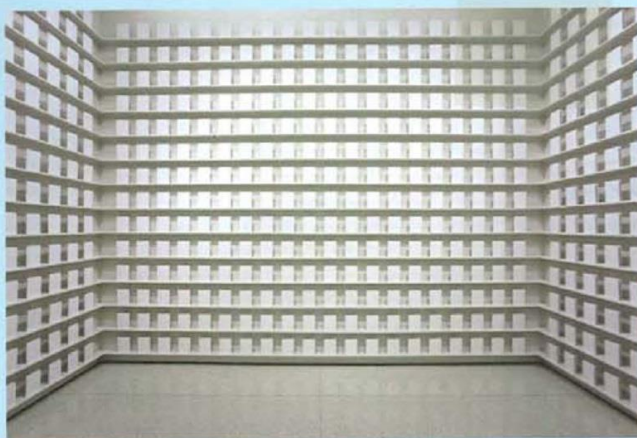


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IN RESPONSE

## Tribute to a Palestinian

*New York critics decried Emily Jacir's work for its bias before looking at its form.* By Murtaza Vali

**MATERIAL FOR A FILM (PERFORMANCE).** 2006, 1,000 blank books shot by the artist with a .22 caliber gun, shelving, 67 photographs, dimensions variable. Installation view at Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009. Photo by David Heald. Courtesy the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York.

Walking through Emily Jacir's 2008 Hugo Boss Prize exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum, which ran from February through April, I chanced upon two museum guards holding a spirited debate over the intentions, strategies, successes and shortcomings of the work around them. The exchange was hardly surprising. Dealing forthrightly with the conflicted histories and tragic realities of fellow Palestinians, Jacir's work is hotly contested whenever exhibited in the United States. In January, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art published an accompanying text to its display of *Where We Come From* (2001–03)—a photo-text installation documenting deeds Jacir performed across Palestine on behalf of Palestinians—which was almost apologetic in its justification of the piece as important contemporary art and the museum's decision to acquire it for the permanent collection. In the US, a pro-Palestine position runs the risk of being mistakenly viewed as not only anti-Israeli but also anti-Semitic propaganda, which must be balanced by the opposing viewpoint.

The Guggenheim exhibition brought together two recent projects inspired by the life and death of Palestinian intellectual Wael Zuaiter, murdered in Rome in 1972 by Mossad agents for his suspected, but never publicly proven, involvement in the massacre of Israeli athletes by Black September at the Munich Olympics earlier that year. Much of the local critical response—Ken Johnson in the *New York Times*, Howard Halle in *Time Out New York* and Don J. Cohn in *ArtAsiaPacific* in a review of the catalog for Jacir's 2008 museum shows in Europe—was conducted less in the spirit of open debate than character assassination, betraying the rather conservative opinion that a strong political viewpoint makes for bad art. While accusing Jacir of somewhat naively, or in the case of Halle's caustic diatribe, guilefully, presenting Zuaiter as an innocent victim by focusing on his personal life and scholarly and humanist pursuits, these critics take Zuaiter's guilt as a given, presenting little actual evidence to support their view.

Similarly, having charged Jacir of an almost immoral partisanship, these critics betray a comparable prejudice in their evaluations, largely limiting their analyses to the subject matter and intention rather than engaging with the specific forms and conceptual strategies Jacir employs.

A stark-white mausoleum-like room, *Material for a film (performance)* (2006) is comprised of walls lined with shelves holding 1,000 blank books each pierced with a single, barely visible bullet hole. Superficially reminiscent of other recent memorial art—Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial in Vienna's Judenplatz immediately comes to mind—like much of Jacir's previous work, the installation's emotional trigger (pun intended) lies not in its final form but in the process of its creation, as its bracketed subtitle asserts. Jacir spent two weeks at a shooting range, first learning how to shoot a .22 caliber pistol—the type the Mossad used to kill Zuaiter—then applying her newly acquired competence to shooting a single bullet at each book. This seemingly endless repetition of a violent act—which symbolically placed the artist in the role of Zuaiter's assassins—was no doubt unnerving for an artist whose life in Palestine is lived under the gun, repeatedly interrupted by checkpoints manned by heavily armed Israeli soldiers. Despite the privilege her American passport affords her, Jacir has been held at gunpoint for several hours at a checkpoint for filming the border and has been caught in the crossfire of a gunfight, narrowly escaping harm. For Jacir, the Israel-Palestine conflict is not an ideological abstraction constructed at a safe distance, as Cohn suggests; it has very real, possibly life-threatening consequences.

The other work on view at the Guggenheim was Jacir's ongoing *Material for a film* (2004–), a fragmented, surprisingly unassuming and at times almost clinical installation documenting Zuaiter's life with photographs, correspondence between Zuaiter and family and friends, and brief video and audio recordings. In his review, Johnson cites this as a major shortcoming of the work, which fails to "bring him [Zuaiter] to life sufficiently enough to elicit a strong emotional response." Except for a few creased pages of Dante's *Inferno* that Zuaiter carried with him, Jacir presents much of this material as facsimiles, emphasizing her acts of appropriation and manipulation. Her attempt to conjure him back to life seems to paradoxically resist or deflect the powerful emotional draw of the original artifacts. As a result, Zuaiter remains a fugitive, an absent center around which the traces of his life orbit. Rather than establish him as a martyr to the Palestinian cause as Jacir's critics accuse her of doing, *Material for a film* conveys the desire to memorialize the deceased and the inherent futility of such attempts at reanimating the past, emphasizing the profound finality that death, any death, represents.

With this gnawing absence at its center, Jacir's installation opens up to viewers, who evaluate the evidence presented and supply the necessary interpretation. Hence, some are deeply touched by the tragic story of a murdered innocent while others balk at the apparent memorialization of an alleged terrorist. Unlike propaganda, however, *Material for a film's* most radical gesture is that it permits the political prejudices of the spectator (or critic) to surface. Debate is encouraged, not stifled, as overhearing the museum guards demonstrated. Jacir's work openly acknowledges that, however troubling or unknowable it may be, there are inevitably more sides to Zuaiter's story than the one acted upon by Mossad.