



01 Texts taken from, 'Frequently Asked Questions', SFMOMA, Emily Jacir Exhibit, 2008.



Dense Objects and Sentient Viewings:

Contemporary Art Criticism and the Middle East

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At a recent exhibit at SFMOMA of Emily Jacir's "Where We Come from" (2001-2003) the museum staff felt compelled to add additional text to their usual write up. SFMOMA is committed to exhibiting and acquiring works by local, national, and international artists that represent a diversity of viewpoints and positions. Works of art can engender valuable discussion about a range of topics including those that are difficult and contested, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁰¹

Jacir's project was—in effect—an interactive photodocumentary in which she enacted various different requests from Palestinians living in the diaspora who are unable to go to Palestine. For example, she asked,

'If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?' The requests that followed ranged from the mundane to the poetic and from the specific to the expansive: 'Go to Haifa and play soccer with the first Palestinian boy you see on the street.' 'Go to the Israeli post office in Jerusalem and pay my phone bill.' 'Go to Bayt Lahia, and bring me a photo of my family, especially my brother's kids.' 'Climb Mount Carmel in Haifa and look at the Mediterranean from there.'

The final work included Jacir's snapshots along with the text of the requests she received, printed in both English and Arabic.

Clearly, museums mediate the viewing experience of art by grouping certain works together ('Islamic world', 'Middle Eastern art', 'Contemporary Art in Beirut'), by the placement of objects and installations, and by providing wall-text, for instance to provide art-historical context or an explanation of how the work was made. Yet, rather than view Jacir's work in art-historical terms of comparability—such as through ideas of diaspora, journey, and exile—the work was seen primarily through the prism of politics.

So why did SFMOMA feel obliged to provide extra-textual information about the work and about its political content? While a functionalist explanation would ask questions about the

Canan Şenol,
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museum's trustees and the possibility of a politically motivated intervention into the audience's understanding of the art work, we should consider the possibility that the curatorial staff—like much of contemporary Anglo-American art criticism—views the Middle East, and Palestine in particular as a densely saturated metonym for politics. In any case, neither interpretation is exclusive of the other.

Dense Objects

In the previous example of Emily Jacir, Palestine was constituted as a nodal point, one that reproduced the Middle East as a dense object that was at once opaque and transparent. I say 'opaque' because her work was made to represent a manifestly different or exotic world, and 'transparent' because it nonetheless conformed to certain normative conventions for viewing the Middle East.

The presentation of Jacir's work as 'purely' political is indicative of wider curatorial issues in the representation of Middle Eastern art, and perhaps even non-Western art. In particular, the reception of her work as eminently 'localized' and particular (that is to say, specific to Palestine-Israel) is indicative of wider trends that view Western art as marked by universal themes appealing to a global audience, while artworks from the Middle East and elsewhere are marked by their 'particularity', for example, war and conflict or religious traditions. 'Art', Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari insist, cannot 'be made to represent geo-political identities without falling back on extreme simplifications.'⁰²

The so-called dichotomy of the local and the global is thus shaped by a very particular geo-political understanding of the world. It is one in which 'the West' aspires to universality and globality, as the universal arbiter of aesthetic judgment, while 'the rest' are consigned to a locality that can only be admitted if they represent their identity in terms palatable to a blossoming multi-culturalism that seeks to grasp, and appropriate, cultural difference. Clearly, parallels may be found elsewhere in postcolonial and/or post-socialist contexts. Thus, Igor Zabel, formerly senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, has discussed the Russian context and the curatorial constraints surrounding the presentation of works of art that cannot be seen solely as art, but must always be inflected by their locale (a 'Russian essence', for example), while Western art exists in itself as iconic representative of 'contemporary art.'⁰³ While all contemporary art is clearly 'constitutively stained' by its location, only non-Western art is expected to have questions of identity function as a touchstone.⁰⁴ Discourses of hybridity—so highly developed in art critical discourse—only serve to buttress this false dichotomy of the local and the global by assuming a (non-Western) space of cultural purity that is cross-pollinated with a universalist cosmopolitanism.

02 Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari, 'Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed', *Art Journal*, 66: 2 (2007), 49-67 (p.50).

03 Igor Zabel, 'We and the Others', *Moscow Art Magazine*, 22 (1998).

04 See Saba Mahmood on Judith Butler's discussion of the way in which theoretical formulations, purportedly universal and abstract, are 'constitutively stained' by their examples, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 163.

In point of fact, however, certain artistic works appear to lend themselves to such dichotomous viewing, and I am thinking in particular of Shirin Neshat and Ghada Amer as the most obvious examples, and also of their prominent status in the globalized art circuit. When I refer to dichotomized or binary thinking I am talking about 'either/or' thinking—in which categories appear to be pure and unsullied, such as local/global, tradition/modernity, public/private, or politics/aesthetics. Middle Eastern artists whose work has reified such binary splits as tradition and modernity as particularly heightened in an 'Islamic' context, such as Neshat and Amer, have thus been propelled to the forefront of globalised artistic production in the biennial circuit. The absence of any sustained critique of the Eurocentric binaries underlying their artwork is nothing short of astonishing.

Shirin Neshat: 'the tyranny of culture'

Shirin Neshat's acclaimed photographic series, 'Women of Allah' (1993-1997), as well as her video trilogy provide a useful point of entry for thinking about questions of aesthetics, locality, and globality. By and large her work has received critical acclaim from art critics, curators, and scholars alike. Igor Zabel stated:

When I first saw Neshat's photographs at the 1995 'Transculture' exhibition in Venice, I immediately thought that I recognized the represented person: I 'knew' I was looking at an Islamic terrorist. But an essential part of this reaction was a feeling of a gap, an inconsistency. Because of this gap, I was able to distance myself from my first impression and recognize in them a mixture of old and more recent stereotypes and preconstructed ideas about the 'Orient,' the Middle East, and the Muslim world. The phantasmic mixture of spirituality, poetry, fanaticism, and violence did not however, disappear after this insight. Rather, it changed its role. The divided world we live in is not a fiction; representational stereotypes that function as divisive mechanisms cannot simply be dismissed. An important effect of Neshat's photography is that they prompt us to rethink our own position in this divided world and our relationship to Others.⁰⁵

05 Igor Zabel, 'Women in Black', *Art Journal*, 60:4 (2001), 17-25 (p. 25).

While Zabel is quite right to point to the way in which 'the divided world we live in' is an effect of representational stereotypes, the key question I want to pose is—in what ways do Neshat's photographs and videos conform to geo-politically normative ways of seeing the Middle East? In particular, how do they represent the 'locality' of the Middle East to the Western viewer?

In 'Rapture' (1999), an installation of two 13-minute films projected on opposite walls of a gallery, the viewer stands in the middle and observes as women and men occupy the different screens. Michael Rush discusses the installation as follows:

06 Michael Rush, 'Imperfect Lives', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 21:3 (1999), 64-71 (p. 71).

07 See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), chapter 6, on the Other as a source of fear and desire, marked by excessive enjoyment. Of the misunderstood nature of ululation see, for example, Peter Matthews who glosses it as 'the Muslim women's dreadful war whoops, echoing over the Casbah', in 'The Battle of Algiers: Bombs and Boomerangs', in *The Battle of Algiers* booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection DVD release (2004), 6-11 (p. 9).

08 Neshat, Interview with John LeKay, *heyoka magazine*. <http://heyokamagazine.com/HEYOKA.4.FOTOS.ShirinNeshat.htm>. See also her discussion of women, nature, and culture – similarly mired in stultifying binaries, Shirin Neshat and Babak Ebrahimi, 'Passage to Iran', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 24: 3 (2002), pp. 44-55.

09 Hamid Dabashi, 'Border Crossings: Shirin Neshat's Body of Evidence', in *Shirin Neshat* (Edizioni Charta, Milano, 2002), pp. 36-59.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

They stare (some sternly, some blankly) for what feels like minutes until one of them initiates an 'ululation', the persistent single-note vocalizing and wagging of tongues side to side that is unlike any other sound. To the Western eye and ear it is an extraordinary moment... Neshin [sic] places the viewer literally in the middle of the metaphoric gender wars being waged on opposite walls. Her approach is a subtle one, allowing for sympathy for both sides of this great divide.⁰⁶

Two key markers of identity stand in for the Middle East: the 'ululation', that polysemic sound so frightening and confounding to the Western ear that it constitutes the veritable mark of the other, and the metaphoric 'gender wars'.⁰⁷ 'Rapture' fits neatly into the prevailing conception of Middle Eastern societies as marked by peculiar cultural habits (ululation, veiling, and the like) and torn asunder by gender asymmetries. Perhaps these are the musings of art critics who are unfamiliar with the context and meaning of Neshat's work's – well meaning misinterpretations, if you will. But Neshat herself references her work as embodying a non-Western aesthetic and sentiment, 'an intuitive tendency to see the world with an eye that is less rational but more emotional'.⁰⁸

Hamid Dabashi, a scholar at Columbia University who has been increasingly taking up questions on Middle Eastern visual culture is perhaps Neshat's most eloquent supporter – placing questions of locality at the forefront of his nuanced readings. In a discussion of the 'global gaze' versus the 'local look', Dabashi faults both global and local audiences for misreading Neshat.⁰⁹ Viewing her artistic corpus as a series of complex border crossings, East-West, Male-Female, sanctity-sensuality, body-soul, prophetic-poetic, home-exile, he argues that her work is locally subversive (challenging the prison house of culture) and globally transgressive because of her dissident aesthetics.¹⁰

Thus, he criticizes global art critics who view Neshat and other international artists as coming from nationally distinct cultures in need of communicating their aesthetics *inter-nationally*. Rather, he views such art as defying distinct moral, political, social, and cultural boundaries. As well, he critiques the 'local look' of Iranians, Muslims, and those who claim to speak for the third world, as being bewildered because they assume the Orient and Occident as fixed distinct entities and paint a static East to a dynamic West. Critiquing those who have labeled Neshat self-Orientalizing, he states, 'it is constitutional to the very act of border crossing she performs that she must take the culturally private to the globally public'.¹¹ By performing the veil she takes the privacy of her local Iranian aesthetics to the public domain of her global audience, and in the process bypasses her global admirers and nativist critics.¹²

11 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

While I agree with many of Dabashi's points, especially that many of Neshat's admirers and detractors have missed key transgressive elements of her artwork, I cannot but disagree with his final assessment. It seems to me that even though he thinks the idea of nations and cultural units of analysis are moot – he still retains the category of culture as central, indeed going so far as to discuss the 'tyranny of cultures and the prison house of their national identity'.¹³ Dabashi himself seems to remain mired within the unit of analysis he seeks to dismiss.

The Local and the Global: the question of hybridity

In the formulation of the dichotomy local aesthetic/global audience (and one could substitute local content/global form) the category of culture defines the idea of locality as largely anthropological. That is to say, the local is equated with 'culture', 'religion', 'tradition', and 'the private' – and the global with 'modernity', 'cosmopolitanism', and the 'public' as an open sphere of exchange and debate. Thus, if we look at discussions of Shirin Neshat and Ghada Amer we can see that the 'local' Middle East (in implicit contrast to the 'global' West) comes to stand in for a series of binaries: public-private, male-female, politics-religion, tradition-modernity.

Allow me to clarify by taking an example from Ghada Amer's work: in her exhibit 'Private Room', displayed at New York City's P.S.1 in 2000, she presents:

fifteen satin garment bags suspended from a rod stretched between two walls... and shimmering with reflected light... Their sheer beauty beckoned visitors closer; the curious were rewarded with embroidered texts stitched across the surface of each suspended object.

The physical presence of heavy, life-size garment bags evokes the figures of women concealed in chadors increasingly seen in Amer's native Egypt. Amer has expressed dismay at the religious conservatism that often circumscribes the sartorial, personal, and professional choices of Egyptian women. Recalling the less constrained lives of Egyptian women in the 1970s, when her family moved to France, she laments the impact of conservative Islamic law on women's attitudes towards their own bodies. In a recent interview, she described her own experience of this effect: 'When I go home, I feel so conscious of my body, every time, conscious of the relationship to the body of everything I wear. Everything is so hidden that if you have a finger out, it becomes the focus of sexuality.' Amer has identified her work as 'a vengeance against this.' The texts embroidered on the garment bags of 'Private Room' present the multiplicity of Islamic attitudes towards women, countering the sometimes monolithic gender politics of religious conservatism. As Amer explains, she 'took all the

sentences that speak about women from the Qur'an and embroidered them in French'... The scale of the piece was partly determined by the Qur'an itself, as the number of embroidered bags was set by her wish to include every text in which women are mentioned. Setting all of the statements side by side, she highlights the diversity of viewpoints expressed in the holy book and takes issue with the narrow perspective on women promulgated by some Egyptian authorities today.¹⁴

14 Laura Auricchio 'Works in Translation: Ghada Amer's Hybrid Pleasures', *Art Journal*, 60:4, Winter 2001, 27-37, (p. 30). See also Olu Oguibe, 'Love and Desire: The Art of Ghada Amer', *Third Text*, n.55, Summer 2001, pp. 63-74.

Ghada Amer is defined by Laura Auricchio in terms of 'hybrid pleasures', but what kind of 'hybridity' is invoked in Amer or Neshat's work? To answer this question we need to explore both the forms of locality and globality that are read into their work. In both Neshat and Amer locality is configured in culturalist and gendered terms, whether as 'women concealed in chadors' or Qur'anic texts on women. The equation of locality with tradition and culture is symptomatic of a larger tendency to view the local as an anthropological artifact, while the global is marked by its modernity and contemporaneity. Quite simply, to be local is to be the object of anthropological inquiry and to be global is to be contemporary.

The only way, then, in which the local can be de-provincialized from the perspective of Western art critics is through a notion of hybridity – through Amer's translation of the Qur'anic texts into French or her use of garment bags, or through Neshat's use of a Philip Glass score, or the installation as an artistic form. Above all, however, hybridity emerges from the possibility of the *critique* of local culture. Thus, Neshat exemplifies critique by juxtaposing Forough Farrokhzad's secular feminist poetry to images of devout Muslim women; as Amer juxtaposes the Qur'an (simplistically represented as the unmediated embodiment of authoritative tradition) and its contemporary delimitation. This is why almost all descriptions of Neshat and Amer must point to their cultural hybridity (the development of a hybrid vernacular in the case of Neshat and hybrid pleasures in the case of Amer) – precisely because art critics assume that to escape the 'tyranny of (local) culture', one must be hybrid. In other words, the critique of the local must be situated in a global cosmopolitanism.

In the aforementioned discussion of Amer the art critic puts forth what she calls an optimistic notion of cultural hybridity for understanding Amer's piece and postcolonial societies more generally. Hybridity, she states, can be seen as 'revealing the essentially mixed and always unstable nature of language and social relations. Rather than presuming preexisting differences among all cultures, the artist who makes hybridity visible highlights a constant state of interaction among all cultures and

15 Auricchio, 'Works in Translation', p. 33.

16 Ibid.

shatters illusions of cultural purity.'¹⁵ Her view draws on Yuri Lotman's notion of a semiosphere marked by the 'asymmetry, heterogeneity, and interaction' of multiple languages.¹⁶

The problem with hybridity, of course, is that it actually does often assume an unsullied space of cultural purity that is cross-pollinated with a universalist cosmopolitanism – the native whose culture is disrupted by coloniality, travel, or exile. Hybridity in other words is based on a uni-directional binary model (colonizer-colonized; East-West; local-global). For example, would the notion of hybridity apply to Anglo-American artists? Is Trevor Paglen hybrid because he escapes the 'prison house' of American jingoism and militarism? Or is he simply engaged in counter-hegemonic artistic practices?

Laura Marks poses a similar dichotomy for the Beirut arts scene, discussing the 'global in the local' as the question of an international style (the contemporary 'biennale style') and local emplacement. But her account is equally marred by a Eurocentric historicist narrative – in her discussions of the temporal 'lag' in the artistic production of the region and the notion that these regions will eventually 'catch up' with new artistic and conceptual practices, such as installation and video based work.¹⁷ Her narrative is one of belatedness – the local's late arrival to the global scene of conceptual art.

The issue of contemporaneity and belatedness returns us to Igor Zabel's questioning of the implicit equation of 'Western' and 'contemporary' art within art historical criticism.¹⁸ Indeed, one can argue that this is linked to a much longer standing Enlightenment historical tradition that Reinhart Koselleck has referred to as the assertion of the 'noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous,' that is to say, the notion that diverse histories (European and non-European), although occurring simultaneously, became 'nonsimultaneous.'¹⁹

In fact, the idea of the non-simultaneity of the Middle Eastern present, or its regression, is consistently put forth by artists like Amer and Neshat themselves. Above all, their work is undergirded by a Eurocentric historicist narrative: the Pahlavi era and the Sadat era are presented, in keeping with Western historicist narratives of progress, as one of convivial socio-sexual relations. This is why their invocation of tradition is always synchronic and static rather than diachronic – marked by the complete absence or invisibility of historical change (at best) or the notion of regression (at worst). When the local is invoked by these artists and critics, in other words, it is as an ossified tradition, rather than as a living, embodied, contested tradition.

In sum, most critics view the possibility of critique – or more precisely critical artistic practice as emanating from the space of a global public sphere, one marked by hybridity, but only when produced by 'local artists.' Why presume a hermetically sealed

17 See, for example, Laura U. Marks, 'What is That and Between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut', *Camera Obscura* 54, 18:3 (2003), pp. 43-44.

18 Zabel, 'We and the Others.'

19 Coexisting cultural levels could then, through synchronic analysis be ordered diachronically, within the framework of a universal 'world history.' See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 231-288.

20 See Timothy Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', in Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 1-34.

'local' that is provincial and a 'global' that is cosmopolitan? Why not view artistic production like modernity itself, as something produced *across* the space of historical and cultural difference?²⁰

Sentient Viewings

Once critical artistic practice is understood, not as the static communication of local aesthetics to a global audience, but rather as a dynamic experience that is produced across the space of human difference, then questions of relationality become crucial.

This is part of what Susette Min has called for in our reconsideration of art itself:

Rather than see art as a materially finite object or event... [we can see that] art is also a critical and incomplete encounter. What remains to be explored further is the role of the relational within aesthetic experience. In contrast to focusing on how an autonomous object emanates the very elements that lead to the transcendent experience of a viewing subject, how might we, for example, expand on George Yudice's or Grant Kester's work on artists who engage dialogically with a community, who foster an experience that leads to the radiation, touch, conversion of an aesthetic's distributive value – an attentive looking – into the caring for the other?²¹

21 Susette Min, 'Aesthetics', *Social Text* 100, vol. 27, no. 3 (2009).

22 Jason Read develops Foucault's idea of homo-economicus as defined by an anthropology of competition (rather than exchange, as in classical liberalism) in 'A Genealogy of Homo Economicus: Neo-Liberalism and the Production of Subjectivity', *Foucault Studies* 6 (February 2009), pp. 25-36.

23 Compare Lyle Ahston Harris and the complex critique of the historical image of Sarah Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus (in his photograph 'Hottentot Venus 2000'), which places the question of audience and the spectatorial fetishised consumption of the Other at the center of the work.

In the context of artistic production in the Middle East, I suggest that we turn to the Brechtian method. If we understand the Brechtian legacy, in part, as the rejection of the notion of art as a culinary experience – one that is embodied in the notion of a 'marketplace' of ideas, art works, etc. – then we can attempt to shift away from a neoliberal model of artistic consumption and production.

By neoliberalism I refer to a social and economic system based on an anthropology of competition and the creation of a subject of interest (a self-interested individual) locked in competition.²² Within a neoliberal framework the art viewer functions as passive consumer of a cultural or geo-political experience embodied in art; while the artist sells a commodity which purveys a particular aesthetic, cultural, or political experience. This is clearly manifest in today's geo-political moment in which the production and consumption of war as an aesthetic artifact has made its appearance in insidious and unexpected ways. To posit the question, then, 'What keeps mankind alive?' is, one hopes, to subvert neoliberal subjectivity by moving towards the idea of the viewer as an accomplice in art and the artist as engaged in a collective experiment.

Thus, in our previous examples of Neshat and Amer 'locality' was offered up as an image of anthropological spectacle in which the consumption of the Middle Eastern female was as an over-determined object.²³ This recuperation of an 'indigenous subject'

in the face of a recalcitrant modernity represents the Middle East as a backwater of tradition in need of social transformation and uplift. This is in keeping with the implicit historical narratives embedded in art criticism that anxiously and condescendingly await a new Middle East – one that has 'caught up' with the West and its aesthetic, gender, or secular practices. Rather than maintain a derisive attitude towards an aesthetic object of study – viewing it as backwards or ideologically 'naïve', the analyst can take the stance of co-producer of knowledge. Within this context critique will be a dialogical encounter between the self and the other, between artist and audience, between local and global – responding to the Brechtian imperative to ethically engage the viewer, without condescension or derision, to become an active participant.

To take an example, a series of recent art interventions in 2007-2008 within the urban space of Cairo demonstrate the way in which art can transform the viewer from a passive consumer of the object towards what I am calling a 'secret sharer.' In 'Tales Around the Pavement', curated by Aleya Hamza and Edit Molnar and 'staged in the streets of downtown Cairo, seven local artists, designers and architects produced new low budget projects that subtly disrupted the urban landscape of the city by creatively reinventing some of the guerrilla-style tactics and survival strategies employed by Cairo dwellers on a daily basis.'²⁴

In 'How to Make Your Body Double Overnight' (or the 'Koshk' project), Malak Helmy transformed an abandoned kiosk into something akin to a magic box, by covering it with gold paper and creating a velvet midnight blue curtain to conceal an imaginary person behind a window. She added a sign 'write your wish, deposit it into this box, come back tomorrow and you may see what you desire' above a slit on its facade. As individuals began to submit their wishes on pieces of paper Helmy would transform them into visual images that would be displayed by the following evening on the facade of the kiosk. What transpired could have hardly been anticipated. Individuals submitted wishes that ranged from the material (a fridge, hajj, 10,000 pounds) to the fanciful (a desire to fly, dinosaurs to take over the city), to the overtly political (a revolution). Overnight the kiosk was transformed from a derelict edifice into a projective space for material, political, and social fantasies. For example, one individual scribbled on a scrap of paper:

My wish is

1- Civil disobedience

2- pomegranate juice

3- stability with no boredom

4- no mubarak, no gamal mubarak, no muslim brotherhood, no ayman nour, and no america²⁵

24 'Tales Around the Pavement' (Cairo: Contemporary Image Collective, 2008). Also noteworthy is the recent work of the Kharita collective (comprised of artists and writers Malak Helmy, Shahira Issa, and Nida Ghouse) which embodies the possibility of an ongoing engagement with neoliberal transformations in Cairo's urban fabric. By actively engaging and contesting the larger political, economic, and social forces that shape the space in which art is produced, the Kharita collective brings together an assemblage of collective thought (artists, academics, curators, architects, and urban planners) to draw attention to the 'mechanisms by which place is articulated in our imaginary and practices.' www.pericentreprojects.org

25 'Tales Around the Pavement', p. 39.

But like other urban interventions that challenge the monolithic vision of political authority and urban stability (the street hawker, the busker), the kiosk became subject to the vicissitudes of political control. Eventually, a series of interventions by Egyptian police dressed in civilian attire attempted to muffle the politically 'inappropriate' desires of the kiosk users, even going so far as to conscript the caretaker of the neighbouring building as a spy in order to smoke out politically offensive wishers. In the event, two days before the end date of the project the kiosk was vandalized – paper was removed, then the slit, then the illustrations. But as Helmy notes, 'for ten days it was a soft, ephemeral, fantastical space in the city.'²⁶

26 Ibid., p. 48.

As a space of artistic production the kiosk eschewed the notion of the artist as the sole generator of aesthetic value, opting instead to create a collective social experiment. At a formal level, it took the modular form of the kiosk – understood as the prosaic space of quotidian economic exchange – and opened it up as a space of fantasy, but one that remained intimately tied to questions of economic and social urgency. This was visible in the sheer number of requests for financial assistance or political transformation, not to mention the actual policing of the kiosk as a site of potential insurgency. As Brecht reminds us, the aesthetic representation of the complexity of socioeconomic relations and political repression can be enabled through innovations in form and technique that draw upon what is already at hand. Stated differently, it is, as Jameson notes, proof 'that reality is theoretical.'²⁷

27 Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 84–85.

Beyond a space of artistic production, the kiosk was also a site of active conglomeration, a space in which artists (at one point Helmy invited artistic collaborations in the representation of wishes), wishers, and desires could interact together, if even under the watchful eye of the repressive state apparatus. What could better embody the idea of art as 'an Experience that leads to the... conversion of an aesthetic's distributive value – an attentive looking – into the caring for the Other?' What might art mean once it enables the act of active listening (an *ecoute*, in the psychoanalytic sense)?

Bestial acts

What keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions
Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance
In keeping its humanity repressed.
For once you must try not to shirk the facts:
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.
Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*

In 'Life is Short Although the Day is Long,' Rabih Mroué choreographs a performance piece in which the viewer is made

complicit with murder, based on a monologue by Robert Olen Butler in his collection of short stories *Severance*. Butler's collection begins with the hypothesis that the human head remains conscious for one to two minutes after decapitation, and that in a heightened state of emotion individuals speak at the rate of 160 words per minute, in order to imagine the final words and thoughts of several decapitated individuals. Mroué's performance piece postulates the following to its audience (text by Bilal Khbeiz):

Death cannot reach us unless we refrain from gathering to watch it, and hence celebrate it and bless it or refuse it and condemn it... If we want to defend those condemned to death, the best means would be to refrain from watching the execution... The crime takes place once, when the blood is shed. But it also takes place another time when it is enacted and applauded... Even if no art can be equivalent to the act of killing or can show the density of the blood being shed, the applause of the public is destined to be the one capable of reproducing, with the most fidelity, the monstrousness of this death. This representation allows us to watch the crime free of any remorse. This is why, representing executions and decapitations, showing the act of beheading, only reinforces our desire to watch a crime so as to be able to condemn it better later on. Perhaps we had better decide to return home and deprive ourselves from watching executions even if that means that we will not be able to condemn anymore. This may be the victims' only chance of coming through.²⁸ In the performance Mroué and a fellow actor step out in front of the audience, time after time, bending over to offer up a head for decapitation. The audience must leave in order not to be complicit with the act of murder. Central to Mroué's piece is its dislocation of the space of performance – as one of passive consumption of image and action. What might it mean to create art that is based on the active refusal of the audience to look, see, or perceive? This active estrangement of the audience from the work of art is crucial to the piece – it requires the audience to actively admit its complicity, to refuse the pleasure of the gaze and their complicity with the order of power.

28 Rabih Mroué, 'Life is Short Although the Day is Long', 2005.

The question of temporalization is, thus, central to 'Life is Short Although the Day is Long', and its temporal unfolding is, ideally, relational. For the effective actualization of the piece, the audience must act within its diegetic time-space, rather than placidly wait for its end and applaud. Indeed, in this instance the audience's applause would simultaneously signal the applause for the death of the condemned and the recognition of the artist as sole generator of a politico-aesthetic experience. The piece

requires for its instantiation that the audience actively reject art (or beheading for that matter) as mere entertainment.

Rather than the delivery of an inert object or static performance for aesthetic consumption, both 'Life is Short Although the Day is Long' and 'How to Make Your Body Double Overnight' place the relational at the center of their mode of operation. They thus enable artistic practices that disrupt or dislocate the supposed distance between artist and audience, reality and theory. They do so by productively dislocating the stage or the installation as a pristine and hermetic space of artistic autonomy that is to be passively consumed. Such work resists the production of locality as an identifiable space of difference to be consumed by a voracious globality. In so doing, they replace the static synchronic relationality of the global consumption of locality, with a relationality that is based on the possibility of art as a scene of action.

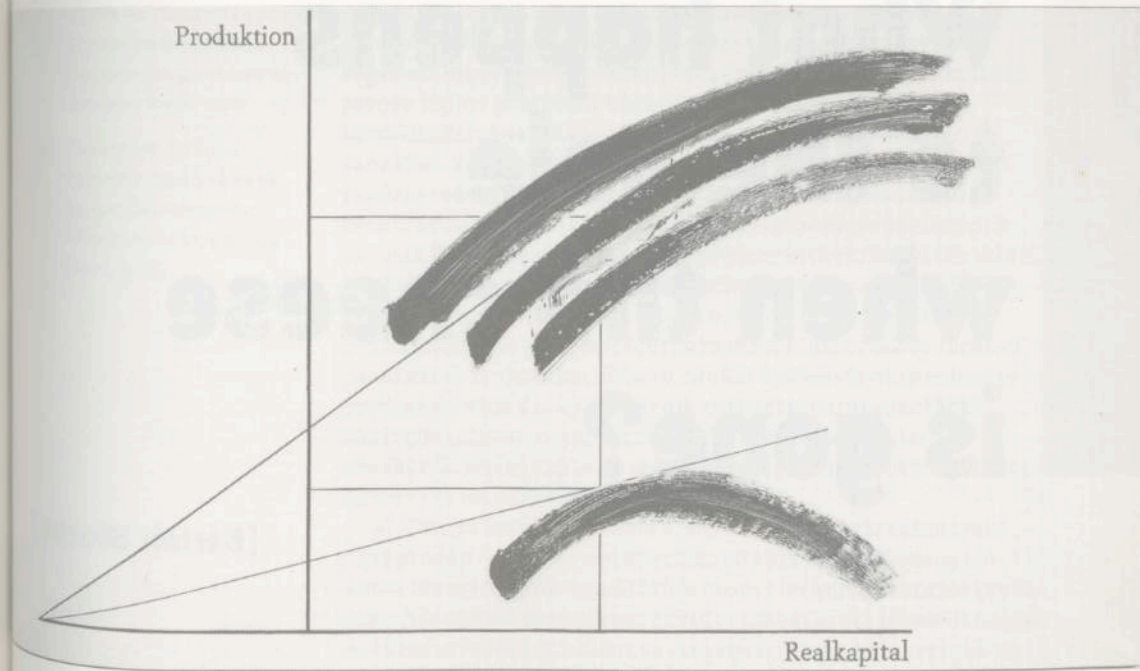
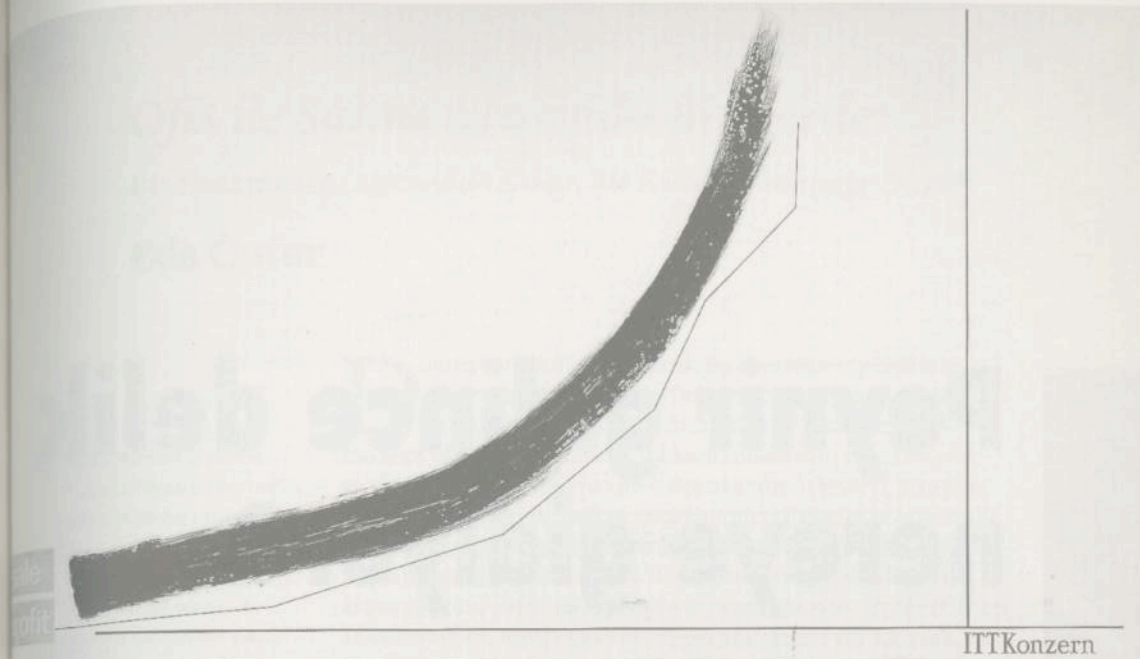
In keeping with the Brechtian spirit, then, we must continue to ask how art can help to visualize power and its obscene excess, yet also avoid 'the aestheticisation of poverty and suffering - which would just be another form of exploitation in the generation of artistic value.'²⁹ In the examples of Helmy and Mroué, we saw how artistic practices that disrupt or subvert the space of installation and performance can undo the neoliberal conception of the artist as the seller of a commodity that conveys a particular aesthetic, cultural, or political experience and the viewer as passive consumer of a cultural or geo-political experience embodied in art. If art can have the capacity to 'foster an experience', to 'anticipate a community to come' or 'to expose social dissensus',³⁰ then perhaps it may have to forego its position as autonomous object and the artist as autonomous agent. ✖

29 Milica Tomić, 'Reading Capital', 2005.

30 Min, 'Aesthetics'; Jacques Rancière, 'The Misadventures of Critical Thinking', lecture transcription, *Aporia*, 24:2, 2007, p. 32.

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KP Brehmer, *Reel Sermaye - Üretim | Real Capital - Production*, 1974