

# POP, BREAD, AND NATIONALISM: CONSIDERING MEDIA ART IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*An outsider's initial impression of the Middle East is regularly informed by negative imagery, thanks in large part to the mass media's ongoing partiality towards showcasing the region as a destination fraught with suppression and political conflict. As cultural scenes begin to develop and flourish against the perceived backdrop of these globally reported events, artists are re-establishing their claim on the dissemination of imagery by creating work which sheds new light on the ebb and flow of day-to-day life in Middle Eastern cities, disclosing an overlooked world perpetuated by wit, humour and strange beauty. Our correspondent, international curator and critic Nat Muller reports from Beirut.*

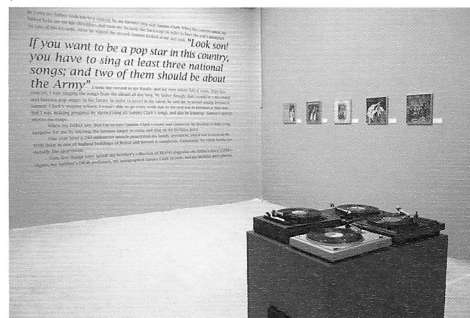
More often than not, combining the words 'media' and 'Middle East' results in the usual onslaught of generic news images fed to us through our TV sets, and newspapers. Those who have never visited 'the region' before might be prone to think that these reductive representations of conflict, war, fundamentalist Islam, and dictatorship are the only takes on reality in the Middle East, or at least the only ones deserving attention. Given the situation, it is not surprising then, that the relationship of artists with the prime vehicle mapping the Middle East in - and as - the location of difference, namely, the media, is a convoluted one. In turn, these circumstances function as a catalyst for the production of work that is situated, engaged with the systemics of mediation, and the materiality of technology.

Lebanese artist and professor at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) Ricardo Mbarkho often uses new media to tackle issues related to human relations and topics within the socio-political sphere. In his most recent projects *Visualizing Communication* (2008) and *Digital Visuals from Lebanon* (2008), he remediates the charged semantics of words into abstract visuals by having his computer render the binary code of a text file into an image file. For example, in the series *Visualizing Communication*, the words 'communicate' and 'miscommunication' become respectively translated to four



Hassan Khan, *Host*, 300x225 cm, Digital vinyl print based on ink drawing based on digital cell phone image, 2008.

Raed Yassim, *The Best of Sammy Clark*, Installation view. Text, autographed records, photos, sound, 2009.



and six coloured squares. Equally, the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, becomes a print of colourful pixels devoid of the weight of its meaning. Here, language becomes pure data and pure structure, and is, on its own terms, transformed to colour which in and by itself means nothing. There is no immediate symbolic logic we as viewers can apply in order to understand the workings of the computational algorithm: what you see is what you get. Mbarkho makes a poignant political comment on the processes of communication by reducing a whole semi-otic system to a colour code, which remains ultimately incomprehensible to its viewers. Similarly, in the series *Digital Visuals from Lebanon*, Mbarkho performs the same treatment on the various agreements signed by the Lebanese state over the past decades to put an end to the sectarian strife which has plagued the country since its independence in 1943, consequently plunging the country into a violent 15 year-long civil war lasting from 1975 to 1990. Whether he is referencing the Cairo Agreement (1969)<sup>1</sup>, the Ta'if Agreement (1990)<sup>2</sup>, or the recent Doha Agreement (2008)<sup>3</sup>, Mbarkho's visualisations all look pretty much the same, manifesting themselves as tableaux of colourful confetti. Not

only does the artist herewith suggest that all these agreements throughout history signify a *status quo* that is generally indicative of little effect or change, he is simultaneously reiterating a subject taken on by many Lebanese artists, such as playwright and performer Rabih Mroue, and artist and filmmaker duo Joanna Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige whose respective works allude to a narration of how a collapse of political systems signifies a collapse of semiotic systems – be that linguistic or visual.

Raed Yassin, also from Beirut, has chosen to approach narratives of history and nationalism through the vehicle of pop culture. A long-time aficionado and collector of all things pop in the Middle East, especially Egyptian blockbuster movies and popular music, for Yassin, the collective cinematic and musical memory shared among the people in the Middle East – and by corollary, the nostalgia the latter evokes – provides him with a gateway to sensibilities on a local level. In a 12' video titled *The New Film*, made during a residency in Cairo in 2008, he draws on more than 50 popular Egyptian films from the 80s and 90s. The work commences without image, but with a song by *shaabi* (popular Egyptian singer Shaaban Abdel Rahim, known for his political lyrics and anti-American and anti-Israeli stance. He laments the trouble and worry America is causing Hosni Mubarak, the long-ruling president of Egypt. To viewers, the lyrics come across as ironic, yet Shaaban's intentions are nationalist and

patriotic. What follows in Yassin's video is a collage of film clips, sequenced either on cinematic aesthetics or thematically, such as 'good morning' scenes or scenes involving shouting and cursing. What all these clips have in common is that they take place in police stations with the picture of the president presiding in each office, and highlight, not only through hyperbole, the cruelty and power relations of a *de facto* police state, but also the fact that within the 28 years of Mubarak's reign, nothing ever changes. The video unfolds cyclically through repetition, and ends where it initially began: with Shaaban's song and a portrait of the president.

In his latest installation *The Best of Sammy Clark* (2009), nationalism and the history of Lebanon's civil war is deconstructed in an unorthodox fashion. A combination of a homage to what Yassin considers "the most powerful voice during the civil war" (the singer Sammy Clark) and a fictional narrative, Yassin's most recent project flirts with tropes recurrent in post-civil war Lebanese art, such as an obsession with the archival (as in the work of the Atlas group and Akram Zaatari), and the thin line between historical truth and fiction. The marked difference with Yassin's take is that a historical imaginary of war is created through something as mundane as fandom for the Lebanese King of Arab electro-pop (Sammy Clark), with the artist as the unchallenged protagonist. The installation consists of four components: a large text mounted upon the frontal wall when entering the installation, which functions as a directive for interpreting the piece. It is an account of how, in 1984, Raed Yassin, as a child, was taken backstage after a



Hassan Khan, *DOM TAK*  
TAK DOM TAK Audio  
CD produced by the  
artist, sound equipment,  
computer software, lights,  
vinyl text, Torino 2005.

<sup>1</sup>The Cairo Agreement (1969) was supposed to regulate the presence of Palestinian guerrillas in Lebanon

<sup>2</sup>The Ta'if Agreement (1990) brokered in Saudi Arabia set out to abolish political sectarianism and end the civil war (1975-1990)

<sup>3</sup>The Doha Agreement (2008) brokered in Qatar after one of the worst flare-ups of sectarian violence in May 2008 was supposed to end 18 months of political crisis and stalemate between the government and the opposition

Sammy Clark concert, becoming the singer's protégé. After a missile hit the family's apartment, Sammy's records were among a few of the articles that were salvaged from the wreckage. Here, one's curiosity is peaked as to what is fact and what is fiction. Central to the piece are four record players fitted with Sammy Clark vinyls respectively consisting of two nationalist songs and two love songs, with stickers plastered across the records' surfaces. The stickers produce a looped soundscape, and as the exhibition continues, the wear and tear on the record increasingly distorts the sound. The physicality of memory is thus reproduced in the physicality of the medium. In the end, all that remains is a residue of what was. On the left wall, we find childhood images of Yassin at family parties, with Sammy Clark. The tacky domestic photo frames suggest that we are really peeking into someone's private life. The entire set-up also raises the question of authenticity: Are the photos true representations of actual events or have they been manipulated? Is that really the artist Raed Yassin? Was Sammy Clark truly present on these occasions? Have these images been photoshopped or is our perception merely off kilter? Opposite the displayed selection of childhood images, we find Sammy Clark's autographed record sleeves; all are marked with dedications to Raed Yassin - 'the miracle child' - encouraging the artist to sing for Lebanon and peace. Capitalising on sentiment and nationalism, the sequence of the LP sleeves on the wall spell out their own history of Lebanon throughout the years of war. They also function as an informal manual for how to become a successful artist/singer during times of conflict. The latter operates as an ironic reference to the expectations heaped upon Lebanese artists.

Yassin's interest in the materiality of media: from vinyl records to the grainy quality of Egyptian video CDs, also resonates in the work of Cairo-based artist Hassan

Khan, yet in a far more formalist way. In his 2005, multiple channel audio installation *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK*, Khan uses six recordings from *shaabi* (popular street music) tracks, chosen from commercially distributed tapes. Once the standards of the respective recordings are identified, Khan invited six *shaabi* musicians to separately perform - without hearing the others - to the beats of the respective tracks. The resulting interpretations are mastered and mixed together, producing six hybrid instrumental masters. In this work, the process of production as well as the spontaneity of improvisation are broken up and re-assembled again in a mechanical fashion. Khan has chosen to present the final musical product in a setting which emphasizes its making. Apart from an explanatory vinyl text which outlines the latter, the installation consists of 14 speakers distributed throughout the space with a specific light-setting designed for each track. Also, the amplifiers, mixers, light-control console and computer are present in the space, highlighting the meticulous constructedness of what we normally perceive as natural. Every time a track ends, we hear a 30-second metronome click before the lights turn to a white neutral state. This looped structure interrupts the 'flow' of experience for visitor, seemingly disallowing us the opportunity to fully immerse ourselves seamlessly within the event. For Khan, "the piece is about the process of production / its relation to culture / the contradiction between something that is automated and cold and something that is actually at the heart of the human experience."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the contradic-

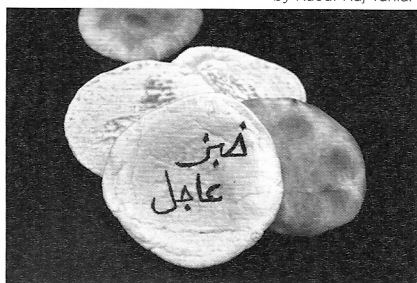
tion Khan alludes to is more of a paradox: though counter-intuitive there is always a texture and structure, which define the core of things. Extracting these formulae might do away with factors such as affect, mystique and aura, raising the question as to whether the final product will remain the same.

Flipping the question of the systemic, and meshing activism with the symbolic is at the centre of Palestinian artist Raouf Haj Yahia's 2006 project *Gaza Express*. A reaction to the looming humanitarian crisis in Gaza in 2006, when wheat stocks were dwindling due to closures imposed on border crossings, Yahia's project is still eerily timely to this day. Originally a photographer, Yahia created six photographs, using bread that, in some way or other, has to be delivered to Gaza, as the main subject. Utilising various mailing lists, Yahia sent these pictures to random addressees. Thus, not only does he stress the urgency of the situation, but also by using the exact medium that conventionally supplies us with images of war and destitution, he performs a symbolic gesture by sending the most basic human food staple: bread. In addition, for Yahia, who is based in Ramallah, email remains one of the few technologies of proximity with mobility between the West Bank and Gaza curtailed. *Gaza Express*, as a work of art and as an action, capitalises simultaneously on the level of news and emotional value.

*Gaza Express*, 2006  
by Raouf Haj Yahia.



*Gaza Express*, 2006  
by Raouf Haj Yahia.



Stills from *The New Film*, 2008  
by Raed Yassin.



<sup>4</sup> Email conversation with the author 19.7.2009



Hassan Khan, Videostill 8 from  
RANIT, 6' 42" Single Channel  
Video and Music, 2008.

**إمكانية قيد التبلور: حكومة حماس في غزة وسلطة عباس 'فتح' في الضفة**

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**so what should I do now?**