hour-glass, which is filled with concrete ground into dust; the passing of time is registered in fits and starts – as Majd explained, laughing, an accurate reflection of daily life in Palestine. Other objects included a shower curtain printed with an image of the Wall (yes, the Wall has infected many an imagination here); jars of local honey; a clock made from concrete chipped off the wall, a basket made from pegs, matchboxes printed with reproductions of Palestinian photographs and so on.

That afternoon we travelled to Jerusalem on the local bus. I hadn't realized that when I entered Israel and asked my passport not to be stamped – an Israeli stamp can make it difficult to travel in Arab countries – the security official had stamped a separate piece of paper, which was subsequently taken off me as I left the airport. In other words, I had no proof of entry into Israel. At the checkpoint, two Israeli soldiers got on the bus, armed to the teeth. They looked about 18; nervous kids with huge guns, barking commands at everyone. They flicked through my passport, noted its obvious lack, and ordered me off the bus; my friends came with me for support. It was an eerie feeling to be momentarily stranded in the middle of a brutal expanse of concrete, barbed wire and watchtowers. The soldiers were indifferent; a taxi driver helpfully pointed out where we needed to go next – a large metal shed full of claustrophobically narrow cattle grids. As we filed through, a disembodied voice told us where to go. Two more soldiers with guns sat behind thick glass; I explained my situation to them. They looked bored and let me through. I asked for another stamp. They shook their heads.



Qalandiya Checkpoint taken from the bus

Walking through the narrow lanes of the extraordinary old city of Jerusalem was like time travelling; streams of Orthodox Jews raced to the Western Wall, while the Muslim call to prayer filled the air and Christians crowded around the Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa; groups of soldiers mingled with the date sellers, rug merchants and hordes of tourists. We finally made it to the opening of [‘*Gestures in Time*’](#) curated by Katya Garcia-Anton and Lara Khaldi, which was held in two atmospheric, low-ceilinged ancient hammams at the Centre for Jerusalem Studies at Al Quds University, a stone’s throw from the Temple Mount. After baklava and tea and impassioned speeches about the importance of this exhibition to the region, and how it was an attempt ‘to reconsider how the individual can conceive of having an aesthetic and socially creative life, within and beyond a specific geography’ – along with a big thank you to all of the artists and co-workers who weren’t allowed, or able, to travel to Jerusalem – we crammed into the warren-like rooms to view well-installed work by Rheim Alkadhi, Erick Beltran, Martin Soto Climent, Julia Rometti & Victor Costales, Subversive Film, Wafa Hourani, and Uriel Orlow. Much of it dealt with the vagaries of memory and dislocation: Beltran, for example, researched underground Ramallah-based newspapers of the 1990s; Hourani’s sculptures and drawing of palmistry suggest that ‘geography is inscribed in our bodies’; Subversive Film’s single-channel video of historic footage questions ideas around the ownership of images; Alkadhi made delicate sculptures from hair and Soto Climent, who works with the ‘secret animism of found objects’ strung loaves of local bread from the ceiling alongside braille versions of Playboy magazine. (He told me that as he was attempting to travel from Paris to Tel Aviv he had had a tough time trying to explain his braille works to Israeli security, who, not au fait with the vagaries of conceptual art, suspected that they were coded messages – which they are, of course, but not the kind that threaten national security – and was forced to miss his plane.)

We then moved onto the staggeringly beautiful location of the Lutheran Church around the corner, where we sat under the stars in the courtyard and listened to a mesmerizing performance by poet (and regular frieze contributor) Quinn Latimer, who read excerpts from *Your Poem is the Letter I Write* (2012) – a series of poem/letters to people close to her and writers she admires, such as Anne Carson, her brother, Susan Sonntag and Etel Adnan. ‘Language has left them / like a lover / like a mother who has fled them ...’

From the Lutheran Church we walked to The Tile Factory and Al Ma’mal LAB and saw work by Anadiel Ruanne Abou Rahme & Basel Abbas, Amjad Ghannam, Ciprian Muresan, Tom Nicholson, Cornelia Parker, Amer Shomali, Ra’ouf Haj Yehia and Mohammed Al Hawajri. Highlights included *Comparative Monument (Palestine)* (2012) by Tom Nicholson – posters of photographs of memorials in Melbourne to Australian soldiers who died in Palestine in World War I (he also pasted these on walls around Ramallah); Cornelia Parker’s minimal wall sculpture *Bullet Drawing* (2012) which she had created from unraveling (if that’s the word) a bullet, and *Made in Bethlehem* (2012), a fascinating film study of a crown-of-thorns making family business in Bethlehem; and Abou Rahme & Basel Abbas’s gripping video and installation *The Incidental Insurgents: A Story in Parts: The Part about the Bandits* (2012) which fused three different stories about an anarchist bandit in Paris in the 1910s, a bandit gang involved in a rebellion against the British in Palestine in the 1930s and the artist-as-bandit in Roberto Bolaño’s 1998 novel *The Savage Detectives*.



Tom Nicholson, Comparative Monument (Palestine), (2012) on wall in Ramallah

After food and revelry in a local restaurant full of people dancing to the Gypsy Kings, we travelled back to Ramallah and went to the great Beit Anneeseh bar, which is owned by curator Yazan Khalili (who co-curated the YAYA, the Young Artist of the Year Award, which we saw the next day) where we sat and drank under the stars far too late into the night.

The next day we travelled for about an hour by bus along narrow, hilly, winding rows to the village of Abwein, the site of one of Riwaq's conservation projects. Khaldun Bshara was our guide. We passed the impressive buildings of Birzeit University and then Israeli settlements, high on hills and fortified amongst the olive groves; a stark, enormous house, along in a field – the Palestinian Authority guest house – which, Bshara told us, is the focus of much local anger. Apparently when the PA ran out of funds, building on the house mysteriously continued, prompting much talk of corruption and misuse of funds.



The village of Abwein

When we arrived in Abwein – a village over 10 centuries old of about 6,000 people – the outgoing mayor, (an elderly woman with a broad smile) welcomed us; then, a group of local children gave us a tour of the buildings in the old town, their eyes wide with excitement as they regaled us with a mix of local folklore, history and gossip. Artist Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh then did a lecture/performance about living in a Lebanese refugee camp and her feelings about the use of photography there; this was followed by an audio tour, *Unmade Film: The Voiceover* (2012) (which is part of a larger, still growing, body of work) by Uriel Orlow. It's a moving account of the 1948 massacre by Jewish Paramilitary groups at the village of Deir Yassin; in 1951 a mental hospital, treating Holocaust survivors (one of whom was Uriel's aunt) was erected on the site of the tragedy. As I listened to the tour on headphones, I sat on the roof of one of the old houses and looked out across the village to the retreating hills, which were bathed in golden light. The landscape looked peaceful; an old man tended goats. A group of children came up to talk to me; they were proud of their English and fascinated to hear I was from Australia. They bowed, smiled and

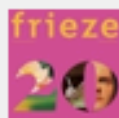


Children from Abwein giving us a tour of their village with Marie Zolamian

Back in Ramallah that evening we all attended the award ceremony for the [YAYA](#) (The Young Artist of the Year, the Hassan Hourani Award, a biennial programme that supports and promotes young Palestinian artists, which opened concurrently at the YMCA in Gaza.) Curated by Yazan Khalili, Mohammad Musallam and Reem Shilleh, the jury – Negar Azimi, Khaled Hourani, Nicola Gray, Rula Halawani and Marco Nereo Rotelli – awarded the prize to Jumana Manna for her video, a meditation on an archival photograph of a party held by Alfred Roch, a wealthy Palestinian who lived in Jaffa in the 1930s.

After another evening at Beit Anneeseh (the unofficial headquarters of the trip) it was time to go home. The taxi driver who picked me up to take me to the airport early the next morning suggested I didn't mention Ramallah at any security checks. 'Tell them I picked you up in Jerusalem' he said. When I asked him why, he shrugged, and looked weary. 'If you mention Palestine, they'll make my life hard. They'll spend hours searching my car.' He needn't have worried, though. No-one asked me where I had been.

About the author



Jennifer Higgie is co-editor of *frieze* and editor of *frieze masters*

