RE/viewing Jerusalem:
Political Art Interventions in Occupied East Jerusalem

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Abstract

This collaborative essay emerges from the authors' ongoing dialogue about the political potential of participatory urban art interventions in the contemporary context of occupied East Jerusalem. Although contemporary Western discourses of participatory art offer productive starting points for thinking about the role of art as a means of political engagement, they do not adequately address the ongoing colonial situation that shapes life in occupied East Jerusalem. This essay calls attention to the gaps between the prevailing art-world discourses of participation and community engagement, and the realities of life in occupied Jerusalem. To find methods adequate to these unique local circumstances, critical reflection upon common methodology is required in order to rethink dominant paradigms. This essay examines an art walk titled *RE/viewing Jerusalem* (2015-16), one of several participatory, community-based art projects initiated during Alia Rayyan's tenure as Director of Al Hoash Gallery—Palestinian Art Court in Jerusalem. The authors ask how political engagement might be imagined and practiced through art in the context of the ongoing Israeli military occupation of the city. *RE/viewing Jerusalem* was an aesthetic and performative strategy of counter-occupation in a contested and highly politicized space. The authors demonstrate the ways in which *RE/viewing Jerusalem* reflected upon Western urban art intervention practices and translated them to the specifics of the local situation in Israeli-occupied Jerusalem. The goal of *RE/viewing Jerusalem* is shown to be twofold: to decolonize both thought and space. In other words, the projects seeks both to intervene in Western discourses about political art, and to resist the occupation through the collective activation of public space.

1 Introduction

This collaborative essay emerges from the authors' ongoing dialogue about the political potential of participatory urban art interventions in the contemporary context of occupied East Jerusalem. Although contemporary Western discourses of participatory art offer productive starting points for thinking about the role of art as a means of political engagement, they do not adequately address the ongoing colonial situation that shapes life in occupied East Jerusalem. In this essay, we aim to call attention to the gaps between the prevailing art-world discourses of participation and community engagement and the realities of life in occupied Jerusalem.

We take as our starting point an art walk titled *RE/viewing Jerusalem* (2015-16), one of several participatory, community-based art projects initiated during Alia Rayyan's tenure as director of Al Hoash Gallery—Palestinian Art Court in Jerusalem. Through an analysis of this urban intervention, we ask how political engagement might be imagined and practiced through art in the context of the ongoing Israeli military occupation of the city. *RE/viewing Jerusalem* was an aesthetic and performative strategy of counter-occupation in a contested and highly politicized space.

2 Life in Occupied Jerusalem

The Israeli occupation operates through the sophisticated manipulation of spaces and bodies, and seeks to create a sense of fatalism and inevitability for those subject to it. Although the harsh effects of the occupation are felt throughout occupied Palestine, residents of East Jerusalem face unique challenges as a minority in the city. They are increasingly being forced out of their shrinking neighborhoods as settlers illegally appropriate their homes; their basic right to reside in Jerusalem is precarious—dependent on the possession of residency permits that may be abruptly revoked by the Israeli authorities—and they are cut off from even the semblance of Palestinian autonomy that exists in parts of the West Bank. The duration and severity of the occupation has caused community members and social associations in Jerusalem to respond to such conditions with a high level of skepticism, a fearful resistance to change, and a reluctance to challenge the current system. This situation illustrates the theories of Franz Fanon (1964), who described how colonialism becomes internalized in the very bodies of suppressed peoples. The repressive circumstances of colonialism influence and restrict both bodies and psyches; colonized subjects learn to stay within the limited borders imposed by the system. This is evident in the fact that Jerusalemites tend to restrict themselves to private spaces—the only places where they can feel free and secure (although even that security is increasingly under threat by settlers). The experience of fear and insecurity in public spaces is enormous and has of course increased throughout the years of occupation and the ongoing cycles of violence in the streets. What role can art play in responding to this situation, and what forms might creative responses take?

3.1 *RE/viewing Jerusalem*

In the first edition of *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, which took place in 2015, groups of local residents and visitors followed a route through Jerusalem's Old City and into the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Al Zahra, stopping at various art "stations"—mundane or forgotten places that had been subtly transformed into sites of urban art—a parking lot, a flower shop, a community garden, an ancient abandoned covered bazaar that was once a thriving vegetable market in the Old City. Along the way, participants encountered traces of a suppressed history, glimpses of possibility in the present, and new visions of the future. None of the art stations in *RE/viewing Jerusalem* presented work that was explicitly political in any conventional sense, yet each offered participants new ways to occupy public space—something that is in itself a political act in Palestinian Jerusalem.

3.2 Social practice and the debates of participatory art

Before we turn to the specifics of *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, it is important to contextualize it within the broader field of participatory social art practices that inform urban interventions, as well as to consider the contemporary debates concerning its ethics, aesthetics, and politics. Since the 1990s, contemporary artists have become increasingly interested in collaborating with various "non-art world" publics. The artists associated with these practices are

Fig. 1 - *RE/viewing Jerusalem* art walk map, 2015.

frequently driven by a desire to address social injustices, and they view the participation of the public as an ethical imperative (Bishop, 2012). A diverse array of participatory, community-based, socially-oriented art projects is referred to today as "social practice." As Bishop (2012) observes, such practices are often based in everyday social forms such as talking, eating, gardening or walking; sometimes they are discursive rather than visual, engaging the public through publications, workshops or lectures. These contemporary practices may offer new and at times confounding notions of art, but they are the legacy of a century of avant-gardist assault on the boundaries between art and life.

Fig. 2 - A cart specially designed by Al Hoash for *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, in the style of the traditional carts used to transport goods through the narrow alleyways of the Old City. The cart is painted with colorful arches, reflecting the architecture of the old bazaar. Photo by Ahed Izhiman and Majd Zughayer.

Although they may not meet the demands of the commercial art market, participatory social practices have become well integrated into the contemporary artworld: they fit readily into the rapidly expanding public arenas of biennial culture and are welcomed by museums eager to provide interactive experiences for their visitors. However, such practices are not without controversy. Many forms of "social practice"—particularly so-called community art projects—have been sanctioned and funded by various states agencies as non-threatening forms of "social work"—what political theorist Oliver Marchart (2002) referred to as "privatist version[s] of public welfare." Art critic Claire Bishop (2012) notes that that in seeking to establish a critical distance from the neoliberal new world order "collaborative practice is perceived to offer an automatic counter-model of social unity, regardless of its actual politics." She calls attention to the risks of perceiving all works of collaborative social practice as equally significant "artistic gestures of resistance." While Bishop may at times seem intent on protecting a space for aesthetic critique, her insistence on criticality is also an insistence on politics. Both Bishop and Marchart are wary of a social practice in which art is instrumentalized to co-opt underprivileged communities into the existing neoliberal order, rather than to challenge the assumptions on which that order is founded. While their critiques do have validity, they are principally aimed at the discourse of Western political art and its implication in or appropriation by neoliberal capitalism. However, contemporary art may no longer be adequately defined in the terms of a "western tradition." At its best, art is a complex and contradictory set of practices—and if globalization may be said to impose a degree of cultural sameness, art introduces a source of alterity that confounds such a reductive formulation. Artists and art worlds in many colonial and post-colonial contexts increasingly refute the distinction between the local and the global, the West and "the rest." Such is the case in Palestine, where the traditional dichotomies that structure Western political art discourse (social vs. political, individual vs. community, local vs. global, aesthetics vs. ethics) do not make sense in the context of an ongoing colonial occupation. There are significant differences between the accommodation to capitalism/neoliberalism that Marchart and Bishop identify in some Western artistic practices and participatory social practices in the Palestinian context. To borrow Achille Mbembe's (2015) timely phrase, it may be necessary to "decolonize knowledge" (in this case, the discourse of political art) as well as to decolonize Palestinian territory. Such an approach unites the psychic and spatial dimensions of the occupation, and connects the logic of capitalism to the logic of the occupation.

3.3 The twin logics of capitalism and occupation

In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007), Boltanski and Chiapello update Max Weber's notion of the "spirit of capitalism" to explain the contradictions of capitalism today and how the system works to overcome them. Weber's vital—and still relevant—insight was that the capitalist system cannot operate without the complicity or co-optation of most of its subjects. As Boltanski and Chiapello observe, this system successfully defies its own contradictions by sustaining a dialectic between capitalism and its "critique." Capitalism typically overcomes the crises it generates by neutralizing "critique"—stealing the thunder of its critics by ostensibly answering some of their challenges while diverting attention from other grievances that are left unremedied or even exacerbated.

Such a dialectic also informs the logic of occupation. Marchart, Bishop and Boltanski emphasize the danger that art—even in the anti-capitalist (non-commercial or commodity forms) that characterize much social practice - may be coopted into the capitalist system, thus losing its critical force and effectively becoming disarmed. In the Palestinian context, what Boltanski terms „neutralisation of critique" takes the form of a very real fear that any expression of critique will be neutralized—either through its violent elimination or through integration into the very system of occupation that it seeks to oppose. To some degree, this dialectic touches all forms of critiques within a totalizing system. But what makes art different from other forms of social/political critique is its capacity to sustain contradiction—to hold opposites in tension and thus to offer a different dialectical movement. As such, art offers a unique space of possibility—a place to imagine and visualize alternate realities.

4.1 Making "place" in East Jerusalem

We are currently seeing an increasing turn towards participatory and performative practices in Palestinian art. How might such practices begin to unravel the intertwined logics of capitalism and occupation? In *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, a precondition for transferring artistic practices of place-making to Palestinian Jerusalem—and a major difference from its counterparts in Europe—was the decision to avoid those public spaces already defined and claimed by the state, but instead to discover (together with the artists and the community) new approaches to making space accessible for public use and engagement. In Jerusalem, permissions issued by the Israeli municipality are required for any public activity in East Jerusalem. As any sort of public gathering tends to be qualified as political activity, requests for permits to assemble are usually denied. The lack of public infrastructure and public spaces in East Jerusalem—in comparison to the expansive public spaces and rich resources of West Jerusalem—complicates all attempts to design public engagement beyond the traditional format of the street festival. In addition, public spaces in East Jerusalem are subject to intense surveillance by the Israeli army or police. These spaces have become increasingly unsafe, as soldiers injure and kill Palestinian residents with impunity in the name of vague and frequently unfounded claims of self-defense. Because most Palestinians do not feel safe to gather in public space, it was imperative for Al Hoash to develop a creative and subversive approach to place making in East Jerusalem.

4.2 Space and Place

Michel de Certeau (2011) draws an important distinction between place and space. Place, according to de Certeau, refers to the "locational instantiation of what is considered to be customary, proper and even pre-established" (Pannell, 2006). Space, on the other hand, has none of this stability but instead is composed of the "intersections of mobile elements," which are ambiguous and often in conflict (Warner, 2002). Space may be abstracted and viewed objectively, but place must be activated by bodies, by walking—it must be experienced subjectively. Space is produced while place is risked or activated in practice. Space signifies an abstract representation of knowledge about the world, while place represents the actions or practices by which this knowledge is produced, affirmed or transformed. Al Hoash realized that in order to elicit public engagement, it needed to turn hidden and forgotten "unofficial" spaces into places.

4.3 Transforming space into place

The Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem has created a widespread sense of political depression and apathy amongst Palestinian residents. Activism is blocked and "a disintegration of politics results in isolation, frustration, anomie and forgetfulness" (McLennan, 2012). Al Hoash's task was to find a spark to revive the community—to disrupt the passivity of residents of Palestinian Jerusalem. They approached this challenge by identifying new kinds of spaces in East Jerusalem—spaces that could be defined and opened by participatory art interventions. The goal of *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, to use de Certeau's formulation, was for artists and the public to join forces in activating hidden and forgotten spaces and transform them into embodied places.

The Al Hoash team became location scouts, making the rounds of community centers, shops, hotels, or forgotten/abandoned public buildings in their search for such potential places. They invited artists from Palestine and abroad to participate in a residency. These artists formed a temporary collective to jointly create art interventions in the selected semi-public spaces. Over a period of three weeks, this collective took over the Al Hoash Gallery and discovered the surrounding area, meeting with community members and discussing possible topics for the selected "art stations." Ownership of the process was given to the artists in order to dissolve the hierarchy of the classical curatorial and institutional set up. After much discussion with community members, local organizations, and time spent observing

the daily routines of life between the Old City and the Zahra Street neighborhood, the artists selected the central themes of silence and repose for their project—a form of response and resistance to the stress and turmoil that comprises daily life in East Jerusalem.

Fig. 3 - Making use of the only public park in Palestinian Jerusalem. Photo by Ahed Izhiman and Majd Zughayer.

Fig. 4 - *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, 2015. Photo: Ahed Izhiman and Majd Zughayer.

5.1 *RE/viewing Jerusalem*: **a new way of looking**

In a city that attracts tourists to its religions processions and rituals (the route along the stations of the cross, the Via Dolorosa, being the most well-known) but restricts their exposure to the injustices of the occupation, the "art stations" subverted such practices and addressed the contemporary daily life of Palestinian residents. Yet this was not done in the tragic mode of political victimization but in a creative and life-giving spirit.

Each art station offered a new vision or surprising alteration—the route led participants between al Zahra Street and the Suf Market in the Old City and varied from an encounter with "urban furniture" to a pause in a forgotten dead-end street next to a public garden, an art intervention in the community center Ibna Al Quds, to a music performance in an abandoned, semi-ruined former vegetable market in the bazaar.

The artists cleaned up and reclaimed this old bazaar (the Al Bazar Market) and it became a central location on the walk. During the tours, participants of were led from one station to the next and provided with an introduction to the space, its background, and its connection to the art intervention. None of the artists used the spaces simply as exotic background for their own work but instead involved the participants in activating each new place and making it their own. (Each station had its very particular set up, the specific details cannot all be described in the scope of this essay.) One intervention exemplifies the multilayered thoughts behind the project. The Qwaweer Flower shop next to the Damascus Gate in the Old City was one of the middle stations of the tour. Participants were invited to enter the shop, but at this station they found no art installation present. Instead, they were asked to pick up a small flowerpot and carry it through Suq al Seit until they reached the final station—the rooftop of the reclaimed bazaar overlooking the Old City. There participants placed their flowerpots in a prepared wooden frame, thus creating a living roof garden and activating this space through their collective installation. What began as an alternative tour through the city turned into a performative demonstration—one that played with and subverted a dominant tourist cliché in the Old City: the carrying of religious symbols. The participants now became artists. This simple yet powerful activity turned out to be one of the most successful aspects of *RE/viewing Jerusalem*. It attracted the attention of neighboring Palestinian shop owners and residents who became interested in learning about and participating in future versions of the project.

Fig. 5 - *RE/viewing Jerusalem*, 2015. Photo: Ahed Izhiman and Majd Zughayer.

5.2 Challenging expectations

Half a year later, Alia Rayyan discussed this event with a group of German *RE/viewing Jerusalem* participants during a lecture at the University of Lueneburg in December 2015. Many of those present expressed the discomfort they had felt carrying the flowerpot through the Old City. Perhaps these visitors had arrived with predetermined ideas and expectations of Jerusalem that were disrupted by the intervention and the resulting blurring of roles between participant and artist. Interestingly, the local participants did not feel that estrangement but experienced the "flower procession" as an unusually liberating act of performing in a familiar place—a claiming of ownership. The tour was repeated six times and successfully attracted a local audience. This act of place-making in Jerusalem—a subtle gesture of political resistance—engaged the local community on a different level than it did some of the participants. Perhaps it more effectively blurred the boundaries between art and life for those who live under occupation.

6 Conclusion

Placemaking interventions such as *RE/viewing Jerusalem* will not bring the occupation to an end. But art is not an endeavor to be judged by measurable concrete outcomes—as Bishop and Marchart emphasize in their critique of the instrumentalization of art. Yet artistic practices may provide a spark for change when they react with other existing elements. These effects simply cannot be known in advance—or they may be belated. While such local practices of urban intervention are necessarily influenced by the recent wave of participatory art interventions taking place in the Western world, we need to continue the search for methods that speak to the specific circumstances of Palestinians living under occupation in Jerusalem. To find methods adequate to these unique local circumstances, we need not only critical reflection upon common methodology but also a means to disconnect (even if only partially) from dominant paradigms (McLennan, 2012). *RE/viewing Jerusalem* reflects upon Western urban art intervention practices and seeks to translate them to the specifics of the local situation in Israeli-occupied Jerusalem. Its goal is to decolonize both thought and space: to intervene in Western discourses about political art, and to resist the occupation through the collective activation of public space. The experience of participation is very much a bodily experience, a sharing of public spaces and collective experiences with other bodies. Palestinians understand that the most effective form of resistance is to activate places in unexpected and overlooked spaces, and to occupy them—to embody them. This cannot be currently accomplished by winning territory, or even by building new structures or public spaces, but *RE/viewing Jerusalem* has successfully demonstrated the capacity of art to transform spaces into places, and to generate new possibilities for an art of counter-occupation.

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