

# How to Organize a Biennial In Occupied Territory

The Qalandiya International is in its fourth iteration and offers a bounty of solutions for curators working outside centers of power and wealth.

by [Hakim Bishara](#) October 29, 2018



Hans Haacke, "We all are the people" (2013–2017) (all photos courtesy *The Qalandiya International* unless otherwise noted)

JERUSALEM — There were times, particularly during the 1970s and '80s, when solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation was in vogue among people who wanted to call themselves leftists. Back then, wearing the black and white Palestinian keffiyeh, made stylish by

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, was a fashionable sign of revolutionary zest. That trend started to peter out with the signing of the now defunct Oslo Accords peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993. International solidarity with the Palestinians has since dimmed and gone out of fashion. "Solidarity," or whatever is left of it, is the theme for the fourth edition of *The Qalandiya International*, the burgeoning Palestinian art biennial that kicked off earlier this month in East Jerusalem and Ramallah.

Without a contiguous state to host the events in one location, the biennial spreads across East Jerusalem, Ramallah, and in "collateral" events in other cities in Palestine and around the world, including [New York](#). Challenged by scarce resources and political obstacles, nine local art institutions, including the new Palestinian Museum, put together a month-long program with the participation of tens of local and international artists.



Audiences engaging with the project "Jaffa Gate and Mamila" by Jack Persekian at the Lutheran School, *Jerusalem Show IX* (photo by Issa Freij)

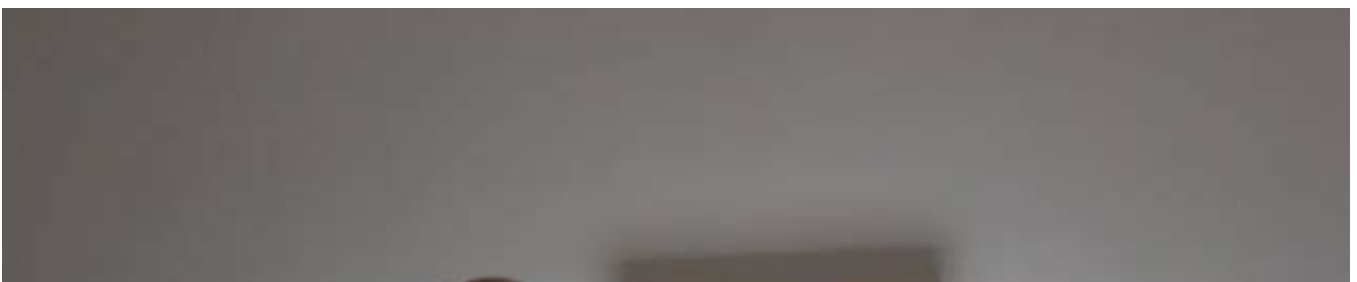
The Qalandiya International grew out of the annual [Jerusalem Show](#) at Al Ma'mal Foundation in East Jerusalem in 2012. *The Jerusalem Show*, which now runs as part of the biennial, marks its tenth anniversary this year with "Jerusalem Actual & Possible," curated by Al Ma'mal founder and director Jack Persekian and Beirut-based art historian Kirsten Scheid. In a change of course, the current show yields all its materials from the city of Jerusalem, driven by a desire to do away with passive white-cube spectatorship.

"Instead of using the city to show art, we are using art to show the city," says Persekian in a conversation with Hyperallergic. One such activity is a tour through the Old City of Jerusalem with the *Palestine Hosting Society*, formed by artists and professional cooks Suzanne Matar and Mirna Bamieh. In a two-month residency at Al Ma'mal, the duo researched the politics and economics of the old city through its residents' food practices. The tour consists of 21 stations—restaurants, cafes, and bakeries—that tell the story of the city, its conflicts, and transformations, including hidden gems like a 200-year-old stone-pressing Tahini factory. In another work, artist Johny Andonia studies stone-cutters in the Jerusalem area by collecting from dump sites discarded stones deemed imperfect by the artisans. Finding beauty in those imperfections, Andonia presents a series of paintings that probe the inner lines and veins of the stones that cause breakage. Another venue features a collection of nineteenth century Armenian studio photographs of families and dignitaries from the city. Armenian photographers are known to have pioneered the field in Palestine during the Ottoman period. The photographs are drawn from the collection of Joseph Malikian, an artist who studies the rise of Armenian photographers in Jerusalem and explores the history of the city through their work.



Nisa Ari, "In Jerusalem there was never any renaissance" (2018), installation commissioned by Al Ma'mal for the Jerusalem Show (photo by Issa Freij)

A better probe into the history of the city through photography comes from Al Ma'mal's Persekian, who joins the tradition of his Arminian ancestors with two new photographic exhibitions: [100 Years](#) at the Goethe Institute in Ramallah and Jaffa Gate, and *Mamilla* at the Lutheran School in the Old City of Jerusalem. In both, Persekian juxtaposes century-old archival photos of the city with new photos he's taken of the same locations, replicating the angle and light of the original photos. Viewers are invited to use light-boxes to layer slides of the new photos over the old ones, or vice-versa, to reveal the layers of history of this ancient city.



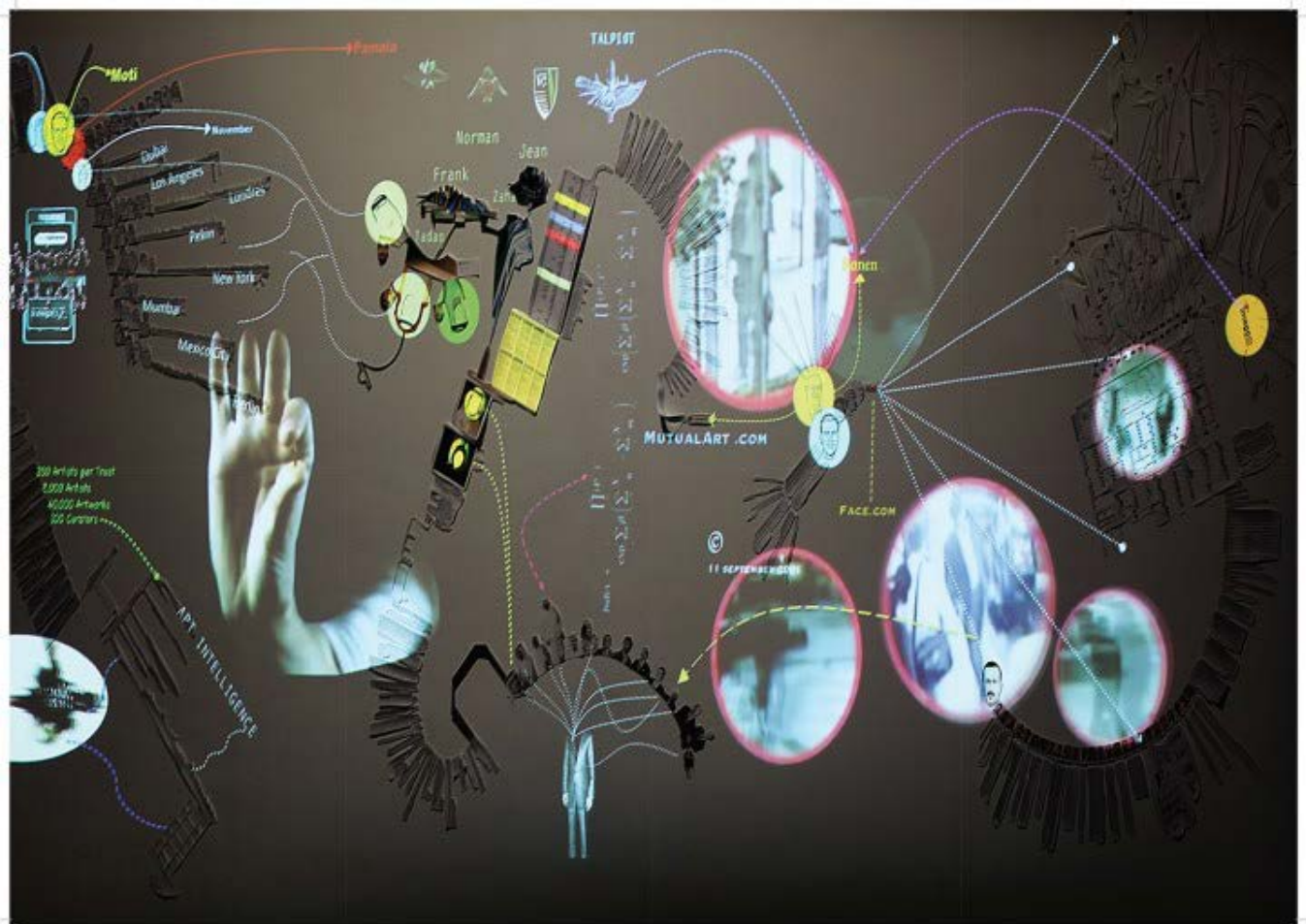




Jaffa Gate and Mamila installation by Jack Persekian at the Lutheran School commissioned by Al Mamal for the *Jerusalem Show IX* (photo by Issa Freij)

The main challenge in mounting this series of shows, reports Persekian,

was his foundation's scarcity of means. "We stretched ourselves thin," he says. Operating with shoe-string budgets, he adds, sometimes left no money for framing. The same kind of budgetary constraints led curators Yazan Khalil and Reem Shadid from Al Sakakini Center in Ramallah to come up with inventive solutions for their exhibition *Debt*, which investigates forms of solidarity, or lack thereof, in the art market. In one instance, Walid Raad's massive installation "[Walkthrough, Part I](#)" (2014–2018) is transformed into giveaway posters, through a collaboration with the artist. One side of the poster features a diagram following the money trail of the Dubai-based Artist Pension Trust, and the other shows his [text](#) about the project.



Walid Raad, "Walkthrough Part I" (2013–2018), *Debt* exhibition

Another extensive work, Jill Magid's "[The Proposal](#)" (2016), is represented by a wall print of an interview with the artist (in English and

Arabic) that was extracted from her publication [Critical Spatial Practice](#). "We would have never had the money to borrow this work," says Khalili, "so instead of displaying it, we offer a representation of its existence."



Omnia Sabry, "Elements From A Sterile Room" (2018), *Debt* exhibition

Another major hindrance, Khalili explains, is shipping artworks to Ramallah in the West Bank, a city enclaved behind Israel's security walls and military checkpoints. With the difficulties mounted against normal art shipping, many works had to be made or printed on site. Others had to change hands between friends and colleagues from several countries in order to arrive in Palestine. Egyptian artist Omnia Sabry's "Elements From a Sterile Room" (2018), a photographic series and a book accompanied by recorded audio conversations she conducted with artists and art practitioners in Egypt, arrived in Ramallah through a friend in Cairo, who met a friend in Jordan, who met another in Ramallah, tells Khalili.





Walid Raad, "Walkthrough Part I" (2013–2018), Pablo Helguera, "Artoons" (2009–2018), installation view in the Debt exhibition

The trials of actually getting the artworks into the show are referenced in the biennial's name, which is taken from the village and refugee camp Qalandiya near Ramallah, where Israel operates its largest military checkpoint in the West Bank. *Qalandiya Checkpoint* is the main valve through which Israel controls the movement of Palestinians from the West Bank into Israel. Qalandiya is also the site of the closed Jerusalem airport, which was supposed to be the future Palestinian State's gateway to the world under the provisions of the Oslo Accords. The biennial attempts to symbolically substitute the checkpoint and the closed airport as Palestine's point of contact with the world. In reality, the checkpoint doesn't only hamper art shipping, but also significantly limits the access of visitors to the biennial from other Palestinian areas. Artists from the besieged Gaza Strip participate in the biennial's talks and discussions through Skype. "Palestine exists mainly on Skype," says Khalili with a wry



smile.



Audiences engaging with the project "Jaffa Gate and Mamila" by Jack Persekian at the Lutheran School, *Jerusalem Show IX* (photo by Issa Freij)

Feeling abandoned by the world, especially in light of the Trump administration's [relocation of the American Embassy](#) to Jerusalem and its defunding of the [UN program for Palestinian refugees](#) (UNRWA), Palestinians look inside to find a new definition for solidarity. The way things stand, they have no one else to lean on but themselves, and they have no better tool of resistance than art. Given these crippling circumstances, the notion of *solidarity* that reverberates through the biennial differs greatly from what the term represented to Palestinians in the 1970s and '80s. "We wanted to de-romanticize the notion of solidarity, and bring it down to reality on the ground," says Khalili. A series of discussions between local artists and art practitioners that he orchestrated as part of the biennial posed the question: what does solidarity stand for in the Palestinian context today? The answers

proposed steer away from popular slogans, instead focusing on practical support mechanisms for Palestinians artists, like health care and legal representation.

[The Qalandiya International](#) runs through October 30. The exhibition *Debt* will remain on view at [Khalili Al Sakakini Cultural Center](#) (P.O. Box 1887, Khalikl Sakakini Street, Al Masyoun, Ramallah) through November 23 and is curated by Reem Shadid and Yazan Khalili; *Jerusalem: Actual and Possible* at *Al Ma'amal Foundation in Jerusalem* (8 Al Jawalida Street in the Old City of Jerusalem) is curated by Jack Persekian and Kirsten Scheid. Other venues of The Qalandiya International include: *Interlude* at *Al Hoash Gallery in Jerusalem*, curated by Ahed Izhiman; *Exhibition Toward Hope* at *Elitqa and Shababek galleries in Gaza*, curated by Shareef Sarhan and Raed Issa; *Labor of Love* at the *Palestinian Museum in Birzeit*, curated by Rachel Dedman; *Lydda – A Garden Disremembered* at *Birzeit University Museum*, curated by: Abd Alrahman Shabaneh, Amer Shomali, Iyad Issa, Vera Tamari, Yazid Anani, Ziad Haj Ali.

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