

Emily Jacir

By *Martina Corgnati*

If the Arabic words, that should have been written right next to their Italian equivalents at each stop of the ferry Line # 1 (Canal Grande), would have been consistently installed as promised, the most part of the occasional or habitual public transport users in Venice would not have understood what was going on. Although during the opening days of the Biennale of Art Venice is mobbed by a great number of insiders, even a lot of different people go around in the city, who would have possibly interpreted the Arabic writings as the sign of extreme good will by the authorities in charge: Welcoming the immigrants, thus anticipating the rest of the Italian municipalities. Very few people indeed, despite the ongoing event, would have recognized the hand of an artist in this project, and even less would have connected it with Palestine and its Pavilion, *Palestine c/o Venice* that was open for the first time at the Venice Biennale, though as a collateral event. On the contrary it would have been seen as a political statement, thou involving political parties, and especially Lega (North league) against Democratic Party, and welcoming immigration policies vs. intolerance, a debate that more and more every day inflames the atmosphere in the Italian public administration offices and rooms. This country, indeed, is just beginning to experience the same events characterized by a great tension and growing violence that took place in the French banlieue some years ago. With this project, Emily Jacir (1970) wanted in fact to emphasize the evidences left by centuries of cultural, technical and architectural exchanges, to be recognized in particular along the Canal Grande; in her opinion the exchanges gave shape to the forms and traditions of the lagoon city. As we read in the explanation text on her installation, distributed at the pavilion *Palestine c/o Venice*: “Forms that migrated from the East are evident in the architecture of Torre dell’Orologio, the campanile of the Basilica of San Pietro Castello, and Ca’ d’Oro, to name a few”.

As a matter of fact, the authority in charge suddenly about-faced, and took back at the very last moment the authorization for the execution of the Arabic writings on the ferry stops, giving birth to an unpleasant case of censorship. We must not forget that a similar action had already been undertaken in Italy, more precisely in Rome, around twenty years ago by the Iraqi artist Ali Assaf; he has been working with no permission at all (he did not ask for a permission to the Roman municipality), and created a constellation of a new toponymy within the area of San Lorenzo, in Arabic. A different era, at a time politics and politic militancy both in Italy and in Europe were very different. On the contrary, Emily Jacir's installation had originally been conceived as a cooperation between the municipal authorities. It should have become “their thing,” but it was impossible. Hence, it will be shown at the artist's personal exhibition at Gallery Alberto Peola in Turin (March 2010), a place specifically devoted to art, where the language of art is well understood by viewers who are both able and free to do this, but where the installation will lose of course much of its *raison d'être*.

Emily Jacir is offering us an excellent opportunity to question the limits, the sense and the space of contemporary public art (that is, art taking place outside of the dedicated and protected areas), in particular with ambiguous artworks (like the hanged puppets that Maurizio Cattelan put on a leafy tree some years ago in Milan) that can be interpreted even in a totally different ways, depending on the sensibility or priorities of the viewer. In Cattelan's case a person got injured (a guy fell off the tree while he was trying to “set the children free”), while Stazione could have well been everything: from a provocation to a pilot scheme.

In Turin we still have the project's maps, statements, pictures, together with a travelator that keeps on moving when somebody gets close to it, reminding us that the



Where We Come From 2001-2003 detail (Munir)
 American passport, 30 texts, 32 c-prints and 1 video
 text (Munir): 9 1/2 x 11 1/2 in / 24 x 29 cm
 photo (Munir): 36 x 27 in / 91.5 x 69 cm
 Copyright: Emily Jacir
 Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin Gallery

theme of obstructed borders and blocked motion is so obsessive in the work of Emily Jacir. Since the days of *Where We Come From* (2001-2003), maybe her most poetical and touching work. It is made of a potentially endless series of journeys, made through a third person, within and outside the borders of Israel and the Territories, where the artist traveled for people who were not allowed to go around and freely cross the borders. The trips were made for personal purposes that could even be the most prosaic ever: Going back to a certain restaurant, meeting a certain person, watering a tree, visiting a cemetery. *Crossing Surda* (2003) is definitely drier. Once again it's about a borderline story, or better a check point story (the one between home and university in Ramallah), a long report made with a hidden portable video camera used as a clandestine eye eluding the prohibition to show things, in reply to a threat she suffered. *Crossing Surda* (a record of going to and from work), exists because an Israeli soldier threatened me and put an M-16 into my temple [Ms. Jacir says she was filming her feet with a video camera at a checkpoint that day]. If I had not had this direct threatening experience this piece would not exist.”

The eye here is invisible, solipsist, lacking reciprocity. More interesting and meaningful than what the video actually shows: Feet, steps, streets, mud, partial vision of moving bodies, is the rhythm inside of it, its internal tempo, the pauses, the waitings, the uncertain steps. The eye is far but physically present, in a sense similar to the claustrophobic and terrified look of the tank driver seen in Lebanon by Samuel Maoz (2009).

For Jacir it's about a personal border, like after all everything in her work is terribly personal. Even somebody else's life: Material for a Film reconstructs analytically the life of Wael Zuaiter to the lowest details; it was awarded with the Golden Lion as the best work of an “under forty” artist at the Venice Biennale in 2007.

Text translated from Italian by Veronica Soldani, Florence 2/2010

Where We Come From
2001-2003
American passport, 30 texts, 32 c-prints and 1 video
installation photo: Hagop Kanledjian
copyright: Emily Jacir
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin Gallery

Where We Come From 2001-2003 detail (Jihad)
American passport, 30 texts, 32 c-prints and 1 video
text (Jihad): 9 1/2 x 11 1/2 in / 24 x 29 cm
photo (Jihad): 10 x 10 in / 25.4 x 25.4 cm
installation photo: Hagop Kanledjian
Copyright: Emily Jacir
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin Gallery

