



**Documentation of the Torabyeh graffiti and rap workshops.** Courtesy of the artists and Darat al Funun. © Photo: Ala Younis

## Sentences on the banks and other activities: art activating context

*By: Jessica Winegar*



**Torabyeh performing on the night of the opening.** Courtesy of the artists and Darat al Funun. © Photo: Ala Younis

On a brisk autumn night, the quiet streets of Amman's Jabal Lweibdeh were punctured by the sounds of Sayyed Mekkawy's post-1973 war Arab nationalist hit "Al-Ard Bitkallim `Araby." Remixed to a hip-hop beat, overlaid with rap lyrics that criticize vapid Arab nationalism and push for another collective belonging. Torabyeh, Amman's new underground rap sensation were spinning tunes amongst the Byzantine church ruins on the grounds of Darat al-Funun, the outside wall of which had been sprayed with graffiti for the occasion. Amman's pre-teen hip-hop junkies bobbed their heads alongside Amman's visual art crowd, exhibiting artists from around the world, and various city residents who had taken part in constructing the art works at the Darat or in the previous days' workshops associated with the exhibition. The rich and sometimes jarring connections that rap

artists have always made between genres and issues (always via a strong rootedness in place), and the unexpected conglomeration of people, were very apt for the opening of the new exhibition project called Sentences on the banks and other activities.

Organized by Abdellah Karroum, an independent curator and art researcher based in Morocco, Sentences on the banks is in his words, "an experimental suggestion" for how art works may, in the process of their construction and viewing, connect different spaces and audiences within the city of Amman and beyond, and connect the visual art scene to other fields. It takes inspiration from the unique feature of Amman as a city of several mountains, each associated with particular social groups, the passage between them taking place through the various valleys or through a set of eight linked circles by which many residents mentally



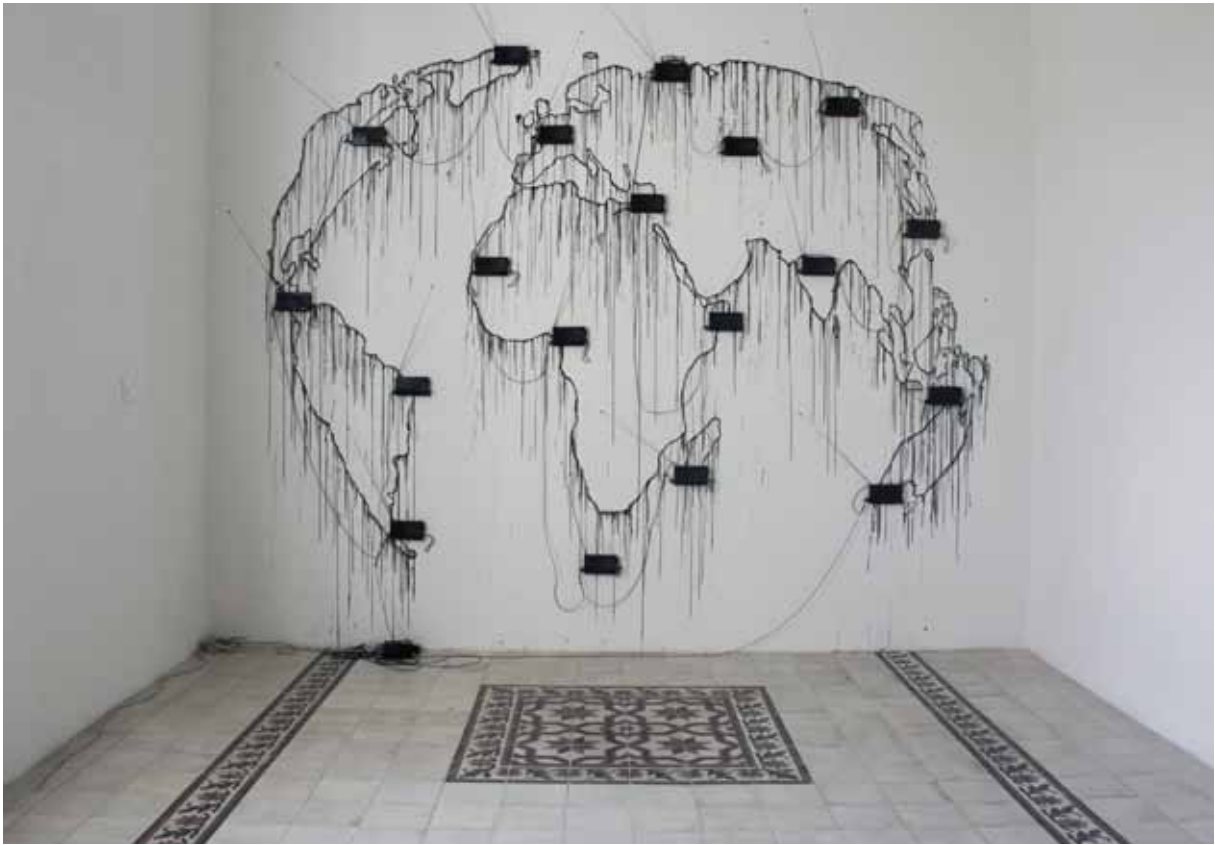
**Raed Ibrahim, 'Where to go?' (detail),** digital prints and map, 42 x 60 cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Darat al Funun. © Photo: Ala Younis

organize the space of the city. While there are means for passage along the banks of the city, and circles in which drivers and passengers from different areas might pass one another, there remain physical and mental divisions that reinforce social ones. Just as Amman is hoped to be a city of passage for the Palestinian and Iraqi exiles, a place of transition before they can return home, it more frequently becomes a city where this future path becomes blocked. Sentences on the banks aims to highlight the possibilities of passage and connection within the urban environment, while also commenting on the durability of divisions.

The project is multi-faceted and ambitious, using a variety of means beyond the typical exhibition format in order to connect different audiences and different kinds of people with a variety of spaces. It features site-specific works, art objects and video pieces at or near Darat al-Funun that comment

in different ways on the Amman-inspired issues of passages and distances, of social relations in specific spaces. Yto Barrada's video work *Beau Geste* documents a radical action to stall the takeover of a social space in which people fill a hole in a tree carved out by a builder who is trying to fell the tree. Younès Rahmoun's site-specific *Safar* (English: travel, journey) documents the process of taking rocks from one place and leaving in their place rocks from another, linking the artist, audiences and the earth itself between Morocco, Syria, and Jordan. Viewers must bend down and move about the room to read the documentation of this process thereby participating in the action of this passage, the picking up of rocks, on a smaller scale. Rocks are given the privilege of circulating throughout the region whereas people frequently are not, but here is a chance to participate in an imaginary journey. Antoni Muntadas' *On Translation: Miedo/Jauf*, a video work combined with prints and wall text, similarly explores the creation of social topography. Video interviews with people living on both sides of the Straits of Gibraltar show that fear of people and life "across the border" work to construct a social border which is also, paradoxically, the locus of dreams of passage. In *Archipelago – A World Map II*, Hamdi Attia also examines the politicized construction of topography that prevents passage but inspires hopes for the same, hopes that were expressed during the actual installation of the piece. Puzzle-like pieces in the shape of each Palestinian "bantustan" created by the divide and conquer border-making policies of the State of Israel are hung on a metal grid, arranged in the image of the map of the world – all on the Darat al-Funun veranda looking westward towards Palestine. As calligrapher Muhammad Abdel Aziz inscribed the original Arabic names of the towns on the map, various early visitors and staff assisted in remembering the names of villages. This "place-making," or attempt to make a place active, links Attia's work to that of Rahmoun and Barrada, as well as to Mohamed El-Baz's *Imagine* installation which sonically connects points on a black dripped-paint world map through audio devices.

The "other activities" of *Sentences on the banks*



**Mohamed El-Baz, IMAGINE, 2010, installation (paint, audio devices, mixed media), 395 x 93 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Darat al Funun. ©Photo: AK**

also work on activating place and creating social connection. These include a conference on art practices and vocabulary at the University of Jordan, a children's opening where kids get to see the installation of the show and speak with artists, a "tour" connecting two mountains in which experts, inhabitants and activists meet to experience their different senses of space together, a set of rap and graffiti workshops rooted in one mountain neighborhood but bringing together youth from all over the city to discuss its problems, an open reading of the visual/literary work "Jumaa al-Qiffari" by Mones Razzaz within different spaces of the city, open studio visits, weekly informal meetings of artists and other intellectuals, and two publications. The first of the publications is a blank book that is distributed to artists and writers all over the world in which to record what they desire (drawings, sentences, ideas, etc.) and the second is an archive of the exhibition

project. Alongside this, a very innovative mapping project led by Raed Ibrahim (Where to Go?) brings together city residents to reflect on their own urban space, the areas that are important to them and the routes they take. Ibrahim then creates maps to document these "unofficial" social maps of the city. Karroum has called this sprawling, accumulative project an "imprecise field for ideas." It is this imprecision, this refusal to create a central narrative for the project, which gives Sentences on the banks its greatest force in creating linkages between different groups of people and different kinds of spaces. In this project, art's agency in society – to act on people and bring them and their ideas together – is not so highly harnessed and choreographed, as is so often the case in typical museum and gallery exhibitions. Rather, all of the participants in Sentences on the banks – from the curator to the artists, from Darat al-Funun staff to the rap and mapping workshop

participants and from the visiting schoolchildren to other audiences – have been allowed to experience the agency of art in all of its messiness. The art has activated place and connections between people and between places. It is in this constantly unfolding, messy and unsettled process of letting art's agency and its interlocutors make (or refuse) connections that the show's spirit can be found.

Symbolic of the unfolding and unfixed nature of the project is the fact that its locus is in a large room at Darat al-Funun where the project is under continuous planning and documentation. On a table in the middle of the room rest various mappings of the city and documents that chart the pre and post-production processes, including some of the first white page books that have been filled by the exhibition's interlocutors. Documentation of the various activities accompanying Sentences on the banks are taped to the walls and post-it noted. On some headphones, one can hear Torabyeh's music whose sampling and word plays remind listeners of the creative potential unleashed by the unexpected connections that an art work, or an exhibition project, creates.

*The project is available for activation at Darat al-Funun (The Khaled Shoman Foundation) and at other locations in Amman from November 13, 2010 until February 28, 2011. Various elements can also be viewed or listened to at [www.radioapartment22.com](http://www.radioapartment22.com) (R22-Amman), produced by Karroum's space in Rabat, Morocco.*

*Jessica Winegar is a professor of anthropology at Northwestern University and the author of Creative*



**Nadia - Kaabi Link - under\_standing\_over\_views, 2009,** collected pieces of chipped layers of paint, black silk threads, metal grid, paper clips & spotlights, Galerie Christian Hosp



**Faouzi Laatiris, Vis-à-vis, 2010, mirror, wood, two parts of 150 x 100 x 2.6 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Darat al Funun. © Photo: Ala Younis**