



Destination: Jerusalem Servees

Interview with Emily Jacir

Adila Laidi-Hanieh

Emily Jacir's audio work *Untitled (servees)* was produced as a site specific work and installed in 2008 at Damascus Gate, in Jerusalem's Old City. It was displayed as part of the second edition of the Jerusalem Show organized by The Ma'mal Foundation. In its form, content and location, it was a crucible of contemporary Palestinian visual art and culture, of Jacir's practice, and of Palestinian efforts to affirm presence and ownership of the city in the face of the forced 'silent transfer'.

Emily Jacir is one of the most successful Palestinian contemporary artists and one of the best known internationally, as well as arguably its most recognized. She won numerous prestigious awards including the 2008 Hugo Boss Prize of the Guggenheim Foundation in New York; where the Jury noted her, "rigorous conceptual practice... bears witness to a culture torn by war and displacement through projects that unearth individual narratives and collective

Photo courtesy Emily Jacir.
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experiences". In 2007 she won the Prince Claus Award, an annual prize from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development in the Hague, which described Jacir as, "an exceptionally talented artist whose works seriously engages the implications of conflict" (PCF). In 2007, she won the 'Leone d'Oro a un artista under 40' - (Golden Lion Award for an artist under 40), at the Venice Biennale, the oldest and premier international art event in Europe, often dubbed 'the Olympics of art', for "a practice that takes as its subject exile in general and the Palestinian issue in particular, without recourse to exoticism".

Jacir was born in Bethlehem and spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia, attending high school in Italy. She studied fine arts there and in the United States. Like many contemporary Palestinian artists, she is forced to divide her time between the Diaspora and Palestine, in her case, between New York and Ramallah.

Jacir has worked in a variety of media including film, photography, installation, performance, video, writing and sound. She has exhibited extensively throughout the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East since 1994, holding solo exhibitions in major galleries and biennials in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, the UAE, New York, Los Angeles, Venice, Sydney, etc. She has also been involved in creating numerous projects and events in Palestine, such as Bir Zeit University's Virtual Art Gallery, and she also founded and curated the first International Video Festival in Ramallah in 2002, and works as a full-time lecturer at the International Academy of Art in Al-Bireh.

Her major works include: *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948* (2001) a tent with embroidered names of the villages, *Where We Come From* (2001-2003) for which Jacir –travelling on her American passport- asked scores of Palestinians living both abroad and within Palestine if she could fulfill a wish for them in Palestine. She collected responses and carried out tasks in a performance of "wish fulfillment by proxy".

Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work) (2002) (made after an Israeli soldier threatened her and put an M-16 to her temple at the Surda checkpoint on her way to work in Bir Zeit, and *Material for a film* (2005-ongoing) - for which she won the Venice Biennale Golden Lion Award - where she documents aspects of the life of Wael Zu'aiter, a Palestinian intellectual living in Rome, mistakenly identified as one of those responsible for the Munich Olympics murder of Israeli athletes and his 1972 assassination by Mossad. The work creates a film in the form of an installation where she has gathered together photographs, books, music, letters, interviews and telegrams. It even includes a clip from a Pink Panther film in which Zu'aiter had a small part.

With the accolades also comes censorship, most recently at the 2009 Venice Biennale; and ferocious criticism, as in critiques of her Guggenheim award. *Time Out New York* wrote: "That such a crude, self-indulgent exercise has been given one of contemporary art's most prestigious awards is unfortunate, though not, sadly, entirely unexpected" (Howard Halle). The *New York Times* argued that: "If the ultimate point is to arouse humane concern for Palestinians in general, Ms. Jacir's work falls short" (Ken Johnson).

Untitled (servees) echoes a recurrent theme in contemporary Palestinian cultural production: Hani Abu Ass'ad's *Ford Transit*, Azmi Bishara's *Al-Hajez*, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti's *Road Map*, etc. dealing with the ubiquity of this indispensable and uncomfortable mode of transport to navigate post Oslo archipelagoes. In Jacir's practice, however, it is a constant theme, which intersects here with Jerusalem's former – "prosaic", yet vital function as a regional transportation hub.

Trying to revive another of Jerusalem's functions, that of erstwhile cultural capital, al-Ma'mal is part of a handful of struggling non-governmental cultural institutions serving Palestinians in Jerusalem, and was established in 1998 by curator and gallerist Jack Persekian in a former tile factory close to New Gate. It serves as a base for its various initiatives: residencies, exhibitions and youth workshops. A contemporary, conceptual art space may seem out of place in an area filled with tourist shops and Catholic institutions, but it is also a manifestation of Palestinian Jerusalemites' 'war of maneuver' to assert their presence in the city. Regular activities of the Foundation include a single event: *The Jerusalem Show*. It is an ambitious endeavor that exhibits annually scores of Palestinian (local and Diaspora) and international artists in the Old City- in its Turkish baths, youth clubs, cafés, walls, schools, etc. It brings the local population into contact with contemporary art, but it also creates a new level of Palestinian and Palestinian-oriented activity in the Old City, the highlights of which are the guided tours of the art works. *The Jerusalem Show* is defined as:

Neither a biennial nor a one-time event. It is neither a large-scale show nor an international grand exhibition. We like to see it as an attempt to intercede between the apocalyptic decadal tides of upheaval under which the city kneels... to wage an action of covert resistance to the forced hegemony of one creed and one people on the city. In a way it can be perceived as a political action, and so we tried to garner as much support as possible from institutions, organizations, youth centers, clubs, etc., who operate in the city. *The Jerusalem Show* presents works, performances, and interventions throughout the Old City as unique actions that promote a re-reading of the city in a creatively open, accessible, and interactive manner" (Al-Ma'mal).

The works shown are indicative of the forms and trends of international and Palestinian conceptual contemporary art: Video art, light installations, text based works, site-specific installations, multimedia and photography. The themes -dealing mostly with archiving, belonging, memory and resistance- and the style of the Palestinian art works are indistinguishable from the internationals'. The whole event is -as most cultural activities in Palestine are- funded by Western donors, but is logistically supported and housed by local community institutions.

Emily Jacir's work stood out as, a site- and occasion-specific work. It engaged not only the physicality of the city but also its history. It also interpellated and caught its public by surprise by its medium: sound. Any confusion that this was part of the quotidian soundscape of the city was dissipated by the absence of a visibly logical



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origin to it (taxi drivers). To the regular Jerusalemite pedestrian, the ‘dissensus’ produced would be sharpened by its incongruous location (inside Damascus Gate where there are no car parks), by the names of the cities called out (Beirut, Damascus, etc.), as well as by the ‘description’ of the sounds as a work of art (through a sign posted near the sound system), certainly clashing with received notions of art.

The work is a sound piece of cab drivers’ voices calling out their destinations to attract passengers, destinations no longer attainable post 1967. The work underscores Jerusalem’s isolation from its cultural and geographic environment, and its very existence challenges and historicizes this seemingly eternal and fixed status quo.

This work can be seen as exemplary of original works of political art that induce a ‘dissensus’ in their public. Political content (here, the impossibility of movement due to occupation) is not a clichéd Palestinian specificity, but is indicative of an increase

of overt political content in the arts internationally, caused by the theoretical and conceptual turn in contemporary art, reaction against the intense commodification of 1980s Western art, post 1989 end-of-history debates, the rise of identity politics; and with the globalization-induced visibility of Third World and conflict area artists into the international art world.

The philosopher Jacques Rancière has increasingly been writing on aesthetics, becoming the premier theoretician of political contemporary art. Perhaps mindful of the dismissal of political art as mediocre, didactic or propagandist, and of competition by the profusion of real time reports and images of political events and injustices, Rancière warns that: “The politics...of art is not oriented at the constitution of political subjects. It is much more oriented at the reframing of the field of subjectivity...the political interpretation of the uncanny” (Rancière 2004, 62). For him, the ideal effect of politicized art is “Dissensus” and/or “heterology”, primarily the creation of a fissure in the order of the sensible:

The dream of the suitable political work of art is...the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as vehicle...suitable political art would ensure...the prediction of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused...by the uncanny, by that which resists signification...the ideal effect is always the object of negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of an art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.” (Rancière 2004, 63).

The distinction here between artistic/political tactics and effects is clear, Works that create an ‘ideal effect/dissensus’ are those that are not didactic, do not over determine audiences’ reactions; as is *Untitled (servees)*. The interview below charts how the work was made and the reactions it received, and also places it in the context of Jacir’s interest in transportation routes, past, and present; metonymic of dominance and oppression. Emily Jacir’s childhood memories of Jerusalem as related in the interview, *Untitled (servees)*, and its exhibition, all underscore Palestinians’ – Jerusalemites and exiled- concrete, quotidian/secular connection to Jerusalem as a living city, despite more than forty years of strangulation.

Q: *Untitled (servees)* seems to be part of a larger project on transportation in Palestine, after your research into the old bus route linking Hebron to Bethlehem; or is it a specific meditation on Jerusalem -as part of a wider regional hub?

Untitled (servees) is a small component of my ongoing long-term research, which explores and investigates the disappearing transportation network in Palestine and its implications on the physical and social experience of space. I have quite a large body of research on this and there are several works which I would include under

this category such as *Where We Come From* (2002), *Crossing Surda* (a record of going to and from work) (2002), and more recently *Lydda Airport* (2007–2009). Of course this is all linked to larger themes that my practice addresses including movement (both forced and voluntary), repressed historical narratives, resistance, political land divisions, and the logic of the archive. I wouldn't limit my obsession with transportation to Palestine however! My latest public project that was supposed to take place in Venice for the Biennale entitled *stazione* was an intervention situated on each of the vaporetti stops along line #1. The names of each vaporetto station along this route were to have been translated into Arabic and placed next to their Italian counterparts creating a bilingual transportation route through the city. Unfortunately, the Municipal Authorities of the City of Venice cancelled the work for political reasons and it did not take place.

Q: This is your first work on Jerusalem, which resurrects its past as a hub for regional transport. Are there other specificities of Jerusalem that speak to you for other work (its religious significance, childhood souvenirs, etc?)

In works like *Where We Come From* (2002) Jerusalem played a very prominent role in many of the participants' requests. Jerusalem is also the heart of another work entitled *ENTRY DENIED* (a concert in Jerusalem) (2003), which was based on a group of musicians: Austrian nationals Marwan Abado, Peter Rosmanith, and Franz Hautzinger who were denied entry at Ben Gurion International airport by the Israeli Authorities for "security reasons". They were slated to give a concert in East Jerusalem as part of Yabous' 12th Jerusalem Festival – Songs of Freedom. I asked them to play the concert exactly as it was to have been played in Jerusalem and then I recorded them in an empty theater in Vienna. In this piece I transformed that which was to have been a live performance into a digital record of that which was not allowed to take place. Several years later in 2006 I was able to project this concert on the walls of the old city in Jerusalem with Al-Ma'mal Foundation finally bringing the concert home.

Going back to *Untitled (servees)*, one of the features in the landscape of Palestine for me since my childhood has always been the sound of the servees' drivers calling the names of their various destinations. As a kid I was always imitating their calls over and over again. The work itself is an audio work located at *Bab il Amoud* (Damascus Gate), which stands at the start of the road leading to Nablus and onwards to Damascus. Once a massive hub of the main regional transport network of *servees* (communal taxis), it had direct links to Beirut, Amman, Baghdad, Kuwait as well as every urban Palestinian center such as Lyd, Jaffa, Ramallah, Nablus, Gaza, and Ramle. Damascus Gate was the point where servees drivers used to pick up customers by calling out the names of their various destinations. *Untitled (servees)* recalls that purpose and the once fluid space of movement, connection and exchange and attempts to make visible through sound the fractures and interactions of everyday life within the disintegrating urban landscape. Calling out cities *servees* drivers recall their destinations.

I spent around a month going around and working with the *servees* drivers to record them calling out cities. I ask them to call out their destinations some of which they can still reach like Bethlehem and Ramallah. I also had them recall those cities that were once attainable but no longer are such as Beirut, Kuwait, Baghdad, Gaza ... as the years go by we lose more destinations. The calls of the *servees* drivers are a sound which is disappearing from our contemporary landscape. The final piece is a 20-minute audio track of their calls which when installed on site blend into the sounds of the city. If you happen to walk by when it is the call for Beirut or Baghdad or Gaza you would really notice something uncanny, given the impossibility of such destinations from Jerusalem today, otherwise it just sounds like *servees* drivers calling out everyday destinations.

As for your question regarding the specificities of Jerusalem that speak to me, the religious significance does not speak to me at all (and never has). As for childhood souvenirs I guess it would simply be walking around and hanging out in Jerusalem on the family trips we used to take there in the 70's. It's really all the people and the social interaction that we had with Jerusalem. We used to go from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to spend a day and I have very vivid memories of wandering around on foot with my parents, grandparents and other relatives. They would all catch up with friends, relatives and colleagues. Everyone seemed to know each other. Now making such a simple journey has been rendered impossible by the Israeli restrictions on movement and the construction of the Apartheid Wall and that feeling of being part of a community in Jerusalem has been severed.

Q: Is *Untitled (servees)* a one time site-specific project or can it be shown elsewhere, and outside Palestine? Would you transform it into a visual component?

It is definitely a site-specific audio work and its location was carefully chosen. *Bab il Amoud* not only stands at the start of the road leading to Nablus and Damascus but it was the site of the main hub of this transportation infrastructure. I wanted to place the audio work in Nablus and Ramallah and Bethlehem as well. Of course at each of these sites the audio work would be different as the names called by *servees* drivers in each city would be different and depend on the transportation route. *Untitled (servees)* is meant to be experienced aurally in a specific place and would not be able to be shown outside of its context or location. The only way to show this work outside of Palestine is as a documentation of a site-specific project that took place.

Q: Can you tell us about some of the reactions you got to the project?

I could write a book about the reactions to the work starting with the *servees* drivers themselves! During the course of the month I recorded them I heard so many amazing stories about their routes. It was also challenging trying to explain the project to them and convincing them to call out names of places none of us can get to anymore. When

I asked them to call for Gaza this led to some very intense political discussions about the contemporary situation. Once installed I had quite a variety of reactions from kids simply running around imitating the calls, to people unaware of anything out of the ordinary around them when the piece blended into the city, and then there were those of an older generation who just stopped dead in their tracks in disbelief when they heard the all too familiar sound of a servees driver calling out Beirut, Amman, il Sham.

Q: From what I understand “Lydda Airport” (2007 –2009) deals with another transportation hub in Palestine. Can you tell us a little about it, what format is it in?

“Lydda Airport” (2007 –2009) is a short animation film that takes place at Lydda Airport sometime in the mid to late 1930’s and I perform in it. It comes from my research into the Jerusalem, Lydda and Gaza airports and Palestine Airways. My character is based on a story Salim Tamari told me once about his father (a transport company employee) who waited with a bouquet of flowers to welcome Amelia Earhart at Lydda Airport. She never arrived. The location is Lydda Airport under construction when it was also a functioning airport. One of the dominant characters in the piece is an airplane called Hannibal. It mysteriously disappeared in 1940 somewhere over the Gulf of Oman en route to Sharjah. No trace of the aircraft was ever found. It was part of the Handley Page fleet of the eight largest passenger planes in the world. In brief the work touches upon a lost promise and a moment of possibilities.

Q: You travel often between New York and Palestine because you cannot live in Palestine full time legally, how do you live this experience, intellectually and affectively?

It is actually a far more complicated trajectory than that in fact. As a child, along with a huge contingency of the Palestinian population we were “guest workers” in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries like Kuwait, so I am really a part of that narrative and experience. Then there is also my connection and years spent in Rome as well. As for the space in between Ramallah and New York, we don’t have a choice in that matter. Our country is under occupation; Israel has designed a system to ethnically cleanse us from our land. Half of our people are forced to live in foreign countries. I don’t think it would be right for me to talk about how devastating it is to me to not be able to live in Palestine full time legally or the fact that I could be denied entry at any moment when there are so many Palestinians who are forbidden by the Israeli Government from ever returning and have never set foot in Palestine. I have had the privilege of constant returns, and of living, walking, breathing, and touching my land.

Q: Your recent work seems to be devoted to Palestine, have you been tempted to explore other subject matter, such as the obvious for a Middle Eastern female artist: sexuality/body, or abstract subject matter?

My recent work is no more or less devoted to Palestine than pieces that date back as far back as 1993. There are several trajectories that have been prevalent in my work since the early 90's such as translation and exchange, as well as the ones I mentioned earlier: movement (both forced and voluntary), repressed historical narratives, resistance, political land divisions, and the logic of the archive. My work comes out of my life experience and I think it is actually quite broad and varied. Having said that I think its only natural that Palestine is a center in my work since I am Palestinian.

Adila Laidi-Hanieh is a cultural critic. Her first book Palestine Rien Ne Nous Manque Ici was published in 2008 in Paris and Brussels (Cercle d'Art Revue).

Emily Jacir is a Palestinian artist and recipient of the Golden Lion Award of the Venice Biennale 2007. She is based in New York and Ramallah and teaches at the International Academy of Art, Palestine.

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