No Show
Refusal as Critique

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Out with Resistance – In with Refusal

'Resistance' has become an over-used buzzword within contemporary art practices. Not only does it offer a tinge of combative bravado, but it also adds political currency and momentum to a scene that has been accused, by some,[1] of operating with little accountability when making politicised or emancipatory claims. Within the arts, 'resistance' as a means of opposition too often becomes something that is malleable and negotiable, or to use an *en vogue* term, it becomes reduced to the discursive. Any activist will tell you that a porous or pliable mode of resistance is not very effective. I am making a blatant generalization for the sake of argument, but the 'resistance' found in contemporary artistic practices is more often than not armed to the teeth with noble intentions, and copious amounts of critical theory and terminology borrowed from political philosophy. However, when push comes to shove, the effectiveness of these types of 'resistance', not only as a mode of critique but as an ideological position and strategy for change, is debatable.

A first question to be asked is whether – and why – the arts in the first place would want to compete on a level playing field with political and social activism. Should art not be doing something else on the level of affect, perception, symbolism and power? And does art's power to effectuate change of some sort, however minor, not lie elsewhere? Obviously, there are many grey zones, but pushing artistic practices in a strait jacket of socio-political functionalism, as we have seen happen over the past decade or so encouraged by policy makers, funders and artists themselves, cannot be right either. I am not discussing commitment or intent here, but questioning the reach of art to further palpable and material political and social change, especially from within the institutions of art such as museums, gallery spaces and biennials. Can artists really be actors with actual agency within these institutionalised art contexts, or do their interventions of resistance remain on a low-risk and cosmetic discursive level, a preaching to the converted that never even reaches the danger zone, or a trickles down into the real world? Should art want to do this at all?

There is a difference between producing work that critiques, pushes boundaries, is abrasive, makes us think and see things anew, and work that claims, naively or self-righteously, to be able to solve the problems of the world just because it simply

resists something. What would the intervention of Pussy Riot have meant had they remained in the white cube instead of crashing Mass at church? What would the work have meant as a critique, had the video not gone viral, and had its members not been arrested? I am absolutely not calling for artists to get themselves arrested, but rather making a point that a claim to radical engagement will always require radical measures. War cannot be waged from the safe confines of the white cube. Here again, I have nothing against the white cube (I actually like the white cube!), nor do I feel that artists should be up in arms and on the barricades. The point I'm making is that there is often a severe disconnect between the radical and lofty claims made for resistance and revolution, and the actual actions. There is also a difference between artists who have demonstrated a long-term, often very personal, investment in social and political issues, and those who pick and mix because revolution happens to be sexy, and apparently has market value. Twenty-five years ago, queer activist Pat (now Patrick) Califia put it very succinctly: 'We can't fuck our way to freedom.'[2] For art practitioners who are – rightly – concerned with the ways of the world, there is a useful lesson to be learnt here. Bluntly: the woes of the world will most likely not be solved by an art project.

At a recent talk[3] at Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, curator and critic Tirdad Zolghadr, who moved to Palestine recently, lamented that whenever there is a political articulation in contemporary art, it usually is overly ambitious and fraught with impossible demands. He characterised the modus operandi of contemporary art as indeterminate, open-ended, ambivalent, and postponing meaning. I would argue that meaning is not necessarily postponed, but rather that it is located elsewhere, and that the beauty of art lies precisely in this ambiguity. Perhaps the mistake contemporary art has made too often over the last two decades is that it has been too pre-occupied with migrating the many meanings inherent to it to a limited realm of interpretation, namely that of political and social commentary. This has the effect that other factors, such as poetics, aesthetics, and affect as powerful instruments of critique, are neglected. The result is that art can only do part of its job, namely the production of meaning. The insistence of specific contemporary practices to engage with the complexities of the real world in a hyper-functionalised/problem-solving way may result in the locking out of

fantasy and the imaginary. These are particularly (and traditionally) the realms where art and cinema create spaces of criticality and of possibility. If we lose that, then what have we got in return, if anything?

What if the current notion of 'resistance' were to be refused, especially by artists working in challenging political environments or with inflammatory content? Could 'refusal' be thought of in a productive and critical way? The issue with resistance is that it always has to acknowledge that which it opposes. This creates an interdependency that has to be continuously reinforced between the act of resistance and what it resists. With refusal the rejection is singular, and then things – ideally – move on. Refusal is not a novel strategy in contemporary art. For example, the conceptual art of the 1960s is marked by a refusal of the object. Likewise, time-based practices like live art refuse to be ossified within a specific temporal moment. These – often ephemeral – performances develop and change over time and with every iteration. The concerns of refusal here can be said to be conceptual and aesthetic foremost. Though these refusals are artistic as well as political gestures, they do occur primarily within the realm of art. If larger political and societal concerns are at stake and call for a refusal, then how would that be channelled into an aesthetics of refusal? How does refusal operate in contexts where security, freedom of expression and of political association are under pressure, such as in the Middle East, particularly since the 2011 uprisings? How do the politics of imagery and of representation come into play here, and which strategies of refusal do artists use when many outside the professionalised sphere of artistic production – broadcasters, citizens, activists, propagandists – engage with the image as a means of resistance, or of quiescence?

A Refusal of the Image

Academic Lina Khatib writes in the introduction to her book *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* that:

> Politics in the Middle East is now seen. The image has claimed a central place in the processes through which political dynamics are communicated and experienced in the region. States, non-state actors, oppositional groups and ordinary people are engaging in political struggle through the image, and the media, especially the visual media, are not only mediators in this context, they are also political actors, deliberately using images to exert political influence. The image is at the heart of political struggle, which has become an endless process of image battling, reversing, erasing and replacing other images... Political struggle, then, is an inherently visual productive process. It is also itself visual to a large degree: It is a struggle over presence, over visibility.[4]

A refusal of the image, or of a particular set of images, would then result in an undoing of presence and visibility, or at least problematize visual representation. Many practices of by now internationally established Lebanese artists such as Rabih Mroué, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige, Walid Sadek and Akram Zaatari, often grouped together as the post-civil war generation, have used (visual) absence and disappearance as conceptual and aesthetic tropes. This generation came of age during Lebanon s civil war (1975-1990) and for more than fifteen years has focused its work on dealing with the aftermath of the civil war. This is exemplified in plays by Rabih Mroué, such as *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), where the artist presents the unsolved case of a disappeared civil servant from Lebanon's Ministry of Finance through a variety of documents and newspaper clippings; Hadjithomas and Joreige's notion of latent images in their acclaimed work *Wonder Beirut* (1997 – 2006), where the film rolls of photographer Abdallah Farah, active during the war, remain undeveloped; and Walid Raad's Atlas Group's acclaimed video *Operator #17* (2000), where allegedly a Lebanese security agent trained his camera on the seaside Corniche, only to film sunsets instead of keeping an eye on the comings and goings of political pundits, spies, and double agents. Or in Walid Sadek's project *Love is Blind* (2006), where imagery is denied altogether and only wall labels referring to paintings by Lebanon's best-known modernist painter, Mustafa Farroukh, make up the exhibition.

The Lebanese political arena is to this day mired in the power play of sectarian loyalties. The absence of political accountability for the atrocities perpetrated during the civil war, the fate of the many disappeared, and an amnesia erasing recent and contemporary political history still very much define the

Lebanese condition. It is therefore no surprise that absence and disappearance feature heavily, on a structural level, in the work of Lebanese artists. Absence and disappearance mark the desire to retrieve something that was lost, or to critique the persistence of this self-imposed void in the Lebanese psyche.

However, there is another issue at stake too. 'There is,' as Suzanne Cotter writes in her introduction of Modern Art Oxford's 2006 Lebanese group show *Out of Beirut*, 'a deep mistrust of the image as a reliable document of history.'[5] This engaged withdrawal from imagery, and from visual representation, within the Lebanese art context has most famously been theorised by the Iraqi artist and theorist, and former resident of Beirut, Jalal Toufic. T.J. Demos summarises his position aptly as follows: 'not only [have] images literally been destroyed, but... like memory in post-war Lebanon, [they] have somehow become unavailable to the senses, following what [Toufic] calls the 'radical closure' of a 'surpassing disaster.'[6] These practices have mostly been described as manoeuvres of withdrawal, and disengagement, from the charged imagery of conflict and ruin. It is an effort, in an era with 24-hour news cycles, to preserve the specificity of the experiences of war that can never be fully captured or conveyed by an image. Except for Sadek's project that shirks from the image completely, traces, clues, and remnants of the visual have always been important material elements in these works, whether this is found footage or a latent image on a film roll. Lately, though, the gestures of refusal have become more radical.

The most remarkable example comes from Akram Zaatari, an artist who for the most part of his career has concentrated his oeuvre around interrogating and unveiling what lies behind and beyond the image, rather than refusing it. Zaatari is one of the co-founders of Beirut's Arab Image Foundation, a unique organization established in 1997 dedicated to the collection, preservation, and study of photographs from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arab diaspora. As such, his role as an artist intertwines with that of a curator, collector, and researcher. Zaatari's fieldwork of 'digging' into the visual history of the region uncovers narratives that have been forgotten or glossed over. All the more surprising then that his project *Time Capsule* (2012) for dOCUMENTA (13) has been based on an inverse logic. Here, the artist entombs painted objects, inspired by different photographic devices and film formats and imagined to be the work

of a photographer losing his sight, underground on the bank of the river Fulda in a concrete foundation block. It resembles the radical preservation tactic of Beirut's National Museum during the civil war, casting their archaeological objects in concrete to protect them from the violence. Whereas previously Zaatari has brought objects and documents of the past into the world and into the present moment, here he is sealing them, freezing them in time and space, and removing them from public view, though they are buried in public space.

Following the suspension of his membership of the Arab Image Foundation and his resignation from its board in 2011, it is as if Zaatari is waiting for a different time, when these images can unfurl their meaning again in a different way, perhaps untainted by certain institutional and other ideologies. The project itself is – though visually understated – conceptually striking and bold in its critique. In a recent interview with Anthony Downey, Zaatari commented: 'I've come to realize that it's only possible to talk about conflicts once they cool down, once conflicts aren't conflicts anymore'.[7] As the prospect of sectarian strife can flare up in Lebanon at any moment, the conflict is, in fact, far from over. Zaatari seems very much to suggest that at certain times, images should be removed from sight, however temporarily.

A Refusal to See

Artists and filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have in their practice predominantly been concerned with history, memory, time and the politics of visual representation. Their work has pondered, amongst others, the retrieval of lost images or ghostlike images. For example in *Lasting Images* (2003), they restore an 8mm film that belonged to the archive of Joreige's uncle who had disappeared during the civil war. Severely damaged, the film reveals traces of people, like spectres that refuse to disappear. It is as its title indicates, an image that has not fully come into being, but that lasts, an image that stubbornly refuses to disappear and forever is latent.

However, the 33-day Israeli July war on Lebanon in 2006 produced a cut in their practice. It was partly brought on by a photo editor at *The Guardian* newspaper who had used an image of their *Wonder Beirut* series to illustrate the July war, instead of using an actual photo-journalistic image of the bombarded Southern suburbs of Beirut and the hard-hit Shia villages in

the South of Lebanon. Here an imaginary image from an art project was taken to illustrate a war that was still in full swing. The artists found the appropriation and DE contextualization of their image so disturbing that it prompted a re-assessment of their practice. They decided not to bring latent images into being anymore, but either produce new images or refuse them altogether.

Their feature film *Je Veux Voir* (2008) is a case in point. It was made in the aftermath of the July War and stars French cinema icon Catherine Deneuve and Lebanese playwright and visual artist Rabih Mroué. Filmed as a road movie, Mroué chauffeurs Deneuve to Bint Jbeil, his heavily bombarded family town in the South of Lebanon. Deneuve insists on seeing for herself the devastation wrought by the war. Mroué, on the other hand, is apprehensive about seeing the destruction. When asked by Deneuve why, he replies: 'I don't like to be a tourist in my own country... But now, with you it'll be different'. The film (*Je Veux Voir*) will make it interesting. Little is shown of the destruction en route, and Mroué's refusal 'to see' the debris of the war is telling. He has experienced the war himself, so what could the viewing of more images possibly add? It is this very tension between Deneuve's desire to see in order to understand, and Mroué's understanding that images in and by themselves will not explain anything, that propels the film. *Je Veux Voir* probes the degree to which we can learn or know anything through images in the wake of violence and destruction, and examines the promise of cinema and art to open up avenues of understanding, otherwise closed to us. Cinema is after all as much about seeing as it is about suspending disbelief and allowing oneself to be immersed in a story or plot. Deneuve betrays the suspension of disbelief in the scenario by demanding to see everything. The filmmakers, though, do not give in and show very little, re-affirming their conviction that the meaning of cinema and art is to be found as much in the realm of the imaginary as it is in reality.

The Performative Refusal of Presence

Absence takes on a different shape in the latest piece of playwright and artist couple Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh. In *33 Rounds and a Few Seconds* (2012) they counter the online disembodied hyper-presence of social media with the ultimate form of absence, namely death. Throughout the play, absence is consciously performed as a refusal of presence, a refusal 'to be' in the world, in 'real life' (offline) or 'on screen' (online), and hence to be co-opted by those worlds. The play focuses on the suicide of a young activist and artist appropriately named Diyaa Yamout, Arabic for 'light dies'. Rumour has it that the story of Yamout is based on the actual suicide of Nour Merheb, a young Lebanese secular activist who, like Diyaa Yamout, took his life and sent a suicide note to friends and family expressing the desire to be cremated, which is forbidden in Lebanon.

33 Rounds and a Few Seconds is completely devoid of human actors, and human presence is mediated through the tools and devices of modern communication technology. The stage is designed to resemble a domestic workspace or living room: phones ring, printers spit forth paper, a record plays on a turntable, the TV shows a 24-hour news cycle and half-drunk cups of coffee sit on the desk. The technological artefacts are not exactly props; rather, in the absence of human presence they take on a subjectivity that supports, and at times breaks, the unfolding of the play's narrative, which mainly unrolls on a large projection screen displaying Diyaa Yamout's Facebook page. On this Facebook page, comments of Yamout's friends come up incessantly. First the comments express dismay and disbelief at his death, yet as the play progresses the online discussion turns more violent. Yamout's absent body becomes the battleground for airing ideological differences.

Moreover, there is a double absence at work here. Yamout's Facebook page lacks a profile picture, meaning that there is an absence of the photographic representation of his physical body in addition to the absence of his physical body from this world. A closer look reveals that no picture of Diyaa Yamout can be spotted on his Facebook page at all. The only images that remain on Yamout's profile page are those that show up in his photo stream. They show the 'Arab Spring', demonstrations across Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain, and images of self-immolation. Lebanon, a country that did not join in the uprising, is as conspicuously absent as Diyaa Yamout. Not only does this serve as a reminder of the geo-political context Yamout found himself in, a region in disarray and turmoil, but it also stresses that Lebanon, with its dysfunctional sectarian political system, remains mired in stasis and therefore is unworthy of an image.

Yamout does not exist as an image in the whole play; we only get to know him by proxy. This begs the question whether in the performative realm of social media, and by extension the theatre, he actually exists at all as an agent. Paradoxically, Yamout is only defined by his absences. In addition to Yamout's sending of his suicide note, he allegedly also filmed his own death, but no one can trace the tape. There is, characteristic of Lebanese contemporary art practices, a paucity of images in this piece. However, the withdrawal from visuality is pushed to an extreme and becomes awithdrawal of bodily and mediated presence altogether. Yamout has not only denied himself a profile picture or any type of visual referent in the virtual sphere, but his desire to be cremated – that is, to deny himself a body after death in the physical world – emphasizes he wants to undo himself of any kind of presence.

In the end, this play is as much about ownership (the fate of your physical and data body after your death) as it is about ontology (how can you be in this world) and teleology (the most definite end, death, seems not so finite anymore in the digital era). Even though Yamout, in his desperate suicidal act, has vowed to completely retreat from the physical world and by corollary from the virtual world by taking his own life, the world itself seems to reject his refusal.

A Refusal to Show

Up to this point, I have discussed the practices of Lebanese artists. Akram Zaatari makes an important point when he notes that a discussion about conflict is only possible *a posteriori*. The practice of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige suggests that a similar approach may well be true for the image. A few years before Syria's uprisings against the regime of Bashar al-Assad turned into a bloody and protracted civil war, Syrian photographer Hrair Sarkissian conceived his acclaimed project *Execution Squares* (2008). Viewing these images now, it is as if the past has come to haunt the present and continues to bode ill for the future. In this series of photographs, Sarkissian photographed at dawn what at first glance seem unassuming deserted squares in Syria's three principal cities: Damascus, Lattakia, and Aleppo. Now, these cities conjure up the imagery of war and devastation but this was not the case in 2008. The city squares Sarkissian has shot seem pretty generic, without too many identifying traits. Some bear posters or statues of former president Hafez al-Assad, others are populated

with palm trees or advertising billboards. However, the photo captions betray that these squares are actually execution grounds where public hangings take place.

Once we learn this information it is impossible to view these sites, and these images, in scenic terms only. They become highly politicised. Sarkissian's refusal to show us anything *a posteriori* in terms of evidence, except for the empty 'crime scenes', leaves the images open to speculation and to the imaginary. This gap of information operates in a far more evocative manner than showing the executions or the corpses. It is as if he were performing forensics in the negative, where as little evidence as possible is shown. In fact, it suggests that in Syria, under this regime, any city square is a potential execution ground and could have borne witness to gruesome deeds. At the moment of writing, and as the bloodshed in Syria rages on, this project becomes eerily current. Moreover, the seriality and the typological quality of the photographs not only reinforce the idea that a repetition of violence is likely to take place or is eminent, but the calm visual compositions, careful studies of site and urban landscape, also monumentalize these sites. Paradoxically, it is only in Sarkissian's photographic documents, combined with their captions, that the squares can take on a commemorative role. In and by themselves the sites, as physical locales, refuse to divulge anything.

A Just Refusal

The practices that I have sketched are particularly poignant in a time when we are always expected to say yes, to be engaged, and to show and share everything every minute of the day through social media in our professional and in our private lives. The refusal to cater to these pressures and the spectacle of representation, especially in challenging political circumstances, is refreshing. Moreover, it counterbalances the desires of an increasingly globalised art world, always hungry for new and engaged imagery. In this sense refusal is, of course, a resistance of sorts. However, it is a just and aesthetic refusal that on the one hand protects material too sensitive to be frivolously tampered with or instrumentalized, and on the other hand allows for speculation in an increasingly self-righteous contemporary art world where speculation as a critical and artistic strategy is steadily frowned upon. What aesthetics, and by corollary what art, do we imagine without speculation, without blunt refusals, indeed without risks? Speaking of his

dOCUMENTA (13) project, Akram Zaatari said that the strategy he used is in fact a script for 'a gesture of radical preservation – of documents and artefacts in times of risk.'[8] Now is most definitely a time of risk and of preserving ideals to safeguard freedoms. If anything, the gestures of refusal cited by artists like Zaatari, Mroué, Sarkissian, Hadjithomas, and Joreige remind us of the essence of 'aesthetic justice'. Namely, aesthetic justice is exactly that, when risk is placed in the hands of the subject, of the viewer: to take position – or to refuse consciously and willingly to do so.

Notes

1 See for example David McNeill, 'Putting Sincerity to Work', in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal and Carel Smith (eds.) (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 157-173.

2 Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts: Erotic Fiction* (Boston: Alyson Books, 1988), p. 15.

3 Tirdad Zolghadr's talk at Witte de With in Rotterdam was held on February 3, 2014.

4 Lina Khatib, 'Introduction: The Visual in Political Struggle', in *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 1.

5 Suzanne Cotter, 'Beirut Unbound', in *Out of Beirut*, Suzanne Cotter (ed.) (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), p. 30.

6 T.J. Demos, 'Out of Beirut: Mobile Histories and the Politics of Fiction', in *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 186.

7 Anthony Downey, 'Photography as Apparatus: Akram Zaatari in Conversation with Anthony Downey'. www.ibraaz.org/interviews/113 ,last accessed February 9, 2014.

8 Yves Aupetitallot, 'Interview with Akram Zaatari', in *Akram Zaatari. Time Capsule, Kassel. 24/25.05.2012* (Naples: Mousse Publishing, 2013), p. 36.