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Critical Paper

Contemporary Art: Reassessing the Real

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Under the broad title of contemporary art, the art world has witnessed a move from its conventional inclination towards aesthetic beauty and purity to a desire to touch the real, to works that address real life issues of diverse natures, in what can be labeled a socially, politically, culturally or even environmentally conscious art. In this sense, contemporary art encompasses the aesthetic and extends to embrace a mission of raising awareness that in itself embodies an act of resistance, a resistance that reveals itself in the form of an initiative to search for the truth or in Badiou’s terms a “passion for the real” which as Lind and Steyerl state, “calls for a renewed purge of reality from all things deemed inauthentic, a desire which spills over into reality and catalyses purges a politics of cleansing.”1 Through a variety of disciplinary practices that shed light on the documentary’s ambivalent nature and through blurring the divide between fact and fiction, contemporary art assumes the role of the critical historian in an attempt to reassess historical truths and fill in the gaps that documentary practices or historical narratives have deliberately or even innocently failed to capture and in the process, raise awareness by imposing a change of perspective; a journey that fulfills Friedrich Schiller’s notion of aesthetics that “holds the promise of both a new world of art and a new life for individuals and community.”2

While it might be argued that history is a science that deals with objective, whole and absolute truths based on factual and documentary evidence that is usually considered as the opposite of art, Walid Raad, through his Atlas Group project, has proven the fallacy of such assumption, or more precisely the shortcomings of documentation and historical narration in presenting whole and unbiased realities. “Traditional history is written as a chronology of events or a biography of participants. We are not saying that history should not include this. We are certainly saying that history cannot be reduced to this,” explains Raad.3 Through various documents, Raad has created a fictitious series of works under the title of Atlas Group in an attempt to write a recent history of the Lebanese war, an experiential history that has been subject to neglect and omission. Raad describes his works saying, “These tapes do not document what happened, but what can be imagined, what can be said, what can be taken for granted, what can appear as rational, sayable and thinkable about wars.”4

Perhaps, one of the most striking of these imaginary works in Atlas Group is the one concerning Dr. Fakhoury, who according to Raad’s imagination, was the most prominent historian of the Lebanese war and who had handed all his documents to the artist before passing away.4 In his notes, Dr. Fakhoury has recorded his Sunday meetings with major historians of the time on the racetrack. These recordings include calculations, newspaper photographs of winning horses, notes from the winning historian and their unusual bets, bets on the exact moment or fraction of a second a photographer would snap the picture of the winning horse with respect to the finish line.4 The irony of a historian documenting horse races in the time of war is thus completed by the inability of photography to capture the exact finish moment, which according to Sarah Rogers, is “a metaphor for history’s inability to seize the absence of the past in the present,”4 while Dina Al-Kassim describes it saying, “this fable of the temporal dimensions of writing history suggests that history, even the official history guaranteed in public and countersigned by institutional sanction and public repetition, is itself the invention of a moment.”5 Walid Raad, through blurring the border between fact and fiction, assigns visual representation the double task of reporting the past and questioning the authenticity or inadequacy of prevailing narratives6, making his work an act of resistance against narrow perspectives and subjective distortions that stain historical documentation and narratives.

While prevailing narratives are surrounded by an aura of non-negotiability owing it to an alleged historical authenticity, contemporary artists, through a skeptical stance translated into visual representation, have opened the doors to broader readings, making their art an invitation to reading between the lines of history in search for the truth. The necessity of a critical reading of present narratives and the notion of viewing reality from multiple frames of reference is evident in Akram Zaatari’s work which according to Rasha Salti, “defends a forgotten cause, speaks for the silenced and exposes a reality occluded from presentation.”7 In his *All is Well on the Border*, which is a clever manipulation of real life still images, archival documents and recorded interviews with people absent from dominant narratives, Zaatari questions the different representations of the resistance in the South of Lebanon and in the process presents a version of history taken from the perspective of the marginalized such as prisoners, traitors, exiled, coerced or opportunistic8, to lead his audiences to an understanding of the conditions that led to their allegiances and alliances8. His work, as Feldman explains, presents a truth that includes existential, psychological, social and economical issues, as well as fear, that certainly affected the political allegiances of the Southern inhabitants, as opposed to the prevailing ideological causes conveyed through official historical narratives.8

Zaatari’s work “conveys a history that is based on the incommunicable, personal experiences derived from daily life rather than official representations and narratives.”9 It is an initiative or a proposal to a new way of seeing the nature of resistance in the South. In this sense, it raises awareness of the deep and inherent war realities and multiple truths8 not obvious to majorities to become Enwezor’s “mode of verite” that “doesn’t confront the spectator with non-negotiable facts, as more conventional documentary does. Instead, it creates a space for an ethical encounter between spectator and the other, a space in which truth is not an abstracted mot d’ordre, but instead, as Alain Badiou proposes, a truth process.”1 Zaatari’s work is a call for the necessity of capturing truth from wider angles and countering amnesia, hence, a much needed eye-opener for a real understanding of not only the Southern war, but of war in general, to become a work that “does not reflect backwards, but projects and creates “possible worlds”.”1

In a world characterized by injustice, turmoil and unequal globalization, the failure of prevailing narratives to convey reality can also be viewed as a convenient act of manipulation or reluctance imposed by the fact that these narratives embody instruments of power that aid in the process of domination, as in the case of the Palestinian experience, which Emily Jacir, the Palestinian/American conceptual artist, tries to unveil in her work while filling the gaps that prevailing historical narratives and documents have left out.

In her multi-disciplinary works, Jacir makes use of archives, documents, images and texts to bring the Palestinian condition and history that has been the victim of an imposed amnesia, into public awareness. In her more than controversial work, *Material for a Film*, and through the story of Wael Zuaiter, the sad story of a poor, peaceful and most importantly, innocent Palestinian intellectual in exile, unjustly murdered in Italy on the hands of the Israeli Mossad, she reminds the world of the conveniently forgotten mass persecution of Palestinian intellectuals in the 1970s, in an obvious attempt to cripple a culture, a tactic typical of authoritarian regimes.10

“Our narrative, our story is absent from history books. When I made *Memorial to 418 Villages*, I chose English because the piece was made in NYC and I wanted the New York audience to be able to read the names, say them out loud and question why they had not heard them before and why that history is not in their books,”11 explains the artist whose work addresses another repressed narrative and what Agamben describes as “the condition of the country-less refugee”12 along with the broad issue of human rights, which as Hanna Arendt explains, “The very phrase “human rights” became for all concerned- victims, persecutors, or onlookers alike- the evidence of hopeless idealism or feeble minded hypocrisy.”13 In *Where we Come from*, a series of photo-text representations, in which Jacir fulfills the wishes of fellow Palestinians making use of her American passport, the artist portrays the hypocrisy of the notion human rights and presents the Palestinian experience in its human dimension where the Palestinian is reduced to the condition of “bare life”12 and where Israel emerges as Agamben’s “state of exception”12 where, as T.J. Demos explains, the suspension of laws becomes an accepted practice and the issue of human rights a hopeless ideology12. Similarly, in *Crossing* *Surda*, Jacir documents the inhumane difficulties and obstacles Palestinians encounter while crossing Israeli checkpoints, which comes in ironic contrast to a much “taken for granted” freedom of movement in *From Texas with Love,* which features an uninterrupted journey across Texas, while listening to songs suggested by fellow Palestinians deprived of the right to such freedom.

Despite the political implications of her art, Jacir’s work evades the banality of documentation and its reduction to mere political activism as it embraces human dimensions that transcend location to appropriate the reality of every exile, every refugee, every outcast, or in Demos’ terms “the one who inhabits the fissures and gaps between states and corporations and is left to the precariousness of a deregulated global sphere unbound by any rule of law.”1 Jacir’s work stands as evidence for the potential of contemporary art in questioning and rewriting history and revealing truth in its universal dimension. It is a work of resistance against a mass hypnosis practiced by prevailing documentary practices, against masking reality, the reality of the refugee, hence, a path leading towards “human emancipation”.14

“Today artistic creation is a part of human emancipation” states Badiou in his *Fifteen Theses* *on Contemporary Art*14. Contemporary art, through its attempt to touch the real and bring it to public awareness, accompanied with a reluctance to propose clear resolutions, creates a participatory mode that engages a critical thought process in its audiences, thus establishing an initiation point for the journey of reshaping the future; a journey of real change that can only start from within.

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