Platform 009

Performativity and Public Space

Interventions as Performative Gestures for Political Engagement in Jordan

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Series of photographs taken undercover during a trip out of Amman in October 2010 in an attempt to capture the protagonists on board the RJ flight, but was not successful. At the time it was a simple digital camera, not so easy to disguise.
Courtesy of Samah Hijawi

The scene opens at a gate where passengers are slowly and impatiently getting ready to board their Royal Jordanian flight. The crowd is a mix of people, mainly families with loud crying children and excess hand luggage. It is absolute chaos until everyone is finally seated. Inside the plane bored air stewards try their best with a welcoming smile, their overly done makeup bordering on a drag queen aesthetic. The protagonists are two mustached men sitting in the front and the back rows of the plane wearing badly tailored suits, white socks and black shoes. Slouched to one side in their seat, one leg crossed over the other, they indiscreetly check every passenger over, as they curl away at the ends of their mustaches. These are part of the notorious Jordanian state security apparatus, Al Mukhabarat.[1] For a brief moment in time, the faithful servants of the Kingdom were clean-shaven as they followed in the footsteps of their current King – an appearance that may have slightly aided in camouflaging their real personas despite their hideous trademark outfits. Nevertheless, that look quickly went out of fashion and the solemn mustache was firmly brought back, maintaining the stature of seriousness and machismo to complement the famous Jordanian frown and humourlessness. The performativity of Jordan's state security apparatus is not so different to other highly controlled police states in their blatancy and lack of grace, but this particular setting onboard all Royal Jordanian flights stands out distinctly for its ridiculousness. Still, the mechanisms and feeling that 'big brother is watching you' is in fact quite effective in regulating both the private and public space and helps impose a self-policing system by the inhabitants themselves.

This is a speculative piece in which I will try to unpack the relationship between artists' works in public spaces as performative gestures of active participation and critical citizenship – engagements with state security mechanisms of monitor and control. In fact social practice, interventions in public space, or other similar actions by artists in the city were most noticeable between 2007 and 2011, but decreased in numbers in the years to follow.[2] The frequency of these interventions would depend on the number of artists whose practice lends itself to working outside the gallery walls. But it is more the relationship of artists with their works as mediums for critical reflection and engagement that lies at the heart of this text, which will factor in questions around active citizenship and participation as an important part of this equation. The ideas put forward here connect the role of police-state strategies in creating an effective system of surveillance with the particular social fabric of Jordan and the political history of the region. I will cite some works by practitioners as examples of performative gestures for claiming the public space as a site for critical and political engagement and how the intelligence units react to them over the years, starting with an intervention that happened in the late 1980s until recent events in 2012.

In 1988, the artist Samia Zaru was driving through the residential area of Al-Shmeissani in Amman when she came across a building in the process of being demolished. The site

immediately inspired her and became a location for a new series of works that she was in the process of developing. On that same day, she located the owners of the property, convinced them to hold off the demolition process for one month, and grant her access for an artistic intervention. The work was a multi-media installation entitled Tents and Stones (1988), composed of sculptures, sound, and 13 mixed-media canvases five by four meters each made from UNRWA refugee tents, installed in the half-demolished building. The intervention attracted a lot of attention from people, the press, and residents from the neighbourhood. Groups of school children were brought to interact with the piece, and use it as a setting to stage school theatre works. Tents and Stones reflected on the repercussions of the First Intifada that was taking place in neighbouring Palestine. The popular uprising had begun that same year and brought with it both successful strategies for resistance against the Israeli occupation and the devastating production of refugees as a result of the hostilities, which Samia herself had witnessed during her trips from Amman to Ramallah, her birth town in Palestine.

According to a Skype interview with Samia Zaru, one person frequented the location throughout the duration of the intervention, a post assigned by Al Mukhabarat to monitor the activities on site. Although he was instructed to be on location only every other day, according to a conversation with Samia, he enjoyed the dynamics of the site so much that he was present everyday and no action was deemed necessary to stop or remove the intervention. Initially intended as a two-week project, the intervention continued for a whole month, and was visited by people working in humanitarian organizations, who offered Samia the opportunity to tour the project in North America.

In 1988 when Samia Zaru produced her intervention, Amman was a quiet sleepy town that closed shop by 8pm. In the short years to follow waves of refugees continued to flood in from neighbouring countries, most prominently from Iraq starting in 1990 following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and later the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then Syrian refugees fleeing the hostilities that began in 2011 started to arrive. Reaching as far back as the turn of the century – cyclic waves of refugees relocating from Palestine across the river to Jordan – the influx of large amounts of people has resulted in systematic quantum leaps in the country's population, bringing with it sudden changes in demographics, the social fabric and economic conditions. Cities became over-populated, putting pressure on the country's infrastructure, increasing the demand for basic goods and services as well as housing, which in turn caused a sore in prices and competition for work.

In order for the Jordanian monarchy and government to maintain its branding as the neutral safe haven in a turbulent region, the country's army and state security forces have increasingly become the most important entity in country. The militarization of the country distinctly shifted

following the events of Black September in 1970, a six month 'civil war' between the Jordanian army and Palestinian militia of El-Fedayeen fighters, which threatened the stronghold of the monarchy in the then-recently formed, 20-year old kingdom.[3] Since then the government has geared a lot of its energy and expenditure towards strengthening its police-state systems in order to maintain hegemony.

Shawahed, photographs of the installation and protests on 9 January 2009.
Courtesy of Laith Majali, Jordan.

In January 2009, Firas Al-Taybeh along with some of his university colleagues created a (offline) crowd funding campaign to support their intervention planned for a series of empty plots of land in the residential district of Al Rabieh in Amman. The group of art students wanted to recreate a cemetery in reaction to the massacres happening in Gaza by the occupational forces of Israel. They choose their first location near Kalouti mosque, a landmark meeting point for protests and marches in the western side of Amman. The mosque is also located in close proximity to the heavily guarded Israeli embassy making it an ideal site for the gathering of protestors walking in the direction of the embassy. The mosque had already attracted a group of people who had set up tent a few days earlier – protesting the same injustice – who were threatened eviction by the police. The group of young artists chose to start creating the cemetery in a large field beside the tents. This action seemingly deterred the police from their mission, and the site became an even more prominent landmark. The following Friday a very large march was organized starting from the Kalouti Mosque heading towards the Israeli embassy. The march was quickly hijacked by the police, army and Gendarmerie forces ending violently with tear gas, arrests, as well as the destruction of the intervention. Not wanting to be deterred by this episode, the artists reproduced a larger number of tombstones and went back to the site to re-install, but were immediately stopped by the police and Mukhabarat.[4]

Both interventions were directly reacting to events in Palestine, but each got a different reaction from the state security apparatuses, which begs the question of the parameters in which politically performative gestures in the public space are seemingly acceptable, and which of these are deemed a threat. I will breakdown and contextualize this relationship by going back to the brief historical trajectory of Jordan's arts and cultural scene, touching on its private and public sectors as well as the political conditions in which artists have been producing over the

last decades since the 1960s when their activity began to build some momentum.

It's important to mention that culture is defined in the National Charter of Jordan within the parameters of heritage, Islamic tradition, and the Arabic language[5], and until the 1970s there was no independent Ministry of Culture to endorse creative productions. Cultural activity mostly took place in universities that had the facilities of theatres and exhibitions halls in which they programmed a variety of events. This continued until 1970 when the Ministry of Culture and Youth was formed.[6]

The year 1970 marked the events of Black September, after which government policies became geared towards safeguarding the monarchy's power, sidelining the power of Palestinian-Jordanians in government, and reducing their political clout in Jordan by exiling the headquarters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which relocated to Beirut. This also came with an increase in funds and function of the army and state security apparatuses. Alongside this, the public sectors' activities focused on archaic propaganda strategies to celebrate the monarchy, alongside the country's historical sites, as a visual tool to aide the maintenance of power and control. This phenomenon of visually complementing the police state with images of the monarch and family in every public and private enterprise has increased drastically since 2005.

In parallel, the region was going through a highly politicized period: the short-lived project of the Arab Unity Republic from 1958 until 1961; the formation of the PLO in 1964 with its headquarter in Jordan; the Arab defeat against the occupying Israeli army during the Six-Day War of 1967; and the events of Black September in 1970 are all prominent historical events during that time. Artists working during this period were organizing themselves to engage collectively with other artists and activists around the world against imperialism. Palestine was a central topic for many practitioners becoming the legitimate alibi for their working against foreign control of the region.

A second factor in the infrastructure of the arts that contributes to our understanding of its dynamics is the space created for alternative forms of cultural production that became possible when independent platforms began to appear in the beginning of the 1990s. These supported and even encouraged new media experimentation, and also offered exposure to contemporary practices by artists from around the world through exhibitions, talks and residency programmes. This enabled emerging artists to work beyond the framework of classical media in production. Simultaneously, the beginning of the 1990s is linked with a new wave of refugees, this time coming from Iraq, whose artists came to live and work in Jordan bringing with them a new aesthetic of quasi-abstraction. Along with this came an increase in galleries targeting a growing commercial demand specifically for Iraqi art. Local artists followed the wave. This can be read

as the moment in which politically driven art fizzles out (for a good 10 years), until the regional circuits for artistic production and dissemination created chances for production and display through contemporary practices that were more critically engaged.

The timeline of artistic development is frequently intercepted with political events that disrupt the momentum and introduce a new set of parameters for artistic production – responding to external factors and regional dynamics versus an internal development of thought, or what we could broadly refer to as a national identity. The latter is obviously lacking in Jordan, especially when compared to its neighbouring counterparts – admittedly, this little nook of the Levant is the back yard of vibrant regional civilizations.[7] Coupled with a social fabric pieced together from a minority of local Jordanian tribes and families[8], and refugees from the region whose sense of belonging and, in turn, citizenship participation are compromised by temporality and transience. This social condition of temporariness creates a disconnect between the inhabitants (including the artistic communities) and their milieu, breeding a general apathy and reluctance towards political engagement. Together these factors contribute to how artistic developments need to be read, as a fragmented trajectory in which little time or cultural tradition allow for a deepened or layered development.

For artists working in the 1970s their engagement was two-fold. On the one hand, they contributed to setting up an infrastructure for cultural education and presentation. On the other, their work engaged in political and activist circuits regionally and internationally. My theory is that in time, as the political milieu of the 1970s and 1980s changed, artists came to rely on government funding and work opportunities available in the public sector. Together these factors played a part in pacifying political production as regional activist circuits changed or disappeared and were replaced with an infrastructure that bred dependency on (very little) public money at the price of censorship. In addition to this the introduction of Iraqi aesthetics of abstraction by the 1990s set a path for what Ahmad Zatari refers to as an 'aesthetic luxury'[9] in reference to artistic production that does not address pertinent social or political issues. This sentiment is an insight into the dissatisfaction of the active cultural producers working in Amman today, who are critical of disengaged practices. In the same conversation, Zatari also expresses his dissatisfaction with the conceptualization of ideas towards political subject matters, citing Palestine as an example. He explains that the occupation of Palestine has been stylized and idolized to the extent that 'Palestine has become a mere image on TV...what is important is to strip away the sacred halo around it' and work with the subject with different critical approaches. [10] The naiveté or superficiality in addressing complex historical and political subjects may be attributed to both a disrupted social and political history, disenfranchised citizenship, and high state security apparatuses that enforce self censorship within the population.

In 2007, and as part of the Meeting Points 5 locally curated programme[11], Maha Abu Ayyash was invited to propose a work in the public space. Her initial proposal was to play on the Arabic colloquial word, yitbarwaz يتبروز meaning picture frame, coming from the noun birwaz برواز from which the derivative colloquial verb means the act of posing (for a photograph). This verb also has a double meaning, referring to the posture assumed by people who strive for positions in government for the benefits the position offers and not for the service of the people.[12] Maha was proposing an interactive work in the public space for a photographic setting, as a way to investigate the appropriation of the concept of yitbarwaz. The project was not realized as the artist decided that the subject was too sensitive and not worth the risk of possible trouble with the authorities.

Left: Aysha El Shamaylah performing in Makan art space (not on the rooftop in this image). Right: Mohammad El Baz's poetry installed on one of the buildings in downtown Amman.

Courtesy of Darat Al Funun, The Khalid Shoman Foundation. Part of exhibition Sentences on the Banks and Other Activities curated by Abdulla Karroum for Darat Al Funun.

In 2012, Aysha El Shamayleh, a spoken word poet performed from a rooftop to an audience in the street a poem that begins 'Tell your governments, the only kingdom my generation will bow to is the one between our temples, for it is the most compassionate authority we have ever known'.[13] A powerful sentence of direct criticism that went by unnoticed. In contrast, a poem by artist Mohammad El Baz was installed on a 14-story building in downtown Amman as part of the project Sentences on the Banks and Other Activities[14] caught the attention of Al Mukhabarat and prompted them to make an inquiry on the perceived political insinuations of some of its verses which read 'let us imagine that the rivers are burning at a distance', indicating a potential threat – perhaps a hidden message for the public on the revolutions happening in the region?

Granted, one work was a live temporary performance in English, and the other is a fixed Arabic text (from 2011 until today) on the entire face of a building in the heart of the city, which gave more time for Al Mukhabarat to react. What has also changed for these two works, in

comparison to those made earlier by Sami Zaru and Firas Al Taybeh, are the changes that followed the uprisings in the region, which brought with it higher security laws and an omnipresence of intelligence personnel to keep the public in check that has been on the rise ever since 2011. It is precisely the fact that particular strategies can in fact avoid attention that makes these performative gestures possible. Nevertheless, the policy of the Jordanian government to disenfranchise its poly-ethnic inhabitants, even those with full citizenship rights, is a successful strategy to eliminate the possibility of building a critical mass of intellectual dissidents who would otherwise actively participate in claiming their rights whether in the public space or otherwise. This can be reflected onto artistic gestures in the public space – a territory highly infiltrated with state security, military, and police personnel. In the end this space is not for the citizens, but little effort is made to try and reclaim it.

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1 Dairat al-Mukhabarat al-Ammah, the intelligence agency in Jordan, is notoriously known for its extensive activity in Jordan and throughout the Middle East, as well as its cooperation with American, British, and Israeli intelligence. Through a complex spying system, it plays a central role in preserving stability in Jordan and monitoring seditious activity; see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Intelligence_Directorate_(Jordan).

2 Several events, commissions and festivals staged artistic works in public spaces in Amman and a few other cities, most consistently by Makan Art Space. These include Meeting Points Festival's Unclassified, a local programme of works in public spaces and several residencies where artists presented works in the city and in Shatana International Artists workshop, which took place from 2007–2009. There was also Darat Al Funun's 'Sentences on the Banks and Other Activities' in 2011, curated by Abdullah Karoum which looked at works in public spaces. The National Gallery of Fine Arts Jordan also conducted a sculpture workshop for consecutive years starting in 2007 in which works produced were installed in various places throughout the city.

3 Joseph A. Massad, Colonial Effects: The Making of a National Identity in Jordan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

4 See: http://aramram.com/episode/537.

5 Hanan Hajj Ali, ed., Cultural Policies in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia: An Introduction (Brussels and Amsterdam: Al Mawred Al Thaqafy, European Cultural Foundation and Boekmanstudies, 2009).

6 See: http://www.allinjordan.com/index.php?
cGc9TWluaXN0cmllcZjdXN0b21lcj1NaW5pc3RyeSBvZiBDdWx0dXJl.

7 The most prominent of which are the northern city of Jerash, an ancient Greco-Roman city from founded in 2000 BC, and the southern city of Petra, an ancient Nabatean city established around 300 BC.

8 Jordan's residents have come from different tribes and cities in the entire region, Palestine, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

9 ''An al-tawat' al-'ammal al-thaqaffiyin fi madina miskeena: hadith bayna ra'id Ibrahim wa Ahmad al-Zaatari,' The Spring Sessions website, 4 December 2014,
http://thespringsessions.com/2014/12/04/عن-تواطؤ-العمّال-الثقافيين-في-مدينة-مس/.

10 Ibid.

11 Unclassified, a programme curated by Makan art Space part of Meeting Points 5, 2007.

12 Ministers in Jordan are assigned their posts by the Prime Minister, who in turn is assigned by Royal decree.

13 Aysha Shamayleh, Manifesto of Youth, 2012.

14 See: http://appartement22.com/IMG/pdf/SentencesActivities_Journal_01.pdf.

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Samah Hijawi lives and works in Amman, Jordan. She graduated in 2005 with a Masters in Fine Arts from Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design, London. Hijawi is a cross-disciplinary visual artist whose recent work has focused on interventions in public spaces with projects that include participatory and performative elements. Hijawi explores the issue of identity through the historical, political, social and religious structures and questions definitions of collective identity, memory and the notion of a 'sense of belonging'. Hijawi is also an active arts writer, lecturer and cultural producer.