

AISSA DEEBI, EXILE IS HARD WORK

Touring exhibition
Fattoush gallery 2019



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Aissa: The City's clip

Aissa Deebi's exhibition "Exile is Hard Work" presented at Gallery Fattoush surpasses its artistic borders, and concurrently, its personal and geopolitical discourse. These elements are inevitably dominant in the works, and would be distinguished even once exhibited in a cold European city where the artist resides these days. Gallery Fattoush sees that Deebi's multiangled approach is depicted in two ways. First, Deebi's works are presented for the first time in his hometown Haifa. Throughout his practice years, Deebi, son of Wadi a-Nisnas, has moved between Cairo, the United States and Europe, where he obtained his education and exhibited his work in various galleries and venues. However, Deebi's works were not shown to his family, his friends, and the people of his hometown so far. The works introduce the viewer to a personal chronicle which includes multiple stages in the artist's life; stages that intersect and separate at the same time, multiple chronicles which documents the place, the collective, the city, the family, the homeland, and other inherent accounts familiar to Deebi himself. Second, Deebi is a dear friend of Fattoush family, who, among other friends, showed support at the very beginning of establishing Fattoush Café and Restaurant in the Germany Colony, Haifa. Deebi was the one who initiated the opening of the first gallery, which we call nowadays "The Small Gallery" after opening the new Fattoush Bar & Gallery space. Throughout the years, the gallery hosted artworks by hundreds of artists, thus fulfilling the owner's wish, Wadih Shahbarat, to provide a genuine space for visual arts in Haifa. Over the course of two decades, the city has witnessed transformations which are visible in an enlarged form to the spectacle of a visitor who lives in exile, which is the case of Aissa, as if he examined those changes through a microscope lens. The route that Aissa used to pass with his brother towards Tal AsSamak (the theme of one of the exhibited works) is not a primitive road anymore, it was maintained and paved and is often visited by walking or jogging pedestrians every morning. The houses of Wadi Salib were sold to and reinhabited by elegant law firms and art studios. In parallel to these -both ostensible and major- changes, a new generation was born, adding a remarkable contemporary voice to the cultural and art scene in the city. It might seem that

the emergence of a new art movement and the deformed appearance of the city are two displaced yet concurrent reactions and geographies that coexist parallelly, or perhaps the opposite is true: the rise of a new cultural movement could be complementary to the elimination and distortion which have shaped the city over time. In both cases, “Exile is Hard Work” functions as a clip which holds both realities together. By portraying histories, personas and relationships which no longer exist or seen roaming around the city, the exhibition sustains their existence which is hidden under the layered current landscape.

Asmaa’ Azaizah | Artistic Director
Fattoush

Aissa Deebi

is a Palestinian artist based in Geneva, Switzerland. His early work investigates the complexity of daily practices in post-1948 Palestine: *Days like this* (1997); *Makkan* (1998); *My Dream House* (1999); *Nothing is New Only Forgotten* (2000). Later, Deebi's work tackles the theme of immigration and alienation, which culminates into his Ph.D. research, providing critical analysis of Diaspora as a creative space. In tandem with his scholarly work, Deebi produced a body of works that interrogate the complex phenomena of cultural-migration and Diaspora reality as experienced by an adult Palestinian-Immigrant artist in post-Sept 11 America: *Killing Time* (2004); *Naked Heroes* (2003); *Dead Sweet* (2004) *Tal El Samak* (2011). *The Trail* 2013), *Motherland*(2016), *Exile is Hard work* (2016/17), *This is who I saw Gaza* (2017).

Deebi has held several leadership positions teaching art and design at a number of institutions including the Winchester School of Art, the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom, Centro de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey Design, Mexico and Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok Thailand, The American University in Cairo, Montclair State University and currently Deebi is Visiting Reader in Contemporary Art of the Middle East at Birmingham City University, United Kingdom (UK).

His work has been exhibited globally including Art Dubai, The Palestinian Art Court – Al Hoash, Jerusalem, Birzeit University Museum, Palestine, Çanakkale Biennale, Turkey, Kunsthalle Osnabrück, Germany, The 55 Venice Biennale, Italy,

Art Lab Gnesta, Sweden, Berlin Art Laboratory, Germany, Art Space Gallery at Sang Myung University, Seoul, Korea, Darb 1718, Cairo, Egypt, Kunstverein, Germany, The Queens Museum of Art in New York, Haus am Lutzowplatz in Berlin, Tanit Art Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon, Beirut Art Fair, Lebanon, Asia-Pacific Triennial, Taipei in Taiwan, VCU Art Gallery, Qatar.

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Double Binds: The Biennial as National and Transnational Context

Noah Simblist

This exhibition includes two works by Aissa Deebi, *The Trial* (2013) and *Motherland* (2016). These two projects were conceived for biennials: *The Trial* for the 2013 Venice Biennale and *Motherland* for the 2016 Çanakkale Biennale. By bringing together these two works, this exhibition creates a dialogue between their themes but it also raises a number of issues related to their original contexts.

The Trial is a two channel video installation that depicts a group of actors in a black box theater reading from the transcript of a 1973 statement made by Daud Turki, a Palestinian poet who was on trial in an Israeli court for espionage and collaborating with the enemy. Turki was a communist and his statements echo the revolutionary rhetoric of the time. Deebi filmed this work in Haifa, which is not only where Turki was from but is also where Deebi grew up. At the time of its making, Deebi was living in Cairo, in the wake of the 2011 revolution in Egypt. While this work stems from the particular nature of Palestinian revolution and its links to international currents of revolutionary struggle in the 1970s, it has resonances with Egypt's political situation in 2013 and larger questions about revolutionary struggles in general.

Motherland is an elegy to Deebi's mother and a photographic meditation on exile. Deebi shot images of landscapes in the United States and Switzerland, two countries that he has lived in for the past few years. This project asks, how do we define home and mother? What is the affective nature of being in between spaces? And finally, how do larger political currents relate to one's personal life? *Motherland* is shown as a series of photographic prints that evoke the poetics of space.

The context for *The Trial* at the Palestinian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, raises the question of nationalism in major international exhi-

bitions. How is identity performed in this context and how are some nations privileged more than others? How do real politics intersect with the politics of display? This is especially relevant to the subject matter of *The Trial*, which was a communist view of class struggle that transcended nationalism, race, or other identity positions. On the other hand, *Motherland* was originally conceived of for the 2016 Çanakkale Biennale, an exhibition that was cancelled because of political pressures in Turkey, following a failed military coup. In this case, the biennial was subject to the particular conditions of a national context. So, given these histories, *The Trial* and *Motherland* are not only artworks that are about political and personal histories of Palestinian dispossession and exile. They also evoke the larger exhibition histories that have embedded within them related political currents.

The biennial as a particular typology of exhibition making began in 1895 with the Venice Biennale. In 1951, when São Paulo launched its biennial, the notion of a recurring exhibition, separate from the institutional context of a museum, emerged as a global phenomenon. When the Havana biennial began in 1984, followed by the Istanbul biennial in 1987, peripheral communities were given greater prominence. But in all of these cases, national pageantry, comparable to the Olympics emerged as a major force. This is exemplified by the national pavilions in the Giardini in Venice.

The 2013 exhibition in Venice, *Otherwise Occupied*, which set the stage for Deebi's work, *The Trial*, is an example of an exhibition participating in the dominant nationalist discourse of the biennial. In this case, an exhibition approximating an unofficial national pavilion, Palestine reiterated itself as an aspirational state, given that Palestinians have yet to attain full sovereignty.¹ But Deebi's work, which tells the history of Daud Turki, an anti-nationalist communist, questions the nationalist foundation of the very pavilion in which it was shown. In this sense, Deebi carries out another characteristic of biennials, the use of an exhibition as a platform to grapple with political issues. By telling a story that references Palestine, Israel, Syria, and Egypt, nationalism is present, thereby echoing its use in the biennial. But the revolutionary

rhetoric of *The Trial* also invokes a challenge to the assumption of national sovereignty as a fixed thing. To take it a step further, Deebi's use of absurdity to undo the romanticism of revolutionary rhetoric refuses the strategy of revolution as an easy antidote to hegemonic nationalist forces. Thus, both the state and the forces that oppose it are questioned.

Biennials have been hotly debated since their explosive rise in the 1990s. They have been criticized as festivalist spectacles of global capital that serve tourist industries and the art market, not unlike art fairs. They have also been analyzed in terms of their sometime problematic attendance to local issues. Grant Kester cites Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains*, commissioned for the 2002 Lima Biennial, as one example of an artist commenting on a community in which the biennial was sited. His work highlighted the need for the empowerment of a community living in a shantytown made up of immigrants, displaced farmers and refugees. But Kester questions the depth of the political intervention by Alÿs, and proposes that this lack of depth may be built into the biennial system.² Similarly, Tirdad Zolghar has described "ethnic marketing" as another problematic phenomenon of biennial culture. Zolghar defines ethnic marketing as a Euro-American xenophilia that can be found in international exhibitions predicated on artists and curatorial platforms that engage in postcolonial platitudes.³ I believe that Deebi's *The Trial* avoids these problematics because it questions the very nature of platitudes both for or against the state, problematizing political discourse itself.

The notion of a biennial being sited in a particular political context doesn't always lend itself to the ways that artists attend to a site. Sometimes the state can push back. This was the case of the 2016 Çanakkale Biennale, which was being planned during a time of increasing instability and a risk averse government. Many biennials assume a neoliberal global order, which can withstand, even to the point of coopting, political criticality. But the Çanakkale Biennale was cancelled because of a collapse of the assumed mutuality between art and politics. Perhaps this is a good time to contemplate the relationship between the two and how this relationship necessarily changes from one context to another.

The themes embedded in Aissa Deebi's work planned for the Çanakkale Biennale included exile and migration, two themes also addressed by Okwui Enwezor's 2006 International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville entitled *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*. In his essay for the exhibition catalog, he says,

At a minimum, any art aiming to engage itself in social praxis today must begin with a critique of the romantic illusion of pure distance and total autonomy from world events. If indeed distance and autonomy need to be maintained in order to attain a clear separation between art and social praxis, then it would be a qualified distance, one which recognizes the imbrication of artistic structures in social temporality. The evident decay in the political and social structures of the global present permits a reassessment of the role of art and artists in social discourse, not an enunciation of their distance from it.⁴

This statement, made ten years before the political crisis in Turkey that led to the cancellation of the Çanakkale Biennale, articulates the nature of the distance that occurred between art and social praxis. The theme of the Çanakkale Biennale was to be migration, a reality that is a result of the war in Syria that had a great effect on Turkey's social structure. But, as many have noted, this is a recent refugee crisis in the region that has many antecedents, most notably the Palestinian example. One par-

1. It's important to note that Bruce Ferguson, the co-curator, claims in a catalog essay for the exhibition that *Otherwise Occupied* was neither official nor unofficial, but rather affiliated with the larger Venice Biennial Project. This was the second Palestinian exhibition to occur within the construct of the Venice Biennale. The first was the 2009, *Palestine c/o Venice*, curated by Salwa Mikdadi.

2. Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) p134

3. Tirdad Zolghar co-curated the exhibition "Ethnic Marketing: Art, Globalization and the Intercultural Supply and Demand" with M. Anderfuhren for the Kunsthalle Geneva in 2004.

4. Okwui Enwezor, "The Unhomely" in *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society* (Barcelona: Fundación BLACS, 2006)

ticular dimension of this historical tragedy is the double exile that many Palestinians based in Syria have experienced.

When we consider the biennial as a context for the two works by Aissa Deebi included in this exhibition, there are two dimensions of transnationalism at play. One is a movement between borders as defined by migration and exile (both Syrian and Palestinian). The other is the neoliberal form of transnationalism that biennials propose. It is not an accident that globalization and biennials rose to prominence around the same time in the 1990s and early 2000s. The links between these two social phenomenon have been discussed. But the question now to address is how migration affects the intersecting forces of globalization and biennials. Deebi's work provides us with a unique opportunity to examine transnationalism's double bind because he chooses an unrelenting criticality to address the challenges that we face.

NOAH SIMBLIST is Chair of Painting and Printmaking and Associate Professor of Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. He works as a curator, writer, and artist and has contributed to *Art Journal*, *Modern Painters*, *Art in America*, *Art Papers*, *Terremoto*, *Art Lies*, *Art Pulse*, *Art21* and other publications. He edited the book *Places of a Present Past* (New York: Publication Studio, 2015), contributed to *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic* (eds. James Elkins and Harper Montgomery, Penn State University Press, 2013), *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* edited by Johanna Burton (New Museum and MIT Press, 2016), and is in the process of editing a volume about Tania Bruguera's, *The Francis Effect*, a project co-produced by the Guggenheim Museum, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, and SMU. He has published interviews with Kader Attia, Khaled Hourani, AL Steiner and AK Burns, Omer Fast, Jill Magid, Walead Beshty, Yoshua Okon, and Nicholas Schaffhausen. His curatorial projects include *False Flags with Pelican Bomb* in New Orleans (2016), *Emergency Measures at the Power Station* (2015), *Tamy Ben Tor at Testsite* (2012), *Out of Place* at Lora Reynolds Gallery (2011), *Queer State(s)* at the Visual Arts

Center in Austin (2011), Yuri's Office by Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation at Ft Worth Contemporary Arts (2010) and was the curatorial team for the 2013 Texas Biennial. In 2016, he was the co-curator and co-producer for New Cities Future Ruins, a convening that invited artists, designers and thinkers to re-imagine and engage the extreme urbanism of America's Western Sun Belt.

The Sensory Experience of Internationalism: On Aissa Deebi's Exile is Hard Work

Aymon Kreil

In the exhibition *Exile is Hard Work*, Aissa Deebi presents two of his recent pieces: *The Trial*, already displayed at the 2013 Venice Biennale, and *Motherland*, an installation he prepared for the 2016 Çanakkale Biennale, an event which was eventually cancelled because of the political situation in Turkey. The juxtaposition of these two artworks offers an important insight into the relation of political discourses and ordinary experiences. Deebi restores the link between Marxist internationalism, body perceptions, and the intimacy of his family surrounding. In this text, drawing on Gaston Bachelard's "poetics of space" and Georges Didi-Huberman's "position of the exile",¹ I argue that Deebi's artistic reflections address one of the crucial issues of political involvement: the difficulty to relate larger political prospects to one's concrete life. Deebi's work makes obvious the gap existing between these two dimensions. In parallel, he tries to reconcile these two dimensions on an imaginary plan. Thus, beyond reflecting merely on the artist's experience of exile, his work summons a powerful specter: the sensory appeal of revolutions.

The Trial was part of the collateral exhibition to the Venice Biennale called *Otherwise Occupied*. The core piece of *The Trial* is a video showing two actors reading the 1973 declaration of the poet Daud Turki to an Israeli court. Turki's speech was part of the trial against the Red Front, a Marxist-Leninist organization that tried to bring together Israeli and Palestinian activists for fighting class exploitation and colonialism. The declaration is built on the rhetorical repertoire of the 1970's communism: the praise of leaders as Che Guevara and Mao Zedong; the denunciation of US imperialism in Vietnam and South America; internationalism based on the objective solidarity of all workers worldwide; and a revolutionary theory based on organizational centralism. Concerning the situation in Palestine, the text combines a condemnation of the Zionist project with an autobiographical recounting of Turki's own

militant path and of the problems he had to face in Israel as an Arab communist.

Deebi's staging alludes to techniques of distancing used by Berthold Brecht.² Thus, the word "Revolutionary" is emblazoned on the two actors' red T-shirts while a woman wearing a blue T-shirt with the word "Police" written on it continuously interrupts them. She announces the arrival of the invisible court presiding over this trial, and incessantly intervenes by ostensibly bringing glasses of water to the "revolutionaries" along with a man dressed like her. This overtly artificial and minimal setting avoids any sensory link between the staged scenes and ordinary experiences. At times, the voices of the two actors overlap, making their words sound confused and almost impossible to understand. Some sentences are also repeated or remain unfinished. The fact that two actors read the same declaration alternately adds a layer of strangeness to their performance.

With his second installation presented in Geneva, Motherland, Aissa Deebi reflects upon the experience of intimacy through an elegy to his mother. For this research, he relies on anecdotes. According to Deebi, his mother repeatedly asked him to paint flowers. As a response, Motherland consists of photos of flowers and landscapes from the United States and Switzerland. Deebi deforms these pictures according to the lens of his mother's glasses, as he puts it. This installation evokes previous works of the artist. For Tel al-Samak, for instance, he asked a friend to photograph the way to the beach in Haifa, where he used to walk as child along with a brother who later died while in Israeli police custody. The mediation of pictures brings forward both the presence of the dead and his absence.³ In Deebi's work, the relation to his deceased mother Muand brother takes on a particular tone due to the distance to the places they once shared. Hence, these places become metonymies of his intimate link to the persons he loved and of the loss of exile at the same time.

Showing The Trial and Motherland together opens perspectives about the aesthetics of exile for which the approach of French philosopher

Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space seem particularly useful. For Bachelard, poetic images escape to the past of causal chains or the future of projects. These images act upon the soul in an instant, awaking intimate resonances which in return transform existence and reverberate from the listeners into the world.⁴

Deebi's work questions the poetics of space of Marxist internationalism, and its capacity to awake intimate resonances. For this aim, the exhibition puts into dialogue an ideological discourse sustained by the models of causality of dialectical materialism and of revolutionary projects on one hand, and the details of Deebi's ties to his close family on the other.

Two texts accompanying *Motherland* make this relation between politics and the ordinary experience obvious in a dialectical way. In the first one titled "It Is a Great Thing That You Are Still Alive, My Brother," Deebi recounts his first travel to a place located in the Soviet Union he calls "the city of dreams." He evokes the farewell from his family and friends, and his first journey on a ship to Cyprus and then on an Aeroflot airplane. He concludes his narrative recalling a reprimand by the stewardess of the airplane, when he asks her for another glass of mint-flavored water. She tells him that he is not alone and has to share with the others. "This was my first lesson in scientific socialism," he concludes, a lesson which is related to being thirsty. Thus, through his account, Deebi draws the outlines of a sensory geography of Marxist internationalism. In the second text, titled "Take Me With You," he remembers his room being searched by the Israeli Police because of his communist involvement. Deebi's mother was not part of the Communist movement,⁵ but when the Israeli officer in charge of the search issues the order to arrest narrator, she tells him: "Listen, foreigner (kha-waja), if you take my son with you because he is a communist, take me with you, because I am a communist too." These two texts show a constant back and forth between the dreamed spaces of revolutionary projects and the affective ties to his surroundings in Palestine.

To go back to Brecht, French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, in a text on the years of Brecht outside of Germany, describes exile as

setting a position in-between allowing to combine analytical distance and emotional involvement toward the abandoned country. Didi-Huberman calls the relation of Brecht to Germany one of “concrete dialectic,” using Brecht’s own motto that “Truth is concrete”, meaning it is “singular, partial, incomplete, and passing like a shooting star.”⁶ Here, Brecht’s caption of truth as a patchy assemblage evokes the immediacy of experience in Bachelard’s poetics of space.

Deebi intricately binds the project of Marxist internationalism to affective ties to his close surrounding. Eventually, political engagement and ordinary life become immanent to each other. Hence, Deebi’s poetic images gives a virtual access to a reconciliation of his socialist dreams and the immediacy of experience. However, inscribing this relation into the aesthetics of exile renders this into fiction, and alienation as well. Made in absence, these images convey a sense of powerlessness. In this regard, their significance goes beyond the case of Palestine, but questions the resonance of all political discourses that were an inherent part of leftist protest movements in the 1960’s and 1970’s. These echoes from the past often sound disconnected of experience and as such, they feel shallow, but no systemic crititranslational discourse has been able to replace them since. To restore the immediate experience which they were carrying is maybe the best way to make audible their appeal again, through the sensory experience of revolution, in a moment in which the political left seems weaker than ever in Europe, North America and the Middle East, and in which its minority position feels like exile in many places.

1. Gaston Bachelard, 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press [transl. Maria Jolas]; Georges Didi-Huberman, 2008, *Position de l’exilé*. *Lignes* 26(2), 64-87

2. Sarah Rogers. 2013. *The Return*. In: Ryan Bishop and Gordon Hon (eds.) *Bashir Makhloul Aissa Deebi: Otherwise Occupied*. Jerusalem: Palestinian Art Court – al Hoash, 80-103

3. Hans Belting. 2001. *Bild-Anthropologie*. Munich: W. Fink, p. 143-188

4. Gaston Bachelard, 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press [transl. Maria Jolas], p. XXII-XXIII

5. Personal communication by the artist.

6. Georges Didi-Huberman, 2008, *Position de l’exilé*. *Lignes* 26(2), 64-87, p. 73, my translation

AYMON KREIL Is an anthropologist. He conducted most of his research in Egypt. In 2012, he defended his Ph.D. Thesis on the registers of talk on love and sex in Cairo at the EHESS (Paris), as part of a joint program with the University of Neuchâtel. Among his most recent publications are “Dire le harcèlement sexuel en Égypte: Les aléas de traduction d’une catégorie juridique,” *Critique internationale* 70, 2016; “Territories of Desire: A geography of competing intimacies in Cairo,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 12: 2, 2016; “The Price of Love: Valentine’s Day in Egypt and its Enemies,” *Arab Studies Journal* 24: 2, 2016. Kreil taught at the University of Cairo, at the University of Neuchatel, at the Geneva University for Art and Design, and at the University of Fribourg. Currently, he is a researcher at the Asia-Orient-Institute of the University of Zurich.

Culture is a Form of Memory

Beral Madra

In 2014, when I was invited to curate the Çanakkale Biennial, the refugee crisis was at its height and we were watching this disaster with regret and horror. It was not only a responsibility to return to this human tragedy but also a commitment to the memory of the artists who have experienced a history of forced immigration. I tried to focus on the most crucial aspect of this reality and conceived of the concept of homeland. The city of Çanakkale is located just north of the epicentre of the refugee crisis in the Aegean Sea. A biennale with artists with a refugee or immigration background was expected to be a perfect opportunity for us to face and challenge global human tragedy with the universal language of contemporary art. The works of the artists, among them works by Aissa Deebi, could raise questions about the sustainability of ideas, of national and ethnic identity, in a world whose borders are becoming increasingly accidental, penetrable, and dangerous. The Çanakkale Biennial could not be realized due to the disputes between the ruling power and our position but our international colleagues from the Osnabrueck and Thessaloniki Biennales, who had the same intention, to make this tragedy more visible for their publics and construct their exhibitions around concepts of homeland, invited groups of artists from the Çanakkale Biennial to their respective institutions. Given this exhibition history, I'd like to focus more deeply on the concept of immigration.

Vilem Flusser's book *Von der Freiheit der Emigranten* (1994) should be pursued today as essential knowledge in reading and interpreting an artwork that deals with migration, emigration, exile, or refugee crisis. In one essay he indicates,

A philosophy of emigration is only to be written. Its categories are still misty and blurred. One of their tasks would be to distinguish emigration as clearly as possible from escape. And this in the midst of a situation that has many elements of escape.¹

Currently, the rather complex category of emigration is not only more blurred than before, but has a pivotal influence on global geo-politics and economics. In the ongoing global refugee crisis, emigrant, migrant, exiled or refugee artists are producing artworks that can help to build on the philosophy Flusser was prophesizing half a century ago. The accumulation of these artworks may help to conceive diverse perspectives for philosophical endeavour.

The age old difficult task to live in a complex and enigmatic region such as the Middle East entered into a post-historical phase after the first Gulf War, designated now as the bloodiest war, since WW II. This is a post-historical phase in the sense that humankind lost its memory of the ancient, Medieval and Ottoman civilisations of this vast region that made the world we live in. It was a realm of the utmost creativity, thought and wisdom. It became a region, which was transformed under imperialism and other radical ideologies, that now carries all the vices and burdens of 20th and 21st century politics and economy. Today, people can neither reflect on the magnificence of its nature and monuments, nor imagine the disasters, wars, and interrupted lives that exist in this region. Currently artworks are accumulating the corpus of a relational visual archive. Future history will mention the statistics of massacres, lost lives, and immigration routes. The red of blood will be overall the colour of this phase of history.

The majority of people living in the region were born into a modernized traditional society as programmed by colonisation and had to face one of the most ambitious utopias of the 20th century. But the paradox is that their region was called “the Third World” or “the periphery”. Here one can also “follow the concept of heterotopia” of Foucault which is “the difference (hetero) with the dominant space (topos).”² Even after heterotopology the tumultuous experience of globalism, for the emigrants and exiles a problem of heterotopia exists, due to the memory of Third World and Periphery discourse of the 20th century. Since then liberalism, socialism, communism, militarism, internationalism, nationalism, fundamentalism, consumerism, and multiculturalism have been interpreted, challenged, condemned and

upturned by global intellectuals and artists. But after intersections of post-periphery, globalism, heterotopia, dystopia, now humankind has to face a dilemma of truth versus post-truth.³

This process, full of paradoxes, hopes, and disappointments, fills the stories of many individuals in this region. Among them, artists and art experts of various creative disciplines living within this geo-political social context have tried to deconstruct the complex mechanism of peripheral Modernism and reconstruct an art system based on free and independent creativity, interactive exchange of concepts, and collaborative projects with international critics and curators. The cultural and artistic exchange had to play on the territory of multi-tensions had to keep the memory alive, because memory is an essential part of a cultural production.

Artists take on today's basic socio-political concepts of home and motherland such as: what is global nomadism? what is global citizenship? and what is identity in exile? They are dealing with memory, remembered landscapes, micro histories and ways of struggle during exile or immigration. At this point, dealing with a complex memory, we have to rely on the artists like Aissa Deebi, who have been digging into the personal and collective memory with detailed research, and deciphering the political, economic, social, cultural complexities of being an emigrant, seriously related to ideological interventions. Questions like: what does "home" and "mother" mean? what are the links between "homeland" and "motherland" in today's individual psychology and the socio-psychological, political and economic order of things? are key points one can discuss through Aissa Deebi's work. Even if he approaches the subject with rational production and a commitment to visual language and wishes "to deliberately avoid the Freudian analysis of" his "relationship to the subject and the object of desire, land and mother,"⁴ looking back to the associative discourse will give the viewer more insight into the work.

Aissa Deebi's work *A patriemere*, or *Motherland*, a three channel photo/ video installation dedicated to his mother and conceived for

his participation in the cancelled 5th Çanakkale Biennale, entitled Homeland, is a remarkable example of this quest for truth in the age of so called post-truth. Above all, this personal memory content sets an example for countless comparable narratives for all the refugees of the Middle East.⁵

Aissa Deebi investigates inherited objects. He is associating his current position with objects that can bring about familiarity, comfort and a sense of belonging. Photography and video, two effective techniques of documentation are contributing to his research and inquiry.

In some languages, especially in Turkish, motherland is frequently used instead of homeland. Home and mother have a common bio-social attribute, namely “to be born.” Here one can refer to Flusser again, when he also mentions pain and surgical invasion:

Homeland is not an eternal value but rather a function of a specific technology; still, whoever loses it suffers. This is because we are attached to heimat by many bonds, most of which are hidden and not accessible to consciousness. Whenever these attachments tear or are torn asunder the individual experiences this painfully, almost as a surgical invasion of his most intimate person.⁶

Edward Said in his essay *Reflections on Exile* also describes it in terms of physical and mental pain: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”⁷

Mother is an essential subject-object relation or conflict in Freud’s and Lacan’s work. In Freud the mother has an inferior position in service of the father designated in the Oedipus complex. Lacan also designates mother as the Other and her mysterious desire creates a crisis for the individual, which ends up in castration. In both cases “mother,” as the person given birth and life to a human; she loves, shelters,

educates, and guides, she is gentle and has warm understanding and infinite tolerance, but within the sphere of the Oedipus complex she creates ambivalence for the same human. This positive and negative character or this tangle of motherhood can result in a complex relation. The psychoanalytic approach declares that it is solved or overcome in favor of the father.⁸

Deebi's work evidently is not writing a prescription to this ever-present Oedipus complex but arouses a question about what happens when the bond to the mother is severed in the wrong way, with a forced separation, in this case exile. Here, the rupture triggers the meaning of the bond between mother and motherland.

After all the years of absence and the interminable mode of mourning her death Aissa Deebi found a possibility to face this dilemma and come to terms with this memory through the concept of the biennale he was invited to and through an installation consisting of abstract and tangible relics.

As an artist masterfully using photography and video techniques to produce dissident political works, such as *The Trial*, he surprises the viewer with his decision to paint flowers to fulfill the 20-year-old wish of his mother. Her intelligible appreciation of valuable art as still-life or flower paintings and his intuitions and impulse to stay faithful to memory guided him to flower. Flowers in art history adds a healing value to art, representing religious truths, love, joy, friendship and happiness. Is it a coincidence that he prefers the therapeutic value of art? Or is he expecting reconciliation by emphasizing the sensory pleasure of flower paintings? In both cases, flowers fulfill the requirement of

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1. Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (University of Illinois, 2013)
 2. “#FOUCAULT, Episode 7, Questioning the Heterotopology” *THE FUNAMBULIST MAGAZINE*. <https://thefunambulist.net/architectural-projects/foucault-episode-7-questioning-the-heterotopology>
 3. Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Vol- ume 8, 2015, pp 327-333.
 4. Artist's statement
 5. Note that Deebi's work *Motherland*, originally conceived of for the Çannakale Biennial, was a video installation. The works from this series that were included in the Birzeit University Museum exhibition were digital prints based on stills from this video installation.
 6. Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (University of Illinois, 2013) p3
 7. Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*(University of Harvard Press, 2000) p173

this sensibility. The tangible piece in this work is a pair of glasses that belonged to his mother. In all religious rituals the first task just after the death of a person is to close the eyes still staring to the world. It is a duty to end the last connection to the world. Eyeglasses are a symbol of this last connection as well as the gaze that never leaves the world, as long as the person is remembered. The existence of the gaze in the work also reveals the ambiguity of the artist's relation to his mother and to his motherland. Maria Scott argues that,

the meaning of the gaze constantly shifts and that gaze occupies four different positions (the gaze of the lost object, the gaze of the substitute object, the gaze as cause of fascination, and the gaze as cause of separation) in Lacan's seminars, corresponding to four different readings of Lacan's notoriously elusive object a.⁹

Object a here is the eyeglasses and all of these meanings of gaze are in association with Deebi's interpretation of his mental and spiritual quest for a lucid and sublimated confrontation with his position as an exile.

His video work prepared for the cancelled 5th Çanakkale Biennale also follows this path. The background of the text, narrating a memory, is a landscape, sometimes bright and spirited sometimes dark and uncanny. Deebi juxtaposes the verbal and the visual, his mother's imagination of nature as the leitmotif of art and his position as an artist with Marxist background.

Aissa Deebi's exhibition in Palestine is zeitgeistlich, as it is based on the quest for truth. According to the socio-political discourse we are living in a critical phase of globalization namely "post-truth." It is an adjective defined in Oxford dictionary as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."¹⁰ This term will

8. Alan Rowan, "Mother – From Freud to Lacan," pre- sented at the Irish Circle of the Lacanian Orientation – New Lacanian School (ICLO-NLS) Open Seminar Psychoanalysis & Literature in Dialogue, November 9, 2013.

9. vvMaria Scott, "Deciphering The Gaze in Lacan's 'Of The Gaze As Objet Petit A'" http://thedsproject.com/portfolio/deciphering-the-gaze-in-lacans-of-the-gaze-as-objet-petit-a/#_ftn-ref7

10. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

11. Edward Said & David Barsamian, Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said (South End Press, 2003) page 159.

also influence the concepts and statements of artists and art experts. If post-truth is produced in political, economic and social levels, artists and art experts will evaluate truth and reflect it in art works and how artists will discover a lie today. It is early to have answers, but what they realize is that the world is changing in an unpredictable direction. For the moment, we can rely on Edward Said's comment "In the case of a political identity that's being threatened, culture is a way of fighting against extinction and obliteration. Culture is a form of memory against effacement." ¹¹

BERAL MADRA Is a curator and critic based in Istanbul. She coordinated the first (1987) and second (1989) Istanbul Biennale, curated exhibitions of Turkish artists in 43rd, 45th, 49th, 50th and 51st Venice Biennale, and co-curated the exhibition Modernities and Memories-Recent Works from the Islamic World in 47th Venice Biennale. Since 1984 she has organized more than 250 local and international artists in Istanbul. She curated and co-curated over 50 international group shows including Sanat, Texhn (1992); Treffen-Kunst (1993); Iskele-Türkische Kunst Heute (Berlin-Stuttgart 1994); Orient Express (Berlin 1994); Xample (1995); Concrete Visions (1995); Berlin in Istanbul (Berlin 1998); Reise durch das Labyrinth (Berlin, 1998); Veritas Omnia Vincit (2000); In Image We Trust (2001); Sheshow (Sofia, 2002); Registering the Distance-Istanbul/Los Angeles (Santa Monica 2003); The Sphinx Will Devour You, Karşı Sanat (2004); Bizhan Bassiri, Evaporations, Tophane-i Amire (2004); Neighbours in Dialogue, Istanbul Collection Exhibition for Ars Aevi, Sarajevo, Feshane, İstanbul (2007); Atmosphere 41: Contemporary Art from Georgia, Siemens Art Gallery (Istanbul 2007); Neighbours in Dialogue, (Sarajevo2008); A week of Art and Culture from Turkey (Huarte Contemporary Art Center Spain 2008); Istanbul Diptychs, Istanbul Centre in Brussels (2008); Next Wave, Exhibition of 17 Women Artists from Turkey, (Berlin Academy Pariser Platz 2009); Cityscapes, Munich and Istanbul Siemens Art Gallery (2010-2011); A Conceptual Heritage: Vanguard Exhibitions, 1980-1990, Antik AŞ Artam Art Gallery (2011); co-curated ANTEPRIMA, 6 Video Artists from Turkey and Italy, ICI, Istanbul; Joseph Kosuth: The Wake, (Kuad Gallery 2012), Aidan Salakhova, MMOMA, Moscow (2012).

On Aissa Deebi's Current Experience

Shaker Laibi

For many years, Aissa Deebi's concern was the question about the secrets of intimacy which link one to any country. It is a kind of intimacy that enfolds sensuality, emotions and intuition together as one, forming a universal bond between them all. Throughout Aissa's intricate visual art practice and projects, we perceive another form of complexity: an obsessive bond with his mother. Does the homeland resemble a mother, in the very sensory sense (which derives from the placenta, and the intimate smell), and not merely as a metaphor?

Deebi's choice to title one of his shows "The Land of Mothers" was not arbitrary. The chosen title combines a personal dimension and a more common one: the mutual and universal bond which connects all human beings to their lost homelands. Deebi's late mother, whose photos were repeatedly shared by him and viewed to his circle of friends, is presented in his work as a subject through which he encapsulates the intense meanings of a placental land, the first land, the original, the real and tangible land, whose concrete meaning is as powerful as its metaphorical representations. This land is similar to any other mother on earth.

However, the relationship between one and his/her homeland/mother is of an instinctual nature characterized by adhesion and dependency. The maternal-bonding is bound to a spatial experience and is prone to disconnection and to connectedness at the same time, often associated with ambiguous feelings and memories. Can we identify colonialism and its aftermath in the structures of these intimate relationships in Deebi's work? Exile is depicted as a double extraction, sometimes it is portrayed as an infinite situation; yet paradoxically, it might seem like a continuous attempt to re-implant the self somewhere/anywhere. Generally speaking, the dialectic of extraction and implantation is a recurring theme in Palestinian visual art. Deebi himself adopts this

duality as he tries to discern the paradox using an experimental approach which syncs with the global contemporary art practice. To convey those messages, he uses different techniques including installation, visual texts, and a variety of digital media representations.

What role does the image take in establishing a critical memory? And what image would be considered as a leading one? Should we select an image that depicts “contemporary murals” which are often less garrulous, as opposed to ideology-loaded murals from the past, murals with a subtle intellectual voice? The digital photos presented by the artist seems like “negative pictures” of reality. In this series of photographs, we stumble upon an inescapable metaphor: here we find representation of the intimate space, the place of origin, the homeland, whose value -at a later stage- becomes insignificant. Due to its considerable relevance to Deebi’s work, it is a good opportunity to recall the etymological origin of the term “negative” in photography. The word conveys denial and negation (including its syntactic function); it expresses rejection as opposed to acceptance. Once put together, “Negative” vs. “Positive” are antonyms. “Negative” expresses denial and prohibition. In Deebi’s case, the fact that images are shown in their “negative” form immediately implies “negation”, “denial”, and “prohibition.” Three major elements which constitute the dramatic essence of this part of the world. In regard to the language aspect which is boldly dominant in Deebi’s project “Exile As A Tough Job,” the artist embraces conceptual art methods by using written texts next to visual texts while treating the written texts as images. In realistic dimensions, “negation” is contradictory to “residency,” (in Arabic, the word of “exile” stems from the same root as the word “negation”, ن.ف.ي). Negation indicates expulsion, instability, and metaphorically it is denial and disavowal. While denial is the opposite of definition, “the denied” is unknown and denying an identity is the opposite of proving it, “the denied” reflects ignorance or an alleged ignorance. Prohibition is interdiction and impermissibility which are the antonym of disclosure. What is prohibited is what is forbidden and banned by religion and law. The language that remains is spoken in this show. Here we stand in front of a portrayal of exile as a concrete reality, presented in the form of a “film negative” and not as a clear image as we know the

world.

The issue of “representing the homeland” in Deebi’s case presents another dilemma of two dimensions: aesthetic and semantic. Memory is only one of the questionable elements in this case, as memory mixes up the imagined with the real, the subjective with the truthful, the dream with the nightmare, the nationalist with the colonialist, residence with departure, and war with peace. It is a kind of representation that has to trace what has been wiped off, smudged, and destroyed; this representation is an impossible retrieval of a place that was available to everyone in a previous lifetime, of an abandoned view, and of an occupied landscape. In the case of Palestine, landscape is not a subject for contemplation or recreational meditating yet, but rather a subject that broadcasts drama. Here is a chance to present a new genre to the wide realm of art history: “The Occupied Landscape,” whose meaning might be underrepresented in the equivalent English term and might not be equally loaded with emotions the way it sounds in Arabic. The contradictory essence of the suggested term is explicit and thorough. The natural landscape which is perceived as an image through the eyes, and the art which represents this scene are no longer similar in the meanings they denote. The shared significance was exposed to distortion, alteration and falsification. The “Occupied Landscape” then stands in contrast to “The Maternal Homeland”, questions it, and covers it with ashes.

This discourse about the “homeland” is relevant to identity in its deepest form than with common nationalism. From a pure aesthetic perspective, this discourse increases and improves the quality of exploration and enables replacement of art status in permanent institutions and in art biennales. Institutions prefer acceptable art forms, art that is well-acknowledged and familiar, art that serves its direct interests, while they are often sceptic and cynical about perplexing art. The visual discourse built by Deebi does not correlate with the classic visual discourse we know, especially in countries with urgent issues are taking place, where nonstop wars are controlling life and production means. Deebi presents a conceptual discourse which contradicts the one-dimensional and functional discourse, which is an outdated approach. In a broader view, institutions are somehow similar to the biennale

whose system is becoming closer to an institutionalized phenomenon. Biennales are some sort of an “institution” which is well-organized and follows firm rules. One claim suggests that biennales are not strict as long as the organizers are concerned with free, open and various forms of expression in contemporary art. However, biennales do have strict rules in selecting representatives of nations worldwide. The majority of the selected works are often experimental. Moreover, if we taken into consideration that some biennale advisors adhere to contemporary art dogmas without expressing a critical position while the capitalist model is the decision maker (the way it functions and controls what is exhibited at modern and contemporary art galleries, and museums around the globe), then the phenomena becomes more complex. A modern institution that is concerned with contemporary art does not become less institutional. Deebi’s discourse contemplates all these ideas and uses video art to reproduce a historical discourse that is rooted in his Haifa born memory. He reproduces moments of Daoud Turki, political activist and leftist poet, who is the first publisher of Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry in Palestine. Yet, he reproduces Turki’s biography in a different context, to serve different needs and presented to a different audience. In the mentioned video, we go back shortly to both “text” and “memory” through a small number of performers and in minimalist conditions, limited elements which form “imminent aesthetics” depicting and examining Deebi’s most favourite topics. In fact, whoever chooses to study Deebi’s art should be cautious, the way I am trying to be right now, and perhaps refrain from using terms such as “beauty” and “aesthetics” and linking those with “exile” the way the artist did in an exhibition he once had in Zurich, Switzerland 2016. Truly, there is a courageous attempt to connect the personal fate of the artist as a roaming exiled human with public and political affairs, but in fact a vision that evokes aesthetics requires an amount of serenity, which is not possible in exiles and which is negated by exiles too. Reformulating exile is Deebi’s deepest concern, perhaps he is trying to prove his presence in the intellectual, political, and aesthetic spheres. Why does Deebi go back to Brecht? Is it because the German poet and dramatist is an artist? Leftist? Or is there another hidden reason? Let’s exclude leftism for a moment. In Deebi’s current photographic murals

we find a subtle relation between Brecht's epic theatrical alienation and the alienating "negatives" mentioned previously. The duality of the photographic scene (the positive hides the negative) is similar to the duality in the Brechtian theatrical characters in the eyes of the viewer/reader, which demands contemplation despite the chromatic contradictions, thus assembling the theatrical and artistic elements in a particular context. At this stage, we find the spectator practicing criticism and examining the visual landscape.

What does exile do in essence? It drops ideologies, especially rigid ones although a "utopia" seems obligatory for the future. It can make an occupied country like Palestine the future dreamed utopia. Deebi continues to remind us that wandering in the motherland is a hard way towards the dream and reminds us that he is interested in the way this ideology is formulated. We catch here a paradox: awareness of the political "right" and its weak imagination versus the "left" that can, in the most difficult circumstances, dream, imagine and evaluate its own "utopia". Deebi finds some references to the leftists' imagination in the adventures of the European radical left such as Baader Meinhof, which symbolizes imagination and hard work, drilling into death and the impossible.

Deebi says that "Exile As a Tough Job" is like living itself, which is an arduous job. Exile does not occur in one dimension. And the artist examines it as an idea, a profession and a task for both the visual and the intellect, which makes it three-dimensional (3D). With this trinity in exile, plastic concepts cannot be reduced to lamentations at a conceptual level, or to nostalgia and a souvenir of the place at the purely visual level. Thus, all dilemmas and issues of thought, art, politics, collective or personal anguish are intertwined in an aesthetic structure that cannot be summarized. Here we face the question of conceptual art that prioritizes the concept over actualizing it (as a form). A question that always induces concerted thinking and often non acceptance, because despite the chemical interaction of the two, art is a visual structure and not an abstract Idea, Hence the visual has more space in Deebi's current exhibition and it bears the conceptual ability underlying that vision and insight.

SHAKER LAIBI A poet and academic specializing in the history of art and the aesthetics of the image, he is a professor of art at the University of Gabès, Tunisia. He received his doctorate from the University of Lausanne in 2003. He published widely on arab poetry and culture.



Aissa Deebi during the installation of the exhibition at Fattoush gallery, Haifa 2019



Aissa Deebi during the installation of the exhibition at Fattoush gallery, Haifa 2019



The Trial, 2013

Two channel video installation

15 min.

Ed. 3



The Trial, 2013

Two channel video installation

15 min.

Ed. 3



The Trial, 2013

Two channel video installation

15 min.

Ed. 3



The Trial, 2013

Two channel video installation

15 min.

Ed. 3



The Trial, 2013

Two channel video installation

15 min.

Ed. 3



At the court, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 cm



The Trial, Traces of the Video (1-10), 2017

Silkscreen on paper

10 images, 40 x 50 cm each

Ed. 10



The Trial, Traces of the Video (1-10), 2017

Silkscreen on paper

10 images, 40 x 50 cm each

Ed. 10



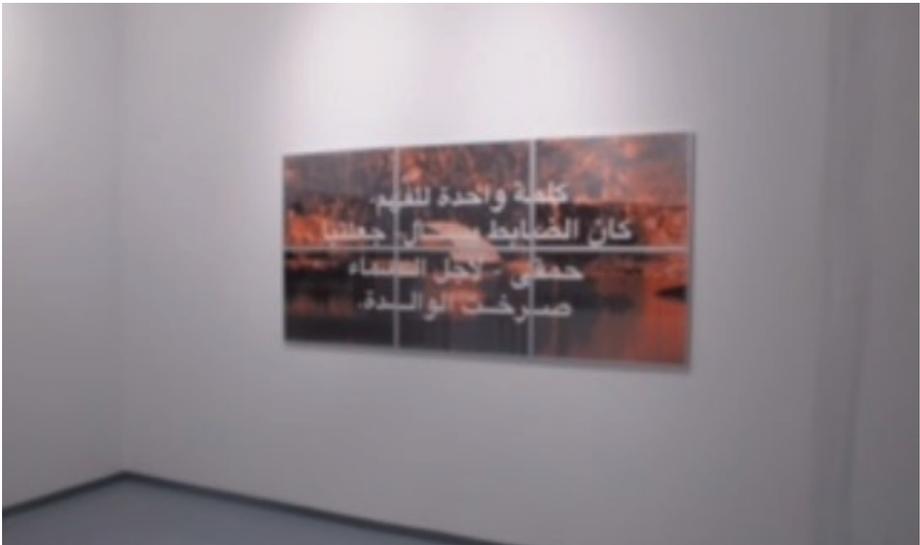
Motherland 1, 2016-17
 Pigment print on water color paper
 100 x 210 cm
 Ed. 5



Motherland 2, 2016-17
 Pigment print on water color paper
 100 x 210 cm
 Ed. 5



Motherland 3, 2016-17
 Pigment print on water color paper
 100 x 210 cm
 Ed. 5



Motherland 4, 2016-17
 Pigment print on water color paper
 100 x 210 cm
 Ed. 5



Motherland 5, 2016-17
Pigment print on water color paper
100 x 210 cm
Ed. 5



Aissa Deebi: Exile is Hard Work

Touring exhibition

EXHIBITION

Curators: Noah Simblist and Beral Madra

Exhibition producer: Birzeit university museum, Palestine

FATTOUSH GALLERY

Artistic Director: Asmaa Azaizeh

Production supervisor: Rafat Harb

Production team: Diana Shadafny, Fayeze abu Hayeh, Maria Zreik

General manager: Hamudi Shamy

CATALOGUE

Design: Nihad Awidat

Translators: Amr Assad, Ala Hlehel, Bekria Mawasi

Edition 2: Fattoush gallery (2019)

Edition 1: Birzeit university museum (2017)

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“Exile As a Tough Job” is like living itself, which is an arduous job. Exile does not occur in one dimension. And the artist examines it as an idea, a profession and a task for both the visual and the intellect, which makes it three-dimensional (3D). With this trinity in exile, plastic concepts cannot be reduced to lamentations at a conceptual level, or to nostalgia and a souvenir of the place at the purely visual level. Thus, all dilemmas and issues of thought, art, politics, collective or personal anguish are intertwined in an aesthetic structure that cannot be summarized.

Shaker Laibi