

PERTURBED VISIONS

By Nat Muller

Writing in the summer of 2015, the news is dominated by who is in or out. Grexit or Brexit¹, anxious speeches by European politicians worrying about the vulnerability of their borders as desperate migrants and refugees arrive, if they're lucky, on the shores of Lampedusa and Kos, or attempt to cross from Calais into Britain. In the Middle East, the territorial gains of ISIS have reconfigured political maps in Iraq and Syria, causing massive internal displacement, while Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan are struggling to cope with the influx of refugees fleeing the wars.

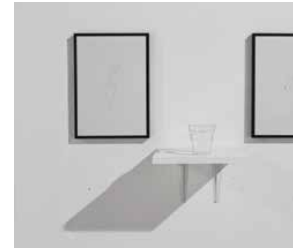
Borders, boundaries, and walls - natural or manmade, physical or ideological (but often both) - always define inside from outside. These borders are much more than just territorial and geographic. More often than not, they are about fear of "the other," intended to keep the outside from the inside or, in the case of ghettos, keep the inside from getting to the outside. The default setting in times of crisis is primal and survivalist: barricading oneself in. The effects of this strategy - as that other crisis - the global economic downturn has shown us, has produced social polarisation and has sharpened wealth inequality and deprivation. Increasingly bogged down by lack of opportunity, crumbling social services, and caught up in an endless web of precariousness and debt, the prospects for the 99%² are not exactly rosy in anything-goes hyper-capitalism. In that respect, the banking crisis has demonstrated that even when the economic system reaches its limits and collapses, the boundaries of what is ethical, let alone decent, turn out to have been extremely malleable.

It has been invoked endlessly and with hindsight, we can almost smile at its naiveté, but many across the world hoped for a world without walls when in 1989 Germans on the

Eastern and Western side of Berlin cried, "Tear down the Wall!" The Iron Curtain fell and the Cold War (1945-1991) ended, and with it a division of the world into an Eastern and Western bloc. For a very short moment a world seemed possible where there would be freedom of movement, of people, and of ideas. Recent history has crushed these hopes forcefully. If anything, the past two decades have been reigned by a political culture based on an ideology of inclusion/exclusion. The Israeli Separation Wall cuts like a scar through the Palestinian landscape; the US-Mexican Border Wall spans well over 2000 miles; Hungary is building its own wall along the Serbian border, intended to keep migrants arriving from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq out; and most recently, Turkey started its own wall along the Syrian border.

Walls do not only block the view, they symbolically also block vision. The artists in the exhibition *Walls and Margins*, many themselves from places that have suffered through strife, war, and occupation, focus on the porosity of boundaries and barriers. More specifically, not only do they unpack how our ways of seeing are conditioned and therefore limited, but also, they scramble our perception and our gaze. Sometimes they are standing at the margins looking in, but often they peer between the cracks and crevices of walls, through nooks and crannies, and across the fence. They take multiple vantage points, and translate this conceptually, as well as materially through their work.

As for vantage points, whether you're a glass half-full or half-empty person obviously depends on your point of view, or as Lebanese artist Charbel-Joseph Hage Boutros might imply in his installation *Mixed Water, Lebanon, Israel* (2013), on your geopolitics. A glass of



Mixed Water, Lebanon, Israel
by Charbel-Joseph H. Boutros

water, holding equal amounts of Lebanese mineral water (Sohat) and Israeli mineral water (Eden), is placed on a small wooden shelf. Mounted on the wall, on one side a small, framed print in the shape of Lebanon, on the other side, an identical-looking print, but in the shape of Israel. Placed in the middle of a white background, only the countries' border contours are represented. These neighbouring enemy states look as if they are floating in a vacuum; nothing suggests that in reality they share territorial borders. The glass takes on a paradoxical function here. It operates on the one hand as a dividing line, a physical border, separating these two countries. On the other hand, the water in the glass performs a dilution of borders. We cannot distinguish between Lebanese and Israeli water in the glass; in the end it is all just water that will eventually evaporate. The artist further puts both countries on a par by his minimalist presentation: the drawings are each meticulously positioned at the same

¹ "Grexit" points to a Greek exit from the Eurozone. Cfr. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_withdrawal_from_the_eurozone [last accessed 6.9.2015]. "Brexit" points to a British exit from the European Union. Cfr. www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/brexit [last accessed 6.9.2015]

² The "99%" was used as a political slogan during the Occupy Wall Street movement (2011) referring to the large income gaps between the 1% wealthiest in the US and the other 99%.

Photograph courtesy of Grey Noise Gallery

distance from the glass. Visually, there seems to be no hierarchy, yet, the whole project takes on another dimension knowing that Hage Boutros, a Lebanese citizen, cannot travel to Israel. Borders become hard once again, whilst the piece's effective minimalism is equally deceiving. Our attention is commanded by the consolidating glass of water in the centre of the installation, yet the real field of action, subtly plays itself out at the margins of the piece. The artist has fixed a pin on both maps, designating the water's spring. For Lebanon's Sohat this is in the Falougha Mountains, for Israel's water this is in the settlement of Katzrin in the Golan Heights, illegal under international law. Water, a scarce resource in the region, and a crucial commodity in Israel's politics of occupation, is anything but innocent in this piece.

Time and territory are of utmost importance when thinking of the strategic creation of cartographies, particularly when establishing "facts on the ground." These are issues that have long concerned many Palestinian artists and it is therefore no coincidence that their work features strongly in this exhibition.

Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar, too, conflates notions of innocence and unity with his *Buddy Bear* (2013) sculpture, made from reconstituted concrete from Israel's Separation Wall. The "Buddy Bears" project started originally in Berlin in 2001 as an urban art project with bears – Berlin's coat of arms – of various decorative designs across locations in the German capital. Later the project developed into "United Buddy Bears," an international exhibition promoting peace and harmony representing the 140 countries recognised by the UN. Though Palestine had to wait till October 30th 2014 for a majority of the UN member states to recognise the State of Palestine, a Palestinian Buddy Bear was already exhibited along other national bears in a United Buddy Bears exhibition in 2007 in Jerusalem. The artist makes a wry comment on the hypocrisy of what nationhood means. The symbol of unification of a once divided city, Berlin, is on show in another divided city, Jerusalem. What is important here is that Jarrar leaves his own bear unadorned. Like the other objects that he has fashioned out of reconstituted pieces of the Separation Wall, such as footballs, ping pong rackets and basketballs, the roughness and imperfection of the material lends them a degree of weathered monumentality. Jarrar chips away at the wall in order to collect enough fragments that he then pulverises into a fresh cement mixture for his sculpture moulds. Cement is a contested material in Palestine. Not only is it used by Israel to erect its wall and roadblocks for checkpoints, in Palestine it is needed to reconstruct the destruction wrought by bombing campaigns, even though in Gaza restrictions on building materials are still in place. As such, the repurposing of an embargoed material of conflict for the creation of an artwork is in and by itself a defiant gesture.

A similar strategy of transforming material can, for example, also be found in Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed's *Sphere I* (2006), a ring

made out of metal razor wire. Used as a deterrent, barbed wire secures perimeters and cordons off inside from outside. However, here it is unclear where inside and outside exactly begin and end, and which threat is being fended off. Deceptively perfect in its form and simplicity, Abdessemed's large sphere combines fragility with aggression, and constitutes a poetic work of art out of an unlikely material.

Other material transformations are manifest in the practice of Los Angeles-based artist Walead Beshty's *FedEx* series (2005-ongoing). Monikers of globalisation and mobility, courier services such as FedEx deliver goods across the globe, crossing continents and borders. The trajectory from sender to addressee can be tracked, but usually we pay little attention to the details of this journey, as long as our package arrives on time. In his work, Beshty has materialised the effect of time and travel on an object. He ships shatterproof glass works in the shape and size of generic FedEx packaging, in that packaging, from his studio to the exhibition venue. At the venue both glass and packaging are exhibited side by side. Not only does this work shake up notions of copy and original, but it also poses the question of whether the glass piece is the actual artwork and the packaging is merely a carrier? Or whether the packaging, rendered unique by its stamps, shipping bills and barcodes is the actual original and the singular artwork? Every time Beshty ships the work, something happens during the course of travel: the glass becomes more cracked, the packaging more dented. It accrues the marks of travel over time and both objects continuously

change. As such, Beshty has scripted temporality in his objects. Or as he puts it himself, "No box cracks like any other. Before it gets shipped, all you can see is the box's form, but what starts to overwhelm the shape itself is travel, the accumulation of cracks being dependent on whatever pathway it takes through the world."³ In other words, FedEx' advertising slogan "The World On Time," wherein geographical space and time collapse, acquires a wholly different interpretive layer here.

Time and territory are of utmost importance when thinking of the strategic creation of cartographies, particularly when establishing "facts on the ground." These are issues that have long concerned many Palestinian artists and it is therefore no coincidence that their work features strongly in this exhibition. Artist Larissa Sansour has become very adept at creating her own "facts on the ground" in her futurist scenarios for a viable Palestinian State. As prospects for a Palestinian State with territorial contiguity are increasingly dimming, Sansour puts forward a proposal for a Palestinian state concentrated into a prime, vertical Palestinian real estate location: a colossal high-rise stretching into the clouds, which houses the entire Palestinian population. Each Palestinian city has its own floor, so that annoying and time-consuming checkpoints or clandestine dirt road detours are bypassed. Just use the elevator! *Nation Estate* (2011-2012) is a comprehensive project that consists of a 9-minute sci-fi short film and a photo series. For this exhibition Sansour



Buddy Bear
by Khaled Jarrar

Photograph courtesy of Gallery One

³ Cf. www.buddy-bear.com, last accessed 15 August 2015]

⁴ Mikkel Carl, "Interview Walead Beshty", www.konsthal.malmoe.se/upload/pdf/Walead_Beshty_Interview.pdf [Last accessed 15 August 2015]

shows the print *Nation Estate - Living the High Life* (2012), the Nation Estate lobby poster shown in the film that welcomes visitors and residents to live "the high life." As with other skyscrapers, height is a trait of status, power and wealth. In this case it also alludes covertly to isolation. The work is based on the iconic "Visit Palestine" poster designed by Franz Kraus in 1936, issued by the Tourist Association of Palestine, a Zionist development agency. In the original we see an olive tree framing the city of Jerusalem with the monumental Dome of the Rock and its golden cupola, placed in the centre. In Sansour's version we see that same olive tree, but Jerusalem is substituted for a compound of skyscrapers – the Nation Estate building – surrounded by the Separation Wall. We can assume that the residents of Nation Estate will see the Old City of Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock when they peer out of their windows from the top floor. The view and the dream of Jerusalem can thus be desired and consumed from a safe distance. It is of course no coincidence that Sansour echoes the utopian lingo of luxury property development, promising its residents a tailored and personalised "living experience" in a gated community. In real life, many Palestinians literally live in gated communities, fenced off and walled-in, minus the luxury amenities. The worlds and futures Sansour has created might not be ideal and do not fulfil the national aspirations of the Palestinian people, far from it, but they do embrace and insist on the value - and agency - of exploration. Fantastical and dystopic (with a trickster twist) as Sansour's narratives may be, they do achieve pulling the perception of Palestine and the discourse on it, out of the stasis of its political *status quo*.

The vantage point of the poster is of someone looking on the Nation Estate tower from afar, though we know from the project's film that Sansour herself actually lives in the tower. Nevertheless, in the closing scene, stroking her pregnant belly, she defiantly peers out of the window, across the wall, onto Jerusalem. This shifting of gazes is telling. It is also what defines the work of Palestinian artists Sliman Mansour and Steve Sabella in this exhibition, as well as Tunisia-born painter Nadia Ayari. Sliman Mansour, one of Palestine's most influential artists of the post-*Nakba* generation⁵, is well-known for his distinct use of Palestinian iconography that ties Palestinian identity to its land, such as the city of Jerusalem, village life, orange and olive harvests and other agricultural activities. He was also instrumental in channelling the Palestinian ideological concept of *Sumud*, steadfastness, into art. In *From Birzeit* (1998), Mansour depicts, what would be otherwise

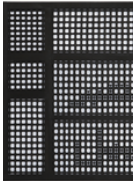
an idyllic landscape scene of rocks, fields and olive groves, from his hometown of Birzeit, near Ramallah. Mansour's composition, however, consists of individual similar-sized oil paintings that have been stuck onto a concrete slab. The spacing between the paintings produces a grid, which results in a fragmentation of the image, akin to prison bars. This is a view in which the land is partitioned and visual access, let alone physical access, is disrupted. It is a common reality for many Palestinians who suffer land confiscation and are barred from entering their own properties. In *From Birzeit* there is an additional rub between the organic softness of the earthy-toned landscape and the harsh coldness of the prime material of the built environment, concrete. In this respect, the work functions as an omen of what is to happen to this vista.

Similar sensibilities, though articulated in a radically different style, can be found in Nadia Ayari's oil painting *The Fence* (2007), in which a giant eyeball stares at the viewer through a fence. Or perhaps it is the other way round, and the eye, which Ayari sees as a symbol for our conscious experiences⁶, is ogling an imprisoned viewer. In any case, the dynamics between captivation and captivity of our gaze is fuzzy. This is taken up a notch by Jerusalem-born photographer

Steve Sabella's series of photographic collages *Metamorphosis* (2012). The work featured in the exhibition shows segments of the Separation Wall multiplied in a dizzying motif. There is no top or bottom here, no sky or ground, the wall is reduced to pure pattern that confuses our way of looking. The artist describes the project as a "conflict between form and function, between visualisation and perception," in which, if he manages to transform part of the wall into pure form, then he will somehow have defeated what it represents. It becomes "part of [his] building blocks. It will be muted⁷." The frenetic and tumultuous pattern appears to have no beginning and no end and resonates with Sabella's own biography of being uprooted and living in exile. And yet, though the pattern appears hermetic, it is frayed at the edges and hints at a transitional process. History has taught us that if walls can be put up, they can also be knocked down.

Sabella strikes a cautious note of hope in an otherwise bleak reality. Though many of the works in the exhibition *Walls and Margins* are far from optimistic, the possibility of change, no matter how modest, is palpable. Change, seeing things differently, does require a certain degree of patience. German-Egyptian artist Susan Hefuna brings these sentiments together poetically in her work *Al Sabr Gamil* (2007), which translates from Arabic as "Patience is Beautiful." Hefuna's work encapsulates her hyphenated identity - born to an Egyptian father and German mother. This state of in-between-ness, of being both

on the inside and the outside is articulated through her use of the *mashrabiya*, a traditional Arab architectural ornament fitted on the windows or other openings of buildings, which filters the sunlight and funnels cool air into the interior of the home. The intricate latticework allows those on the inside of the house to observe the goings-on outside on the street, without being noticed. In other words, the *mashrabiya* facilitates seeing for those on the inside while blocking the view for those on the outside. As such, in its traditional use, it is a perforated screen that makes the boundaries between public and private porous. Hefuna's *mashrabiya*, however, is a hybrid object that on the one hand retains its original reference as an ornamental frame, yet on the other hand becomes an art object expressing a popular adage. There is, nevertheless, still a language barrier. The meaning of the Arabic words "Al Sabr Gamil," written in Arabic script on the *mashrabiya*, is accessible to an Arabic-speaking audience, but inaccessible for a non-Arabic speaking audience. Hefuna's work thus resonates differently depending on where it is shown, thus her *mashrabiya* becomes a mediating frame between cultures. In much of her oeuvre, points of view, what we can or cannot see converge with markers of identity and locality. Nevertheless, Hefuna is always careful to point out that these markers are in flux and under the right conditions, open to change or reinterpretation. Perhaps this is the lens through which to view the works in *Walls and Margins*; not only as mere exercises in beauty and patience, but as testaments to perseverance and resistance.



Al Sabr Gamil
by Susan Hefuna

⁵ See for a comprehensive discussion on Sliman Mansour: Gamnit Ankori, "Earth: Sliman Mansour and the Poetics of Sumud", *Palestinian Art. London: Reaktion Books, 2006*, P.60-92.

⁶ Cfr. Maymanah Farhat, "In Conversation with Artist Nadia Ayari", *Jadaliyya*, March 10 2014, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/16825/in-conversation-with-artist-nadia-ayari [last accessed 15 August 2015]

⁷ Dorothea Schoene, "Steve Sabella's Ecdysis: The Catharsis of Metamorphosis", *Contemporary Practices - Volume XI* (2012), P.116-119, P. 118.

⁸ Ibid 6