



Khalil Rabah

United States Of Palestine Airlines,
London Office (2006)

By Rose Issa

In early 2008 at our project space in London, we showed the wonderful and witty installation, “United States of Palestine Airlines, London Office” by the exceptionally talented Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah. We were amazed and delighted by the public’s strong reaction to the work, because this wonderful piece speaks better of the present situation, dreams and aspirations of the Palestinians than any book or film.

The installation includes a large model plane with the fantasy logo, *United States of Palestine Airways* composed of letters from other airlines; a map with haphazardly coloured borders; empty display cabinets; five clocks whose hands are frozen at different times; and a sofa with no client to welcome. We had people banging on our door asking for cheap tickets to Palestine or Gaza, or wondering how we dare represent a country that does not exist! (We are not far from the Israeli Embassy in London and many of its staff probably live nearby.) Even children were delighted to see the model plane, as travel agencies in London no longer have them. We then exhibited *United States of Palestine, London*

Office at the European Parliament in 2008 to coincide with the *Arab Week* summit of European and Arab parliamentary representatives, and later in 2009 in Paris at the Institut du Monde Arab’s major exhibition on Palestinian art. The work was acquired immediately afterwards by a great collector who lives in Zurich.

Another version of the work, *United States of Palestine: Middle East Office* was displayed in Beirut during the *Homeworks* cultural forum. This had the added elements of a bus with the USPA logo to take you to the airport for your non-existent journey.

Rabah works in a variety of media, including installation, video, photography and performance, and his overriding themes are displacement and replacement; presence and absence; context and identity; belonging and isolation; man’s relationship with nature; and human suffering on a global scale. He also enjoys playing with words – not only in USPA but also in *Philistine* (1997), composed of an Oxford dictionary that describes the word Philistine in a very racist way, which



United States of Palestine Airlines, London Office, 2006
Image courtesy of Rose Issa Projects

he has embedded with nails (now in the collection of the British Museum).

Rabah plays with different methods of de-constructing (in the case of USPA, with the logos of other airlines) and intervening conceptually and physically with objects, spaces and ideas to formulate new identities. For those who know a little about the ever-changing reductionist map of Palestine, and the difficulties each Palestinian encounters crossing from one town, village, or even one street to another, the USPA is a poignant reminder, despite its wit, of the physical situation of these 'states'. Similarly, his work in progress, *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* (a title that coincidentally has 48 letters, echoing the drama of 1948), is a conceptual and poetic project full of charm, irony and fascinating ideas, which was recently exhibited at the Liverpool Biennial. In this ever-changing installation, history, memory and fantasy collide in the *Museum's* exhibition displays: it becomes a museum of the absurd, for Palestine has no national museum of its own and is continually neglected by the

world as its infrastructure is torn apart, and its history and culture ignored or denied.

Rabah's humorous touch is something he shares with compatriots such as the award-winning filmmaker Elia Suleiman and photographer Raeda Saadeh. Each of these artists explores themes of despair and resilience with great skill, entrancing stories and, above all, a defiant optimism.

Khalil Rabah was born in 1961 in Jerusalem and now lives and works in Ramallah, Palestine. He received a BA in Fine Arts from the University of Texas in 1991. On his return to Ramallah he worked as an architect and taught architecture at Birzeit University, Palestine and later taught at the Department of Fine Art at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem (1997-2000). He is the co-founder of some of the most interesting cultural projects in Palestine: the Al Ma'mal Foundation in East Jerusalem and the Riwaq Biennale.



