

## RECONSIDERING THE VALUE OF PALESTINIAN ART & ITS JOURNEY INTO THE ART MARKET

by Steve Sabella



**Figure 9.** *Hani Zurob, A flying lesson #03, Acrylic and oil color on canvas, 200x160cm, 2010*  
There is a distinctive shift in the style of Zurob's art since he left Palestine in 2006.

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## ABSTRACT

The Israeli occupation and the absence of political stability have enticed Palestinian artists to look beyond Palestine to seek critical and economical recognition. In the early 1990s, Palestinian art that was created in the occupied Palestinian land, shifted from collective symbolic, illustrative, figurative and narrative expression to more individual or personal expression. The adoption of Western references to relate to local experiences has extended the geographical area where Palestinian artists showcase their work. Traditional value mechanisms do not apply to art created in Palestinian land. Accordingly, there has been a need to find other centres for Palestinian art to flourish critically and economically. Neither Jerusalem nor Ramallah has developed a well functioning art infrastructure. In contrast, Palestinian art can benefit from having mechanisms of representation in the United Arab Emirates.

However, the idea of a mobile art centre or the nomadic Palestinian artist remains the most viable option. Yet, for Palestinian artists who choose to stay in Palestine, they need to get connected with cultural institutions and influential curators who assume similar roles to those of a primary market. They became the mediators and the connecting link between the artists and the outside world. This 'primary market' does not survive on art sales, rather on foreign donor money. Personal interests of the players and the donor's political agenda have not allowed for organic development of Palestinian art. This reality has created four circles of recognition that Palestinian artists need to go through on their way for international recognition and art market success: Institutional Acclaim, Curatorial & Prize Acclaim, Foreign Public Acclaim and Patronage by Dealers and Collectors. This path contributes to the long journey artists from occupied Palestine travel till they reach their economic target.

The local auctions and private sales match in fiscal value and they do not exceed the 4700 USD margin. In Palestine, auction results eclipse the value of Palestinian art. But when this art is traded or auctioned internationally, paradoxically, it achieves prices that far exceed the local value. The success of Palestinian artists living in occupied Palestine has started to align itself with the success of other Palestinians living in Israel or the Diaspora Palestinians who mainly live in western countries. Artists from the Gaza Strip have the lowest international ratings. Furthermore, artists who have been in the West for more than 15 years have constantly enjoyed better rating when compared to Palestinian artists from occupied Palestine.

The graphical data indicates that after living long enough in countries with well-established art systems, artists would achieve higher ratings and their critical success translates into an economic value.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Rawan, a Palestinian artist, decided upon finishing high school to study in one of the six art schools that exist in Palestine. She preferred to go to the Jerusalem Academy of Fine Arts because of its important connections with the art world. Upon graduation, at the final show, Rawan was happy that most of her work was bought by known collectors in Palestine, including the influential collector known as Abu Daoud. She also earned the respect of her artistic peers in Palestine, which paved the way for her first critical review in the respected journal ART Jerusalem, which also runs the annual art fair that holds the same name. This has opened the eyes of some of the commercial galleries in Palestine. Confused between choosing between the galleries in Ramallah, Bethlehem and Gaza, she preferred to find representation in the centre of the art happening—Jerusalem. Over a five-year period, the gallery helped the artist establish a solid art market presence. The gallery was also ecstatic that it managed during the ART Jerusalem fair to include Rawan's work in the prestigious collection of the Diaspora Museum of Contemporary Art in Jerusalem.*

This is the study of how none of the above exists in Palestine. There are five main questions that this dissertation tries to examine concerning the absence in Palestine of 'Western' value granting mechanisms that help artists to sustain their art career from an economic perspective. Even though these artists have achieved critical and curatorial success, there does not exist yet one Palestinian artist from the occupied Palestinian land who is able to practically claim that his or her income is based on art sales in contrast to other Palestinians who live outside of Palestine.<sup>1</sup> To conduct this analysis of why artists are not capable to live on their art, it is necessary first to define where is Palestine? Who is considered a Palestinian artist and what accordingly is understood by the term Palestinian Art?

2 (Question 1 - Section 1)

The conceptual transformation and the engagement with new forms of expression in Palestinian art just before the 1994 Oslo Accords peace agreement,<sup>3</sup> has helped Palestinian artists achieve international recognition. The

1- This fact is according to ground research and consultations with the major art players in Palestine.

2-These questions are complex and this is mainly due to the history the land of Palestine went through in the 20th century that fragmented its geographical continuity, and dispersed Palestinians who are now living all over the world.

3-This agreement between Israel and the Palestinians created the Palestinian Authority to rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 1994.

question is why does this new international audience finds it easier to understand Palestinian Art and relate to it 'post-Oslo'<sup>4</sup> 4, and why at the same time did the local consumption of Palestinian art decrease in the last twenty years? (Question 2 – Section 2)

Ramallah has been emerging as a centre for Palestinian art at a time when there has been a political process for the marginalization of Jerusalem as the expected centre. The research traces back the creation of the Ramallah centre, its characteristics, viability and audience. Since Palestine's value mechanisms are embryonic, other centres are considered such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that has been emerging in the last five years as a regional competitive art centre, especially for Arab art. The question is, can Palestinian artists embrace this UAE centre until a viable one of their own emerges, or is the theory of a mobile centre more suitable to the dispersed nature of the Palestinian community in many countries? (Question 3 – Section 3)

When art is created, a distribution system forms around it.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of several competitive non-governmental organizations (NGOs cultural institutions) to fill the gap of the lack of a primary market in Palestine is explored, especially the fact that the survival of most of them depends on Western donors. Historically, the development of Palestine and its arts has always been connected with 'competing foreign powers'.<sup>6</sup> The influence of these powers has its positive and negative effects, and of interest to this study is the impact it had on the cultural institution and the artist. The question is what is this distinctive system that emerged after the Oslo Accords agreement and what are its characteristics? (Question 4 – Section 4)

Lacking the traditional value granting mechanisms in Palestine, such as critics, museums, galleries and auction houses, Palestinian artists have been depending on Western art infrastructures for critical recognition. Alan Bowness described four circles of recognition through which an artist travels on his/her path to fame: peer recognition, critical recognition, patronage by dealers and collectors,

4- Palestinians commonly refer to the agreement as Oslo, and often they refer to events before and after it as Pre Oslo and Post Oslo. For clarity, this research will use these terms.

5- Iain Robertson, Understanding International Art Markets and Management (Routledge; London, 2005), 13.

6- Kamal Boullata thoroughly discusses the influence of foreign power in his seminal study on Palestinian Art in Palestinian Art From 1850 to the Present. London, New York, Beirut, Saqi Books, 2009.

and finally public acclaim.<sup>7</sup> What may have been proven in the West in terms of value granting mechanisms of art may not necessarily be applicable in Palestine, where on the ground other factors play a role. Hence, can new circles of recognition be theorised that may be necessary as conditions of success for the entrapped Palestinian artist? (Question 5 – Section 5)

## METHODOLOGY

Written resources on Palestinian art are extremely limited. The key writer on Palestinian Art is artist Kamal Boullata (b. 1936) whose “historical writings and art criticism in Arabic, English and French have become the standard by which all other writings on Palestinian Art are measured.”<sup>8</sup> Boullata offers a comprehensive and critical development of Palestinian art from 1850 till 2005, and in some parts tackles art from an economic perspective. He approaches the subject based on the intrinsic quality of the art and does so by explaining the political and social environment Palestinian artists worked in. Even though this research also approaches the topic through a socio-political perspective, nevertheless, it is different because it explores the construction of the economic value of Palestinian art. It looks at value mechanisms, the role of the primary and secondary market, and the role of the institution / institutional curator that the artists have to work with. The way Palestinian art has been marketed qualifies to be labelled as an art market in accordance with the operation of supply and demand, even though the majority of the interviewees commented on the absence of one. The question should focus more on the characteristics of this market, as any traded art always has value. The issue is to try to understand the value mechanisms for Palestinian art that shifted from politics and engaged with the traditional value granting mechanisms in the West.

Accordingly, given the lack of scholarly material, a qualitative approach was adopted to collect primary data. To get an overview and a feel of the different variables shaping the cultural situation in Palestine, a diagnostic research through recorded personal interviews was conducted. Directors (many of them the founders) of eleven of the key cultural and academic institutions in Palestine, together with thirteen recognised artists from Palestine have been interviewed. The recording time

averaged ninety minutes per interview. Upon return to London, these interviews were carefully listened to again in an attempt to diagnose the cultural situation in Palestine. The data was analysed and divided into categorizing themes, and a narrative was developed and finally theorised at the end of section five.

The research mainly focuses on Palestinian artists who live in the occupied Palestinian land in Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with cross references to Palestinians in the Diaspora and in Israel as necessary for value comparison purposes, as they have been living in other art distribution systems. Accordingly, it seems that the art of the latter has more value than the art of the former. To seek consensus, the question was posed whether success, and accordingly value, have geographical implications with artists born outside Palestine being the most fortunate and artists born in the Gaza Strip the least fortunate. With the vast majority of interviewees agreeing to this in theory, using numerical data from the ratings of Artfacts.net and auction house records, it will be shown that the above classification does justify the argument that in lack of value granting mechanisms, artists struggle to sustain their careers from art.

Finally, I have the advantage of being an artist who has lived in Jerusalem for thirty-two years. This advantage of being a participant observer (an insider) and the knowledge I developed dealing with the institutions, donors, curators and the audience have helped me to try to ask critical questions and gain wide access.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Ground research could not be conducted in the Gaza Strip due to the Israeli blockade on the strip. Also, some censorship had to be conducted as requested by some of the interviewees. The research focuses on Palestinian artists from Jerusalem and the West Bank. Even though it does tackle artists living in Israel, and outside Palestine, it has taken into consideration the successful artists. There is a need to do an in-depth analysis to study why some artists who did gain enough exposure in countries with established art infrastructures did not succeed.

7- Alan Bowness, *The Conditions of Success : How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame* (Thames and Hudson; [London], 1989).

8- Joseph Massad, *Permission to Paint; Palestinian Art and the Colonial Encounter*, Art Journal v. 66, number 3 fall 2007, 126 – 133.

## SECTION 1

### The Fragmentation of Palestine

#### **- In search of Palestine and Palestinian**

First, it is critical to define where Palestine is, who is considered a Palestinian and accordingly suggest a definition for the term Palestinian Art. This brief definition from a geographical, national and conceptual perspective respectively is necessary to show how it has influenced the distribution of Palestinian art and its economic value. For the sake of objectivity, the following United Nations (UN) description gives a quick survey about the history of Palestine:

*Palestine was among the several former Ottoman Arab territories which were placed under the administration of Great Britain. All but one of these Mandated Territories became fully independent States, as anticipated. The exception was Palestine.... where, the Mandate had as a primary objective the implementation of the 'Balfour Declaration' issued by the British Government in 1917, expressing support for 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people'. After looking at various alternatives, the UN proposed the partitioning of Palestine into two independent States, one Palestinian Arab and the other Jewish, with Jerusalem internationalized.... One of the two States envisaged in the partition plan proclaimed its independence as Israel and in the 1948 war expanded to occupy 77 per cent of the territory of Palestine. Israel also occupied the larger part of Jerusalem. Over half of the indigenous Palestinian population fled or were expelled. Jordan and Egypt occupied the other parts of the territory assigned by the partition resolution to the Palestinian Arab State which did not come into being. In the 1967 war, Israel occupied the remaining territory of Palestine... the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This included the remaining part of Jerusalem, which was subsequently annexed by Israel. The war brought about a second exodus of Palestinians, estimated at half a million.* 9

During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, 750,000 Palestinians, over half the indigenous population, fled or were expelled. The 1967 Six Day War also resulted in a second exodus of Palestinians estimated at more than half a million.<sup>10</sup> Today, the official UN figures confirm that over 4.6 million refugees receive care in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>11</sup> The 156,000 Palestinians who managed to stay in their homes (what would become Israel) during the 1948 War, became citizens of the State of Israel, and are commonly known by Israel as Arab Israelis. They now number over a million and they have no restrictions of movement in Israel and can easily travel abroad. There were also many Palestinians who were at the time of the 1948 and 1967 wars visiting or temporarily residing abroad. These Palestinians were denied the right of return and accordingly settled wherever they were and became known as Diaspora Palestinians. In total, there are approximately ten million Palestinians.

UN Resolution 476 (1980) confirms that it considers the occupation of East Jerusalem since 1967 illegal and denounces its annexation by Israel.<sup>12</sup> Even though Palestinians in Jerusalem were granted Israeli ID cards that allow them relative freedom of movement, and temporary residency in their own city, their political aspirations remained totally devoted to the destiny of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As for the Gaza Strip, after it was occupied by Egypt from 1948 till 1967, Israel occupied it physically from 1967 till 2005. Israel still maintains total control over the Strip's air, land and sea space. It controls the borders and severely restricts movement of Palestinians exiting or entering the strip.<sup>13</sup> Israel has also encircled the West Bank with an eight-metre separation Wall which was ruled illegal by the International Court

10- General Assembly resolution 194 of 11 December 1948 states that: '... The refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.' United Nations, "194 (III). Palestine -- Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator,"

<http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/C758572B78D1CD0085256BCF0077E51A>, accessed Sept. 3 2009.

11- UNRWA, "Establishment of UNRWA," <http://www.un.org/unrwa/overview/index.html>, accessed Sept. 2 2009.

12- United Nations, 'Resolution 476 (1980), <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.nsf/f796f8bc05ec4f30885256cef0073cf3a/6de6da8a650b4c3b852560df00663826?OpenDocument>, accessed Sept. 1 2009.

13- Furthermore, movement of non-Palestinians wishing to visit the Strip is restricted to UN and foreign aid officials and some NGOs. This restriction of movement has dramatically worsened since the political party Hamas took over ground control of the Strip in June 2007.

of Justice.<sup>14</sup> Since the second Intifada (popular uprising) that erupted in the year 2000, according to the Israeli Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 'Israel enforces severe restrictions on Palestinians' freedom of movement in the West Bank...'<sup>15</sup> Most Palestinian cities and hundreds of villages have been effectively transformed into enclaves.<sup>16</sup> This, and the continuation of Israeli settlement on the ground continue to suffocate Palestinian life.

Today, the descendants of the original Palestinian refugees continue to live in refugee camps, the majority of which have not been assimilated in the hosting countries except in Jordan, and in some cases the Palestinian Christians who reached Lebanon in 1948, where the Lebanese government, in order to balance out the fragile religious demography on the ground, nationalized them.<sup>17</sup> Hence, as can be understood, Palestinians are dispersed in many countries and their identity is understood according to the experience they went through regardless of the new nationalities they acquired.

Within the framework of this research, it was decided that a Palestinian is somebody who is from:

- Jerusalem and the West Bank; or
- The Gaza Strip; or
- Inside the State of Israel; or
- Those who have left by choice or were forced to leave the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem or Israel; or
- Those who were born outside of Palestine to people originally from Palestine.

14- The UN General Assembly asked the court to evaluate the wall's legality. The court asserted that if Israel maintained it was for security purposes, it should have built it on its land and not on the occupied Palestinian land. International Court of Justice, "Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/index.php?pr=71&code=mwp&p1=3&p2=4&p3=6&case=131&k=5a>, accessed Sept. 8, 2009.

15- B'TSELEM, "Restrictions on Movement," [http://www.btselem.org/english/freedom\\_of\\_movement/Checkpoints\\_and\\_Forbidden\\_Roads.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/freedom_of_movement/Checkpoints_and_Forbidden_Roads.asp), accessed Sept. 12, 2009.

16- The notable Israeli and Jewish writer Gideon Levy who writes for Haaretz newspaper, describes the Palestinian reality on the ground using words such as concentration camps and ghettos. 'Anyone facing the barbed-wire fences surrounding Qalqilya, for example, cannot help but think of a concentration camp. A concentration camp - not an extermination camp. The person who smeared graffiti on the separation wall calling Abu Dis a ghetto, as it severed by an 8-meter high concrete wall, did so with good reason.' Gideon Levy, "The Holocaust and Israeli occupation cannot be compared," accessed April 19, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1079368.html>, accessed Oct. 4, 2009.

17- Kamal Boullata also writes about the cases of several Palestinian artists who are commonly known as Lebanese such as Julian Seraphim (b. 1934) and Paul Guiragossian (19261993-). Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art, 150153-.

### - Reconsidering Palestinian Artists

Though it might seem that the definition offered above of who is considered a Palestinian is historically settled, when this question was posed to all the interviewees, there was an uncertainty regarding who might be considered a Palestinian artist. Given that this dissertation is the reconsideration of Palestinian art, rather than the reconsideration of Palestinian artists, it is essential to examine both terms and differentiate between them in accordance with the feedback received from all those interviewed.

There is a common approach when curating exhibitions on Palestinian Art to make the unifying concept the fact that all participating artists are considered Palestinian or are of Palestinian origin. The curating is not based on a thematic concept or other kinds of conceptual thought, and often the exhibitions lack in-depth knowledge or proper research on Palestinian Art.<sup>18</sup> This may be one main reason why Palestinian art has often been perceived as a militant or propaganda art.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, British Art according to popular opinion refers to the artistic works associated with the United Kingdom and its peoples. That is, it refers to the practice (art about UK) and or to the nationality of its creators. Similarly, does the term 'Palestinian Art' refers to works associated with Palestine and its peoples? At first, there appears to be consensus that in order to 'qualify' to be a Palestinian artist, one should be born in Palestine, or comes from parents where the father or mother is of Palestinian descent regardless of where the Palestinian lives in the world. This view was solid till the start of the Oslo Accords agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis that started to indirectly define the Palestinian Identity. As Dr. Tina Sherwell, director of the International Academy of Art in Ramallah remarks, it has become a question of authenticity where a Palestinian artist who lives in Jerusalem, West Bank or Gaza Strip is considered more authentic than a Palestinian who lives in the Diaspora.<sup>20</sup> Najwan Darwish, a cultural critic, contends that the idea of authenticity is directly related to the Oslo Accords peace process that has started to define who a Palestinian is based on geographical

18- This critique has been formulated during an interview with Tina Sherwell, director of the International Academy of Art in Ramallah. Personal Interview, 272009/08.

19- The major exhibition on Palestinian Art that took place at the renowned World Arab Institute in Paris in 2009 featured 19 Palestinian artists. Several media articles, used titles with clear political connotations such as the French newspaper Le Monde. It read: "The Militant Force of Palestinian Art". Le Monde, "La force Militante de l'art Palestinien," August 04, 2009, [http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type\\_item=ART\\_ARCH\\_30J&objet\\_id=1093213](http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=1093213), accessed Sept. 21, 2009.

20- Tina Sherwell, Personal Interview.

grounds.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the Western institutions have been granting much support to these 'confirmed' or 'fixed' Palestinians, especially to those from the West Bank city of Ramallah. In a way, the major economic development of Ramallah has largely to do with the obvious attention it receives from donors who may have played a role in the shaping of the Palestinian identity. In other words, 'There are foreign powers, that decide who a Palestinian artist is and accordingly what Palestinian art is.'<sup>22</sup> The systematic obliteration of the Palestinian identity, especially by Israel, resulted in confusing the world's perception of Palestinian identity, and in some cases confusing Palestinian born artists who let go of their own 'birthroots'.<sup>23</sup> The Palestinian artist Abdallah Al-Qarra (b.1939) from the minority Druze community living in Israel, went as far to change his Arabic name from Abdallah to the Hebrew equivalent 'Ovadia'.<sup>24</sup>

It is common that people tend to think that Palestinians create Palestinian Art, disregarding other artists who took the topic of Palestine as their main subject matter. This is not the case, for example, of Burhan Karkoutly the Syrian artist, who lived the Palestinian experience where in many articles about his work he was labelled a Palestinian artist. As artist Vera Tamari, director of the Ethnographic and Art Museum at Birzeit University explains, art in Palestine was strongly connected to the political facts on the ground, dealing with issues of identity, memory, exile and so on. Hence, some artists may have not been Palestinian by birth, but because of their deep involvement with the Palestinian case, 'earned the label'.<sup>25</sup> According to this, Palestinian artists are not necessarily identified by their birth national status as some non-Palestinian artists transcended their birth nationality and adopted the Palestinian one.

It is natural for the work of artists who reside in foreign countries to become assimilated with the art of the hosting country—this is not a special case for Palestine. Was the art of Picasso French or Spanish? The land or geography, therefore, could become a deciding factor. The same logic applies to Palestinian art with one major difference—many of the artists who were labelled Palestinian did

21- For instance, when it came to the Palestinian Authority presidential elections only people from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were allowed to vote. Palestinians citizens of Israel, the five million refugees and Palestinians in the Diaspora were banned from participation.

22- Najwan Darwish, Personal Interview, August 28, 2009.

23- Historically, all occupying powers tried to suppress the identity of the people they occupied.

24- The Abdallah Ovadia fact appears in Kamal Boullata's book, Palestinian Art, page 153.

25-Vera Tamari, Personal Interview, August 29, 2009.

not live in Palestinian land but lived the 'Palestinian Experience'. The work of artists who are developing an organic connection with the 'Palestinian Experience' has enabled it to enter Palestinian art history books.<sup>26</sup> As the director of the Qattan Foundation in Ramallah, Ziad Khalaf says: 'I think it is wrong to limit the Palestinian experience for Palestinians only, it is broader than that, it is a condition that has humanistic implications that reaches people everywhere.... Accordingly, it might even be harmful to limit it to Palestinians'.<sup>27</sup> Yet, when it comes to the biannual Young Artist Award, the institution clearly defines who a Palestinian is.<sup>28</sup> There is also the view that the Palestinian identity is still wide open. Curator Jack Persekian and director of Al Ma'mal Foundation in Jerusalem, therefore prefers to use the land as a reference of identity. Only those who feel a belonging to it are Palestinian and therefore anything which is produced and inspired by, or originates from, a belonging point of view to this land is Palestinian.<sup>29</sup> This means that Jews could also be labelled Palestinian if they feel so. To be Palestinian is inclusive and not exclusive as Persekian asserts, and he gives the example of America where it is a land for its entire people no matter where one originally comes from and no matter what one's religion is. Then again, this land reference definition in that regard further confuses the Palestinian identity, especially because it starts to include in it Jews, something that was challenged when I spoke with some people. Artist Suleiman Mansour (b. 1947), who says that the Palestinian artist is the one who feels Palestinian, gives a similar definition to Persekian, and in his opinion it could also include Jewish artists. Conflicting with his theory, he still preferred not to label them Palestinians artists and preferred to categorize their work as 'Art of Palestine' rather than Palestinian Art.<sup>30</sup> Mansour also gives the example of Auri Davis, whose parents are Jewish and who was elected to the Palestinian Revolutionary Council in 2009.

Palestinian art, contrary to the international perception,

26- As some of the interviewees expressed, because of the continuation of the occupation, Palestine has become a global concept, leading to confusion on the Palestinian identity. This is not negative in the sense that it has allowed many people to identify themselves with the Palestinian case. This conceptual transformation started giving the Palestinian identity new meanings, and with the continuation of occupation, this transformation is becoming more global and enticing more artists to engage with the Palestinian experience. 'Palestine is a concept', was said by Hafez Omar, head of public relations at Al-Mahatta Gallery in Ramallah, during a personal interview on August 18, 2009.

27- Ziad Khalaf, Personal Interview, August 18, 2009.

28- To be a Palestinian artist, one should be born in Palestine, or have a father or mother is of Palestinian descent regardless where the Palestinian lives in the world. Qattan Foundation, "Visual Arts," [http://www.qattanfoundation.org/pdf/1953\\_33.pdf](http://www.qattanfoundation.org/pdf/1953_33.pdf), accessed, Oct. 13, 2009.

29- Jack Persekian, Personal Interview, August 28, 2009.

30- Suleiman Mansour, Personal Interview, August 26, 2009.



**Figure 1.** The painting of the flying girl with the balloons (2005) on the Separation Wall at Qalandia checkpoint is the work of Banksy. Photo Steve Sabella, 2006.

seems more thematic rather than ethnic-oriented. What Palestine is going through has enticed many artists of different nationalities to align themselves with the Palestinian experience. The land of Palestine has extended its known geographical boundaries and any artist, regardless of his or her nationality, can live on this virtual land and create. Hence, excluding the work of these artists from curatorial shows has, in many ways, become a sort of self-appropriation when curated by Palestinians and a sort of basic ignorance when curated by non-Palestinians. This has led, according to Darwish, to the creation of a form of indigenous or ethnic Palestinian art that weakens Palestinian art when exhibited in a group, especially because people approach it from a purely political or ethnic perspective.<sup>31</sup> What Banksy has painted on the Separation Wall (figure 1) cannot be excluded from Palestinian art history books, and the same applies to Karkoutly.

<sup>31</sup>- At a time when Palestinian artists are breaking boundaries and aligning their visual language with the international, one limiting Palestinian art to Palestinians hinders its development.

### **CONCLUSION: Identity and The Palestinian Experience**

If Palestinian art is theme oriented, then it can include in it all kinds of artists, including Jewish or Israeli artists. In this case, the more accurate definition would be: Art of Palestine or Art from Palestine. As for what we mean when we use the term Palestinian artists, if we follow the research they were described according to ethnic, national, geographic and sentiment basis. However, it seemed that the majority of people interviewed found the term 'Palestinian Experience', a unifying one that can connect the complex nature of the Palestinian creation. The term in its artistic concept appears in artist Kamal Boullata's comprehensive research book on Palestinian Art (published in 2009). He writes, Regardless of where they [Palestinians] resided, their art continued to grow out of their Palestinian experience.... New generations of Palestinian artists continue to emerge wherever Palestinians are found in the world today.... Palestinian artists may live in different places today, but they all meet through their art as individual voices in a chorus, which resounds with the different modes growing out of the

Palestinian experience.<sup>32</sup> And he also writes:

*Wherever they live on Israel's Separation Wall and its military checkpoints have entered their art as their language continues to cross barriers between exile and memory, identity and gender, displacements and fragmentation. Some have continued to find their expression in painting whereas others went on to explore new tools and media. Together, their work gives body to an art of resistance that never ceases to inspire.*<sup>33</sup>

It is precisely this art of resistance that has inspired many international artists to explore in their own way the Palestinian experience, resulting in an art that embraces new forms of different Palestinian experiences (plural).<sup>34</sup> Hence, when curating a show on Palestinian art it can include many different Palestinian experiences in accordance with the above. The term could include, in its theoretical and philosophical sense, all artists who are from Palestine, Israel, Diaspora or foreign artists whose theme of work circulates around Palestine. To conclude, Palestinian Art today, because of the fragmented state of Palestine, should be understood more within the wider Palestinian Experience since artists of many different nationalities create it.

This research will focus on Palestinian art created by artists who are directly related to the Palestinian Experience, in particular those born in Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>35</sup> There is general consensus that Palestinian artists who live mainly in Israel, or the West have been more successful internationally. Recently, artists from occupied Palestine started closing the gap. For this to happen the visual expression and presentation of these artists had to change. This has led the art to break borders and enter major biennales, curatorial shows, the primary market in the West, and recently, enjoy a presence in major auction houses.

## SECTION 2

### The Changing Characteristics of Palestinian Art

Western audiences who are engaging with artwork created by 'Western' artists may find it easier to relate to the work and understand it because the artists are often creating it with Western references in mind.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, this may also explain why Palestinian art that originated mainly in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem, was not understood or appreciated by foreign audiences, because of its use of local references till the early 1990s. When artists started to become more mobile, educated (in the West), and more connected with artists globally, they started to adopt 'Western' references to relate to their 'local' experiences. This has helped Palestinian art spread throughout the world and gain international recognition. Dr. Sherwell further explains:

*Higher education has become crucial for international recognition. Those who are receiving higher education in Western cultures are appearing to have an advantage over artists who only studied art in local Palestinian or Arab universities.... They have become conversant with the visual language... So they get an understanding of the visual culture abroad and that allows them to make their work to communicate to those audiences and to know what those audiences are looking for....*<sup>37</sup>

In the 1990s Palestinian artists started exploring art universities in the West, and also several attended art schools in Israel. Israeli society is an amalgam of people from all over the world. Accordingly, Palestinian artists gained from this exposure, which together with their global exposure to the arts widened their artistic horizons. The foreign presence in Palestine probably began advancing Palestinian art organically when it started granting scholarships to Palestinian artists to continue higher education in the United Kingdom, France and the United States predominantly.<sup>38</sup>

36- In an interview with artist Suleiman Mansour, he noted that foreigners might not understand the Palestinian reference.

37- Tina Sherwell, Personal Interview.

38- The British Council in Jerusalem, through their Chevening scholarships allocates at least one scholarship in the field of arts out of their nine yearly scholarships. Artists who have recently benefited from the scheme include Rula Halawani, Steve Sabella, Shuruq Harb, Muhamad Il Yacoubi and several others. The French Consulate has also been active in sending artists to study in Paris, and has secured several residencies at the Cite Des Arts. Artists who enjoyed this scheme include Hani Zurob. The American Fulbright scholarship has also sent several Palestinians to study in the United States.

32- Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art, 3036-.

33- Ibid., 36.

34- Dr Tina Sherwell used the term Palestinian Experiences in the plural form, as she finds it more inclusive. The Palestinian Experience (singular) commonly refers to Palestinians who are directly related with Palestine historically.

35-There will be cross-references when necessary to Palestinian artists citizens of Israel and to Diaspora Palestinians regardless if these artists have adopted new nationalities. These artists require a separate study and it is not possible to elaborate on their case in the scope of this study.



Figure 2. Nabil Anani, Mother of Martyr #4, oil on canvas, 1985



Figure 3. Nabil Anani, Summer Evening # 251, leather on wood, 1992

### **Transcending The Physical Geography Of Palestine**

In the early 1990s Palestinian art that was created in the occupied Palestinian land shifted from collective symbolic, illustrative, figurative and narrative expression to more individual or personal expression. The tools might have changed but the content remained more or less the same.<sup>39</sup> ‘Palestinian artists started to explore their topic in-depth. Before it was expository and obvious, using the symbols that everyone identified with; everyone used the pigeon, the colours of the flag and the Palestinian landscape. Now the artists are treating Palestinian issues with a deeper perspective, resorting to philosophy, anthropology and conceptuality.’<sup>40</sup> There is consensus that before the Oslo Accords agreement, all artistic efforts were invested for the sake of the Palestinian cause. Palestinians identified with the collective presence, and the struggle towards national liberation. After 1994, the new political realities became part of Palestinian life and the emergence of the Palestinian State seemed further away than ever. On the other hand, the relative increase in mobility in the 1990s granted Palestinian artists the opportunity to escape the collective aspirations and engage with self-reflection and individual thought.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that the more educated Palestinian artists have become and the more exposure they experienced, the more complex and multi layered their art concepts or ideas have become. Because these ideas or concepts adopted new visual tools, the art transcended the physical geography of Palestine.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the development of a personal identity rather than a national or collective identity opened the way for more exciting experimentation, and eventually as Khalaf puts it, a bridge of reaching the ‘Other’ was created.<sup>43</sup> Or as Al-Jubeh, director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center articulated it, ‘The Palestinian art was searching for the local aspect within a global context.’<sup>44</sup> Even those characterised with the making of traditional

39- The content being identity, home, loss, memory, exile, freedom and occupation among others. Or as Boullata has put it, ‘Wherever they live on, Israel’s Separation Wall and its military checkpoints have entered their art as their language continues to cross barriers between exile and memory, identity and gender, displacements and fragmentation...’. Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art, 3036.

40- Vera Tamari, Personal Interview.

41- Palestinians needed to do some reevaluations and develop a new language that is more attuned with the international art scene. Or as Persekian put it, ‘Palestinians needed to understand their situation in accordance with the state of the world and not only in accordance with the two-sided narrative of the Palestinian and Israeli struggle.’

42- The new generation of painters like Hani Zurob, Monzer Jawabreh, Ra’fat Asa’ad and Bashar Hroub, who emerged towards the end of the 1990s, painted in an abstract expressionist style.

43- Ziad Khalaf, Personal Interview.

44- Abed Al-Jubeh, Personal Interview, August 14, 2009.

Palestinian art felt compelled to follow the trend and adopt these renewed modes of expression if they were to stay on the art map. For example, notice the shift in figure 2 from a clear figurative painting and title to a more abstract art and title in figure 3. This is the work of artist Nabil Anani (b. 1943), a founding member of the Palestinian League of Artists in 1975.

### **Exodus Of Palestinian Artist Through Conceptual Art**

Palestinian art started to be less identified by aesthetics and engaged itself with Conceptual Art. Palestinian artists find in Conceptual Art that is concerned with ideology and politics a means to take positions on political problems and widely raise political issues.<sup>45</sup> Given that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is ongoing, one is bound to notice that the majority of Palestinian artists today work in a conceptual manner and have elements of the conflict at the core of their artworks. Because Conceptual Art broke free from traditional forms of presentation it was capable of being distributed broadly and efficiently. Accordingly, to spread the message, its adoption naturally became the preferred strategy of art creation in countries experiencing political turmoil and dispute.<sup>46</sup> In theory, the role of the artist shifted from one of genius—mastering techniques—to one of investigator, creating art that finds contentment and complexity in thought.

Artistically though, it seems that the Palestinian artists who managed to escape nostalgic, illustrative, and symbolic attributions are those who managed to produce a ‘form’ or a ‘structure’ that is distinctive and which adheres to the claim that ‘Conceptual Art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions.’<sup>47</sup> Hence, Palestinian Conceptual Art, which is geared by politics, becomes a question of ‘form’ and once the ‘form’ is carefully considered in consistence with the concept the artwork transcends its locality to communicate to wider audiences. Once Palestinian artists from occupied Palestine understood the essence of Conceptual Art and form, their art started its journey to the outside world. Eventually, this has triggered an exodus of Palestinian artists who set on a course to discover an artistic freedom that gives them motivation to create with a global perspective. This development was already taking place in the work of Palestinian artists who lived in Western

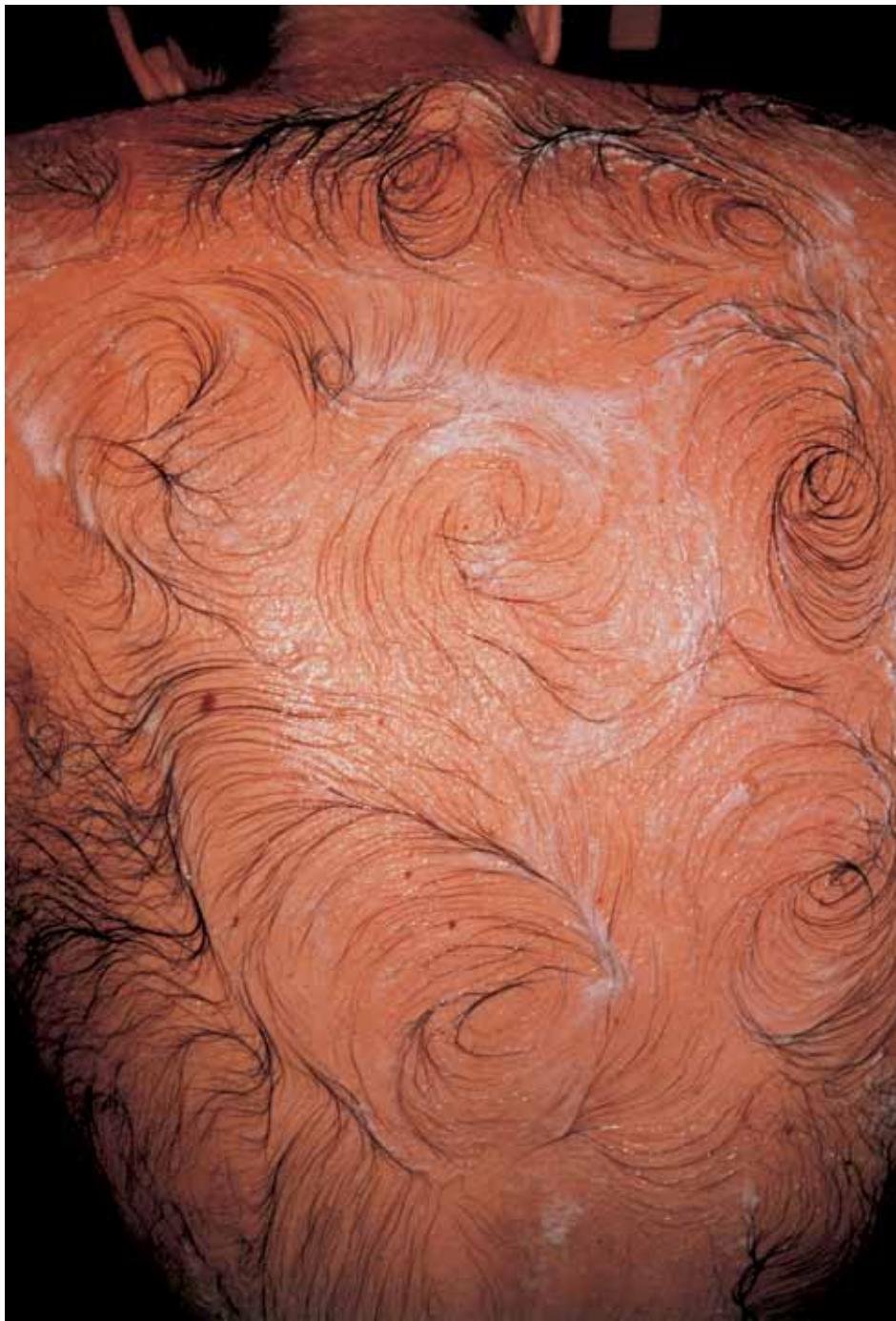
45- Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (Phaidon; London ; New York, N.Y., 2002)

46- Peter Osborne explains how artists from Latin America in the 1960’s and 1970’s who were concerned with the unstable political conditions in their countries, found in Conceptual art that is concerned with ideology and politics a means to take positions on political problems and widely raise political issues. Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, 1112-.

47- Charles Harrison, *Art in Theory, 19002000-: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Blackwell Pub; Malden, Mass. ; Oxford, 2003), 49.



Figure 4. **Mona Hatoum**, *Untitled (wheelchair)*, stainless steel and rubber, 97.2 x 49.3 x 82.7 cm, 1998.



**Figure 5. Mona Hatoum, *Van Gogh's Back*, C-type 66cm / 50cm, 1995.** It is easy for a western audience to relate to this work because most likely everyone knows Van Gogh. Yet, the work allows for multiple readings and connotations where the generated meaning depends on the personal life experience of the viewer. The same applies to the wheel chair with the knifed handles. In brief, because of a sophisticated use of form and concept the artwork transcends its geographical borders and communicates with a large audience.

countries much earlier than the 1990s, as is clear in the case of artworks by Mona Hatoum, Kamal Boullata, Samia Halaby and other pioneers. Perhaps a brief jump to the work of Conceptual artist Mona Hatoum (b. 1952), a renowned Palestinian artist, is necessary to illustrate this idea as 'no one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austere and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively'<sup>48</sup> like her. The form in her work continuously renews itself and accordingly she ensures the development of what could be termed as a new Conceptual Art<sup>49</sup> (Figures 4 and 5). Using different materials such as hair, steel, soap, marbles, rubber, wire, metal and string she expresses concepts such as exile, dislocation and dispossession. Studying her artworks, one is bound to notice the connecting factor in all of them. This factor is better understood by using Hatoum's words: 'I choose the material [the form] as an extension of the concept or sometimes in opposition to it, to create a contradictory and paradoxical situation of attraction/repulsion, fascination and revulsion'.<sup>50</sup> In other words for her concepts to emerge she mediates them through highly charged, coded and often ambivalent visual forms. This use of such recognised form allows for multiple meanings that people can relate to regardless of where they come from.<sup>51</sup> In that regard, Hatoum carefully chooses her 'forms' and is highly aware of how her visuals engage first and foremost the intellect. Notice in figure 4 how the knifed wheelchair hands are menacing and how this relates to the painful reality of being confined to a wheelchair.<sup>52</sup> This is one reading of the work, however, a more in-depth one possibly exposes the hardship and complexity of living in new alienating environments. It is this ambivalent relationship that she creates between the form and the concept, or between the visual and the mind, that makes Hatoum an exceptional and an international artist. It is precisely this that Palestinians artists from occupied Palestine started to engage in. They learned how to pose more complex questions in their work, to

48- PEdward Said, *The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (Tate Gallery; London, 2000), 17.

49- Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory*, 863.

50- Quoted in the essay of Sheena Wagstaff, *The Entire World as a Foreign Land*, 29.

51- Distinction has to be made between formalism and form. In art theory, formalism is the concept that the artistic value of a work of art should be determined by its form in terms of its purely visual aspects such as color, texture, shape, composition and so on. It deemphasized the significance of context, content and intention in the work of art. Traditional aesthetics limited itself by attempting to determine meaning within that form, while in Conceptual art, form is mainly a mediator that helps to elucidate the desired intentions of the artist, while placing them in the right context. Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 2845..

52- Sheena Wagstaff, *The Entire World as a Foreign Land*, 27.

use western references, and how to conceptually refine their presentations. It was inevitable that this would make Palestinian art transcend the geographical borders. Perhaps the work of artist Khalil Rabah (b. 1961) from Ramallah summarises this argument in an intellectual artwork he created in 1997. Using a dictionary and nails (the form), the visual sophistication complements the distorted and unjust definition of Palestine (the idea). Unsurprisingly, works like this made their way to international auction houses. The work fetched £16,100 at Sotheby's London as part of the Modern & Contemporary Arab & Iranian Art Sale. Other artists went as far as to drop the visual form and engage in art as an idea.<sup>53</sup>

### **Referential Theory For the Lack of Audience**

When art shifted direction in the early 1990s to align itself with the universal contemporary art language, the Palestinian audience found itself confused. To develop an understanding for such a new language requires the learning of Western references. Remaining obscure, and possibly out of lack of interest for this new way of expression, the local audience, according to the testimony of many, decreased and became limited to those few who were able to keep up with the change. In other words, the art scene lost its audience when the art lost its clear and national formal components. When the art was based on national references, exhibition openings enjoyed a spectrum of many people affiliated with many political parties, especially the party the artist belonged to.<sup>54</sup> When asked about the audience that sustains the Palestinian art scene, many agreed that it is 'virtually non existing'.<sup>55</sup> Or as one artist put it, 'Three years after residing in France, and when my friends send me images of exhibition openings, I can still identify the attending people and even count them.'<sup>56</sup> Curator Samar Martha and director of ArtSchool Palestine, who returned to Ramallah from London in 2007, also remarks, 'Since I came back, I still see the same faces.' Those who attend have been described as the economic elite<sup>57</sup> —the very few people who have money. This is especially true in Ramallah where most of the art events take place. When asked about the role of intellectuals, there was wide

53- Steve Sabella's jerusalem in exile project in 2005 was a conceptual project based solely on the idea that cities can also be exiled. <http://stevesabella.com/jerusalem-in-exile.html>

54- Mansour explains that many political factions attended exhibitions in accordance with the political affiliation of the artist. Many people also attended out of solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

55- Khalil Sakakini, Al-Hoash Gallery and ArtSchool Palestine gave the same remark.

56-Hani Zurob, Personal Interview, September 7, 2009.

57- Abed Al-Jubeh, Personal Interview.

consensus among the interviewees that those who have money consider themselves the intellectuals in Palestine. One artist put it differently when explaining who attends her shows: 'If I make an exhibition here, who comes to it is not very complicated. It is your friends who come and the more friends you have the bigger your audience is. If I would stay in the country for five years, I would have made many friends. They will come and bring their families, just like at a wedding.'<sup>58</sup> This raises the question as to whether Palestinian artists are now creating or supplying for the local audience,<sup>59</sup> or whether they are looking for a different experience outside of Palestine—that is, a new audience? Perhaps artist Monzer Jawabreh has rightly articulated the main reasons why artists seek the foreign experience: 'When I realised that the local audience (which hardly exists) is paying less attention to my art and to anything new I produce, I started to feel that I was not artistically developing. The audience is not responding and in many ways I feel this limits my progress.... Success for me is when I reach the global audience and this happens when I leave this place, and when I gain recognition in other countries.'<sup>60</sup> The artists started realising that their new art could only gain 'real' recognition outside of Palestine, which lead several artists to choose to leave their country of birth in order to seek such recognition.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps a brief look at the state of education in Palestine is necessary to understand the lack of audience, especially because RAND, an American institution that helps improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis, has conducted a study to explore the characteristics of art participants and the factors that influence art participation.<sup>62</sup> The study indicates that historically, 'education has proven to be the single best predictor of participation in the fine arts.'<sup>63</sup> It found out that people who attend museums are better educated and have higher incomes. It also found a relationship between

income and education, suggesting that people who earn a higher income tend to be more educated. Hence, we can consider general education as an internal factor in increasing appreciation for the arts and adding value to it. With time, this appreciation and the increased level of art participation will give rise to people who grow into a society that is culturally and artistically nurtured. The quality of government education is poor in Palestine and art education is not given any priority in either government or private schools. This, together with the weak Palestinian economy, would make it hard to imagine how a sophisticated audience might develop. According to Dr. Sherwell, 'People are not reading, and there is absence of book shops and general cultural awareness. People go to events because of the social pressure.'<sup>64</sup> Artist Rana Bishara (b. 1971), who is also Chairperson of the fine arts department at Al Quds university in Jerusalem, explains the difficulty she has experienced teaching students who she claims know nothing about art. When she interviewed students to enter Al Quds University she was stunned by their lack of basic knowledge of art as a whole, and, in particular, Palestinian art. She said the students did not even know the name of the artist of one of the most iconic image in Palestinian Art, and often did not even recognise it. She was referring to Sliman's Mansour, Jamal al Mahamel (The Camel / Carrier of Hardships), 1970.

*The next section explores the geographical ground where Palestinian art is created. It evaluates whether traditional value granting mechanisms exist there. It also asks, if there is a centre for Palestinian art that can sustain and develop these mechanisms. Alternatively, all interviewees were also asked whether Palestinian artists could benefit from these new and advanced distribution channels existing in the neighboring country, the UAE. Can the UAE be a centre for the Palestinian art market and a place that develops the value of Palestinian art?*

58- Shuruq Harb, Personal Interview, August 23, 2009.

59- The question was remarked by Shuruq Harb.

60- Monzer Jawabreh, Personal Interview, August 23, 2009. Furthermore, Mahatta Gallery confirms that they feel artists are isolated from their society and that they want to energize the scene.

61- This is also what I realised, and this is one of the main reasons why I finally understood in 2005 that success could only happen to me in the centre of art—London. Artist Hani Zurob poetically describes the change he went threw when he moved from Ramallah to Paris: 'In Ramallah, the fish thinks it swims in an ocean, just to discover later that the ocean was only a barrel. You know what a real ocean is when you live in one. In Paris, I was shocked and liberated at the same time.'

62- The research was conducted to study art participation in the United States, but its findings can apply to other countries. McCarthy F. Kevin, A Portrait of the Visual Arts : Meeting the Challenges of a New Era, (RAND Corp.; Santa Monica, CA, 2005).

63- Kevin F. McCarthy, A portrait of the Visual Arts , 21.

64 - Tina Sherwell, Personal Interview.

### SECTION 3

#### Mechanisms That Confer Value & Finding The Centre For Palestinian Art

According to a previous study published by the author on the mechanisms that confer value to art,<sup>65</sup> countries seeking to increase the critical and economic value of their art were required to go through the development of nine major steps.<sup>66</sup>

1-Ensuring political stability and creating advanced and well developed urban infrastructure and economy. There appears to be a direct relationship between a given country's development and political status and the way in which its art is perceived and valued. There is a difference in value between two similar artworks painted by two artists where one resides in New York, and the other in Abidjan. Clearly, art created in New York will have more value.<sup>67</sup>

2-Developing education, from primary to university level. There is a correlation between wealth and culture.<sup>68</sup> This might explain why Western countries appreciate art more than developing countries.

3- Encouraging government policies for foreign investors in general, and in the arts in particular. Attractive income, sales property and value added taxes should all be carefully considered. Countries should also endorse and practice copyright and intellectual property laws for art to prosper with confidence.

4- Building museums and attracting iconic museums to open branches. The role of museums is essential in validating art and in adding value to it. Also, museums play a 'fundamental role to the general education of arts appreciation.'<sup>69</sup> Artworks which become part of museum collections enhance the pedigree and future sales of the artist and the primary dealer.<sup>70</sup>

5- Creating powerful curatorial biennales. These shows bring influential people to the country such as artists, dealers, critics and collectors.

6- Collectors. They are required to support artists and

<sup>65</sup> - Steve Sabella, "Is the United Arab Emirates Constructing its Art History? Mechanisms that Confer Value to Art," *Contemporary Practices Visual Arts from the Middle East*, 126, V. 4 (2009).

<sup>66</sup> - It is clear that the order of the steps is crucial with the first being the most important. However, one can debate the order of these steps, as long as all are considered.

<sup>67</sup> - Iain Robertson, *Understanding International Art Markets and Management*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> - Ibid., 17.

<sup>69</sup> - Iain Robertson and Derrick Chong, "Introduction to Studies in Art business," *The Art Business*, (Routledge; London, 2008) 13.

<sup>70</sup> - Derrick Chong, 'Marketing in Art Business: Exchange Relationship by Commercial Galleries and Public Art Museums,' *The Art Business*, 117.

help sustain their livelihood. This in turn entices artists to create more and as demand increases and the art economy progresses.

7- Establishing galleries, as dealers are an integral and active part of the support system in the art world. Top dealers are influential 'tastemakers' and are important economically and culturally. Galleries dealing in the primary and secondary market can be seen as the cornerstone of any country aspiring to have a healthy art market.

8- Art Fairs. They expose artists to a larger audience and this helps to validate their art internationally. Good fairs also aim to create forums that bring together regional and international artists, writers, collectors, curators and academics to discuss art and bring vibrancy to the art scene.

9- Auction Houses are necessary for secondary market sales. The transparency of their sales influences the career of artists. In recent years, they have been playing major roles in validating artists and in becoming a component in influencing public taste.

The UAE built its artistic credentials in accordance with the above, that is, it resorted to Western mechanisms. Can Palestine go through a similar transformation?

#### The Case of Palestine

Step 1 : If we were to adopt the same mechanisms and in the order of their importance, we will be stuck at step 1. This alone dramatically hinders a 'healthy' development, if any, of the rest of the steps. Palestine has no political stability. It is still under occupation and is not officially recognised as a country.<sup>71</sup> Palestine as a whole has been suffocated by a severe economic condition due to the closure imposed on it by Israel. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the overall unemployment rate in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is 22.8%. The age group 20-24 registered the highest unemployment rate at 38.6% (29.3% in the West Bank and 57.0% in Gaza Strip). For the record, 51% of Palestinians live below the poverty line

<sup>71</sup> - To further complicate the issue, the Gaza Strip has been ruled separately since 2007 by Hamas, which took over the strip by power due to internal conflicts with the Fatah party that lost the national elections. Hamas is a political party that democratically won the Palestinian Authority elections in 2006. Unsatisfied with the will of the Palestinian voter, Israel, the United States and the European Union isolated the authority and froze all funds to it.

and about 19% of them live in extreme poverty.

Step 2 : Education is underdeveloped in Palestine and art education hardly exists in government and private schools.<sup>72</sup>

Step 3 : The Palestinian Authority does not have sole authority to attract foreign investors as Israel has to certify any agreements and often license them.

Step 4 : There is not one contemporary art museum in occupied Palestine. A few small heritage, religious and ethnic museums exist.

Step 5 : Two biennales exist<sup>73</sup> but, as is often the case, strict Israeli security procedures do not encourage artists to participate.<sup>74</sup>

Step 6 : There are no commercial galleries or art dealers in Palestine as understood in the West.<sup>75</sup> Attempts to create such roles or institutions have always failed.

Step 7 : With the state of the economy and poverty, collecting art is a far fetched luxury. In Palestine there is only one passionate collector.<sup>76</sup> Due to the economic development of Ramallah, the last few years have seen the expansion of this passion. However, all of those newly interested in Palestinian Art do not come together to make a collecting phenomenon, and are often referred to as buyers of art rather than collectors.

Step 8 : With the absence of the above, art fairs have no place in Palestinian society.

Step 9 : Ironically, while lacking most of the traditional mechanisms that grant value to art, auctions have been conducted in Jerusalem and Ramallah since 2002 (more details in section 5).

As can be understood, these mechanisms do not apply to

72-According to UNESCO, educational development in Palestine is a challenging experience because the Ministry of Education is being built from scratch. 'Challenging because Palestine is not yet an independent country and is witnessing conflict on a daily basis'. UNESCO, «Developing education in Palestine: a continuing Challenge.» [http://www.unesco.org/education/news\\_en/131101\\_palestine.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/education/news_en/131101_palestine.shtml), accessed Oct. 6 2009.

73 - The two biennales are The Jerusalem Show and The Riwaq Biennale.

74 - A large number of Palestinian artists and academics have been denied entry including Marwan Abado, Norma Marcos, Tayseer Mashareqa, Rashid Masharawi, Annemarie Jacir, Sandra Madi, Omar al Qattan, Hayyan Yacoub Jubeh, Joseph Massad, Alia Arasoughly, Dima Bawab, Nadia Hasan and Suzy Salamy to name a few. This has enticed them to form a social group on facebook as a sign of protest called 'Artists & Academics Prevented from Entering Palestine by Israel'. Furthermore, according to the Israel's most influential newspaper Haaretz, 'Number of people denied entry into Israel up 61 percent since 2005'. Shahar Ilan, «Number of people denied entry into Israel up 61 percent since 2005.» June 15, 2008.<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/992670.html>, accessed Oct., 2 2009.

75 - Cultural institutions sell some art when they organize exhibitions, but art selling is one of many other functions the institutions perform.

76 - Lawyer, Mazen Qupty, is a well-recognised figure, and has one of the biggest collections of Palestinian art. The Independent newspaper went as far to call him 'The Palestinian answer to Charles Saatchi'. Donald Macintyre, The Independent, «Art from Gaza and the West Bank: Gallery of a troubled nation.» March 13, 2007.

Palestine. This explains the need to find other centres for Palestinian Art to flourish critically and economically.

## POSITIONING PALESTINIAN ART

Before locating this centre, it might be necessary to understand the reality in Palestine and the view of the key players regarding the idea of the centre locally and regionally. From an historic perspective, Jerusalem should be the natural centre of Palestinian art as is evident in the study of Boullata.<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to learn that historically the development of Palestine and its art was connected with 'competing foreign powers'.<sup>78</sup> This case is still true today and more light will be shed on this in the next section. However, the Jerusalem centre Boullata writes about could no longer function after the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine in 1948. As he explains, 'The cosmopolitan cultural centre and seat of the art movement that Jerusalem proffered was demolished when that fateful year the city was sundered as the rest of the country was between the two new born states of Israel and Jordan...'<sup>79</sup> In 1980, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, and has ever since been declaring it its unified and eternal capital.<sup>80</sup> These actions have been dispersing the Palestinian population and fragmenting its geographical continuity, the latest being the construction of an eight meter Separation Wall that not only encircles the Palestinian cities in the West Bank, but also dissects Jerusalem itself into isolated districts (Figures 7 and 8).<sup>81</sup>

## Even though the unification is only recognised by Israel

77 -Boullata also writes: 'In Palestine, Jerusalem, which emerged as a major administrative and political centre during the Ottoman period ... Having maintained a special status as a holy city to the world's Jews, Christians and Muslims, Jerusalem which was important to Arabs and Ottomans, became the focus of interest to rivaling Christian missionaries and competing foreign powers, each of which installed their religious, educational and diplomatic institutions in the city.... Naturally, it was Jerusalem that the art of painting thrived and the leading pioneers of Palestinian art all happened to be natives and residents of Jerusalem.' Palestinian Art, 42.

78 - Kamal Boullata thoroughly discusses the influence of foreign power in his seminal study on Palestinian Art in Palestinian Art From 1850 to the Present. London, New York, Beirut, Saqi Books, 2009.

79 - Ibid., 27.

80 - The UN Security Council Resolution 478 declared soon after that the annexation was 'null and void' and 'must be rescinded'. It also called upon member states to withdraw their diplomatic missions from Jerusalem. The resolution 'Affirms that the enactment of the 'basic law' by Israel constitutes a violation of international law and does not affect the continued application of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, in the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since June 1967, including Jerusalem.' United Nations, "Security Council Resolutions – 1980," <http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1980/scres80.htm>, accessed Sept. 27, 2009.

81 - The Wall's total length will be 723 kilometers, of which 409 have already been erected. Jerusalem's share stands so far at 78.5 Kilometers. B'TSELEM, "Separation Barrier," [http://www.btselem.org/english/Separation\\_BARRIER/Statistics.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/Separation_BARRIER/Statistics.asp), accessed Sept. 27, 2009.



Figure 7. The eight-meter Separation Wall built by Israel cuts the heart of East Jerusalem. Photo: Steve Sabella 2006.



Figure 8. The Separation Wall zigzags around neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, and separates Palestinians from other Palestinians. This has restricted the mobility of Palestinians to move in their own city and prevents West Bank Palestinians from reaching Jerusalem. Photo: Steve Sabella 2006.

(with the United States abstaining Resolution 480), Western powers have always been careful not to upset this unification indirectly. This may explain why Ramallah has been emerging as a cultural centre for Palestinian art and as a base for NGOs and cultural institutions. The share in foreign funding that Ramallah city receives exceeds the amount allocated to Jerusalem. The building of the six million dollar Ramallah Cultural Palace, which was funded by the government of Japan, and the opening of the multi-million dollar International Academy of Arts through a grant by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are two clear examples of Ramallah's funding status.

The Ramallah centre has been described as a place,<sup>82</sup> institutional centre,<sup>83</sup> a drug,<sup>84</sup> and a bubble, among others. It functions as a centre and Sherwell asserts that it has international dimensions, especially because Palestinian artists from the Diaspora engage with the city and world curators see Ramallah as an address. 'Ramallah is diverse, many people can identify with it and they feel comfortable in it'.<sup>85</sup> Opposing the idea of Ramallah as a centre of art, Darwish, disqualifies it completely: 'Ramallah does not have the components of a centre which are freedom of internal and external movement, access, and plurality of thought. In brief, a ghetto can never be a centre.'<sup>86</sup> Rawan Sharaf, director of the Palestinian Art Court gallery in Jerusalem adds, 'I cannot say Ramallah is a centre, I have many reservations regarding the art seen in Ramallah.... Those who present themselves as artists and intellectuals live isolated from their society... It is a bubble. We need to go down on earth.'<sup>87</sup> And earth is an occupied Palestine, a fragmented land into hundreds of cantons, checkpoints and restrictions of movement in and out.<sup>88</sup>

Given that Palestine is fragmented, can a centre exist on its land? Perhaps it is necessary to highlight briefly other regional centres that embraced Arab and Palestinian art. As Boullata explains, Cairo served for 150 years as a cultural centre for the Arab World until the Egyptian

82 - Khalil Rabah, Personal Interview, August 28, 2009.

83 - Hafez Omar, Personal Interview.

84 - Monther Jawabreh, Personal Interview.

85 - Tina Sherwell, Personal Interview.

86 - Najwan Darwish comments, 'A village that has huge density population does not it make a city?'

87 - Rawan Sharaf, Personal Interview, August 22, 2009.

88 - The younger generation of artists is led to believe in this central system as is evident in the case when the young artist Shuruq Harb was asked where she thought the Palestinian art centre was, she answered 'Ramallah', and when asked about the city that assumes the second place, she also answered, 'Ramallah'. Shuruq Harb, Personal Interview.

Revolution.<sup>89</sup> However, after the revolution in 1952 Arabs needed a new refuge and it seems they found it in 'Beirut's brand of openness ... the ideal environment for becoming a microcosm of the Arab World, embracing all its distinctions and contradictions.'<sup>90</sup> Beirut, whose political system sought to represent seventeen religious denominations, had commercial art galleries and an art market. With the establishment in 1952 of the first museum of contemporary art, the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum, galleries 'sprang up around the capital to display the freshest work of the city's artists as well work from all over the Arab world and even Europe and the United States.' Artists included Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Georges Mathieu and John Ferren. Foreign cultural missions or commercial galleries sponsored the exhibitions.<sup>91</sup> It was the capital of Arab modernity from 1952 till 1982 when Israel occupied it and naturally put an end to the thriving art economy and culture.

Furthermore, due to the civil war in Lebanon (1975 – 1990) and the subsequent wars with Israel, Beirut lost its centrality. As Boullata asserts, this led to the dispersal of the Palestinian artists who once found refuge there, and he continues to write, 'The cultural centre that nourished the first generation of Palestinian refugee artists was no more. Without any cultural centre to bring artists together, Palestinian art developed along different paths. Palestinian art had to grub its survival under new and different skies.'<sup>92</sup> The period that Boullata refers to was 1982, a time from which Palestinian artists continued to create wherever they were based in the world. Is it possible that in 2005, the UAE with its economic power and openness to the world started to become the new 'sky' for Palestinian art? At the beginning of the millennium the UAE was not on the art map, yet in just a few years it managed to prove itself as an art centre and an emerging art market that is capable of attracting substantive art investors.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, the UAE is necessary to this research because it is replacing the traditional Arab art

89 - For a century and a half preceding the Egyptian Revolution, Cairo had been the cultural capital of the Arab World. There, Western concepts of modernity were eclectically borrowed, refashioned and diffused to fit a nationalized framework. In what was called the renaissance (al-Nahda) of Arab Cultural identity by contrast with its European counterpart. The rebirth of the national Self was reinforced by the negation of the Western Other.' Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art, p.125

90 - Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art, p.125

91 - Ibid., 124 – 127.

92 - Ibid., 158.

93 - These investors no more consider art that is created in the Middle East to be 'junk', but rather have started to give it the label of being cutting edge. The art in question might not have changed in the last decade, but there are factors that allowed for this alteration in the perception of 'value' as discussed in the beginning of section 3.

centres, Cairo and Beirut, which Arab artists flocked to for critical recognition and economic success. Hence, all those interviewed were asked whether they could find in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) a centre for Palestinian art that could bring together Palestinians globally.

Accordingly, the UAE centre has been described as a phase that will wind down 94 as just another mall 95 and also as a universal centre. 96 The UAE is quite geographically close to Palestine and, ironically, it is easier for Palestinian artists from the West Bank and Gaza Strip to reach the Emirates than to reach Jerusalem! 97 However, even though the UAE seems geographically closer, many people note that it lacks the unique intellectual scene, pluralism and culture that Beirut thrived on. The Gulf has developed, according to the opinion of many, an artificial culture in which the oldest building might be only forty years old. 98 This is a striking contrast to Beirut, which has a long and rich cultural history. But, do we need this kind of mental connection for art to prosper from an economic perspective? 99 People do not, as yet, attribute much culture to the UAE; it remains a sudden thing and only time will tell if the system has been constructed with a long-term sustainable vision. Furthermore, the UAE has the art infrastructure but have they developed the human resources to crown the art Renaissance? Not many artists choose to live there in comparison to Beirut where artists and intellectuals flock from all over the Arab World. 100

Many wanted to believe that Jerusalem is the centre, but agreed that under the political conditions 'it is impossible' 101 or that a 'miracle is needed' 102 to make it as such. As for the Ramallah centre, it is in fact

94 - Vera Tamari, Personal Interview.

95 - Rawan Sharaf, Personal Interview.

96 - Sliman Mansour, Personal Interview.

97 - Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip require special permissions to enter Jerusalem. There is no geographical continuity between Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel controls all entrances to the city by militarized checkpoints.

98 - This remark on the oldest building in Dubai was made by Samar Martha in a personal interview, August 19, 2009

99 - When asked whether the UAE could be the centre for Palestinian art, Persekian replied: 'This is what I am trying to achieve. I am trying to convince the UAE to adopt this project. I try to find resources, create interest there with those concerned, to grant to Palestinians special privileges and initiate fully funded projects and curatorial shows....' As Khalil Rabah puts it, 'The UAE will play an important role. The way it is going, it appears so, but whether I like it or not, that is a different story.' Just like artists who seek the international centres of New York and London for recognition, Arab artists could find in the UAE opportunities of success, especially because the art scene in the UAE requires Arab art to thrive on. However, a major difference between these opposite geographic centres is that the value granting mechanisms in New York and London have been functioning and proven for a long time.

100 - Najwan Darwish, Personal Interview.

101 - Rana Bishara, Personal Interview, August 22, 2009.

102 - Jumana Aboud, Personal Interview, August 21, 2009.

suffering from the same political situation as Jerusalem and cannot be viable. It is a centre for a select few and it is geographically isolated. The emerging centre in the Gulf has increased demand for Palestinian art. Some are viewing the UAE as a good thing. It is an economic power, open to the world and is ruled by influential leaders. It seems that having, as Sherwell puts it, mechanisms of representation in the UAE, would best serve the Palestinian artists from the occupied Palestinian land. However, what happens if the centre dissolves? 103 In this case the theory of Kamal Boullata seems to offer the decisive answer to where to establish the centre of Palestinian Art.

### A MOBILE CENTRE ?

Kamal Boullata writes and talks about the idea of the nomadic Palestinian artist. That is, Palestinians should integrate into the societies and systems in which they reside. This way they effectively promote Palestinian culture and art. 104 It seems that the influence of Boullata's idea of the nomadic Palestinian artist is far reaching as the centre takes its centrality through the artists who live everywhere. The Museum of Contemporary Art (CAMP) involves the biennial 'nomadic' movement of its cumulative art collection and 'portable' structure. Every year CAMP will find a temporary 'home' under the auspices of a 'host museum'. This approach has helped construct a unique hybrid identity for Palestinian art. 105 Many Palestinian artists have understood that the artist is the centre, and it seems those who have left the virtual centre in Palestine found in the world a real centre where they can create in its space and more rapidly advance their careers. Hani Zurob, one of the most significant painters of the new generation of Palestinian artists to emerge in the last decade, expresses, 'the best thing that happened to my art was the moment when I arrived in Paris because what I learnt in the last four years might have taken me a lifetime back in Palestine.' 106 As Darwish elucidates, one of the measures of success in anyone's life is how much a person manages to integrate into environments that are foreign to that person. If one wants to be part of the

103 - Viable centres need to depend on their own resources—people. It is feared that once the international demand falters, or the approach of the ruling authorities shifts, the whole emerging art scene would falter as well. As Darwish articulates it, 'A centre is bigger than the will of the individuals.... That is with or without them the centre does not seize to exist.'

104 - Kamal Boullata, Personal Interview, April 27, 2009.

105 - Boullata writes, 'Palestinian visual art which has been characterized by hybrid components, proceeded to grow in a fluid space in which border crossings between different forms of expression has become an intrinsic characteristic.'

106 - Hani Zurob, Personal Interview.

107 - Najwan Darwish, Personal Interview.

world one needs to have the ability to integrate into the world and put aside identity obstacles.<sup>107</sup> This is what Palestinian artists who left Palestine or were forced to leave eventually understood. Those who stayed like Khalil Rabah had to build firm communication channels with art centres abroad. The question is how did they achieve this? Given that Palestinian artists who live in other countries can benefit from the distribution systems that exist in them, the question is; through which mechanisms does Palestinian art get validated in Palestine before it reaches abroad? The next section explores the role of the influential cultural institution and the curator to address the total lack of a primary market in Palestine.<sup>108</sup>

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*Steve Sabella's artworks have recently entered in the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation in the UAE.*

107 - Najwan Darwish, Personal Interview.

108 - It should be clear that this dissertation refers to the Western understanding of a primary market. That is the existence of commercial galleries or dealers.