

## Anthony Downey (ed.): *Dissonant Archives. Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*

I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, London/New York 2015

by Miriam Rosen

Making one's way through *Dissonant Archives* is strangely reminiscent of archival research, with all of the sometimes contradictory efforts—open-mindedness, critical analysis, intuition, and selectivity, not to mention determination, patience, and an occasional dose of luck—that such an endeavour requires. Indeed, this hefty compendium devoted to “contemporary visual culture and contested narratives in the Middle East” brings together scholarly research, journalistic investigations, essays, project reports, conference papers, and several unclassifiable thought-pieces, plus two groups of “artists inserts”. Many but not all of these contributions come from *Ibraaz* (“revealing” or “bringing into view” in Arabic), an online research and publication platform initiated in 2011 under the auspices of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation. Four years on, it has now become an impressive multimedia archive of writings, interviews, and artists' projects addressing a wide range of cultural issues in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond.

The idea of the book, explains Anthony Downey, editor of both *Ibraaz* and *Dissonant Archives*, “was for readers to dip in and out where they saw fit”. Along the same lines, his lengthy introduction (available on [www.ibraaz.org](http://www.ibraaz.org)) remains largely descriptive, although equipped with abundant references for those in search of context before beginning to dip. It might be argued nonetheless that the myriad of documents proposed essentially reflect three generic types of activities, which take specific forms in response to different regional and local imperatives (and this, as art historian Sussan Babaie reminds readers in her essay on “The Global in the

Local: Implicating Iran in Art and History”, in a region with a millennial tradition of archives): rereading the archives, re-archiving the archives, and reinventing the archives. To single out just a few of the most stimulating examples, the first group could include art historian Rona Sela's “alternative history” of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drawn from a rereading of Israel's national photo archives (on [www.ibraaz.org](http://www.ibraaz.org)) and historian Lucie Ryzova's incisive analysis of the uses and misuses of Egypt's photographic heritage. Or, in a more personal approach, sociologist Mariam Motamedi Fraser's essay recounts the chance discovery of an Iranian archive at the Bodleian Library and the political intrigues—past and present—surrounding the unpublished manuscript it contained (on [www.ibraaz.org](http://www.ibraaz.org)).

Amongst the “re-archivings”, writer Guy Mannes-Abbott's fluidly wide-ranging essay “This is Tomorrow” (written for *Dissonant Archives*) explores artist Emily Jacir's “ex libris” project (2010–12), a haunting portrait-like series of cell-phone photos showing books looted from Palestinian homes, libraries, and universities in 1948, and transferred as “abandoned property” to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. In a very different vein, the artist-critic duo Media Farzin and Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck offer an unconventional flashback to the Cold War era with “Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm” (2009–11), a painstakingly re-edited version of transcribed interviews and screen shots from a 1950s US talk show on foreign affairs (originally published in *ARTMargins*, online at [www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)), just as writer Joshua Craze's “Excerpts from a Grammar of Redaction” tries to “patch meanings out of absences” in the censored pages of CIA documents on the post-9/11 detention of suspected enemy combatants (see [www.joshuacraze.com](http://www.joshuacraze.com) for the complete project).

As for the “reinventions”, the transnational Public Access Digital Media Archive (Pad.ma) provides an ambitious programmatic framework (and an homage to Walter Benjamin) with its “10 Theses on the Archive” (on [pad.ma/texts](http://pad.ma/texts)), which finds an echo in the equally ambitious practice of Palestinian artists Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas, aimed, as they say, at “re-imagining the possibilities of the present”. Here, their “Incidental Insurgents: The Part about the Bandits” (2012–13), with its storyboard stream of images and texts, weaves in and out of time and space on the traces of the eternally contemporary figure of the rebel (on [www.ibraaz.org](http://www.ibraaz.org)).

Overall, the wide range of perspectives, topics, and artists covered in *Dissonant Archives* makes questions of specific choices quite secondary. But one glaring absence cannot be overlooked: the history and memory of the Armenian genocide, which has given rise to many forms of archive-based initiatives. In Istanbul, for example, artist-researcher Tayfun Serttas's “Foto Galatasaray” project (2011–12) has restored, digitised, and “revisualised” the complete professional archive of Armenian studio photographer Maryam Şahinyan (1911–1996) as the first part of a larger “Open Archive” initiative aimed at exploring relationships between archives, democracy, and transparency (see <http://tayfunserttas.com>; on works by artists from the Armenian diaspora, notably Mekhitar Garabedian and Aikaterini Gegisian, [www.armenity.net](http://www.armenity.net)).



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*Dissonant Archives. Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East.*  
Ed. by Anthony Downey.

With contributions by Nick Denes, Mariam Ghani, Tom Holert, Kamel Lazaar, Guy Mannes-Abbot, Rona Sela, Laila Shereen Sakr a.o. (eng.).

With works by Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas, John Akomfrah, Gulf Labor, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Adelita Husni-Bey, Maryam Jafri, Naeem Mohaiemen a.o.  
I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, London / New York 2015.

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This “oversight” is clearly unintentional in political or artistic terms—but it is, to my mind, symptomatic of a larger oversight concerning the difference between the spontaneity of an online platform and the more considered approach of an edited book. If, as Downey indicates in his introduction, the *Ibraaz* publication series is seen as a means of reaching new audiences, it is also a guarantee of material permanence—to paraphrase master archiver Walid Raad, let's be honest, websites disappear. But reading, writing, looking, and listening are not the same on- and offline. The multimedia prowess of the Web does not necessarily “translate” onto paper, but the slower, more concentrated pace of the book offers other advantages for publishers and readers alike.

In the “translation” from *Ibraaz*, *Dissonant Archives* has missed out on several major opportunities. The texts, first of all, could have benefited from a good edit, not only to correct typographical errors but also to smooth out excess academic jargon. But a more serious “translation” problem, especially for an anthology devoted to “visual culture”, is the handling of visual material. The book is a case study in failed design, where many of the in-text images are token illustrations reproduced in (washed-out) black

and white from another century. Similarly, with just a few exceptions like “The Incidental Insurgents”, the “artists’ inserts” are patchworks to patchworks of more or less relevant photos, film stills, and installation shots.

The latest wave of “archive fever” has in fact given rise to some remarkable publications, such as Uriel Orlow’s *Unmade Film* (Edition Fink, 2014), the book-catalogue *Images of Conviction* (Éditions Xavier Barral, 2015), and David Company’s *a Handful of Dust* (MACK, 2015). This is not to say that an anthology like *Dissonant Archives* has to rival such “bookworks” (Orlow’s term), but it should at least function visually. Just as artists and writers have appropriated archival research techniques, researchers in visual culture would do well to learn from the design strategies and production techniques of their “objects” of study. This is also tomorrow.

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### Simone Donati: Hotel Imagine

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TerraProject, Florenz/Rom 2015

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von Gisliind Nabakowski

Erstmals die Wahlen gewonnen hatte Silvio Berlusconi am 27. März 1994. Immer noch Premierminister, formierte er im März 2009 Il Popolo della Libertà, eine Partei, die die Forza Italia und die Ex-Faschisten der Alleanza Nazionale vereinte. Das war der Moment, als sich ihm und seinen Fans der Fotograf Simone Donati für den *L’Espresso* an die Fersen heftete. Berlusconi hatte Erfolg damit, Italien undemokratische Gesetze aufzuzwingen. Gern hätte er noch die Verfassung geändert. Gestoppt wurde der Oligarch erst in langwierigen, zähen Kämpfen, zuletzt durch juristische Eliten. Der überwiegende Teil der ItalienerInnen informierte sich derweil über das Fernsehen, das unter seiner Kontrolle stand.

Es wundert daher nicht, dass – trotz steter Gesetzesbrüche und Skandale – populistische Gepflogenheiten (Berlusconismus) in den Massen weiter blühen. Wie die Korrespondentin der Wochenzeitung *DIE ZEIT* Birgit Schönau schrieb, versuchte der Medientycoon sich die gesamte TV-Infrastruktur zu sichern: »Er hält das Quasimonopol für Kataloge der großen Museen und Ausstellungen, außerdem gehört ihm auch ein großer Schulbuchverlag«, wie die u. a. auf Kunst spezialisierte Mailänder Mondadori Electa-Verlagsgruppe mit ihrer gewaltigen Marktkonzentration. Anfang Oktober kam es erneut zu einem Megadeal: Mondadori erwarb für 127,5 Mio. Euro noch seinen schärfsten Konkurrenten, den Rcs Libri-Konzern (acht Verlage umfassend). Es entstand der neue Riese »Mondazzoli«. Berlusconi besitzt damit 40 % der Ver-

lagsanteile der in Italien und im Netz verkauften Bücher und 25 % im Schulbuchsektor.<sup>2</sup>

Simone Donati gab sein Fotobuch *Hotel Imagine* im Eigenverlag heraus. Neben dem Projekt, den Cavaliere zu fotografieren, der genussvoll und gerissen den Nimbus des Popstars nach Nostalgie und Absolution ausschachtet, verfolgte der Fotograf aus Florenz auch den Plan, eine dem Heiligen Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo gewidmete Bewegung abzulichten. Beim Auswerten tausender Fotografien entdeckte er frappierende Übereinstimmungen im Habitus der wundergläubigen Fangemeinden. Das formidable Buch *Hotel Imagine* spürt mit 48 Fotos den Effekten dieses politischen Verhaltens nach. Sein Titel zitiert den Namen einer Art Pilgerherberge in Apulien, deren Front mit dem Großfoto des Padre dekoriert ist. Die Fotografien über Manifestationen der Gläubigkeit in Italien bebildern eine Auswahl von Massenevents, die, obgleich die Beteiligten zwischen 2009 und 2015 in fraktionierten ökonomischen Verhältnissen lebten, doch durch ihre spezifischen Idolatrien und durch ihr hedonistisches Verhalten zu Vergleichen anregen.

Alles in allem dokumentiert Simone Donatis Buch nun Riten des kollektiven Behaviorismus: religiösen Massenwahn um Madonnen-Erscheinungen, Mussolini-Feiern in dessen Geburts- und Sterbeort Predappio, immer wieder Musik-events, einen Striptease am Vorabend des Mondoriale-Wettkampfs, Devotionalien, die gelackte Jeunesse dorée, durch Chirurgen geförderte Schönheitswettbewerbe, Wahlveranstaltungen und viele politische Manifestationen. Das Buch zeigt daneben ein Foto des mit Bildern von romanischen Kirchen geschönten Ambientes im Sender Rai Due (Rom), wo ein handverlesenes, chices Jungpublikum dem Programm für Familien applaudiert.

Simone Donatis, wie er selbst sagt, »grotesker« Buch zeigt assoziative Momentaufnahmen über den »totalen Glauben« in Berlusconi. Seite um Seite legt es Mechanismen von Realitätsfluchten frei. Man erfährt sehr viel über hysterische und politische Erregungen. Man blättert durch mediatisierte, teilweise exhibitionistische Auftritte, die zuletzt – mal mehr, mal weniger direkt – wie profanierte Massenturgien wirken. Der Bucheinband ist in Analogie zur Hotelbibel



Doppelseite aus: Simone Donati, *Hotel Imagine*, 2015, S. 56–57.

blau mit Goldlettern. Ein kitschiges Lesezeichen, ein schmales Ripsband, welches verschmizt die drei italienischen Nationalfarben wiederholt, ist eingearbeitet.

Auf die 48 Fotografien folgen dieselben im Kleinformat. Gleich daneben listen jeweils nur kurze Textzeilen die Versammlungsorte und Termine auf, was die bildliche Abfolge präzisiert und sehr gut lesbar macht. Ein Essay von Daniele Rielli und Kommentare aus Blogs sind eingestreut – wie »Silvio, erlöse uns von dem Bösen, Amen«. Es ist ein hinter sinniges Buch über ein breites Spektrum der in den italienischen Alltag eingesickerten Reality-Shows. Man wünscht ihm, dessen Fotografien Erkenntnisse auf den Weg bringen, sehr viel Beachtung. Denn die Kompilierung der Fotografien zeigt ein Denken im Sinn der Kritischen Theorie.

- 1 Birgit Schönau, »Ballett der Oligarchen«, in: *DIE ZEIT* Nr. 10/2015, 5. März 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/2015/10/silvio-berlusconi-buchmarkt-italien>. [Stand: 14. 9. 2015]
- 2 Alessandro Gazoia, »La fusione tra Mondadori e Rcs riguarda tutti noi«, 10. März 2015, in: *Internazionale*, <http://www.internazionale.it/opinione/alessandro-gazoia/2015/03/10/fusione-mondadori-rizzoli-rcs-libri> [Stand: 10. 10. 2015]. Vincenzo Vita, »Mondadori – Rcs Libri, questo matrimonio non s’ha da fare«, 7. 10. 2015, in: [www.articolo21.org](http://www.articolo21.org), <http://www.articolo21.org/2015/10/mondadori-rcs-libriquesto-matrimonio-non-sha-da-fare/>. [Stand: 10. 10. 2015]



Simone Donati: *Hotel Imagine*.

Mit einem Text von Daniele Rielli (ita./eng.).

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### Spectres of Yugoslavia

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#### Dragana Jurišić: YU: The Lost Country

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Oonagh Young Gallery, Dublin 2015

by Vesna Vuković

Let us start by stating a common but decisive argument: any given artwork is always informed by the time in which it is made. So, for the artwork to be reflective of its own time, the author has to recognise her own historical situatedness, or the historicalness of her own speech as informed by its time. For the artworks that address historical topics, this should be twice as true.