

HAMZAMOLNAR Indicated by Signs Contested Public Space, Gendered Bodies, and Hidden Sites of Trauma in Contemporary Visual Art Practices

Indicated by Signs began in the summer of 2008 as a loosely formulated and process-driven visual art project by six curators working between Cairo, Fez, Rabat, Beirut, Bonn, Hamburg and Berlin. The initial underlying theme of the project was the depiction of forms of appearance in contemporary artistic practices. Investigating how class, age, ethnicity, profession and sexuality influence the appearance of individuals, Indicated by Signs reflected on how these categories are negotiated in different cultural and political contexts.

Two years down the line, after multiple meetings and residencies, artist talks, presentations, performances and workshops, culminating in an exhibition at the Bonner Kunstverein in July 2009, this book, Indicated by Signs: Contested Public Space, Gendered Bodies, and Hidden Sites of Trauma in Contemporary Visual Art Practices, is presented as a series of endnotes to a multi-layered project.

The book builds on the traditional format of the exhibition catalogue while not necessarily restricting itself to its limitations. Rather than focus on a retroactive documentation and reflection of the various spatial or chronological stages of the project, or the original point of departure for Indicated by Signs, the structure of the publication follows a logic designed upon three key leitmotifs – as the title suggests – which are often not mutually exclusive. These lines of enquiry were formulated through an intensive scrutinization of the artworks presented by the participating artists and the disciplines from which they draw their inspiration. At the last stage of this morphing project is a desire to elaborate upon the vast mass of cultural references from which these artistic positions stem.

In addition to surveying the various artworks and approaches accumulated throughout the project, a principal impulse driving the editorial process has been the creation of a platform for new artistic production. The publication is an assemblage of sorts consisting mainly of ‘site-specific’ contributions conceived for the capacities of a publication: essays, scholarly texts, conversations

and art projects, developed in dialogue with the editors. Tones and approaches vary, not only from one text/project to the other, but also sometimes within contributions. Shifting between theoretical and lyrical to analytical, introspective and critical, the degrees of density are deliberate and shape a difficult discursive terrain.

Urban public space as a highly contested and troubled field in a hegemonic global world system is a recurring view in many works of art, thus yielding an array of politically charged discourses and questions. How do we confront the opaque and gradual privatization of public space at the expense of less privileged groups? How do we navigate ourselves among emerging surveillance systems that dominate urban environments, and subsequently, how do we operate in cities located within conservative, dogmatic and control-driven societies?

In the newly commissioned essay by cultural theorist Omnia El Shakry The Body Doubled: Artistic Strategies, the Body, and Public Space the author examines art projects showcased at the Bonner Kunstverein, approaching them via Jacques Ranciere’s theory of the political in art. El Shakry distills four abstract strategies: dispersion, lingering, crisscrossing, and data doubles, to highlight how artists tackle the implications and complexities of appearance and invisibility in public space.

El Shakry takes a close look at the performative project by the German artist group LIGNA, entitled Radioballet: Exercise in Unnecessary Staying (2002). LIGNA challenges the legal aspects, and consequences of the “misuse” of public space by conducting a choreographed communal performance in a German railway station operated remotely through radio broadcast. For this publication, once again, the group of artists places public space in the center of their investigation through a contribution that takes the form of meandering dialogue that is both poetic and association driven. Inspired by their residency in Beirut, the text revisits iconic sites of trauma, such as Martyr’s Square and the disappearance of traces of memory in this charged city.

When analyzing the photographic project Sleepers (2006–2007) by Yto Barrada, El Shakry employs the strategy of lingering to frame the ambiguity of the images and the indeterminacy of their subjects. The hooded bodies of sleeping Moroccans before the illegal and treacherous journey to the West are cast as strangers who are invading Tangier’s public parks. This brings into relief the brutal marks of exclusion in a capitalist world economy.

When one cannot read the original language, one rapidly loses oneself in translations (veils, fringes or clothing...) (2010) is the title of Katrin Mayer’s artist pages. This visual essay addresses the fight over public space maintaining a lyrical tone while instrumentalizing intuitive instincts. She designs a space in which quotations and visual fragments – culled from such sources as the internet, pages from novels and images by the artist – are loosely bound in a rumination about covering the body and fabric as a surface containing meaning.

The publication contains another visual essay based on similar methodological principles: thorough research that digs out vast amounts of seemingly disconnected historical material, a penchant for storytelling and the belief in the capacity of the visual to suggest unexpected but revealing relationships between historical documents, ideas and critical concepts.

The project in question by Cologne-based artist, Matti Braun is titled [Pierre](#) (2010) as was his solo exhibition in L'appartement 22 in Rabat. Both pieces were born out of a research residency that brought him to Fez, Rabat and Casablanca as well as to Dakar, Senegal. Braun's pages display a similar quality to many of his installation spaces, a potent atmosphere and clear cut aesthetics.

Mixing a wealth of historical material from public and private archives and personal images, [Pierre](#) refers to an untold and unusual story of art, politics and intrigue. The visuals reconstruct abstract fragments of the path of a controversial German artist, Arno Breker who worked for King Hassan II of Morocco and President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal in the 1960s and 1970s. During his stay in Morocco, Breker witnessed a failed coup d'état against King Hassan II at his summer palace in Skhirat, today a beach holiday destination for Moroccans and foreigners alike. In a particularly relevant passage that sums up Braun's approach, Curator Christiane Meyer-Stoll explains, "Braun is particularly interested in the paths taken by cultural exchange; he therefore interweaves heterogeneous historical and personal truths, opens and shifts standpoints, intermingles internal and external realities."

While the contested nature of public space has been the underpinning problematic of the first leitmotif of the book, the construction of gender identities is a main preoccupation of the second. Mahmoud Khaled's [Google Me](#) (2008–2010) is an intriguing and playful example. When invited to give the obligatory artist talk during an international residency program at a London-based institution in 2008, Khaled confounded the audience's expectations by delivering a precise performative lecture about public appearance/disappearance in which he seamlessly collapses two professional artistic personae and oeuvres into one. Throughout the lecture, and later in a reinterpretation of the project for this publication, Khaled elusively merges his persona as a visual artist from the Middle East with all the associations it carries with that of a successful London-based male belly dancer of Egyptian descent, Khaled Mahmoud, who he accidentally discovered while googling his own name. Khaled's fascination with cultural, professional and gender preconceptions and belly dance performers continues in his single-channel video installation [This Show Is my Business](#) (2009), a fifteen-minute video portrait of a Turkish choreographer and performer shown at the Bonner Kunstverein. Mirroring Khaled, Ozgen, the video's protagonist, confronts viewers with a candid self-representation that undermines stereotypical misconstructions of profession, ethnicity and gender.

Equally as wry is Akram Zaatari's photo-based project [Another Resolution](#) (1998–2009), which is the focus of anthropologist Mark

Westmoreland's interview with the artist. [Another Resolution](#) revisits a dated tradition of taking naked photographic portraits of one's offspring. Zaatari presents the original collected photographs side-by-side with photographs and videos of adults, mostly friends of the artist, who reenact the staged poses of the children. In his seemingly minimal gesture, Zaatari wittingly reveals how these images represent the desires and expectations of parents. "What we are talking about is how children become territory to inscribe social identities," says Zaatari in the conversation, making clear that in his ongoing critical research on the history of photography he is also investigating such issues as the power of images in the formation of prescribed gender roles. Photography is far more than just a document of human behavior. Zaatari's experiment hints at the potential of the medium to inscribe something in our collective memory.

In his newly commissioned essay [Limits on Discussion: The Rhetoric of Homosexuality and Gender in Middle Eastern Visual Art](#), cultural historian and writer Joseph Pearson narrows the discourse on gender identities and elaborates on the cultural, political and social implications of same-sex practices in the Middle East. He focuses specifically on how these contested issues are addressed in artistic practice.

He begins his text by outlining the heated debate between Columbia University professor Joseph Massad, author of the controversial book [Desiring Arabs](#) and Brian Whitaker, former Guardian Middle East correspondent who penned [Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East](#), about the question of homosexuality in relation to the legacy of colonialism, human rights and political realities in Middle Eastern societies. Using the debate as a context, Pearson proceeds to explore how artists such as Akram Zaatari, Mahmoud Khaled, Kinda Hassan and Henrik Olesen use rhetorical tools to articulate gender and sexual identities, often vis-à-vis implicit or explicit repressive practices based on political, religious or patriarchal claims.

Adapting his photo collage installation [How do I make myself a body?](#), (2009) Henrik Olesen's pages are a methodological attempt to make a multi-leveled portrait of a public figure. Through reworking existing material about the tragic personal and public life of scientist Alan Turing, Olesen not only restages the traditional idea of the artist making a portrait, he also presents us with a particular account of the ups and downs of twentieth century modernism (as a background for the portrait) with its technological inventions, its destructive world wars and its repressive homophobia.

Similarly, the two-channel video installation [Powerchord Skateboard](#) (2007) by Sherif el-Azma appears to be concerned with a personal rereading of a historical decade (namely the 1980s) through the psychological and biological changes in the introverted life of a teenager – a mystical trip in which hormones, drugs and music play an essential part. Artist/curator Shahira Issa claims in her essay focusing exclusively on that very piece that the artist is occupied predominantly with images that are not actually visible in the work. Issa elaborates on el-Azma's investigation of the way images and memory

work and the way in which he addresses the relationships and links between symbolic images depicting the period of one's life between adolescence and adulthood.

Like Issa, curator Mia Jankowicz's essay constitutes an in-depth engagement with a single work from the exhibition, *A Tress of Hair* (2008) by Doa Aly. The author's journey into Aly's world is led by the instrumentalization of free association and Jankowicz's claim of its ability to activate memory "paving the way to obsession, phobia and fetishism."

Shifting from master narratives to micro politics, from context to subtext, and from the ostensible and the obvious to the hidden and the undisclosed has been a key engine in propelling the threads of this publication forward. The third and final leitmotif takes this movement a step further and traverses into an elemental space in which these tensions became tangible in sites of turmoil and conflict. What is the influence of protracted war and conflict upon civil and cultural life? How do artists internalize trauma and what strategies do they employ to produce accounts that resonate with its quotidian conditions?

Kinda Hassan employs the personal voice of autobiographical discourse to narrate the mundane suspense of living in a state of war. *8 days and war* (2006) discloses a backstage story that the international press in war zones usually fails to cover. For eight consecutive days, Hassan methodically documented the daily life of her own family during the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, locked away in a hidden apartment they had rented in the suburbs of Beirut as a shelter during the sustained assaults on the city. Under the bombardment of Beirut, this long sequence of photographs follows the monotonous rhythm of trapped citizens surviving the crisis. The obsessive routine that Hassan records in her storyboard diary of activities in the apartment – with female relatives endlessly shuffling about a claustrophobic room they all occupy – speaks of the pent up fear and frustration that dominates this shared space and of the hopeless sentence, the indefinite wait and the non-spectacle of a city under attack.

While *8 days and war* zooms in on the literal and figurative interior of a domestic space, in *Du religieux à la séduction – Achoura* (2009), Hassan's camera travels to the town of Nabatiyeh to document an unexpected practice shrouded in the folds of this ostensibly religious tradition. Rather than focus on the intense, hypnotic and bloody rituals of mourning and remembrance for this traumatic moment in the history of Shiite Muslims, Hassan redirects our gaze from the sublime to the carnal. With a sense of humor bordering on the irreverent, Hassan displays Ashura as an act of seduction between the sexes, a transcendental dance performed by the males that is consumed by the hungry eyes of the watchful females.

"In his performances, he created soundscapes full of ruptures, cuts and contrasts, and mashups of intense noises, digital frequencies and samples from different sources including field recordings, voices (Arabic, English, Chinese, etc.), media files (from radio and TV), popular music (Arabic strings,

Chinese opera, etc.), war sounds and much more. Listeners receive the sounds in different qualities (lo-fi to hi-fi) and compressions (MP3 to Wave)." This is how Thomas Burkhalter succinctly summarizes Tarek Atoui's working style in the newly commissioned essay about this young Lebanese artist, musician and performer. Atoui's visceral performances and inspiring workshops have established him as an active and influential figure in a vibrant Lebanese art/music scene and among a fast growing network of experimental musicians. If one is to subscribe to the ethnomusicologist position quoted by Burkhalter in the text which claims that "music resembles the structures of the society an artist lives in," then Atoui's ongoing investigation in the field of electronic music and his use of everyday sounds and noises (especially the aural byproducts of war and political propaganda) resonates with the echo of trauma and conflict.

Jalal Toufic's challenging essay *Credits Included* is an exciting intellectual adventure into his unique approach on cataclysms, introducing his term 'Surpassing Disaster' and its effect on culture and art. The understanding of a disaster as a surpassing one "cannot be ascertained by the number of casualties, the intensity of psychic traumas and the extent of material damage, but by whether we encounter in its aftermath symptoms of withdrawal of tradition", he writes at the beginning of the essay. Toufic enquires into the responsibility of the Arab intellectual in relation to his or her tradition and recounts an impressive number of examples from the history of cinema and art to support his argument that in the wake of a disaster of such scale, tradition ceases to be accessible to subsequent generations until works of a resurrecting nature are produced. His obsessive and systematic scan of remakes of influential and landmark films and artworks becomes a useful tool to provide the reader with a greater understanding of Toufic's notion of available and vanished traditions after the disaster.

Credits Included is the only text in this bilingual publication that was not translated from its original language into Arabic. Toufic's resistance to this process can be understood best through a passage by the author. Referring to two previous works he wrote in English in 1991 and 1993, he writes, "A translator who sets out to translate such a work to Arabic would first have to decide whether writing in English was a symptom of a withdrawal past a surpassing disaster, for in that case to translate into an Arabic that does not itself present a withdrawal in relation to Arabs who are not proficient in English would be a mistranslation."

Notwithstanding, the task of forming this particular Arabic/English publication has been fraught with challenges that many editors of bilingual books face: treating the translation as a proposition that is on par with the language of origin, producing a coherent design that at once remains faithful to the specificities of two languages that physically move forward in opposite directions, maintaining the legibility of each and every text without redundancy, and overcoming the condition of linearity inherent to the book format. This publication can be read from both directions; right to left for Arabic speakers, and vice versa for English ones. Consequently, the

reader will encounter the three layers and leitmotifs that define this publication in a non-hierarchical order.

We would like extend our gratitude to the artists, writers, thinkers, curators, designers and translators for their meaningful and invaluable contributions. We hope that for the reader this book will lead a journey as exciting and engaging as it did for us as editors.

HAMZAMOLNAR is a curatorial collective formed by Berlin based curator **Edit Molnár** and Cairo based curator **Aleya Hamza** focusing on mediation as a role of the curator to address urgent issues pertaining to our contemporary condition through artistic and cultural production. Projects by HAMZAMOLNAR include: [Tales around the Pavement](#), Chapter 1 and 2, a project about public space in downtown Cairo, Contemporary Image Collective, 2007–2008, [PhotoCairo4: The Long Shortcut](#), an international multidisciplinary visual arts project, Cairo and Odense, 2008-2009; [Practicing Pragmatics](#), a two-day curatorial seminar, TRANZIT, Free School for Art, Theory and Practice, Budapest, 2009. (hamzamolnar.wordpress.com)