

Strategies Sectors | **Culture & Society**

Cultural Creations in Times of Occupation: The Case of the Visual Arts in Palestine

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Social sciences literature on Palestine, overabundant insofar as geopolitical, social and economic aspects, proves quite discrete with regard to its artistic and cultural dimensions. However, the art scene in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a particularly faithful reflection of the dynamics in contemporary Palestinian society. Here, art is not the preserve of the elite, and artists, considered spokespeople for the national interests of their homeland (*watan*), fulfil a major social role.

Occupied Palestine: a Daily Confinement

In Palestine, according to the terms of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the State of Israel is an occupying power. In the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, the occupation is manifest in various phenomena: arrests, roadblocks, a dividing wall, curfews and checkpoints preventing all free movement of Palestinians in their own territory. Those who are not residents of Jerusalem cannot enter without a permit issued by the Israeli army; the same restriction of mobility applies to all inhabitants of the West Bank, never mind the Gazans, who are collectively prohibited from leaving their micro-territory.

Since the 1993 Oslo Accords, this colonial system has been stepped up through a policy of extreme fragmentation dividing the West Bank into three zones: Zone A, under Palestinian military and civil control (less than 10% of the territory); Zone B, under Palestinian civil but Israeli military control (30% of the territory); and Zone C (60% of the West Bank with the Jordan Valley and most of its water resources) completely under Israeli (military and civil) control.

The multiplication of colonies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem continues. More than 500 checkpoints reduce Palestinian movement between towns. In addition there is the dividing wall, which has considerably aggravated their situation.¹ Gaza sustains such major restrictions of movement – not only applied by the Israeli authorities but also the Egyptian and Jordanian governments – that its 1.8 million inhabitants (one of the highest population densities in the world) are forced to live in extreme isolation.

From Art as a Tool for Resistance against Occupation...

Exile, *nakba*,² the right of return, the resistance and images of the “motherland” are the predominant topics in Palestine’s revolutionary art before Oslo (1993). Artistic creation of this period adopted a well-codified nationalist rhetoric: references to the major events of Palestinian history, recourse to geometric compositions approaching socialist realism³ and a conventional symbolic vocabulary, depiction of revolutionary slogans and the struggle against

¹ Note likewise that in 2011, Israel built a wall on the border with the Sinai and in 2015, began building another on the border with Jordan.

² To Palestinians, *nakba* means “catastrophe” or “cataclysm,” designating the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland, the destruction of nearly 600 communities and the vast majority of Palestinian political, economic and social life following the creation of the State of Israel.

occupation, as can be seen in the narrative, symbolist and figurative paintings of Sliman Mansour, Ismael Shammout, Nabil Anani and Fathi Ghaben. In this period, all of these artists were strongly repressed through censorship by the occupying power, which considered artistic activity a threat. This generation of artists has experienced prison, frequent arrests, banning of exhibits, vandalization or destruction of works and burned archives... Even the colour grouping of the Palestinian flag is banned in art! The majority of artistic production was then viewed as a tool for the promotion of the Palestinian identity and cause at the service of political parties and the PLO, which completely administered the cultural sector.

... to a Thriving Cultural Sphere Based on Civil Society

The 1990s peace process infused new life to the art scene: there was a reconfiguration of the cultural sphere with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, based in Ramallah, which became not only the political and economic capital but also the cultural one. In any case, obstacles abound: the Palestinian Authority's allocation for culture is extremely low.⁴ "Legally" responsible for culture in the Palestinian Territories, the Palestinian Authority cannot operate in Gaza or East Jerusalem, nor in Israel (where 20% of Palestinians reside). Receptiveness among the population is low: according to the Palestinian national plan, only 6% of youth participate in cultural activities.⁵

Given the Palestinian Authority's limited political and financial power, the cultural sector has made changes. An art market is being established, aided by the emergence of the Arab art market in the Gulf over the last two decades. This new art market includes the first two commercial art galleries in Ramallah – Gallery One and Zawyeh Gallery, for in-

stance. Since the late 1990s, there are exhibit spaces based on private investment or foreign funding (NGOs, consulates, foundations or international organizations) that are dedicated to promoting the visual arts: Al Wasiti Art Centre in East Jerusalem and the Anadiel Gallery are examples of the pioneers, preceding quite a few others such as the Al Maamal Foundation for Contemporary Art, the Yabous Cultural Centre and the Al Hoash Art Court in Jerusalem, and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, the Qattan Foundation, the International Academy of Art and the Al-Mahatta Gallery in Ramallah. Today, 300 civil society organizations are working in the sphere of culture⁶ and often depend on international aid. In fact, Palestine is among the ten countries receiving the most cultural aid from Europe.⁷ Due to the international nature of funding, the artists and those involved in art are part of the circuits and logic of globalized contemporary art. A relation of dependence is progressively being established, which raises sustainability issues, since the majority of the donors fund projects and not infrastructures.

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Whereas before, artists conformed to political agendas (above all Palestinian nationalism), today they follow more economic and international agen-

³ At a time when there was no contemporary art education in Palestine, many of these artists studied art in Russia, others in Egypt.

⁴ The culture allocation in the Palestinian Authority's budget is extremely limited, though in 2011, the Ministry of Culture represented 0.2 to 0.9% of the national budget. In 2013, the Minister of Culture, Anwar Abu Eiseh, estimated the amount earmarked for culture at 0.003% of the Palestinian Authority's overall budget (2013-2014 Preparatory Action 'Culture in the EU's External Relations,' Palestine Country Report, November 2013).

⁵ "Cultural Sector Strategic Plan," in *Palestinian National Plan 2011-2013*, Ministry of Culture, Palestine : www.lacs.ps/documentsShow.aspx?ATT_ID=4789

⁶ Palestinian National Authority, Ministry of Culture, National Strategic Plan 2011-2013, August 2010, p. 37, in Arabic.

⁷ <https://stats.oecd.org> and UNESCO Global Report 2015 (on the 2005 Convention), *RE|Shaping Cultural Policies: A Decade Promoting the Diversity of Cultural Expression for Development*.

das. In this “Palestine of donors”⁸ generated by the Oslo Accords, the action of civil society in the cultural sector is now focused on so-called “universal” values: “peace,” “development,” human rights, women, democracy, etc.⁹ Many Palestinians, moreover, criticize “a culture designed for an international destination,” anticipating the expectations of a Western audience.

Renewal in Artistic Expression: A Post-Nationalist Art Based on Individuality and Everyday Life

After the 1990s, the “peace process” lent the Palestinian cultural scene in the Territories new momentum while enriching debate on what Palestinian art and identity should be. Thus, new forms of artistic expression began developing, as if the artists were freeing themselves from the yoke – at times too heavy – of political ideology that has often led Palestinian art to be associated with propaganda. In regard to form, new media specific to international contemporary art have been developed, such as installation (and performance to a lesser degree), with Mona Hatoum being one of the pioneers;¹⁰ nonetheless, the medium of painting remains very important, particularly in Gaza, where the two galleries, Eltiqa and Shababik (Windows for Contemporary Art), regularly organize highly anticipated group exhibits. Representations of the occupation: the wall, checkpoints, Israeli soldiers – these are recurrent motifs in the works of artists of the new generation. But though the symbols of occupation remain in the background of artistic creation, the intent for the post-Oslo generation of artists is to show its consequences on Palestinians’ everyday life. Thus, for instance, in Khaled Jarrar’s 2012 film, *Infiltrators (al-Mutasallin)*, the artist draws the portrait of a Palestinian civil society struggling to circumvent the checkpoints. Sliman Mansour has left his symbolic, figurative style to adopt an abstract one, where the elements of occupation

are implicitly displayed in a more suggestive manner; young Bashar Khalaf takes up the paintings of his elder, Sliman Mansour, but injecting elements of surveillance associated with the occupation to emphasize the consequences on individuals’ personal lives; Steve Sabella, in his photography series, *Settlement, Six Israelis & One Palestinian*, portrays himself nude before the separation wall to show the Palestinians’ vulnerability in this everyday situation; in his figurative paintings, Hani Zurob depicts his own son amid the colonial apparatus; and finally, Mohamed Abusal, in his installations and photographs, distorts elements of his environment, revisiting it to ironically recount the precariousness of daily life in Gaza. This phenomenon of renewal has been assisted by digital development and new technologies, which provide means of symbolically skirting the barriers, in particular concerning media coverage of artworks. *Warpostering*, for instance (which consists of creating digital posters and posting them on Facebook in times of war), was very popular during the Israeli offensive against Gaza in the summer of 2014, due to its ease of execution and media power.

In these contemporary artistic creations, individuality is at the heart of their aesthetic: the art scene is progressively moving from an “art of us” to an “art of me.” In a more individualized approach to the national cause and collective involvement, the new generation of artists expresses self-criticism of Palestinian society, caught between neo-liberalism and political sclerosis since the failure of the Oslo Accords. In this context, use of the codes of contemporary art and new technologies helps mark a rupture with the conventional political repertoire. The scene is moving from a purely nationalist art to one that tends towards universalism and considers art as a struggle for human rights, as is the case with the latest Gaza film festival, the Karama Gaza Human Rights Film Festival - Red Carpet Edition, launched by film director Khalil Muzayen in 2014 following the Israeli offensive on Gaza and whose lemma was “we want to live, we want to breathe.”¹¹

⁸ SBEIH Sbeih, “La « Professionnalisation » des ONG en Palestine : entre pression des bailleurs de fonds et logique d’engagement.” Doctoral Dissertation in Sociology, Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines University, 2014.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ She is the first female Palestinian artist to gain international recognition, namely through her performance in 1982, *Under Siege*, where she spent seven hours nude in a transparent cube filled with liquid mud: a highly strenuous experience where Mona Hatoum evoked the civil war that was raging in Lebanon and caused her exile.

¹¹ [www.karamafestival.org/en/pages/82/Karama-Gaza-Human-Rights-Festi](http://www.karamafestival.org/en/pages/82/Karama-Gaza-Human-Rights-Film-Festi)

Art Scenes Fragmented and under Pressure

Echoing the geopolitical fragmentation occurring in the Territories, the Palestinian art world is characterized by its structural and identity-related fragmentation. The cultural identities of each town are highly differentiated, even competitive. Even in a single city, artists seldom organize into networks, and it is most often the virtual network (Facebook) that creates social links among them. The disconnection grows greater among cultural actors in the different territories due to visa and entry or exit permit restrictions. And the cultural offer is unequally distributed: depending on place of residence, one does not have the same access to culture and training. In 2010, according to the Palestinian Statistics Bureau,¹² 350 out of 471 cultural centres were located in the West Bank, 121 in Gaza; the six museums were all in the West Bank and 14 of the 15 theatres were in the West Bank, with only one in Gaza.

The pressure felt by artists is not only linked to the occupation, but also to conservatism within Palestinian society, though certain artists speak of an “internal occupation.” In Gaza, for instance, the ten cinemas were all closed in the 1980s by Salafist groups. Moreover, since Hamas has been in power, it censors artists attempting to criticize it. Young artists increasingly feel they are the object of occupation on multiple levels. Echoing the demands of youth movements that, in the wake of the Arab Revolutions, participated in the protests of the timid Palestinian Spring of February 2011,¹³ it is a “triple occupation” (Israel, Hamas and international aid) that these artists protest.

Art in the Context of Crisis, or the Mechanism of Social Bonding

Despite the constraints in a context of occupation, a reconfiguration of the art scene can be observed in Palestine after the Oslo Accords, characterized by a

schizophrenic duality: on the one hand, the worlds of art have been quartered in the grip of growing confinement due to increasing Israeli occupation, and on the other, the artists have been caught up in the new cultural flows allowed by an art market.

Will recent Palestinian cultural creations such as the Palestinian Museum (2016) or the transnational Qalandiya International biennial (2012), which offer a reconfiguration of the idea of a nation and its peoples, allow a fragmented society to reimagine itself and devise new conceptions of their homeland (*watan*)...? A preliminary step towards the creation of a Palestinian State?

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¹² www.pcbs.gov.ps

¹³ The young people in the group *Gaza Youth Breaks Out* (many of whom are artists, and above all musicians) called people to demonstrate on 11 February 2011 through social networking sites, expressing that they were “fed up with the ensemble of Israeli, Palestinian and international actors. Fuck Hamas, Fatah, the International Community [...]”