

Une artiste roumaine basée aux Etats-Unis relate son projet dans un camp avec des femmes réfugiées. Quelles sont les pensées et les réflexions qui surgissent lors de telles expériences? Les microsillons, qui ne connaissent pas cette région, peuvent-ils contribuer à cette publication?

Art in a Time of War

אמפתייה

ميكروسيون

Rozalinda Borcila in conversation
with microsillons

How to write on Palestine and Israel when more or less everything that you know about it was gathered through the filter of mass media? How to write anything that makes sense in this publication, when you never worked in nor went to Israel or Palestine? This was our main concern when we accepted to take part in this project.

This outsider position and our common interest for questions related to pedagogy, led us to imagine a dialogue with Rozalinda Borcila, a Romanian artist and writer based in the US, who is also a member of the women's art collective 6+. In this article, Rozalinda Borcila – who is speaking in her own name and not in the name of the collective – brings a reflexive and critical approach to 6+'s projects in Palestine.

6+ developed, during the last six years, projects in the Occupied Territories of Palestine. In 2006, the collective worked with Palestinian women artists on a project called *Secrets* that led to an exhibition which traveled in the Occupied Territories and in the US.

Learning on the network they built during several working trips to the West Bank, 6+ then developed new projects in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, just outside Bethlehem, a camp established as a temporary living solution in 1948.

In 2006, the collective began a series of workshops with 18 young women from the camp, which also led to a web project entitled *Turning our Tongues*. Starting with the idea of diaries, audio and video recordings were used and led to a series of poems, performances, narratives or songs, that can be listened to on the collective's website (<http://6plus.org/dehisheh.html>). The work was developed in small groups, aiming at collectively supporting each participant's own narrative.

At the end of 2007, 6+ initiated a new project in the same camp. Through a series of workshops 20 young women were invited to pay a special attention to the five senses while walking from the home of one participant to the next. Exploring the links between memory, senses and familiar places, they used video, photography and writing to share their personal memories; some of this material resulted in a second web project entitled *Daughters of Palestine* (<http://6plus.org/dehisheh2.html>)

A third project organized by 6+ in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp is being developed around the creation of soundscapes and sound mappings. It is currently being finalized.

Some very interesting texts¹ have been written about those projects and, rather than explaining each work in depth again, the discussion presented here aims at raising specific issues linked to pedagogy, as well as questioning Eternal Tour's position, through the example of the 6+ projects.

microsilons: When we decided to write an article for this publication about Eternal Tour – taking place this year in the very complicated Israel/Palestine context in which we never worked before – we immediately felt that we couldn't speak directly in our own name, but that we would need to take a step to the side and begin a discussion with someone who had a personal experience to share about the area. Yet, it looks like in the *Secrets* exhibition, with your *Disclosures*² piece, you have also chosen to use a "side step" strategy. Why did you decide to present a piece about the stereotypes on Eastern Europe in the context of a show presenting the works of Palestinian artists?

Rozalinda Borcila:

Secrets was, even from the beginning, imagined as a traveling exhibition, and we sought the support and guidance of several cultural venues in the West Bank in formulating it. We invited contributions from eight Palestinian women artists, as well as the members of 6+, under a loose thematic concept which we felt was relevant to each artist's work in some way, as well as offering a range of possibilities for interpretation. Some of the artwork developed in response to the theme referred directly to the occupation, but the works covered a broader range of topics. Our interest was twofold. On the one hand we wanted to work with, and in support of, Palestinian artists and cultural institutions, in direct defiance of the Apartheid Wall. On the other, we wanted to place our work and ourselves in the context of the occupation. In this sense, *Secrets* as a theme refers to knowledge, power and resistance; but it also refers to that which is hidden in plain sight, that which remains unacknowledged and unspoken, even as it structures almost every aspect of our lives, of our artwork. In my view, American militarism and its role in the occupation is precisely such a "secret" – it operates in every cultural act,

in every aspect of contemporary American culture and daily life. And as women living in this country, we spoke of needing to confront ourselves with its reality in a direct way – not necessarily by making art objects thematically about the occupation, but by directly acknowledging that we are making work during an occupation, within a war zone, that the occupation is there even in art works that do not thematically address it because it structures the conditions within which we live and work. I did not want to be a cultural tourist, a voyeur, I did not want to be the artist that parachutes into a place to somehow "give voice" or speak for others, nor did I want to reduce the brutal violence of the occupation to whatever limited subjective responses I could offer. I decided not to make work about the occupation, but rather to mine my own work, knowledge and personal history from a very specific critical perspective, which for me represented also an ontological shift: that is, my own experience or internalization of some of the systemic geopolitical processes upon which the Occupation is predicated – by this I mean, broadly speaking, the forces of global capitalism in its current historical form. This led me to look more closely at the injection of capitalism into "Eastern Europe" after 1989, at some of the tropes that became mobilized to conflate capitalism with freedom and democracy – and which worked, and to a large extent still work, to delegitimize alternative worlds both there and in the US.

m: When you chose to work on Palestine, did you feel like it was necessary for you to go there physically to run a project?

RB: It is clear that the forces that directly impact the lives of people in Palestine, the agents and powerful actors whose actions directly affect the destinies of millions of people around the world, are situated very far away in the privileged spaces of neoliberal power. This gap is something that we saw as a critical problem. As I mentioned earlier, my art work was not about Palestine. But the collectively organized exhibition and, later, our workshops and collaborations with people in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, are certainly modes of engagement that required learning about Palestinian cultural and political history, required a certain level of research into the conditions of the occupation, but also required our direct and embodied presence. We did not want to do an exhibition project that would be organized elsewhere, funded elsewhere, then curated, packaged and drop-shipped into Palestine; we did not want to work within a cultural politics that merely replicated the power dynamics we found already at work in military logic and the logic of the global (art) markets. Instead, we wanted to use the exhibition

1 Dina AWAD, "Turning our Tongues: Journals from Dheisheh", in: *The Electronic Intifada*, 17 September 2007, <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article8993.shtml>, last visited July 2010.

2 Maymanah FARHAT, "The Unearthing of Secrets: Palestinian Art, 6+ and a Series of Transgressions", in: *ArteEast Quarterly* 1, March 2007, <http://www.arteeast.org/pages/artenews/article/88/>, last visited July 2010.



Olav Westphalen, 2010.

form as a vehicle for different kinds of encounters, at different scales and unfolding slowly, with time—and which would carry the very real weight of consequence and accountability. We also had to learn what it means to create an exhibition collectively, to work as equal partners without imposed or assumed hierarchies, which is what we mean when we say it was a self-organized project. And of course, the very quotidian aspects of traveling an exhibition within the Occupied Territories means someone with access and privilege must carry the works through the numerous checkpoints; our passports gave us this privilege, which we were determined not to deny but to leverage.

m: How was your position as western artists perceived when you arrived to work in the field? How important was it for you to collaborate with organizations that are already working there?

RB: Very early on in the dreaming process, we often spoke of wanting to work in solidarity, or to become the allies of women artists in Palestine. Some of us discussed the question of solidarity as we found it in various feminist traditions, and recognized that we did not know what it meant, what kinds of actions, attitudes, orientations would constitute solidarity in this sense. For me, this was a critical question and desire. I have since found my own formulation—partially learned through this 4 year process of working within 6+, and partially through my collaboration with the group Compass: you cannot call yourself an ally, you cannot claim solidarity, because solidarity hinges on being recognized in the eyes of another as an ally, based on your actions. This requires finding (or cre-

ating) the specific institutional, organizational, social and political conditions under which such a relation is possible.

There are many wonderful NGOs doing excellent work in the West Bank. However, a foreign nonprofit is often not accountable to the people with which it works, and often forced by its own funding structures to adopt a service paradigm... which we were uneasy about. We received invaluable logistical support, advice and a great deal of “cover” from some of these organizations, but we were looking for a different framework within which to place ourselves. Our experiences lead us to the much besieged and only partially built Al Feneiq Cultural Center in Dheisheh Refugee Camp. This is a self-organized community and cultural institution, with an existing understanding of what role culture plays in struggle politics and in the life of a community. It is run by members of the Popular Committee camp, itself an expression of the self-governing process which began during the first *intifada*. I think we self-consciously placed our efforts within an existing struggle, and tried to make our work accountable to it.

Some things can seem trivial, but I think they are actually essential, and it goes to the question about *being present* in a place—being physically there, but more than this, paying attention, being exposed to and being accountable for your position in the complex web of social relations that define a place. For instance, my Palestinian friends and hosts in Ramallah could not enter Jerusalem. So, would I go visit this city? How would I make sense of my decision when the people who had extended their trust and knowledge, the people whom I called my partners, did not have

this privilege? What does it mean to be a partner or ally in this situation?

I felt very strongly I could only go into Jerusalem when there was something strategic to be leveraged through my presence there, when I could accomplish something useful to those who were excluded from accessing the city. Hence my initial reservations and questions addressed to you³ about this publication and the larger Eternal Tour festival in Jerusalem: what kind of (cultural and financial) capital is involved in this project, who is generating it and where does it become concentrated? How can it involve Palestinians as equal participants with European cultural producers, when Palestinians do not have the same privilege to enter the city? I don't think there is a way to remain neutral in a situation in which silence functions as direct complicity; I am a supporter of the cultural boycott against Israeli institutions because this campaign asks us to become accountable for, and to intervene in, cultural and institutional politics. How does the Eternal Tour project formulate an ethico-strategic position in a situation where systemic oppression has very concrete and undeniable spatial expressions—not only the restrictions placed on movement, but also the coercive, naked violence to which all Palestinians within the city are constantly exposed? I am interested to see how these questions are addressed as the project unfolds.

m: You are talking about your strong opposition to the existing “community arts” models⁴. What kind of methods did you use in the Dheisheh projects to differentiate your approach from those models? How can the artist, in such a context, be something other than a “parachuted savior”, how can she go beyond “symbolic help” which just diverts from the real problems?

RB: In the process of organizing this exhibition, we needed to move slowly and with mindfulness: creating relationships, listening and learning, over several trips to Palestine. Out of this work a new and unexpected direction emerged, through our connection with the Owdah family in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp. So, even as we were organizing and then traveling—an exhibition of 14 artists through the West Bank and later the US—we began another process which is at the intersection of art and pedagogy, and which unfolded as a series of workshops with young women in Dheisheh. These

³ The *Secrets* catalog is available online at this address http://www.6plus.org/secrets_catalog.pdf, last visited July 2010.

⁴ Information about the projects in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp is available on the 6+ website: <http://6plus.org/>, last visited in July 2010.

two lines or trajectories became more and more separate from each other.

In my writing and public speaking I critique a *specific* model or approach to community arts, (and community organizing as well). I would say this has to do with an understanding of culture that separates cultural producers from cultural consumers, that separates organizers from communities being “serviced”. We see this also in the humanitarian relation, in which people are to be saved from their predicament by benevolent agents from elsewhere—and this often works to obscure the ways in which these outsiders have privileged access to resources, precisely because of their very implication in the dynamic that produces the inequalities they are supposedly there to remedy. I admire and greatly respect many community artists, but I am also uneasy about the colonizing function of culture, particularly once genres become created, legitimized and massively deployed on the circuits of the global art market. Not only does it work to obscure the ways in which we reproduce very specific power dynamics, but it also works to divest both symbolic and material capital from efforts at local self-organization and self-governance that emerge within the struggles of oppressed communities.

So, did we solve these problems, or have we found a way out of these paradigms? Of course not, I think our work can and should be critiqued in a number of significant ways. We could not wait for structural inequalities to be resolved before acting, so we stumbled along imperfectly and, as the poem goes, we “*made the road by walking*”. We are also making our own strong self-criticism along the way, which can hopefully also contribute to the efforts of others—I think of this text, and many others, as part of this process. Our self-criticism has greatly reduced our “productivity” and “efficiency”, because it means we have internal conflicts and disagreements, and we question what we are doing at every turn. One solution that has been helpful for us has been to deliberately place our work in Dheisheh in the context of the Rights of Return movement and in support of the Al Feneiq Center as I mentioned earlier. But this has also been a complicated and uneven process. The essay I wrote for Third Text outlines some internal contradictions and struggles which remain unsolved in the work.

m: For *Daughters of Palestine*, you mention that 6+ was asked to work with young women aged sixteen to eighteen. Who proposed that project to you? Did they somehow influence the project and/or its content?

RB: We were invited to work with the Al Feneiq by the Owdah family: Naji, director of the Al Feneiq, a leader in

the Popular Committee and widely known as a radical pacifist organizer, and Suhair, a well-respected woman’s leader and counselor. They gave us a much needed education. They helped us to understand the desires for the Al Feneiq Center, their vision for a strong and empowered youth, particularly when it came to the young women of the camp, their concerns over the limited ways in which the camp could nourish the potential of young women. We spoke as intellectuals, as political people, as parents. I also met with many of the young women’s parents, and of course the young women themselves—several of whom, over the course of our 4 years engagement, grew into leadership roles in Dheisheh, became workshop leaders in our most recent series of workshops. I feel that they helped us to understand a specific perspective on the role that culture, art and education play in the highly politicized life of the Dheisheh community. This was specifically at odds with western liberal assumptions about personal emancipation and upward mobility through education—and I feel my encounters there have helped me to understand education as both a tool for empowerment and as a site for oppression. So, yes, what we learned completely framed the project and its content.

In devising the specifics of the workshop, we proposed a general structure and welcomed guidance. The Al Feneiq staff selected the participants in consultation with their parents, helped us understand the schedules and responsibilities of the young girls, as well as introducing us to what was possible logistically. Given the real physical dangers in the camp, the girls would normally navigate it with a certain alertness—however, our recent workshops called for the group to linger, to experiment with different modes of attention, so the Al Feneiq staff organized protection for the duration of these explorations. I don’t think we experienced others influencing “our” workshops, perhaps because we did not have investment in our creative or authorial autonomy. This relation of consultation and guidance was not the same in the development of the web projects, and this shift is precisely where many tensions and unresolved contradictions can be seen operating in our work.

m: You used the term “empowerment” before. How would you discuss this term in relation to the projects 6+ ran in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp?

RB: I want to retract any suggestion that our contribution was somehow empowering people. I think the question of empowerment and disempowerment can only be addressed as redistributive and shared—and there is a very real material dimension to it without which “empowerment” becomes a way to mask a

crude privatization of cultural capital under the guise of political work. Actually, I think this particular self-organized and highly politicized community of people in Dheisheh—who have played such a pivotal role in the Intifada—are extremely powerful and do not need us to empower them. Certainly, the conditions of their oppression can’t be removed by six women artists doing a workshop! However, the arduous and highly dangerous work of building the Al Feneiq was part of the process of building institutional, social and material capacity for the movement. Inasmuch as we contributed to the efforts of building a community cultural center—which means not just stone and glass but also practicing activities and modes of engagement understood by people there to be creative and/or communal—our work was a way of acknowledging the struggle for self-empowerment of this community.

m: What can one learn about oneself and about one’s environment in producing a cartography? Is it “simply” a means of talking about one’s situation to the outside, or can it go further in any way?

RB: I want to first specify that I am not interested in the cartography or the map as an image, but rather in the mapping process—at times, the map works to obliterate the conditions of its own making. In the limited scope of our work with young women and girls in Dheisheh, the mapping process was intended as a way to remake our collective and individual perception of the camp. We worked with the senses, but perception is also connected to affect and to intellection—so we wanted to introduce the girls to a specific set of tools for interpreting their own experience and re-imagining their surroundings. I’m not sure to what extent this process can be transformative or in what ways exactly its transformative force can be manifested. The girls expressed tremendous joy in “taking on” the camp environment, and very quickly engaged with their surroundings not as a given and highly coercive set of “facts”, but as open-ended, as “under construction” and therefore open to their remaking. In our discussions with people in the camp we found that this specific understanding of the work of the imagination was highly appreciated and well developed, very sophisticated: there were many projects and traditions (more or less formalized as cultural) which worked specifically to generate a radical re-imagining of the world. Al-Feneiq itself seems to be a complete remaking of reality, a material embodiment of a political reality which is not yet actualized. It is a very powerful place.

m: The use of sustainable means for your workshops seems to be linked to the idea that pedagogical work and the exchange of knowledge could continue without you, after you leave the camp? Is this working? What is the importance of "teaching to teach"? What can each person teach another in such a closed situation?

RB: This has not worked as well as we had hoped, in that we were not able to create a process which could then remain active and be "owned" by people there, in our absence. Still, several of the girls in the first workshop formed their own collective, which signaled to us that they were experimenting with different forms of association and *intersubjective* exploration. And several of these young women taught their younger sisters the simple bookmaking skills we introduced, as well as becoming workshop leaders in the most recent visit. But of course teaching each other is a highly developed practice in the camp; I suppose one must look at the camp both as open-air prison but also as an open-air free school.

m: Could you tell us more about the idea of "experience as constituted with struggle politics"? Is pedagogy here a means to connect individual experiences to a community struggle, the present with the past and the future?

RB: I think perhaps we can leave the term pedagogy behind—or at least signal that it presupposes that there are aspects to experience or struggle politics that fall outside the realm of "pedagogy". It seems to me that Dheisheh is itself a space of learning—of an imaginative and oppositional kind, that is to say the kind of learning that draws upon the capacity to imagine and postulate a reality which is not yet there. I think this also fundamentally characterizes the Right of Return movement. But this imagining is also intersubjective—knowing oneself, sensing oneself (in terms of affection and perception even) are always in relation to others: the large family, the camp, the original villages, history... this knowing also seems to be generative and somehow prefigurative, in that it brings into the present a sense of a future different from the past.

m: Working on an educative project in Palestine implies a central political dimension. Do you think that with educative projects in the US, this political and critical dimension can also exist in such an evident way?

RB: I think increasingly we need to acknowledge the political dimension of education, to understand education—as it emerges historically within the project of liberalism—as a *subjectifying* process. For instance, the global strug-

gles over the university have finally articulated a refusal of the neoliberal corporate model and will hopefully go much, much further; here is an amazing indicator that the range of practices, institutions and paradigms constituting "education" is indeed a front of struggle.

microsilions

microsilions is an art collective founded in Geneva, working on mediation and pedagogy using different practices such as design, performance, installation and exhibition.

Bibliography

Rozalinda BORCILA, "Notes from *Turning our Tongues*: Audio Journals from Dheisheh Refugee Camp", in: *Third Text* 22, Issue 5, London, September 2008, p. 559–568. Also online at <http://6plus.org/publications.html>

Disclosures is Rozalinda Borcila's video referring to the exotic representations of Eastern Europe by the West, more specifically to the images of Romania broadcasted by the western media after the 1989 revolution. The work is described in the "Secrets" catalog (http://www.6plus.org/secrets_catalog.pdf, last visited July 2010). Some further thoughts related to the Romanian context (and more generally to the practice of collaborative or participatory art) can be found in: Rozalinda BORCILA, "In Search of Liberation", in: *Maska Performing Arts Journal* 120–121, vol. XXIV, Slovenia, Spring 2009, also online at http://borcila.com/In_Search_of_Liberation.htm, last visited, July 2010.

فنانة تشكيلية رومانية
 تعيش حاليا في الولايات
 المتحدة الأمريكية، تحدثنا
 عن مشروعها في مخيم
 نساء لاجئات. ماهي الأفكار
 والتأملات التي تبرز خلال
 تجارب مماثلة؟
 هل تستطيع مجموعة الفنانين
 «الميكروسيون» المساهمة
 في هذا الإصدار بالرغم
 من عدم معرفتهم بالمنطقة؟
 أمنية رومانية המתגוררת
 בארצות הברית מספרת
 על פרוייקט שעשתה עם
 נשים במחנה פליטים.
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