

Palestinian Conceptual Art

Emily Jacir, Shifting to an Art that Engages the Mind of the Viewer

For Walter Benjamin, reproducibility of art that was mainly triggered by photography withered its ‘aura’, which in return reflected on its uniqueness and originality.¹ He explained how “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it began to be based on another practice – politics”.² This change of function will gain significance few decades later in the art movement, or phenomenon as some preferred to call it, Conceptual Art. Walter Benjamin observed how the physical change in the presentation of art influenced its perception; however, in the late 1960’s, there was a need to further stretch the democratization of the art space, to further explore and question its physical appearance, and to dig deep into its essence and function. Peter Osborne identifies six main kinds of Conceptual art in which artists challenged the aesthetic definition of artworks. Of particular interest are the two kinds, which were concerned with *Politics and Ideology* and *Language*. As Osborne writes, Conceptual art “changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function.” In other words it was a change from appearance to conception.³ Just like other Conceptual artists, Emily Jacir, a Palestinian artist, aims at finding ways to make the concept of her work travel clearly to the perception. She makes an effort to make the viewer understand the work for its original purpose, and by the use of language she remote controls the viewer to a channel she sets in advance. Accordingly, if the intentions are already stated, on what basis can one review the emerging success of contemporary Palestinian Conceptual art, especially for Palestinian artists who position the Palestinian-Israeli struggle at the core of their artworks?

Palestinian artists just like artists from Latin America in the 1960’s and 1970’s who were concerned with the unstable political conditions in their countries, find in Conceptual art that is concerned with ideology and politics a means to take positions on political problems and widely raise political issues.⁴ Given that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is unending, one is bound to notice that the majority of Palestinian artists work in a Conceptual manner, and have the elements of the conflict at the core of their artworks. As Victor Burgin argues, “we must accept the responsibility

¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts* ed. David Goldblatt and Lee Brown, (Prentice Hall; Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1996), pp 72-76.

² Walter Benjamin, ‘Extracts from the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *The Photography Reader* ed. Liz Wells, (Routledge; London, 2003), p 46.

³ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (Phaidon; London ; New York, N.Y., 2002), pp 11-12.

⁴ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p 37.

of producing an art which has more than *Art* as its content”.⁵ Because Conceptual art broke free from traditional forms of presentation, it was capable of being distributed broadly and efficiently. Accordingly, to spread the message, it became natural its adoption as the preferred strategy in art creation in countries experiencing political turmoil and dispute. In theory, the role of the artist shifted from one of genius—mastering techniques—to one of an investigator, creating art that finds contentment and complexity in thought. This analysis leads us to analyze how Emily Jacir adopts visual and linguistic strategies to investigate and create the recurrent themes addressed in her work, which are borders, issues of movement, dislocation, radical displacement, and resistance.⁶ In decoding her works, it is inevitable to notice that the political factor is the main component of her work. Three artworks will be discussed here that show a powerful transition, or possibly even a transformation, from what could be argued political propagandas and nostalgic presentations to her successful piece, *Material for a Film*. Given that Conceptual art is an art of questions⁷, one notices how Jacir gradually refined her posed political questions, to come up with a highly charged and reverberating artwork.

Emily Jacir, who originally comes from Bethlehem, grew up in Saudi Arabia, went to high school in Rome, received her undergraduate and graduate studies in fine arts in America and then spent several years on the move living in Texas, Palestine, Colorado, France, and New York. She currently lives and works between Ramallah and New York City.⁸ In her artistic efforts to communicate the complex reality of Palestinians, she found in Conceptual art as her preferred strategy of working. She has gained international attention because of her ability to clearly communicate her thoughts and ideas to a large audience. Beginning her career as a painter, Jacir gradually shifted her focus to Conceptual art, where she used whatever medium she deemed necessary to express her idea or concept.⁹ Ganit Ankori, author of the contentious¹⁰ research book, *Palestinian Art*, would describe her as a hybrid of an extreme talent who operates with great success within the English-speaking West and whose creativity is enriched by oriental and occidental cultures.¹¹ T.J. Demos labels Jacir as a neo conceptualist who adopts strategies such as

⁵ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p 40.

⁶ Alexander and Bonin, ‘Emily Jacir: Accumulations’, www.alexanderandbonin.com/exhibitions/Jacir/2005/accumulations.html (accessed 1/4/2008).

⁷ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p 14.

⁸ Khalil Sakakini, ‘Emily Jacir’, www.sakakini.org/visualarts/jacir.htm (accessed 3/5/2008).

⁹ The Institute for Middle East Understanding, ‘Emily Jacir: Artist’, www.imeu.net/news/article003424.shtml (accessed 4/5/2008).

¹⁰ Joseph Massad, explains how Gannit Ankori in her book on Palestinian Art plagiarized the work of Palestinian author Kamal Boullata. The article ‘Permission to Paint: Palestinian Art and the Colonial Encounter Power’ appeared in *Art Journal*, Vol. 66/3 Fall 2007.

¹¹ Gannit Ankori, ‘Mona Hatoum: Nomadic Bodies, Exilic Spaces’, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p 124.

photo-text presentations, linguistic aspects, task-based performances, and service providing, among others.



Figure 1. Emily Jacir, *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948*, 2001.

Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948 (figure 1), which Jacir created in 2001, consists of a refugee tent like those the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) distributes to refugees. She then started with thick black thread to sew the names of these villages onto the tent. Realizing the enormous time she needed to complete her task, she opened her studio to anyone, including Israelis, to help her complete the sewing of all names. Eventually one hundred forty people participated in the project. The whole process was one of remembrance. Chiara Geraldine who reviewed the exhibition also wrote how “a community of friends and volunteers enlivened Jacir’s studio as they sewed—talking, reading ... discussing politics, singing (on many occasions musicians came to play for the stitchers), drinking, telling stories and remembering.” Furthermore, Jacir carefully chose a political title to emphasize her point, which had to be depicted in any review by the media, as she clearly expressed, “it’s unavoidable, it’s there in the title.”¹²

¹² Chiara Geraldine, ‘Memories in Exile’, www.columbia.edu/cu/museo/6/jacir/index.html (accessed 28/4/2008).

Where We Come From (figure 2 and 3) is another artwork of Emily Jacir that has a title with strong political connotations. Creating it in 2003, the work is directed at Palestinians living in exile and is based on this question: "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" The work consists of photos, related texts, and a DVD projection. Given that Jacir has an American passport, and hence no restriction of movement in Israel and Palestine she embarked in a mission to fulfill the people's wishes. Understanding the context of the artwork is crucial in relating to the work as Palestinians are still under occupation and they are denied freedom of movement and the right of return to Palestine as well. Following are some examples:

"Go to Haifa and play soccer with the first Palestinian boy you see on the street."

"Drink the water in my parents' village."

"Go to the Israeli post office in Jerusalem and pay my phone bill."

"Go to my mother's grave in Jerusalem on her birthday and place flowers and pray."

In her installation, Jacir documents the wishes and the fate or current status of the people, and what she did in order to fulfill each wish.¹³ The presentation is simple and straightforward: photographs record a visa denied, a family separated, a bill paid, and so on. A text in Arabic and English records each request and its outcome (some requests have been impossible to fulfill).¹⁴



Figure 2. Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From*, mixed media. 2001-2003.

¹³ Haupt & Binder Universe in Universe, 'Emily Jacir: Where We Come From', www.cuniverses-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2003/emily_jacir (accessed 22/4/2008).

¹⁴ Debs & Co, www.debsandco.com/jacir.html



Figure 3. Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From*, mixed media. 2001-2003.

In these two artworks, Jacir gave form to her political attitude towards one of the most enduring conflicts. It is inevitable to be reminded of the very first exhibitions on Conceptual art such as the one that took place in Berne “When Attitudes Become Form” in 1969. One is also bound to realize that the context (or even the concept) carries the burden of meaning, rather than the actual presentation itself.¹⁵ This conforms to what critic Brian O’Doherty who wrote in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1970), “As Modernism gets older, context becomes content.”¹⁶ The context is essential in assessing Palestinian art today, and allows us to review artworks critically. Accordingly, the political environment that Jacir works in acts as a trigger to her creations, and as spectators we are expected to relate to these politics.

Furthermore, there are two main factors emerging from analyzing these two artworks of Jacir. The first is the fact that both were collaborative experiences, and second the written and spoken words were the nucleus of the artworks. It could be argued that Jacir did not need to resort to photographic illustrations that materialized the people wishes, taking into consideration that Conceptual art de-emphasized the art object and explored the role of language (including the spoken language) in shaping our knowledge of the world and our conception of art.¹⁷ Conceptual art stressed on the idea that not all works of art need to ‘beheld’, to use a term Michael Fried advocated, or art can also be ‘anti-retinal’, in consistency with the legacy of Duchamp who is considered the Father of Conceptual art. Sol Lewitt, a prominent conceptual artist published in 1969, in the first issue of *Art-Language* a set of protocols for the movement. In the tenth sentence

¹⁵ Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (Reaktion; London, 1999), p 4.

¹⁶ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube : the Ideology of the Gallery Space* (University of California Press; Berkeley, Calif. ; London, 1999), p 15.

¹⁷ Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge ; New York, 2003), back cover.

on “Sentences on Conceptual Art” he wrote: “Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.”¹⁸ As can be understood, he gave emphasis to the importance of the idea or concept, rather than the visual results. The tent itself in Jacir’s work stood as a delicate symbol that united these two factors (collaboration and language), and the photographs in the second exhibition acted as mediators to illustrate the people’s wishes. Jeff Wall indicates how many Conceptual artworks are in the form of photographs or are mediated by them.¹⁹

By any means, the artist’s invitation to spectators to participate in the creation or completion of the work sheds light on the social aspect of Conceptual art. Given that spectators are given the opportunity to be involved in the work and often to complete it, whether physically, or imaginatively, this leads one to question the authorship of the work. Who is the author, or in other words, who is the maker of the work? Spectators have become coauthors of the work,²⁰ something that characterizes artists working in a Conceptual manner. Because of the collaborative nature of Jacir’s artworks, and given that her themes are particularly sensitive, nostalgia is perhaps unavoidable. Nostalgia is a form of homesickness deriving from the Greek words for “pain” and “return”. “Artists who locate their work in linear time risk being dismissed as “merely” nostalgic.”²¹ In other words, “Nostalgia” suggests sentimentality, and in my opinion it overpowers the concept, as it starts to acquire a form by itself, taking away from the artwork major parts of its strength.

The subjects that Emily Jacir handles in her artworks like those of borders, movement, dislocation, radical displacement, and resistance have been the focal point of many Palestinian artists in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Diaspora. In the process of national liberation, all of these subjects are of importance and they naturally acquire symbolic status. Artistically though, Palestinian artists who managed to escape nostalgic, illustrative, and symbolic attributions, I would like to propose the argument, are those who managed to produce a ‘form’ or a ‘structure’ that is distinctive and which adheres to the claim that “Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions.”²² Hence, Palestinian Conceptual art, which is geared by politics, becomes a question of ‘form’, and once the ‘form’ is carefully considered in consistence with the concept, the artwork transcends its locality to communicate to wider audiences. Therefore,

¹⁸ Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Blackwell; Oxford, 1991) pp 30-47.

¹⁹ Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art”, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press [distributor]; Los Angeles, 1995), p 253.

²⁰ Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, p 23-25.

²¹ Michael Flanagan, ‘The Backward Glance - Nostalgia in Art’, *Art Journal*, no. 15 (1996).

²² Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, p 49.

to review artworks like those of Jacir, and because of the already stated intentions, one should see if all of the elements that make the work and the concept work coherently together.

Perhaps a brief jump to the work of Conceptual artist Mouna Hatoum, a renowned Palestinian artist, is necessary to illustrate this idea as “no one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austere and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively”²³ like her. The form in her work continuously renews itself, and accordingly she insures the development of what could be termed as a new Conceptual art.²⁴ Using different materials such as hair, steel, soap, marbles, rubber, wire, metal and string she expresses concepts of exile, dislocation and dispossession, among other related subjects. Studying her artworks, one is bound to notice the connecting factor in all of them. Hatoum “chose the material [which represents the form] as an extension of the concept or sometimes in opposition to it, to create a contradictory/repulsion, fascination and revulsion.”²⁵ In other words, what mattered to her most was the concept, however, for her concepts to emerge she mediated them through highly charged, coded and often ambivalent visual forms. Such forms, and because of the above stated attributes allow for multiple meanings. Distinction has to be made between formalism and form. In art theory, formalism is the concept that the artistic value of a work of art should be determined by its form in terms of its purely visual aspects such as color, texture, shape, composition and so on. It deemphasized the significance of context, content and intention in the work of art. Traditional aesthetics limited itself by attempting to determine meaning within that form, where in Conceptual art, form is mainly a mediator that helps to elucidate the desired intentions of the artist, while placing them in the right context.²⁶ In that regard, Hatoum carefully chooses her ‘forms’, and is highly aware how her visuals engage first and foremost the intellect. Notice below, how her giant sculpture *Mouli-Julienne (x21)* which is a dramatically enlarged rotary vegetable shredder, is menacing; especially because it gives the feeling that when standing in front of it, one is shrunk in size (figure 4).²⁷ This is one reading of the work, however, a more in depth one exposes the hardship and complexity of living in exile or in new alienating environments. It is this ambivalent relationship that she creates between the form and the concept, or between the visual and the mind that makes Hatoum an exceptional and an international artist.

²³ Mona Hatoum, *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (Tate Gallery; London, 2000), p17.

²⁴ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Blackwell Pub; Malden, Mass.; Oxford, 2003), p 863.

²⁵ Mona Hatoum, *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land*, p28.

²⁶ Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, pp 28-45.

²⁷ Mona Hatoum, *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land*, p27.



Figure 4. Mona Hatoum *Mouli-Julienne* (x21) 2000, mild steel main sculpture: 425 x 325 x 560 cm
discs: each 210 cm diameter at the Tate Britain.

When Emily Jacir liberates herself from nostalgic collaborative experiences, a clear shift occurs in her visual sophistication that wins her international recognition. The questions she poses in her work are more complex, and her presentation becomes extremely refined. This leads her to deal with the core issue, rather than the nostalgic side effects of the Palestinian Israeli conflict. Similarly, the viewer is drawn deeply into the artwork, and is intrigued to pose many questions. Such kinds of work more revealing and daring. Emily Jacir's *Material for a Film*, created in 2006, comprised of 1,000 blank books shot by the artist with a .22 caliber gun, mixed media and photographs. It was commissioned for the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, *Zones of Contact*.²⁸ Following is a brief description of the work. For clarity, the description is quoted from the artist's statement:

"On Monday October 16, 1972, Wael Zuaiter left Janet Venn-Brown's apartment and headed to his apartment at No. 4 Piazza Annibaliano in Rome. He had been reading A Thousand and One Nights on Janet's couch searching for references to use in an article he was planning to write that evening. He took two buses to get from Janet's place to his in northern Rome. Just as he reached the elevator inside the entrance to the building of the apartment block where he lived, Israeli assassins fired 12 bullets into his head and chest with 22 calibre pistols at close range. Wael Zuaiter had become the first victim in Europe of a series of assassinations committed by Israeli agents on Palestinian artists, intellectuals and diplomats that was already underway in the Middle East.

²⁸ *Material for a Film*: Retracing Wael Zuaiter (Part 1), 'The Electronic Intifada' www.electronicintifada.net/v2/article7098.shtml (accessed 05/05/2008).

A thirteenth bullet pierced his volume 2 of A Thousand and One Nights and got lodged in its spine. One of Wael's dreams was to translate A Thousand and One Nights directly from Arabic into Italian. He had been working on this project since his arrival in Italy in 1962. To this day an Italian translation from the Arabic does not exist. In 1979, Wael Zuaiter's companion of eight years, Sydney-born artist Janet Venn-Brown published For A Palestinian - A Memorial to Wael Zuaiter. One chapter, titled Material for a Film by Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro, consists of a series of interviews conducted with the people who were part of Wael's life in Italy, including Janet herself. They were going to make a film, but Elio Petri died shortly afterwards and the film was never made.

I went back to Rome in 2005 to continue collecting material for a film.”²⁹



Figure 5. Emily Jacir, *Material for a Film*, 2006 at the Biennale of Sydney. This is part of the installation.

As can be seen above (figure 5), part of the installation featured 1,000 blank books. One of the main characteristics of artists using a conceptual form of art is the fact that all planning and decisions are made beforehand and that the “execution is a perfunctory affair.”³⁰ Considering that Conceptual art is also an art of defiance, it is not surprising to know that the artist underwent shooting range practice in Sydney, Australia, specifically to target these books (figure 6). They

²⁹ Haupt & Binder Universe in Universe, ‘Emily Jacir: Where We Come From’, www.cuniverses-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2003/emily_jacir (accessed 22/4/2008).

³⁰ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p846.

were shot with a .22 caliber pistol which was the same gun used by the Israeli Mossad when they assassinated Zuaiter. One sees considerable maturity compared to her earlier works. Evidently, she has moved from the realm of posing questions and expecting answers, and collaboration, to an installation that primarily questions the viewer. The artwork also asks the viewer to formulate an opinion and in one-way or another to also ‘form an attitude’. It responds meaningfully to her concept, and is still capable of stirring emotions, but what is novel at this point is her ability to transform these emotions to questions, rather than nostalgia. In other words, when the work becomes “emotionally dry”, to use a term Sol LeWitt adopted, the work becomes mentally more intriguing to the spectator.³¹ Her success also lies in creating an installation that possesses a particular form that was stripped visually into its essence. This thorough visual analysis or investigation, in my opinion, is epitomized when she photographed each page of volume two of the book (which Zuaiter had in his pocket and where one of the thirteenth bullets had gone through, until she could no longer see marks or imprints from the bullet (figure 7). The depicted elements are not present for their morphological shapes, but rather are there to serve for a purpose—a function.



Figure 6 - Emily Jacir fires at 1,000 blank books at a shooting range in Sydney, Australia.

³¹ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p847.



Figure 7. One of the 13 bullets fired at Wael Zuaiter hit volume two of *One Thousand and One Nights* which Zuaiter carried on him when he assassinated by the Israeli Mossad in Rome, Italy on 16 October 1972.

Every language requires grammar to create meaning and enable communication. Writers and authors, for example, have to know the linguistic grammar in order to make structure and coherence. In the case of Hatoum or Jacir; ‘form’ becomes the grammar of the total work and the means for communication. It is like the skeleton of the work. Any ‘visual irregularities’ in the form weaken the coherence or unity of the whole work. Good Conceptual artists understand the danger “in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work....”³² It is precisely this change that occurred in Jacir’s work. In her former works, the materials she used surpassed the concept and coated the work with nostalgic layers, where as in *Material for a Film*, the materials are in support of the concept and do not replace it. Because of their articulated arrangements, just like in language, they are in grammatical order to convey a predetermined meaning. What matters for Emily Jacir, is the idea and the concept as she clearly articulated. The fact that she manages to transcend the locality of the context and to bring it to international attention highlights her skill in communicating with an international audience. She has in my view transcended her American and Palestinian citizenship, and has chosen to become now a citizen of the world.

³² Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p849.

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