

## **Contemporary Palestinian Art: Moving in from the Margins**

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“Art has no country.” ~ Y.Z. Kami<sup>1</sup>

The issue of regionalism in the visual arts is controversial. Most artists deflect national or ethnic categorizations to avoid the tendency to interpret their work within certain ethnic or ‘other’ contexts. While artists may be extremely identified with their ethnic or national roots, they often long to break free of the types of narrow understandings that are implicit in viewing art through an ethnic lens.<sup>2</sup> The above statement was put forward by an Iranian artist living and working in New York City. While his sentiment may be true, the reality of the statement is often very different, and most certainly if the origin of the art is related to Palestine or Palestinians. The case of contemporary Palestinian art presents its own unique set of complexities, because the reductivist understanding from which artists desire to distance their work is the very approach applied to Palestinian art by curators and exhibit organizers. For reasons which this paper will explore, the evaluation of Palestinian art occupies a category of its own that surpasses mere aesthetic critique into the treacherous terrain of political and social bias. This evaluation has meant a marginalization of Palestinian art and artists in ways that are at best, disappointing, and at worst, discriminatory.

This paper will briefly examine three specific exhibitions that took place within the last two years in the United States. In narrating the events around the exhibits, I will attempt to elucidate some shared patterns and conclusions in order to better explain this marginalization. Finally, I will propose some approaches to working within the arts community to better educate about this body of art, as well as to effectively advocate for its inclusion in mainstream galleries and exhibits.

Before looking at the specific case studies, it is important to clarify several items. This paper will explore the challenges unique to exhibiting contemporary Palestinian art in the United States, and for the sake of brevity, will not draw comparisons with similar exhibits in Europe or elsewhere. There are also dynamics at play in the U.S. art world that are specific to it, and thus the discussion will limit itself to patterns and suggestions that respond to these dynamics. Additionally, while the term “Palestinian art” is inherently reductivist, for the purposes of this paper, it will have to suffice as a means of referring to this body of work, but by no means implying that it is homogenous or univocal. The

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<sup>1</sup> Daftari, Fereshteh, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York: 2006), p.99.

<sup>2</sup> Salwa Mikdadi comments on the issues of religious and geographic categorizations of Arab-American artists in her essay accompanying the exhibit *In/Visible: Contemporary Art by Arab American Artists*, held at the Arab American National Museum May 19 –October 30, 2005. The exhibit catalogue was published in 2005 by the Arab American National Museum.

discussion will focus on exhibits and artists where the works reflect a Palestinian identity in some way, an identity that has a 'political' connotation here. While many artists choose not to reflect what could be termed a 'political' identity in their work, the exhibits and artists discussed throughout this paper convey specific messages about Palestinian identity, be they intensely personal or part of the larger meta-narrative of the Palestinian experience.

## I. Three Case Studies.

### A. *Where We Come From*. (An exhibit by Emily Jacir, shown at The Ulrich Museum, Wichita, Kansas.)

In January of 2005, the Ulrich Museum in Wichita, KS (affiliated with Wichita State University) hosted the exhibit *Where We Come From*, by conceptual artist Emily Jacir. Kevin Mullins, the curator of exhibitions at the Ulrich, invited Jacir to show the series after he saw her work in New York City and read about her in a number of art journals. After seeing the series, he felt it would be a good fit for one of their spaces at the museum called the Projects space, in which the museum brings visiting artists to exhibit and talk about their work. When Mullins saw this series, he was moved by its humanity and struck in particular by how "it humanized the demons that [the American press] makes."<sup>3</sup> Jacir, who divides her time between New York City and Ramallah, has had a successful career nationally and internationally, with many of her creations addressing the complexities of the Palestinian and/or Arab identity and experience. In this particular project, she asked fellow Palestinians the question "If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" She then took these requests, and with the relative freedom of movement afforded her by a US passport, she attempted to fulfill them. The requests were all ones the requestors could not carry about themselves, due to myriad restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation in Palestine. They ranged from "Pay my phone bill" to "put flowers on my mother's grave" to "enjoy a day in Jerusalem walking freely." The final product of this piece is a series of photographs and text that hang together, detailing both the request and the attempts to fulfill it, with photographs capturing some aspect of each attempt. This series has shown to high acclaim all over the world, including the Istanbul Biennale and the Whitney Biennial in 2004, with rave unanimous reviews.

Prior to the show coming to the Ulrich, the museum director, believing that the exhibit would create some tension, decided to preemptively approach local Jewish community leaders to let them know about the show. The response was exponentially stronger than the director anticipated, with the Jewish Federation of Kansas demanding that they be granted "access to the museum in order to place a poster and political materials 'balancing' Jacir's work in the museum just outside her gallery for the duration of her show."<sup>4</sup> One rabbi protested to the local media and dismissed Jacir's work as

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<sup>3</sup> From an interview with Kevin Mullins on February 23, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> From a note forwarded electronically by Professor Kamran Rasteger of Brown University, <http://www.artistnetwork.org/news15/news701.html>.

“propaganda” and “a blatant anti-Semitic attempt to breed hatred.”<sup>5</sup> In all of the cases of protest, no one had seen the entirety of the series or any of the images in person to actually formulate this type of response. The director of the museum refused to grant their request, and so the group took the matter before the University administration. The administration, thinking it sounded like “a nice idea,”<sup>6</sup> told the group to go ahead. At this point, Jacir issued an open letter in which she said, “This is a complete infringement on my right to free speech, not to mention as insult to me as an artist... [they are] contextualizing and framing my work in ways I have no control over... This modifies my installation and the work is no longer what it was intended to be. I think people should be able to see my work on its own terms and be able to form their own opinion”<sup>7</sup> The furor continued in newspapers, on the web, in phone calls and emails. The decision to open up adjacent gallery space to provide for a different view point was finally rescinded, and the decision became to either hold or cancel the exhibit. Eventually, the administration capitulated and allowed the museum to go forward with the exhibit “without conditions or limitations that could be considered to compromise the integrity of Ms. Jacir’s work as an artist.”<sup>8</sup>

David Butler, the museum director, commented, “It’s so much easier to do something that isn’t politically sensitive, but if we’re going to avoid controversy altogether, then we’re really not doing our job. For an institution that’s dedicated to showing what’s new and what’s important, it’s inevitable that we’re going to show things that people might find objectionable... like all good art, it will help people reflect on their own situation and feel a sense of connection with a situation on the other side of the world that we ignore at our peril.”<sup>9</sup> The exhibit opening was a great success, with many in the community coming who had never set foot in the museum before. Protesters picketed the event and passed out pamphlets that outlined the “Myth vs. Reality” of each photo in the exhibition. The protests did not hinder the success of the exhibit, which continued to receive a steady stream of visitors through the duration of its stay. The Ulrich, previously somewhat unknown in the art world, achieved its own recognition for hosting this controversial exhibit, and as Kevin Mullins put it, they “couldn’t have paid for that kind of publicity.”<sup>10</sup>

B. *The Subject of Palestine*. (A group exhibit of contemporary Palestinian artists, shown at the DePaul University Museum, Chicago, Illinois.)

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in an online article by Jedd Beaudoin, <http://www.f5wichita.com/arts/index.php?pubdate+2005-01-27&story=2252>

<sup>6</sup> From an interview with Kevin Mullins on February 23, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> From an online letter circulated by Emily Jacir on December 10, 2004. <http://www.artistnetwork.org/news15/news701.html>.

<sup>8</sup> From a statement issued by Elizabeth King, Vice President for University Advancement. Quoted in <http://fromthefloor.blogspot.com/2004/12/emily-jacir-exhibition-to-proceed.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in an online article by Jedd Beaudoin, <http://www.f5wichita.com/arts/index.php?pubdate+2005-01-27&story=2252>

<sup>10</sup> From an interview with Kevin Mullins on February 23, 2006.

In February of 2005, the DePaul University Museum hosted a group exhibit of 16 contemporary Palestinian artists entitled *The Subject of Palestine*. Samia Halaby, Palestinian artist and writer, curated the exhibit and organized it at the request of the student group on campus, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). The initiative for this exhibit followed an incident involving a DePaul professor who approached the student group tabling at an activities fair, and engaged them in a heated debate about the Palestinian issue that quickly became belligerent and incendiary. The professor was suspended without pay, and the student group decided to organize an exhibit to increase the campus and community's awareness of the Palestinian narrative. In a DePaul University news release, SJP president Salma Nasser said, "We wanted to give DePaul's population and communities beyond the university a clearer understanding of what it means to identify oneself as Palestinian. We also wanted to shed light on the suffering and humanitarian injustices that Palestinians struggle with daily. What better way to do this than through the eyes of the artists?"<sup>11</sup>

During the weeks leading up to the show and during its time at DePaul, newspapers and blogs were teeming with commentary about this exhibit, with accusations being leveled at DePaul for "cultivating far-leftist anti-Semites and haters of America."<sup>12</sup> The controversy over this particular show stirred up the conversation again that had taken place around the hire of faculty professor Norman Finkelstein, which had generated its own share of heated debate, with accusations of Professor Finkelstein being 'universally regarded as a Holocaust Denier, a Jewish traitor and anti-Semite, and at the very least a fraud and pseudo-scholar.'<sup>13</sup> The process of putting together the exhibit itself also hit on some very rough waters. The museum director was extremely nervous about the content, contested the images to be used on the invitation and made substantial edits to the accompanying essay. However, once the exhibit finally made it onto the museum walls and into the space, it was extremely well-received. The Chicago Tribune gave it a strong review, which came as a surprise given the amount of negative press that the show had received prior to its opening. The Tribune art critic, Alan Arnter, said of the show, "*The Subject of Palestine*... so cogently presents the work of 16 contemporary Palestinian artists that even the least informed of viewers is likely to come away with the sense that they have seen and grasped something important... little stands in the way of the works' broad humanity... no matter the medium, the art communicates strongly, immediately on the level of feeling... these artists have voices that need to be heard, especially at an institution dedicated to the free play of thought. Congratulations to DePaul on its incisive presentation."<sup>14</sup>

The pivotal importance of a show like this taking place can not be underestimated. Not only did it provide many with the rare opportunity to see a broad spectrum of contemporary Palestinian art, it did so in such a way that the art could be appreciated for its artistic merit, its diversity, and its content. While the controversy surrounding it

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<sup>11</sup> Online news release <http://sherman.depaul.edu/media/webapp/mrNews.asp?NID+1279>

<sup>12</sup> Online article <http://www.frontpagemagazine.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=17728>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Online review at the Chicago Tribune, [www.chicagotribune.com](http://www.chicagotribune.com). Review has been archived, but can be found in document form at [www.neiu.edu/~ncaftori/israel/Tribune.doc](http://www.neiu.edu/~ncaftori/israel/Tribune.doc) - Supplemental Result -

rarely, if ever, debated the aesthetics of the show, it generated enough attention such that those who then went and saw the exhibit were exposed in new and thought-provoking ways to a strong body of work reflecting a human tragedy taking place that has been summarily dismissed and ignored for decades.

C. *Made in Palestine*. (Group show of contemporary Palestinian art; originally opened at the Station museum in Houston, before traveling to San Francisco, CA, Montpelier, VT, and is currently on view at The Bridge Gallery in New York City.)

This ground-breaking exhibition opened at the Station museum in Houston, Texas in 2003. When the curator, James Harithas, first decided to organize this show, he traveled with his staff to Palestine and some of the surrounding Arab countries, meeting artists and collecting works to bring back to the United States. Samia Halaby accompanied them on this tour and was instrumental in introducing them to many of the artists and helping to select the work. The show opened to enormous acclaim in Houston, which has a sizable Palestinian community, and was extended from a three-month to a six-month showing due to its overwhelming popularity. There was virtually no controversy prior to its opening or during its stay in Houston. The museum produced a catalogue which included several scholarly essays and many photographs of the works. After its remarkable success in Houston, Harithas felt it imperative to tour this show; given the rare opportunity it was to have a show on this scale with all its substantial pieces already in the United States.

As Harithas began to contact other museums, the success of Houston was quickly buried by refusals from over 90 museums and galleries. In a *Mother Jones* interview, Harithas (former director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC) said, "I thought I had enough contacts to get this exhibit shown in museums across the nation, but I found out that even people who I considered close contacts said off-the-record they would lose their funding if they were to hold an exhibit that was pro-Palestinian."<sup>15</sup> Many institutions rejected the exhibit before they saw a single piece of work from the show. With the exhibit sitting in storage in Texas, and no official institution willing to take it on, various groups and organizations around the country took up the daunting task of trying to bring the exhibit to their cities. Faced with the challenges of mounting a show of such size and scope, organizations had to raise tens of thousands of dollars for space rental, insurance, installation costs, publicity and various event costs. In all three cities that this exhibit has traveled to, the organizers have all been volunteers.

*Made in Palestine* traveled to two other cities before finally arriving in New York City. It went on view in San Francisco in April of 2005, where the Justice in Palestine coalition headed up the efforts to bring it there, with ten groups combining their resources to put towards the show, and two artists donating exhibit space at a San Francisco arts and cultural center called SomArts. The space allowed for approximately 60% of the show to be exhibited. The second mounting of the exhibit took place in Montpelier, VT in October of 2005 at the Wood Art Gallery. It was brought to Vermont by Vermonters for

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<sup>15</sup> From an interview for *Mother Jones* by Onnesha Roychoudhuri, May 11, 2005. [http://www.motherjones.com/arts/feature/2005/05/palestinian\\_art.html](http://www.motherjones.com/arts/feature/2005/05/palestinian_art.html)

a Just Peace Coalition where the exhibit was made possible by a grant from the Lintilhac Foundation. They were able to mount about 50% of the show in the space available. Neither city encountered any significant or notable controversy prior to the exhibit or throughout the duration of its display.

New York encountered significantly more resistance in the lead-up to its opening in March of 2006. Halaby, the primary force behind bringing this exhibit to NYC, along with a band of extremely committed volunteers, combed the city for possible venues. In an interview on World Press.org, Halaby says, “We knocked on the doors of every museum and every alternative space... when they finally all rejected us; the reason seemed mostly that the upper layers of their administrations, the directors, the head curators, had all rejected the show. They would lose their funding if they showed Palestinian art.”<sup>16</sup> When it became apparent that the group would need to basically create their own gallery, i.e. rent space and make it habitable for the exhibit, they began to hold a series of fund-raisers to generate enough income to rent gallery space in the heart of the arts district in Chelsea. During one memorable fund-raising event that took place in White Plains at the Westchester County Center, the NY State Assemblyman Ryan Karber issued a statement calling on Westchester County to cancel the “Anti-Israel, Pro-Hamas Exhibit.” He was referring to a planned fundraiser showcasing Palestinian art, poetry and music, along with slides of the works that would be shown at the future *Made in Palestine* exhibit. He insisted that the Westchester County Center was going to be hosting an art exhibit that ‘glorifies terrorism and denounces Israel.’ Karber went on to say, “This exhibit is a propaganda show for assassins... the pieces included in this exhibit are offensive to me as a Jew, as an American and as a civilized human being.” The fundraiser eventually went forward and was very successful. Most importantly, after two years of intense labor and commitment, the show opened on March 14<sup>th</sup>, and the opening gala on March 16<sup>th</sup> saw nearly 2000 people come through. The exhibit continues to receive positive reviews, most recently from Holland Cotter of the New York Times.<sup>17</sup>

## II. Patterns of Marginalization

Several patterns emerge from the three exhibits outlined above which highlight the challenges inherent to exhibiting Palestinian art that reflects the Palestinian experience. It is important to note this experiential reflection: if Palestinian artists painted landscapes of views from the Golden Gate or George Washington bridges, it is unlikely that those works would ignite the same kind of furor that arises around the more overt “Palestinian” subject matter, and likely artists would not encounter nearly as much difficulty in exhibiting their work. There is however, a spark that flies when the work reflects on uniquely Palestinian themes of loss, displacement, oppression, exile, anger, and resistance; when the art is, as Halaby stated in an interview “about epic tragedy, [about] a

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<sup>16</sup> From an online interview with Remi Kanazi, March 5, 2005, <http://www.worldpress.org/Americas/2280.cfm>

<sup>17</sup> Cottor’s review can be accessed online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/arts/design/24gall.html?\\_r=1&oref=login](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/arts/design/24gall.html?_r=1&oref=login)

population going through a tragedy of proportions that simply fills the cells of the artists.”<sup>18</sup>

Because much of contemporary Palestinian art reflects on life experiences that have political roots, i.e. displacement and exile as the result of an outside, illegal occupation, Palestinian art is often inherently political, and its politics are not popular here. The visual exposure of the full panorama of the Palestinian narrative implicates the State of Israel and it poses serious questions that many would rather not explore. The accusation that all Palestinian art is propagandistic in nature rings false, since ‘propaganda’ implies a deliberate attempt to convince others of a particular cause, and most artists create work that reflect their own experiences, and not for any specific goal to manipulate emotionally or politically. A review of *Made in Palestine* in *The Christian Science Monitor* noted, “While this Palestinian art exhibit does have political overtones, it is meant to be more an expression of cultural identity.”<sup>19</sup> It is clearly the Palestinian narrative and identity itself, juxtaposed as it inevitably is, with the Israeli narrative that causes the most tension. It forces the curator and the viewer to consider a decades-old conflict from a different perspective, utilizing new language and ways of seeing that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable. One commentator says of this, “[T]he question of Palestine has become so difficult to discuss, so thoroughly politicized, that anyone who acknowledges the existence and mistreatment of Palestinians is seen either as sanctioning terrorism, or being anti-Semitic, or both.”<sup>20</sup>

This discomfort is somewhat paradoxical, given that the contemporary art world is stereotypically known for its ability to surprise, shock and startle its viewers. In this case, it appears that a complex political issue has percolated into the arts community and the Israeli narrative of what has transpired in Palestine has established itself as the only credible one. What then happens is that any Palestinian artistic narrative is viewed with suspicion or simply disregarded. That is a very troubling tendency, given that the arts have often led the way in questioning narratives and their legitimacy and have had an important role in significantly impacting social, cultural and even political assumptions. “Art’s role in culture has been to both reflect human life and revolutionize human thought by questioning the authoritative ‘reality.’”<sup>21</sup> Palestinian art gets branded with terms that most Americans would avoid being associated with at all costs, such as ‘supporting terrorism’, ‘promoting extremism’, ‘glorifying martyrdom,’ ‘anti-Semitic’ and ‘anti-American.’ These terms set up a framework that makes it impossible to exhibit Palestinian art without extremely negative associations that are not only blatantly false, but are unsubstantiated by the art itself.

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<sup>18</sup> From a KQED interview with Michael Krasny on the radio program *Forum*, April 12, 2005. Archives of the program can be found online at [www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org).

<sup>19</sup> Axtman, Kris, *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 28, 2003.  
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0528/p02s02-ussc.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Roychoudhuri, Onnesha, *Mother Jones*, May 11, 2005.  
[http://www.motherjones.com/arts/feature/2005/05/palestinian\\_art.html](http://www.motherjones.com/arts/feature/2005/05/palestinian_art.html)

<sup>21</sup> Fifield, Mary, Michniewicz, Margaret *Vermont Woman*, March 2006  
[http://www.vermontwoman.com/articles/1205/made\\_in\\_palestine.shtml](http://www.vermontwoman.com/articles/1205/made_in_palestine.shtml)

Related to tension over politics in art is the secondary position that seemingly ‘political’ art occupies. There is a strong tendency to assume that art with overtly political content sacrifices the aesthetic for a greater nationalistic or propagandistic sentiment. While this may very well be true of some political art, and while there may be similar trends in Palestinian art that does so (as is the case in any country or region,) this is by no means indicative of the entirety of Palestinian art. This type of essentialism imposes a ‘negative’ categorization to Palestinian art that relegates it to this inferior position and removes it from serious consideration. This shows both a false understanding of contemporary Palestinian art, as well as a simple lack of exposure to it. As the previous exhibits discussed have shown, one can deduce from many artists’ work that the aesthetic has not been compromised, and that the artists have been able to express ‘political’ sentiments, such as resistance, steadfastness, hope for freedom from oppression and other such things, in highly sophisticated, aesthetically rigorous, and intellectually challenging ways.

The political nature of Palestinian art is not likely to diminish in the near future. Even if Palestinian artists actively choose to avoid overt politics in their work, inevitably, if they attempt to reflect on their personal, human experiences, politics will be there. Vera Tamari, a Palestinian artist, described Palestinian art in this way, “Many of the works...are not directly political, but they are political in the sense that we want to tell the story of what’s happening in Palestine. People ignore the fact that there are Palestinians who have the same potential as other people in the world, that Palestinians are like other people, that they can live, can produce art and music.”<sup>22</sup> James Harithas responded to a remark about the *Made in Palestine* exhibit being ‘caught up with politics’ with the retort that “under conditions of occupation, everything is political.”<sup>23</sup>

Another issue that comes to bear with exhibiting Palestinian art is the question of ‘balance’. Most Palestinian artists who exhibit in the United States are often asked to exhibit with Jewish or Israeli artists.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes, the intent is to create a exhibition in which both Israeli and Palestinian artists are creating art along a specific theme,<sup>25</sup> while many times, it is simply to make sure that Palestinian art does not hang alone, but is countered, explained or ‘balanced’ by an equal display of Israeli or Jewish art.<sup>26</sup> The odd thing about the issue of balance is that it has no curatorial or artistic merit. Never, in any other circumstance, would a curator insist that balance be the driving force behind an exhibit. Clearly, the political undertones and overtones of Palestinian art are such that it is difficult to show works based on artistic merit alone-- generally the common

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in an interview with Onnesha Roychoudhuri in *Mother Jones*, May 11, 2005.

[http://www.motherjones.com/arts/feature/2005/05/palestinian\\_art.html](http://www.motherjones.com/arts/feature/2005/05/palestinian_art.html)

<sup>23</sup> From a KQED interview with Michael Krasny on the radio program *Forum*, April 12, 2005. Archives of the program can be found online at [www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org).

<sup>24</sup> Artist Rajie Cook noted in an interview on February 20, 2006 that more than fifty percent of the exhibit invitations that come to him include the qualification of exhibiting with Israeli artists.

<sup>25</sup> One example of this is a project called *Piece Process*, a visual art show at ATHICA: Athens Institute for Contemporary Art, Inc. *Piece Process* included 17 Israelis, Palestinians, American Jews, Arabs and Muslims from around the U.S. and was held January 16-February 28, 2004. Palestinian artists Mary Tuma and Rajie Cook participated in this exhibit.

<sup>26</sup> I should note that this same standard of ‘balance’ is never applied to exhibiting Israeli or Jewish art.

denominator qualifier for most exhibits. Artistic creation is generally understood to be the expression of personal or collective experiences and reflections that are valid because they exist, not because they are on the right or wrong side of a particular issue, or because they project a ‘balanced’ approach to an experience.<sup>27</sup>

With the issue of balance comes a certain American naiveté that predominates in this regard, and particularly in the arts. There is a well-intentioned but misguided desire on the part of arts organizers in the United States to try to use the cross-cultural power of art to ‘bring peace’ and to ‘bridge gaps.’ This naiveté manifests itself most in the notion that if Israeli and Palestinian artists are just able to paint together, dance together, sing together, or make music together, that something gets accomplished to advance an end to the conflict. While there are certainly ways that art communicates powerfully across borders of language and ethnicity, in this particular case, the issue at hand is far more complex than merely uniting two different viewpoints in art. The heart of the matter for Palestinian artists that defines their personal life experiences is the illegal Israeli occupation that has been in place for decades and simply hanging their work side-by-side with that of Israeli artists does not change those realities. Unfortunately, what this tends to do is to create a new context for the art and force an interpretation on the viewer that was never the intention of the artists in the first place. Because these symbolic ‘unity’ gestures come about almost exclusively when the issue at hand is exhibiting Palestinian art, it then can never stand alone as its own unique expression but must be shown against the backdrop of the Israeli narrative. This has frustrated Palestinian artists, who deal with this dilemma in a number of ways. Some artists have taken the approach that they will not display their work with an Israeli artist under any circumstances whatsoever. Other artists have decided that if the Israeli artists are clearly against the occupation and understand the narrative of the Palestinian experience, then that is an acceptable exhibition partnership. For others, the choice is not to exhibit overtly political work, or to go the route of exhibiting works with a call for peace that is shared with the Israeli artists.

Institutional funding also plays a decisive role in whether or not Palestinian exhibits go forward. When the exhibit went up in Houston, it was shown in a private museum, funded through a private foundation and put together by a director who had ultimate say over the content. When the exhibit was then presented to other institutions, the main terms of refusal centered on issues of funding, and the loss of support should such a controversial exhibit go forward. Most arts institutions rely on wealthy trustees and donors to remain operational, since actual income derived is generally much smaller than expenditures. With that funding comes a level of expectation from those donors as to the content and direction of the exhibits. There is particular anxiety around exhibits that would be widely accessible to the public, as they would be at major museums or on university campuses, such as in the case of both the Wichita and the DePaul exhibits, and many are concerned with controlling that publicly accessible message. In the case of Palestinian art, the perceived message is that it glorifies terrorism and promotes anti-

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<sup>27</sup> Several curators commented on the specious nature of the ‘balance’ question by pointing out that in no other situations, do opposing ideas or narratives get exhibited together. For instance, curators would not exhibit Irish art in such a way to try to shed light on both sides of the issue, nor would they show abstract and representational art, or art by males and females together.

Semitism, both of which are anathema in the public sphere. In some cases, institutions have strong enough directors to over-ride opposition—as was eventually the case at the Ulrich. The Whitney received large amounts of hate mail and various other letters of protest and pressure when Jacir’s work was part of the Biennial, but the exhibit went forward and the Whitney disregarded the mail and chose not to inform Jacir about the protests of her work until after the show was over.

### III. Recommendations for Increased Visibility

1. *Curatorial Engagement.* It is vitally important to identify and support curators who understand or desire to understand both the context of contemporary Palestinian art, and also its artistic merit.<sup>28</sup> Curators need to have at their disposal examples of strong, sophisticated and intelligent contemporary Palestinian art.<sup>29</sup> Because Palestinian art will be subjected to additional scrutiny and assumptions and stereotypes, the more examples curators have of art that stands the tests of aesthetic merit and artistic impact, the better. To this end, artists who are able to establish themselves and break through some of the barriers to exhibiting their art should advocate for other, rising artists. As one gallery owner put it, “We always pay attention to what our artists like.” In that instance, the gallery took on another Palestinian artist at the recommendation of an artist that they already represented who was also Palestinian.
2. *Funding.* Because funding in the arts is often the determining factor in whether an exhibit goes forward or not, the need for a strong presence on boards of museums or arts organizations to advocate for greater understanding of contemporary Palestinian art is vital. When there is not a push back with funding questions, or threats to withdraw funding are not countered with increased funding or obvious pressure from interested parties, then Palestinian art will continue to be disregarded by curators who know that there will not be a sympathetic or influential member on their museum boards to advocate strongly for a particular exhibit. There is also a lack of vision in the Arab American community for how funding the arts can have a significant impact on public opinions about the region. This is not to say that the Arab American community does not give generously— but it tends to do so to more humanitarian causes, which rightfully seem much more pressing. Particularly when it comes to Palestinian art, donors are more concerned with the basic survival needs of Palestinians living under occupation, such that the arts become a luxury to be enjoyed at a different, more stable time. This unfortunately comes at great cost to artists and to establishing a serious artistic voice in the U.S. and global

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<sup>28</sup> In a recent conversation with the chief of exhibition design at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, he said, “Is there actually contemporary Palestinian art? Is it any good?” This is a good example of a substantive gap in people’s knowledge of this body of work.

<sup>29</sup> The catalogue for *Made in Palestine* is an example of an excellent piece of both scholarship and visual content that provides a compelling presentation of contemporary Palestinian art.

community. If artists are of secondary importance in their own communities, that marginalization will only increase in more hostile environments.

3. *Exhibition in non-Palestinian specific shows.* While an exhibit like *Made in Palestine* powerfully thrusts the art and the issues into the public eye, equally important is public exposure through less direct means. There are those who would be unlikely to attend an exhibit that is comprised entirely of contemporary Palestinian artists. While that may be a political or ideological choice, it can also be a matter of perceived lack of relevance or simply lack of interest. However, exhibits in which Palestinian artists are included alongside other artists of different backgrounds with overall themes that pull the exhibit together can increase exposure to Palestinian artists. This can be successful in that it can place the Palestinian experience within a global context, drawing on broad themes that most viewers can relate to or may be of more current interest, but to which Palestinian artists offer an important and unique narrative. The challenge with exhibits like this is that the works are often taken out of context and subjected to interpretations that may or may not be in line with the artists' thinking-- a risk that artists should consider when submitting their works to such shows.
4. *Exhibition in smaller venues.* An important avenue of exposure is exhibiting on a smaller scale, in communities or venues that would have less exposure to Palestinian art, where exhibits actually end up drawing more attention. The Ulrich Museum, for instance, is located on Wichita, KS. While certainly a great institution, the Ulrich is not necessarily known in the same way that other museums are known. However, the publicity and exposure that were generated through Jacir's show there meant that many more people came to see the exhibit, engaged with the issues, and went away with hopefully more understanding of what it means to be a Palestinian living under occupation. Exhibiting on college campuses is also key, as is evidenced by both the DePaul and Ulrich exhibits. On university campuses, the galleries are usually accessible to students, professors and the community at large, and exhibits get reviewed in campus and local newspapers. These are all extremely important venues for raising awareness. These types of exhibits can also be helpful in including early-career artists and establishing exhibit provenance for their work that will help to legitimate their work for consideration in other shows.
5. *Scholarship in English.* Most current writers about contemporary Palestinian art lament at some point or another in their writing the dearth of scholarly or research material on this issue. Many of them construct their research from a few resources in Arabic, from essays in exhibition catalogues and articles in various journals, but mostly, from personal interviews and encounters with the artists. This work is invaluable, and the reality is that few things will advance the U.S. exposure to Palestinian art as much as strong, articulate and thoughtful writing about it. Visual arts need literary contexts—the two go hand in hand, and the Palestinian visual narrative must be explained convincingly through the written word.

The challenge of exhibiting contemporary Palestinian art in the United States is significant. However, once exhibits go forward, they are reviewed well and the responses are overwhelmingly positive. The burgeoning of exhibits over the past several years has created positive momentum around exhibiting contemporary Palestinian art and it is imperative to capitalize on that momentum. The fact of the matter is that people are more likely to be willing to see an exhibit than to attend a heated political debate about a highly polarized issue. Art can communicate a message with a profundity unmatched by any other medium. Contemporary Palestinian art captures the full spectrum of the human experiences of exile, disorientation, dislocation, dispossession, resistance, steadfastness, and hope. It is deeply reflective, highly introspective, jarringly challenging, witty, somber, hopeful, despairing, defiant, beautiful, intimate, complex, and achingly human. Above all, it commands our attention and is worthy of our respect and deepest admiration.

**Interviews and conversations conducted with the following individuals:**

Ted Bonin, February 2006

Rajie Cook, February 2006

Samia Halaby, November 2005

Emily Jacir, April 2005

Kevin Mullins, February 2006

Mary Tuma, March 2006