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Learning Alongside

Notes from 'Turning our Tongues: Audio Journals from Dheisheh Refugee Camp'

Rozalinda Borcila

In the Spring of 2006, the 6+ collective began developing 'Turning our Tongues', a project that would involve eighteen young women aged sixteen to eighteen from the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Palestine. Writing about work that is in progress, with unforeseeable developments over the next year or so, can run counter to the open-ended practice the collective is striving for. But it may be productive to reflect midstream on some of the tensions emerging within the specific conditions of this project – and which, to my mind, have larger implications for the possibilities and limitations of art in relation to activism. Because the 6+ collective values divergent and even dissenting positions, this text reflects both a shared perspective on the project, developed in consultation with the other members, as well as questions that emerge solely from my own commitments and anxieties.

GROUP WORK

6+ is a self-organised group of women artists currently living in different parts of the US. Some of us have been individually troubled by past experiences with projects intended to address exclusion and disempowerment, but which became instead patronising 'dialogues' on unequal terms. Most had personal or artistic connections with Palestine – either through family ties or through participation in a range of anti-war, anti-occupation cultural/activist projects. All had (more or less successful) experiences working or living collectively. 6+ begins its life as an attempt to develop a different ethics of artistic cooperation, with a return to Palestine an already imagined commitment.

From the beginning, the group subscribes to the principle of uncertainty, to a practice of not knowing. There is constant struggle with the notion of difference, understood initially as a certain opacity or strangeness expected of each other. We carry this expectation into collaborations that extend beyond the group of six. Tensions emerge

when the desire to cultivate intuition and trust mistakenly presumes familiarity or shared experiential/cultural backgrounds.

A collective imagination develops, reaching for a poetic, aesthetic and political practice leveraged against patriarchy and hierarchy. We understand feminism from different generational, cultural and historical positions. We understand collectivity as a life thing, not merely a cultural thing, as implicated in the material conditions and struggles of women's daily lives.

As a group, 6+ tends towards an emphasis on the '6': Sama Alshaibi, Wendy Babcox, Rozalinda Borcila, Mary Rachel Fanning, Yana Payusova and Sherry Wiggins. As a *project* it has more to do with the 'plus', suggesting the leveraging of individual positions and privileges towards broader cooperations. As a larger collectivity of women begins to form, a number of tensions surface. A tiered structure of 'primary' and 'secondary' co-participants threatens to emerge, based on who has what to bring to the table – and although the group struggles for 'inclusive and equal cooperations' within conditions of asymmetry, this may yet prove impossible without bringing the table into question.

'SECRETS'

By autumn 2005, the group was exploring ways to support the production, circulation and public exhibition of new work in collaboration with Palestinian women artists. During our repeated self-funded visits to the West Bank, the International Center of Bethlehem and the Sakakini Center in Ramallah offered invaluable guidance. They were part of a defiant network of cultural producers in the West Bank, operating under conditions of almost incessant siege: by then eight months of international sanctions, daily bombings in Gaza, political posturing for control between Hamas and Fatah, the increase in checkpoints and restrictions on the movement of people and goods decimating the economy, increasing raids by the Israeli military within Ramallah and Bethlehem, a sharp rise in petty crime in the West Bank. We developed a project entitled 'Secrets', which brought together the artists of 6+ and eight Palestinian women artists: Rula Halawani, Rana Bishara, Reem Bader, Faten Nastas, Nathalie Handal, Nadira Araj, Larissa Sansour and Shuruq Harb.

Over the following year and a half, 'Secrets' evolved as a range of activities, manifested in different locations – Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jerusalem, the Birzeit Virtual Gallery, Boston, Boulder, Chicago, New York. It unfolded as a series of exhibitions and social exchanges, a platform, network and publication, among a range of co-participants and publics. An extensive network of friends and institutions formed to facilitate the project. This included securing passage into the West Bank for the foreign artists during the war with Lebanon and immediately after, as many foreign passport holders were expelled or denied entry into Israel. The US-based artists, in turn, became a mini-network of couriers, exploiting their status under Israeli Law to travel within the West Bank and between Palestinian and Israeli territories, meeting artists, transporting artworks.

The group's involvement with Dheisheh refugee camp began within this framework.

RIGHTS OF RETURN

We fight in different ways. Some write in the newspaper, some are teachers, or youth activists... People are busy in jail, they read books, they discuss and share experiences, some people choose to fight this way. Colonialism [means] to make new land; this is colonialism, everywhere in the world. What is your way to fight?¹

Refugees in internal exile played a key role in instigating and sustaining the *intifada* against Israeli colonialist rule. Refugee camps were turned into battlegrounds in the repression of the first *intifada*; the exhaustion of fighters, and the beginnings of the peace negotiations, led to a gradual demobilisation of camp youth.

In 1995, beginning in Balata and Dheisheh camps, the Popular Committees that had been the primary form of self-organisation during the first *intifada* re-emerged with a new structure and set of priorities. Feeling betrayed by the ‘peace process’, and anticipating that negotiations would not address their concerns, refugee Popular Committees worked as an alternative to an increasingly inept and corrupt Palestinian leadership, organising around two major goals: improving living conditions in the camps and affirming refugee rights of return as integral to the struggle for liberation. The Committees have been working with increasing urgency since the 1998 cuts in the UNRWA² budgets dramatically reduced the services provided to refugee camps, paving the way for possible forced resettlement schemes.

The tensions between the refugee struggle for rights of return and PNA efforts at state building continue today. Refugee aspirations are sometimes seen, even within Palestine, as a major block to any ‘peace settlement’. The Rights of Return movement has become the primary form of refugee political remobilisation – and now includes coordination between Popular Committees in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and activist groups of externally displaced Palestinians around the world.³

1 Naji Owdah. All quotes from Naji and Suhair Owdah used in this text are from interviews recorded by Sherry Wiggins.

2 Annual budget reports of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine are published online at <http://www.un.org/unrwa/>

3 BADIL annual reports are also published online at <http://www.badil.org>; the Principles of Unity are published on the website of the North American Coalition for Rights of Return at <http://www.al-awda.org/>

4 Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003, p 43

DHEISHEH CAMP

Politics is the family at breakfast. Who is there and who is absent and why. Who misses whom when the coffee is poured into the waiting cups.⁴

Dheisheh, situated just outside Bethlehem, was established in 1948 as a temporary living solution for 3000 refugees forcefully displaced from forty-six villages west of Jerusalem and Hebron. Each family was allotted one twelve-foot-square tent, which became a twelve-foot-square concrete room, and is now a 12' × 12' three- or four-storey concrete structure. Sixty years later, 11,000 people live in an area of less than half a square kilometre, straining an always incomplete infrastructure.

Before the siege of 2002, around 3000 camp men worked in Israel, dependent on low-pay day labouring primarily in the construction industry. With the building of the 365-kilometre-long ‘security’ wall, Israel has annexed forty-six percent of land in occupied Palestine and further expanded its settlements within the West Bank. An extensive infrastructure

ensures territorial continuity between colonies, while dividing the Palestinian lands in the West Bank into unconnected cantons. This violent re-inscription of borders has further decimated the economy of the region, leading to widespread poverty and soaring unemployment, estimated in Dheisheh to be at seventy percent in the summer of 2006. Malnutrition and hunger, especially among children, are a serious issue for the first time since the 2002 siege. The search for food and the continued danger posed by ongoing nocturnal incursions of the Israeli military on the camp are forcing young men to leave Dheisheh for the first time in its history.

The Dheisheh Popular Committee leadership is primarily comprised of Communist and Popular Front activists, who locally facilitate dozens of micro-economy projects and education initiatives, and maintain pressure upon municipal and local government authorities. They are also key figures in the international movement, articulating their position firmly within an anti-colonial politics.

In February 2006 Sama Alshaibi and Sherry Wiggins met Naji Owdah, one of the coordinators of the Dheisheh Popular Committee, and his wife Suhair, a women's organiser and counsellor. The Owdah family generously shared their time, home, food and family history, introduced the artists of 6+ to the camp and its complex forms of self-organisation, and described many examples of ongoing projects with regional and foreign partners.⁵ A deep friendship developed, and discussions began about possibilities for working together. With great tact and sensitivity, Naji Owdah also established the exigencies of possible cooperation. Between

5 Numerous educational, creative and microeconomy projects are also organised through the IBDAA center, including a dance troupe, guesthouse, childcare facilities and an active women's committee.



View of Dheisheh Refugee Camp at night, 2006, photo: 6+ collective

February and December 2006, the group conducted four visits to Dheisheh, each time represented through a rotating subset of members.

*'If I forget them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself.'*⁶

In September 2006, the group was asked to work with young women aged sixteen to eighteen, whose creative and imaginative capacities are often suppressed as they take on overwhelming obligations within traditional patriarchal family structures, and who often do not have the opportunity to interact and develop relationships with women outside the camp. The desire was to cultivate the strength and vision of young women, considered by our hosts as crucially important for renewing the capacities of the community as a whole. I am particularly drawn to the ways in which the Owdahs speak about education, seeming to confront directly the contradictions of liberal education models under conditions of occupation. In my subsequent discussions and emails with Naji and Suhair Owdah, as well as other friends in Bethlehem and Beit Jala,⁷ we began to share a wariness of liberal assumptions – in particular the expectations of emancipation and upward social mobility through (Western) education. In a liberal-colonial project that assumes either elimination or education as the only form of engagement, I am acutely aware that education functions as both a means of empowerment and a site of oppression.

AL FENEIQ

*Women also join in the fighting. [A local woman] has three sons in prison for life, her husband is dead, they demolished her house twice. She is strong, she is laughing.*⁸

Situated at the highest point of Dheisheh camp is the Al Feneiq (the Phoenix) cultural centre. Three times bombed by the Israeli Army in 2002–2003, and three times rebuilt, it is the dream project of the Popular Committee, an impressive three-storey construction built through camp remittances and local labour. My first memory of Al Feneiq is the garden, astonishing and green. Painstakingly maintained in spite of extreme water shortages, it is a vehicle for stories of the lush and fertile Palestine of the past, stories told to those who cannot remember the land before it was robbed of its water. But the garden is also an expression of a remaking of the world. Suhair Owdah describes the garden as a delirious vision provoked by thirst, a kind of laughter-lunacy that I learn to recognise as a specific form of resistance.

On a clear day, the old villages are visible from the top of the building. Young people who were born inside the camp learn the histories of their villages as their own, and memorise the lay of the land. Spatial/narrative practices are at the heart of the Al Feneiq summer camps, as children map the physical and social geography of villages that no longer exist and lands they can see only from afar, onto the space of the building. Al Feneiq is a poetic restaging of mobility and captivity, of past and future.

6 Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, Seal Press, Seattle, 1989

7 Especially Waddad Handal and the Mikahel family.

8 Suhair Owdah, op cit

They speak of politics as ‘facts’. As though no one had explained to them the difference between ‘facts’ and that ‘reality’ which includes all the emotions of people and their positions. And which includes also triangular time (the past of moments, their present and their future).⁹

The Committee has long been working with pedagogy, understanding ‘experience’ – which grounds self-knowing – as constituted within struggle politics, within a web of social relations that extends through and beyond the ‘big family’. Naji Owdah tells the story of a picnic in 2002, in which his entire extended family crosses into Israel illegally to rendezvous in the old village. The grandmother, aged eighty-one when displaced, is the only surviving family member for whom this village has ever been a material reality. For the rest of the family, the village has been a projection, an immaterial but powerful space of individual and collective identification – the origin, in absolute coordinates, relative to which all other spaces and positions are organised. Naji admits his own fatigue from a lifetime of rehearsing rituals of belonging and continuity that grow more distant, as triangular space/time unravels into untethered instances, actions, locations. The picnic is a turning point in his life, releasing the past into the future: ‘They have destroyed the villages, but I saw the stones, I saw the places, I saw the well for the water, the press for the olive oil. Nobody can take these things from my mind. I had stopped fighting – but after that, I continue!’

WORKSHOPS

6+ are introduced to a group of eighteen young women, aged sixteen to eighteen, who have been recruited by the Committee for a series of workshops in the Al Feneiq: Haneen Abu Aiash, Rawan Aisa, Roá Alaiasa, Eman Alsaied Ahmad, Fatma Arfa, Alà Azzeh, Majd Faraj, Rofaida Fraj, Tamara Hamada, Baraá Owdah, Haneen Owdah, Lama Owdah, Maram Mizher, Rita Ramadan, Safà Salem, Zahra Salem, Shatha Salameh and Aahlam Zwahra. It is through Naji Owdah that the artists receive permission from the families to begin working with the girls during Ramadan. On a subsequent visit I meet some of the parents, who continue to be supportive of their involvement with the project.

The strategy is to create a project in small and, it is hoped, feasible stages, each concrete in some way, yet without a predetermined outcome.

⁹ Mourid Barghouti, *op cit*, p 43



Workshop participants work together, 2006, photo: 6+ collective

We understand we are working within conditions of extreme uncertainty. The group approaches the situation in a fairly traditional way – making small objects, telling stories, small-group exercises, physical play. There is space created for daily meetings to reflect on and respond to the process and to modify (in certain instances, completely revamp) the approach at each stage. We are looking to build upon and between small instances, and to work within the Al Feneiq project as a physical space, an institution, a set of political ideals and a kind of pedagogy.

1 *Books*. Though isolated from even the neighbouring Bethlehem community, and struggling to maintain connections with the world outside the camp walls, Dheisheh residents speak of a chronic lack of solitude, privacy, silence, especially for young girls who are often confined to overcrowded living quarters, tending to domestic duties for long hours of the day. Our first workshop in bookmaking is an introduction to simple collage and bookbinding techniques. Girls help each other make journals, a small but concrete space for private reflection, doodling and so forth. We share our own journals, are embarrassed. There is much laughter and mischief. We are hopeful this experience is the beginning of a relationship between each participant and her own book.

2 *Writing/Translation*. Initial journal entries are largely formal texts that are not exceedingly intimate – eloquently narrated family stories, events from camp life, folkloric poems or songs, or formal declarations of love to unnamed (and quite abstract) boys. The multiple translations at this stage – from Arabic to English to Arabic, from shared to private to shared narratives – generate multiple possibilities for transformation. We focus on identifying and expressively unfolding one small moment in each story – working with verbal and non-verbal means of emphasising, editing, compression.

3 *Recordings*. Each story is then converted into a 60-second oral recording. The problem of compression, and of moving from written to oral Arabic, opens up the narratives to new interpretive possibilities. I notice the girls begin to listen to each other more intently – to hear, perhaps, different nuances and interpretations emerging within familiar stories. The recordings offer the exhilarating, strange, embarrassing sound of a voice that is, and is not, one's own. We are surprised by, and somewhat under-prepared for, the girls' exuberance and intensity.

4 *Spaces, Materials, Sounds*. Using digital recorders, we work in small groups to generate, record, and listen to ambient sounds. Objects are manipulated and the acoustic possibilities of the space are explored. The Al Feneiq library and computer centre – empty rooms awaiting books, computers and the people to use them – are full of sound, of specific material and physical information, of expressive potential. We also work on the balcony and in the garden, inside the bathroom and on the stairwell.

5 *Choreographies – Sixty Seconds*. Each participant identifies small moments in the story that can be paired up with particular sounds. She can also utilise the bodies of her collaborators, directing and choreographing a series of actions that produce desired sounds. In repeated 'rehearsals'

the girls act upon each other and the built environment, reviewing their recordings to understand the possibilities of the 'instrument'. We begin to pay closer attention to the specific materiality of the building, and the material qualities of sound as vibration. But the sound-space emerges also from relative qualities (relationships between sounds, relative distance or speed, transitions from one location to another) and from the subjective ways in which sound/text become internalised. Each participant produces a sixty-second recording, an ensemble performance recorded in 'one take', combining the use of spoken and sound elements.

6 *The Web*. We try to establish email 'circles', inviting the girls to continue their recordings, and to email us their sound files. We would then upload them to a website, hoping this structure can allow us to continue working together in the long breaks between our visits. However, email communication is nearly impossible to sustain. Over the next two visits we learn that the girls continue to work with their journals, but not with the recorder. Haneen Owdah tells us the journals are full, and the girls have been teaching their younger siblings and cousins how to make small books of their own. In conversations with their mothers, the girls insist the books are private and cannot be shared – at the same time they insistently ask for this stage of the project to end, after only one more sound workshop during which to record the most recent journal entries and put them online.

GOING GLOBAL

*They will exercise the compassion of the victor over the loser.*¹⁰

The workshops have only just begun to explore the expressive potential of sound, which we had planned to incorporate into a larger digital/spatial project extending to locations throughout the camp. We are, however, moving away from what was a rather fashionable mapping project and returning to more sustainable and, we hope, useful forms of making. The next stages of the workshops will continue the journaling; they may involve different visual narrative forms, possibly exhibiting the work inside the camp. We are also invigorated by the girls' desire to teach others what they have learned and are concerned with finding processes that can be productively sustained beyond our visits.

A different dimension of the project emerged, initially expressed as a website, later as a sound installation and then a video, directed towards sharing the recordings with the world beyond the camp walls – one of the requests repeatedly and passionately made by everyone we met in Dheisheh. This signals a shift away from working within a local context in close collaboration with a highly organised community. If this project is to facilitate the circulation of audio and other creative 'works' in the circuits of the international art/culture market, neither the young girls, the Owdah family nor the Committee are in a position to operate as a co-participant in the same sense. We are struggling as we become untethered from our relationships within a specific social movement and its political aspirations, which until now have helped guide our work. This may explain a rather cautious, hesitant approach to the website –

10 Ibid, p 156

- 11 To date, members have presented the Dheisheh workshops and recordings at the Annual Conference of the Middle Eastern Studies Association in Boston, US; 'Imaging Place' at the University of Florida, US; the Nobel Women's Initiative Conference 'Women Redefining Peace in The Middle East & Beyond' in Galway, Ireland; 'Sultana's Dream', exhibition at Exit Art, NY.
- 12 Wendy Babcox, private correspondence with the artist
- 13 Part of the exhibition 'Sultana's Dream' organised by the South Asian Women's Creative Collective. Our participation in this exhibition was initiated and strongly argued for by Wendy Babcox, who became the 'moderator' of an often emotional and volatile internal struggle. The extraordinary simplicity of the resulting video and accompanying documentation seems to offer the glimpse of a concrete – though incomplete – way forward. Since the completion of this article, the group has conducted several new bookmaking and imaging workshops in which walking through the camp becomes a vehicle for collective storytelling. Camp residents have drawn a map representing locations within the camp as relationships between different participants' experiences and in relation to spaces elsewhere – particularly the original villages.

lacking translation, descriptions, minimal (visual) interpretive framework – at least until further visits would allow us to learn *how* we might be useful. Instead, the group has chosen to 'travel' the project offline, through presentations at several conferences.¹¹ We understand the importance of defying Israel's efforts to isolate Palestinians from the rest of the world, and these conferences have been ways to present possibilities for working alongside the Dheisheh community, 'to encourage others to go there and do their own work'.¹² We have invited critical input into the strategic possibilities – and political/ethical implications – of re-imagining our project in order to 'circulate' it abroad. We are currently exhibiting a video of narratives from Dheisheh.¹³ Discussions around the production of this video have refocused our commitment and suggested how we might experiment with different possible ways to imagine our role – as well as with the context of artistic production/exhibition in the US – the strategic alliances we might develop with other self-organised projects, and the necessity to situate the project politically while retaining the experimental and poetic intent of many of the narratives.

Throughout the process, we have been in some disagreement as to whether increased representational visibility is necessarily linked with political agency, and have internally questioned the ethics of representing the work of young people and children, especially in relation to the production and conditioning of *feeling*. Some members, myself included, have voiced strong opposition to existing models of 'community arts' in the US, which often work to conceal structures of oppression and domination.

Between the financial squeeze and our commitment to advocating collaborations with self-organised refugee communities like Dheisheh, the pressure is on for a clearer politics and a more efficient strategy of dissemination. My own longstanding commitments are mobilised at this moment of the project in something approaching a state of emergency. I am troubled by my own position as potentially complicitous in commodifying the work. I am troubled by the possibility of being recast as the globe-trotting artist – a surrogate for the privileged social stratum of art consumers who parachuted into so-called 'problem' communities or situations and whose mission is, ostensibly, either to 'give voice' to otherwise voiceless people or to offer aesthetic experiences that can refine and 'sensitise' the locals. The massive deployment on the global art market of 'participatory', 'community' or 'relational' practices since the early 1990s often functions to reinforce poverty, oppression and inequality as problems of specific communities, and not of capitalism, while suppressing the implication of artist and audience in the structures that produce and maintain uneven power relations. The crisis, for me, is provoked by the ways in which both aesthetic pleasure and the philanthropic mobilisation of art often function to 'manage' the threat of systemic critique.

'Going global' is not meant here to suggest the sudden appearance of the global at this stage of the project. From its inception, global capitalism has been present in the lives of all co-participants and in the conditions of our working relationships – but it has not been recognised as such. I am suggesting that interrogating our working principles in relation to global capitalism has now become urgent. But can a unifying politics vis-à-vis capitalism emerge alongside the imperative of preserving distinct, and often divergent, personal and artistic trajectories? What

practices, strategies or forms could mediate between particularisms in this sense?

‘...That “reality” which includes all the emotions of people and their positions. And which includes also triangular time.’¹⁴

These tensions may help refocus the question of commonality as interrelatedness – not assuming a universal shared experience, but rather acknowledging a field of political forces within which we are differently positioned and by which we are differently impacted. In a series of internal correspondences and interviews, 6+ tried individually to make sense of the ways in which they are repositioned as political subjects through this work. Members speak of the transformative power of ‘experience’, in ways that echo an understanding of self-knowing as knowing in relation to others. The primary ground that structures this ‘relation to others’, the web of interrelations between all co-participants in the project, is initially identified as the legacy of colonialism.

Imagining a shared politics that is yet to be calls us to recognise the traces of possible futures. While productive in many ways, speaking of colonialism as a political process *in the past tense* is insufficient, if it forecloses the question of our implication in global forces today, or if it relentlessly anchors us as actors in the theatre of the past. Our task may be to develop, in the various spaces of our daily lives, in the locations and conditions within which we live and work, practices of creative resistance and struggle that can attend to ‘experience’ as a dual hinging or triangulation – to open up the self into an ensemble of social and political processes – to open up the past and future into the present.

14 Mourid Barghouti, *op cit*, p 43

Many thanks are offered to my colleagues in 6+ for their contributions to this essay, and for their sincerity in sharing the joys, hesitations and uncertainties of the practice. I am also grateful for provocative and helpful interventions into previous drafts of this essay by Adaluna Borcila, Riccardo Marchi, Tone Huse, Sarah Lewison and Gene Ray.
