

West of Gaza

Iain Chambers

Independent writer and researcher

ABSTRACT

Considering the work of the Palestinian art collective *The Question of Funding*, accusations of antisemitism at *documenta fifteen* at Kassel in 2022, and the music of the Palestinian oud player, singer and poet Kamilya Jubran, I seek to raise questions about contemporary art as a critical practice and radical historiography.

Keywords

Gaza, art as criticism, *documenta fifteen*, postcolonial aesthetics, alternative histories

In the summer of 2022, as a member of the collective “Jimmie Durham & A Stick in the Forest by the Side of the Road,” I participated in *documenta fifteen*. Held every five years at Kassel in Germany, *documenta* is one of the essential destinations in the international circuit of global contemporary art. This time around, it was decidedly different. Ruangrupa, the Indonesian art collective from Djakarta, were responsible for convening the works to be displayed. Most of the art was collective. True, there were also individual artists, but the bent was very much on art as a collective undertaking and process rather than an individual product. This direct deflection had significant consequences. In the opening days of the event, curators and collectors were flummoxed. ‘Where’s the art?’ was a regular refrain. Faced with alternative practices, their international credentials were suddenly curtailed, and the limits of their Occidental pretensions were exposed. There were certainly individual works on display, but the coordinates for their reception had decisively shifted. This undoing of the aesthetic and commercial evaluation of contemporary art was also clearly underwritten by the fact that the collectives and artists invited to participate were overwhelmingly from the multiple souths of the world. The initial cultural shock of Caliban running the show and calling the shots, or more simply disseminating a set of highly pertinent if unauthorised questions, was subsequently lost in the smoke of the discovery of antisemitism in some of the works (Chambers 2023). What turned into a policing operation seeking to censor works that failed to respond to Occidental definitions of racism, genocide, colonialism, and the Holocaust eventually led to resignations and questions in the German parliament. German identity, and behind it a European-derived

consensus, felt threatened by the irreverent guests not respecting house rules. Suddenly the international forum took a decidedly national and xenophobic turn. Other genealogies of modernity – from the subaltern souths and European peripheries – were subordinated to the hostility of the host and its political and cultural agendas. The usual terms of reference – colonialism, post- and decolonialism – and their undeniable location in the racialisation of the planet by capital suddenly became too hot to handle. The order of the art discourse was fractured. Whether the next documenta in 2027 will pick up the pieces or, most likely, return to business as usual is still to be seen. Anyway, this is the initial context in which I wish to talk about Gaza.

At documenta, the Palestinian collective from Gaza, “The Question of Funding,” had been invited to participate. Their presence was already sufficient ground in the press for the stirrings of accusations of antisemitism. The space they occupied was composed of multiple works along with a detailed description of the (im)possibility of making art in Gaza. In the biggest open-air prison camp in the world, importing the mundane material of paint, brushes, and canvases, along with the financing and selling of the works, is highly restricted when not forbidden. This is the brutal material reality of prison life, the outcome of over 70 years of colonial occupation and military rule. But what I want to talk about, despite the state of exception of life in Gaza, are the connections between what lives on and survives in art under occupation and the ongoing configuration of the world and its queering and refutation by anti, post- and decolonial practices.

Perhaps after what has happened since October 2023, this might all seem rather irrelevant. Yet contesting the destruction of all cultural life and institutions in Gaza by the Israeli military, integral to the Zionist pursuit of ethnic cleansing and genocide, is bound to live on, both in the strip of land between the river and the sea in the eastern Mediterranean and in the cultural archipelago of the Palestinian diaspora (Solombrino 2019).

Despite the obviousness of the ploy, this opens up the more subtle box of tricks proposed by postcolonial art. It certainly takes us back to Isaac Julien’s three-screen installation *Western Union Small Boats* of 2007, where Luchino Visconti’s ballroom sequence in the film *The Leopard* (1963) shot in Palermo’s Palazzo Gangi is revisited in a *danse macabre* of drowned migrants from the contemporary Mediterranean. In each case, there opens up a fold in time that returns us to the constitution of the present, including its arts and aesthetics, with further questions and perspectives. If Occidental modernity was composed through the colonial appropriation of the planet that permitted both aristocratic life in Europe and the contemporary exploitation of so-called ‘illegal’ migrants, then that past, as with the Zionist project in Palestine, presses in on the present. The chronology of Occidental arts and politics, their aesthetics and ethics, are decomposed and exposed to another telling.

With his digital interventions in the tradition of Occidental art history, the Gazan artist Mohammed al Hawajri transforms well-known modern artists, including Jean-François Millet and Vincent Van Gogh, into startling interruptions. The deliberate anachronism of contemporary Palestine enters the frame. The return, repetition and renewal releases from the syntax of Occidental languages and aesthetics precisely those other histories, cultures and lives that the Occident has not authorised to be represented. Jean-François Millet and Vincent Van Gogh are revisited. Domestic peasant scenes become colonial war scenes. Bucolic life is interrupted, and the romantic vision is scarred and threatened with destruction. In their terrible beauty, these works take us directly to the edge not simply of a certain canon of Occidental art and aesthetics but also to the heart of the political economy that, however contradictorily, permits and promotes their expression.



Mohammed al Hawajri, *Harvesters Resting* - Jean Francois Millet (1865), 2010-2013. Digital Image 62.5 x 150 cm. 2010-2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Mohammed al Hawajri, *Pause for a Nap* - Jean Francois Millet (1865), 2010-2013. Digital Image 62.5 x 150 cm. 2010-2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.



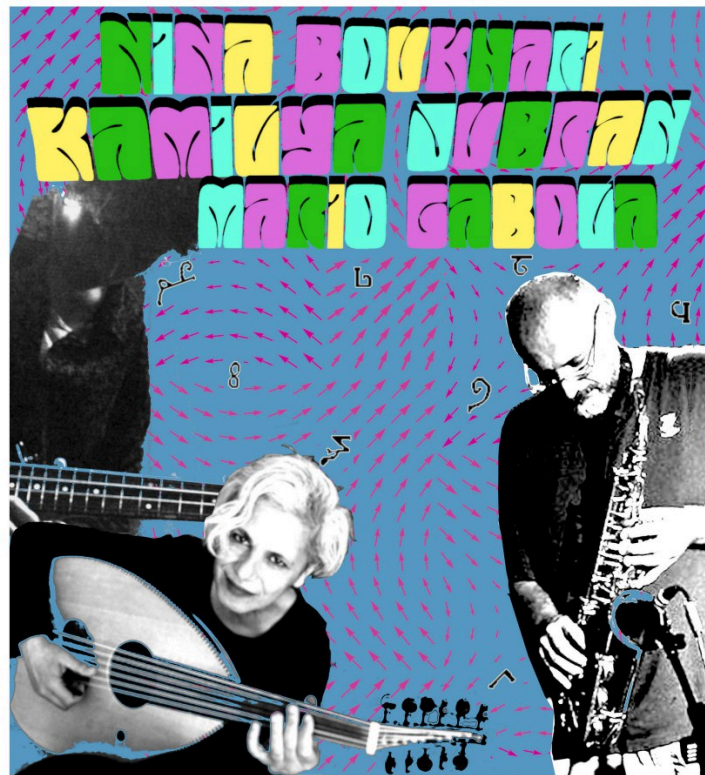
Mohammed al Hawajri, *The Harvest - Vincent Van Gogh (1888)*, 2010-2013. Digital Image 62.5 x 150 cm. 2010-2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Mohammed al Hawajri, *A Family of Farmers - Vincent Van Gogh (1885)*, 2010-2013. Digital Image 62.5 x 150 cm. 2010-2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Along with the present explosion in Palestinian cinema, the life and living on of Gaza and the question of Palestine are also accommodated in the sonic futures of the Palestinian singer, oud player, and poet Kamilya Jubran.¹ If recent films such as *Bye Bye Tiberias* (2023) by Lina Soualem, *Where Olive Trees Weep* (2024) by Maurizio Benazzo and Zaya Benazzo, and *The Teacher* by Farah Nabulsi (2023), draw our eyes across the scarred landscapes and into the mutilated lives of historical Palestine, the sonorial poetics of Jubran travels further inwards and outwards from these terrible archives. Inwards through drawing on the long tradition of Arab poetry and music making, outwards through the musical experimentation and cooperation with diverse musicians involved in a shared dismantling of genres. From her earliest work in the Palestinian group Sabreen to the solo recording of poetry sung to her sparse, highly individual

oud playing and on to the present avant-garde experimentation with jazz, noise and electronics, Jubran's music has persistently disseminated a series of sensorial maps that disorientate conventional Mediterraneans and modernities. Here, as Rachel Beckles Willson points out, the oud as a travelling instrument becomes a portable home that queries a simple alignment with a single location or tradition, whether musical or patriarchal (Beckles Willson 2019). A woman playing an oud in public is hardly typical of the Arab or Occidental world. (Only in recent decades have women in the West begun to play the electric guitar in public, challenging its phallic prerogatives). This unweaving and transformation of traditions transport us into other spaces where Palestine and the possibilities of Mediterranean modernities are sustained in sound. Not only does Palestine live on beyond its present carceral confines where you rendered a stranger at home, but also a wider musical and critical journey is performed.



VENERDI' 28 GIUGNO

- h19.00 *presentazione*
 "Omologia strutturale tra il processo di frammentazione dell' unità territoriale e simbolica della "Palestina" e le categorie etiche ed estetiche di spazio tempo discreto "
 di e con **Gennaro Ascione**

- h21.00 *concerto*
KAMILYA JUBRAN:
 PSJFR, voce, testi e oud preparato;
NINA BOUKHARI:
 FRJMAR, basso elettrico, ghembri e oggetti;
MARIO GABOLA:
 ITA, sax, feedback, latte, molle e corde;

CASA MORRA ARCHIVI D'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA
 Salita San Raffaele 20/C, Napoli
 INGRESSO GRATUITO - FREE ENTRY

FV
 FONDAZIONE
 MORRA

EM
 ARTS

Artwork by Mario Gabola

Jubran's extensive, looping voice, the language reduced to pure sound (for those who do not speak Arabic), and the counterpoint provided by the oud, acoustic bass, trumpet, and electronics produce an estrangement beyond the merely exotic. The layered texture of the musical performance, simultaneously sparse yet potentially expansive in the space between the notes, intimates the stratification of spacetime that houses histories still to be heard. Our comfortable assertion of both musical and historical judgment is challenged. To receive and consider this uprootedness is not only to permit music to take us in hand; it is also to confront the limits of our language seeking to confirm our sovereignty over the world. Palestine here exists not simply as a political proposition but as a critical provocation where our habitual syntax is exposed, reworked and further evaluated: whose modernity, whose Mediterranean, are we now referring to?

Bringing Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean into our proximity registers differences that are very much constitutive of our world. This, however, is not simply to confute the brutal rhetoric of barriers and borders. It is also about embarking on a further journey to excavate and cross-fertilise our local inheritances and their pretensions of domination with what exceeds their bounds and authority. It is to travel musically, culturally, and politically in the world in order to find ourselves and construct our home in that transit. Along the way, it is about looking, listening and learning from Gaza and Palestine.

Notes

¹ Apart from CDs and streaming services, various performances of Kamilya Jubran are available on YouTube. There is also the biographical film *Telling Strings*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2HrRyn5AdA>. Accessed: October 30, 2024.

References

Rachel Beckles Willson. 2019. "Orientation through Instruments: The 'ūd, the Palestinian Home, and Kamīlyā Jubrān," *The World of Music* 8 (1): 23-48.

Chambers, Iain. 2023. "Losing Kant in Kassel." *estetica. studi e ricerche* 2: 271-280.

Solombrino, Olga. 2019. *Arcipelago Palestina. Territori e narrazioni digitali*. Milan: Mimesis.

Iain Chambers studied at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University before moving to Naples, where he taught Cultural, Postcolonial and Mediterranean Studies at the University of Naples, L'Orientale. He is presently an independent researcher and writes regularly for the Italian daily *il Manifesto*. Among his publications are *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994) and *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (2008), *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities* (2017), and with Marta Cariello, *The Mediterranean Question* (2025). With Lidia Curti, he edited the volume *The Postcolonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (1995). E-mail: giovannimcamere@gmail.com