

Art Territories

In collaboration with

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Looking Back at Today

Since *A Prior* extended an invitation to ArtTerritories last October much has happened in the Arab World. The spirit of this new force rebelling against encrusted regimes largely directed the discussions leading up to this collaborative photographic work which grew out of a week-long artist workshop around family photographs. As a group of six we quickly agreed that the project should express instances in Palestinian family and social history that reflect the sense of hope and anticipation that currently blows through the collective imaginary in the region. Reading and interpreting close to a hundred photographs, it transpired that representations of mobility, connectivity and a curiosity toward diverse cultural experiences were particularly prominent in the sixties and eighties. That's when most of the photographs of family trips to other Arab cities and to overseas destinations were shot. And of course there are many stories of migration and exile crossing through the family albums offering a variety of outside views back onto a homeland that was in constant transformation. Depending on whether a family migrated to Medina in Saudi Arabia or to the American suburbs the photos and memories associated with them convey a radically different vision of Palestine. The diasporic perspectives which proved to be everything but homogenous gave cause for many lively and emotionally charged discussions during the workshop. The result of this process is an extract of the visual world produced by the previous generation and commented on from today's perspective.

When *A Prior* approached us about contributing to the issue on and around the Picasso transfer to the Art Academy Palestine, we were interested in designing a project that would respond to this particular setting while proposing a narrative in its own right. Since Khaled Kourani's intervention is first and foremost an institutional critique, we thought of critically engaging with this cover story on two fronts: on the focus of the oeuvre by one of the most emblematic modern artists, and on the notion of the Art Academy as the legitimate place where the modernist legacy was handed down. Both Pablo Picasso and the Art Academy refer to modernist institutions of art which held up the master narrative of the inspired autonomous artist. In an indirect critique of this model of the artist and the institution that reproduced them, we chose to work with the Ethnographic and Art Museum at Birzeit University (MBU) in the West Bank, which by its name and scope speaks of a different genealogy of Modern Art. The museum combines contemporary art with Ethnography, which in the context of modern surrealism played a constitutive role in defining museum practices in the early 20th century. The Musée de l'Homme in Paris for instance was co-founded by surrealist artists and anthropologists. Their unconventional way of collecting and storytelling hasn't lost any of its inspirational quality. At the time, the boundaries of art and human sciences were far more enmeshed and fluid. These were the soft

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moments before those creative and provocative practices began to solidify into the more regimented disciplines as practiced today. What attracted us about the scope of this small Palestinian museum as being both ethnographic and artistic is the systemic relationship between contemporary art and ethnography as two visual domains which share a number of assumptions: they both take culture (not high-art) as the expanded field of reference and they are contextual, interdisciplinary and self-critical. What distinguishes art is that it can introduce non-academic ways of producing knowledge, which includes a reflection on the desire and attitude behind this form of knowledge. It is this sort of reflection that ArtTerritories as a publishing project engages in.

So one critical decision was to choose this particular institutional reference. The other one was to invite into the project a small number of diverse visual practitioners operating outside the academy walls and to form a collaborative workshop setting. Besides the ArtTerritories team Shuruq Harb and Ursula Biemann, both visual artists and writers, the group includes Ramallah based Inass Yasin, artist and curator of the Birzeit University Museum, Ruanne Abou-Rahme & Basel Abass, an artist duo mainly working in video and sound installation, and film maker Nahed Awwad. We gathered that a collaborative mode of producing a photo-text stretch of twenty something pages would surely set a counterpoint to the modernist notion of the artist as creative and predictably male genius. Rather than creating new images we chose to elaborate on the meaning and circulation of already existing ones. The aim was to raise awareness for the cultural value of pictures which constitute the visual world of people in Palestine but are largely kept under closure, for private viewing only. We sensed a great potential in sharing this common cultural knowledge and made it our aim to work the family photographs into a loose narrative that would communicate their meaning in the personal as well as the wider social context of the Palestinian experience.

It has been tempting to think of starting a more formal archive with the wealth of these images before us. However, we can consider the family album as a kind of archive as well, but one that isn't categorized. We ended up not classifying the images in historical or geographic terms in view of storing them in some central place. They remain unclassified but rearranged memories. As a result, neither the workshop nor this photo project has a title. Instead we activated the archive temporarily by the very act of artists coming together and reflecting on the individual and collective dimension of Palestinian history through their parents' stories and visual traces. Indeed, the workshop turned into a rare opportunity to contemplate our understanding of Palestinian history.

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Ursula Biemann and Shuruq Harb



The sea, an open horizon,
you have been waiting
for this moment of rupture
(Beirut, 1964–1980).



There is no turning back from here
(Syria, 1967).



"We don't have to be afraid anymore,
there is no more fear, we are free, we are liberated"
(Habib Bourguiba Avenue, Tunis, 2011).





Looking straight at the camera
it's almost as though you are anticipating
what will happen here twenty-two years later
(Habib Bourguiba Avenue, Tunis, 1989).



We can feel it now, the moment of change is on the horizon,
it's only a matter of time (Basra, 1965).







It was not my decision to marry (Chicago, Illinois 1963).



It was my decision to stay (Bir Nabala, Jerusalem 2011).



After the divorce...



... I realised that I had lived my life through my children.



Class of 2000 (Birzeit University, Ramallah).





Jerusalem Airport, 1963.

By the time we landed, we would find the traditional Kaik still warm,
brought straight from the old city of Jerusalem.
We would sit on the stairs in front of the transit hall.
After we finished someone would suggest to fly to Beirut
and we just did. Oh God, these were the best days.

I flew from Beirut to Jerusalem twice a day and took many tourists, families and businessmen back and forth. Sometimes I made a stopover in Jerusalem. I even used to have a house there.



From inside the watchtower
(Jerusalem Airport, 1964).



My brother is studying at the American University in Beirut. When he comes to visit, he gives us a call and informs us as to the day and hour of his arrival. Then we go up to our rooftop and watch the plane as it is landing on the runway. Before he even comes out of the plane, we run down the street to meet him.





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Riding the donkeys, running after chickens and goats, these were the only ways to await freedom (El-Madina, El-Monawara, 1980).



No one ever explained to us why we went to Palestine in the summers, and why aunt Itaf and uncle Foud could not go to Lebanon and went to Austria instead.

"I warned you," she said smiling,
when I fell off the bike on the bumpy road.



Asira, 1978.



Asira, 1986.

The moment we stepped on the plane
we all felt relieved to leave
our indoor life in Madina.