

PERMANENT TEMPORARINESS

| SANDI HILAL |
Alessandro Petti

AL MASHA/COMMON

MADAFEH/HOSPITALITY

BORDERS

MUJAWAARA/NEIGHBORING

CAMP

PARTICIPATION

CONFESSION

PROFANATION

DECOLONIZATION

REPRESENTATION

EXILE

RETURNS

HERITAGE

TAWTIN/NORMALIZATION

The Arabic term *al masha* refers to communal land equally distributed among farmers. Masha could only exist if people decided to cultivate the land together. The moment they stop cultivating it, they lose its possession. It is possession through a common use. Thus, what appears to be fundamental is that, in order for this category to exist, it must be activated by common uses. Today we may ask if it is possible to reactivate the cultivation of the common, expanding the meaning of cultivation to other human activities that imply the common taking care of life. The Arab Revolts that started in 2010 have shown various ways in which al masha can be reclaimed and reactivated. Al masha is different from “the public.” The state apparatus mediates the existence of the public, whereas al masha exists beyond state institutions. The public is a space that is given to people by structures of power, whereas al masha is a space created by the interaction of people. Public space can exist without people. Al masha only exists if people are constantly producing it.

AL MASHA/Common

P. 117, 143, 167, 191, 201, 219, 241,
251, 331, 339, 359

The border is not a line. It is a space with depth. The materials it is made out of are the same as those of cities, just used differently; a retaining wall made out of reinforced concrete serves as a barricade. Inside the border, the rules are few, but essential. All flows are strictly monitored and controlled. The border is a machine that tears apart everything that crosses it, both objects and people, into separate, classifiable elements, only to put them back together again, in one way or another, when they exit. The border machine is interactive architecture. It changes depending on the citizenship of the person who crosses over it. As a prototype of biopolitical architecture, maybe in its purest form, the border becomes more or less porous depending on the nation it belongs to. A regulating device that mediates between birth and nationhood, it constructs and deconstructs itself depending on the relationship that each individual has with the state.

BORDERS

P. 75, 89, 191, 201, 219

Refugee camps should not exist: they represent a crime and a political failure. For over a century, the social and political experiments that are the camps have not remained confined inside their walls and fences. They have contaminated and undermined the Western notion of the city as a civic space in which the rights of citizens are inscribed and recognized. Camps are established with the intention of being demolished. They are meant to have no history and no future; they are meant to be forgotten. The history of refugee camps is constantly being erased, dismissed by states, humanitarian organizations, international agencies, and even by refugee communities themselves in fear that any acknowledgment of the present undermines their right of return. The only history that is recognized within refugee communities is one of violence, suffering, and humiliation. Yet life and culture in the camp exists, and should be understood, beyond suffering and marginalization.

CAMP

P. 201, 219, 241, 251, 331

Foucault tells us that we live in a confessional society. We like to be interviewed, our dreams to be known, our past investigated, our biographies written, our faces photographed. The confession, once a practice confined to churches, is today prevalent throughout society. There is no need for a priest to confess our sins. With confession, there is automatic absolution.

CONFESSION

P. 181, 293

After the Second World War, decolonization emerged as a powerful cultural and political process to liberate many countries from direct European colonial control and reshape power relations. It was a moment of great hope, but also great disillusionment. Architecture plays a crucial role in the processes of both colonization and decolonization: in organizing spatial relations, expressing ideologies, and serving as evidence for political and cultural claims. The analysis of the ways in which colonial architecture has been re-utilized is a new arena for understanding broader political and cultural issues around national identity and exile, senses of belonging and alienation, and mechanisms of social control and urban subversion. Decolonization is the starting point to understanding the globalized present and the associated conditions of exile, displacement, migration, revolt, and struggle against oppression, with which a convincing conceptual vocabulary can be produced and exercised in today's struggles for justice and equality.

DECOLONIZATION

P. 143, 157, 167, 181, 293, 303

Rather than being in a constant state of postponement—delaying action until a particular time has come—exile can be mobilized as an operational tool to transgress borders and forced dislocation. Exile and nationalism both stem from and respond to the same modern condition of alienation and its subsequent search for identity. Whereas nationalism tries to create collective identities of belonging to an imagined community, a political community of exile is built around the common condition of non-belonging, of displacement from the familiar. As a political identity, exile opposes the status quo, confronts a dogmatic belief in the nation state, and refuses to normalize the permanent state of exception in which we live. Exile demands to be thought as a radical, new foundation for civic space.

EXILE

P. 75, 201, 251, 331

For some, heritage freezes time, space, and culture, reducing buildings to spectacular objects for contemplation and consumption. Yet conservation also pertains to the contested space in which identity and social structures are built and demolished. Heritage has become a battlefield where the understanding of culture, history, and aesthetics has been and continue to be reshaped. Who has a right to define what constitutes heritage?

HERITAGE

P. 143, 241, 251, 293, 331

In order to be accepted in foreign countries, refugees are expected to constantly perform the role of the “perfect guest.” Access to public space is thus a challenge. Turning private spaces, such as the living room, into social and political arenas, is often a response to this limitation of political agency in the public realm. Located between the domestic and the public, *al madafeh* is the Arabic term for the room dedicated to hospitality. It is the part of the private house that has the potential to subvert the relationship between guest and host, and give different political and social meanings to the act of hospitality. Al madafeh opens itself to the foreigner, the outsider.

MADAFEH/HOSPITALITY

P. 117, 303, 359

How can we live, express, interact, think, and converse beyond professional terminologies, academic categories, and the logic of institutions? For Munir Fasheh, *mujawaara* is a form of organization without hierarchy. Mujawaara is a medium of learning. It is a basic ingredient in stitching together the social, intellectual, and spiritual fabric of communities. Mujawaara embodies the spirit of regeneration in the most important aspect of life: learning. It demonstrates that another vision of education is possible.

MUJAWAARA/NEIGHBORING

P. 117, 219, 303, 331, 339, 359

Participation in refugee camps or informal settlements is often understood exclusively through the lens of relief, and architecture as a tool to react to immediate needs and emergencies. This frame establishes asymmetrical relationships between organizers and the participating community, reducing them to “relief recipients” who should be grateful and endorse the attempt of those who are there to help them. In order to challenge this asymmetry, participation needs to operate as a tool to negotiate conflict within different sectors of the community. “The community” is often perceived as one solid entity in need of help and support. Such conceptions do not permit practitioners to effectively engage with “communities” themselves and their different power structures, needs, and agendas. Participation is about finding a new balance between existing power structures. Participation should not escape conflict if it aims to redistribute power.

PARTICIPATION

P. 117, 219, 303, 339, 359

Giorgio Agamben proposes the idea of “profanation” as a strategy to restore things to common use. To profane does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them. To profane is to trifle with separation lines, to use them in a particular way. If to sacralize is to separate—to bring common things into a separate, sacred sphere—then its inverse is to profane, to restore the common use of these things. Decolonizing architecture, therefore, does not only mean to dislocate power, but to use its destructive potential to reverse its operation and subvert its uses. It is, accordingly, important to distinguish between secularization and profanation. Secularization leaves power structures intact; it simply moves from one sphere to another. Profanation, instead, manages to deactivate power and restores the space that power had confiscated to common use.

PROFANATION

P. 157, 167, 201, 251, 293

Contemporary cities and territories have often been described as fluid spaces, without borders, lacking any exterior, and continuously traversed by flows. Interconnected global cities form an autonomous transnational space. There exists a rhetoric and an imaginary tied to globalization, to this new freedom of movement, and to the elimination of distances made possible by new electronic and mechanical infrastructures. These representations of the urban and territorial reality literally implode when things fail to work as they are supposed to, when something goes wrong. The system of representation thus plunges into crisis, revealing all its inadequacy.

The notion of “return” has defined the diasporic and extraterritorial nature of Palestinian politics and cultural life since the Nakba. Often articulated in the “suspended politics” of political theology, it has gradually been blurred in the futile limbo of negotiations. Return is a political act that is practiced in the present as well as projecting an image into an uncertain future. “Present returns” thus ground an ideal in present day material realities. These practices necessitate the adoption of a stereoscopic vision that navigates the complex terrain between two places—the space of refuge and the destroyed site of origins. Both are extraterritorial spaces, not fully integrated into the territories that surround them. The former is defined as “absentee property,” and the latter as a “United Nations run area,” a sphere of action carved out of state sovereignty. Refugee life is suspended between these two sites, always double.

RETURNS

P. 117, 157, 167, 191, 201, 219, 241,
251, 293, 303, 339

Opposition to the normalization of life in the camps and the resistance to settling (*tawtin*) has shaped the experience of refugees for decades. Palestinian refugees have always opposed any assimilation into their surrounding cities, fearing that their right of return might be undermined. At the same time, host governments have opposed normalization in fear of having to deal with the integration of thousands of people, often perceiving them as a threat. Both of these approaches are based on the assumption that as long as refugees are living in horrible conditions, their suffering would put pressure on the international community to enact their right to return. But forcing refugees to live in limbo and destitution has not brought them closer to returning. Why should better living conditions and access to rights in their host countries necessarily undermine the right of return? Today, refugees are re-inventing social and political practices that improve their everyday lives without undermining the exceptionality of the camp. Camps have become semi-autonomous zones where different social, political, and spatial structures have emerged; a fragment of a city yet to come.

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INTRODUCTION

SPARKS IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIA NADOTTI	35
SEPARATION IN CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES ESCHE	45
RETROSPECTION IN CONVERSATION WITH SALWA MIKDADI	53
RECOLLECTION IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT LATHAM	56

INTERLUDE I

ON THE BORDER	67
---------------	----

STATELESS NATION 2003–2007	74
STATEMENTS	80

THE ROAD MAP | 2003

FROM A TO B	94
ASYMMETRIES	97

INTERLUDE II

TEMPORARY MANDATE	109
-------------------	-----

FAWWAR SQUARE 2008–2014	116
ROOFLESS	122

INTERLUDE III

RESIDENCY IN CONVERSATION WITH EYAL WEIZMAN	133
DECOLONIZATION IN CONVERSATION WITH OKWUI ENWEZOR	139

P'SAGOT | 2008

HOW TO RE-INHABIT THE HOUSE OF YOUR ENEMY	146
---	-----

OUSH GRAB | 2008

RETURN TO NATURE	160
------------------	-----

BOOKS OF PROFANATIONS | 2009

THE BOOK OF RETURNS	170
---------------------	-----

RAMALLAH SYNDROME | 2009

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING NORMAL?	182
---------------------------------	-----

THE RED CASTLE AND THE LAWLESS LINE | 2010

LAWLESS LINES	194
---------------	-----

A COMMON ASSEMBLY | 2011

PARLIAMENTS IN EXILE	204
----------------------	-----

INTERLUDE IV

CAMPUS IN CAMPS: A UNIVERSITY IN EXILE 209
HOUSE OF WISDOM | BY MUNIR FASHEH 215

SHU'FAT BASIC GIRLS' SCHOOL | 2012–2014 218
NOTES ON PARTICIPATION 224

THE CONCRETE TENT | 2014–2015 240
INAUGURATION 246

REFUGEE HERITAGE | 2014–2017 250
THE ARCHITECTURE OF EXILE | IV.B 260
ANNEX 5 265

INTERLUDE V

DAAR IN EXILE 289

ITALIAN GHOSTS | 2014– 290
THE AFTERLIVES OF FASCIST-COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE 298

THE TREE SCHOOL | 2014 302
THE BAOBAB'S RETURN 305
MUJAWAARA 317

THE BOOK OF EXILE | 2016 330
ONE HUNDRED STORIES | BY MURAD ODEH 334

AL NADA SOCIAL HOUSING | 2016– 338
DESTRUCTION, DISPLACEMENT, RECONSTRUCTION, AND RETURN 344
AGENCY | IN CONVERSATION WITH RANA ABUGHANNAM 349

AL MADAFEH/THE LIVING ROOM | 2016– 358
THE RIGHT TO HOST 362

CODA 371

RETROSPECTION | IN CONVERSATION

WITH SALWA MIKDADI | *Abu Dhabi* | 2018

SANDI HILAL What were your motivations and expectations in inviting us for an exhibition at the New York University (NYU) Abu Dhabi Campus Art Gallery?

SALWA MIKDADI I've been interested in the collective dimension of your work from the start, so I invited you to come to the campus. I remember that you were very skeptical about the possibility of having such an exhibition, not just within the American context of NYU Abu Dhabi, but also the Gulf Region. I understood your hesitation, but I also knew that the university operated as a very strong space for the liberal arts, and with an international body of students and faculty that would be very open to such an exhibition. I wasn't exactly sure how to develop this, but from our discussions it became clear that there was a space for you, and that the whole campus was open to such questioning of ideas. All of this fit perfectly within the academic environment.

Our first collaboration was in 2009 when I curated the first Palestinian collateral exhibition "Pavilion" in Venice. It was an event that offered great visibility, but like all such "art festivals," the experience was limited in time and space. There's no time to question and engage with the public. Our exhibition at NYU Abu Dhabi not only engaged the public visiting the campus, but, more importantly, the students themselves were able to discuss a set of topics over a period of four months. The faculty integrated subjects addressed in the exhibition in their classroom discussions; they held classes in *The Concrete Tent* as well as in other spaces such as the circle around *The Tree School*, Campus in Camps' *Collective Dictionary* in the reading room, and the experience inside *Ramallah Syndrome*. There was an on-going dialogue.

In 2006, when I was working in Jerusalem and thinking about the Venice exhibition, I was meeting with artists living in Palestine and much of what I saw was, justifiably, a reaction to the Israeli occupation. Very few artists had actually questioned their relationship with governmental institutions and political representation. You were the only ones who were consistently engaged in the collective dimension. This is when we started the conversation that led to the realization of *Ramallah Syndrome*, which created a common space that is neither private nor public. The concept of the commons has always been central to your practice.

ALESSANDRO PETTI I would like to follow up on what you were saying in relation to our desire and worries about thinking of a "retrospective" exhibition. We've always been much more interested in working on projects and engaging in research. However, after ten years of continuously generating projects, it also became important to look back and reflect on how they could become activated in different spaces and times. The question of the location of the retrospective was important to us. As you've

mentioned we were concerned about the context of the Emirates, but at the same time, we did want it to first take place in the Arab world first. Our worries completely disappeared the moment we arrived and started to work with the people on campus. We immediately understood that the exhibition was landing in a place where all the different themes that we have been engaged with in Palestine were actually speaking to the site, and specifically to the temporary students and faculty.

We felt that the condition of permanent temporariness could resonate with people living in the Gulf. The conditions in refugee camps are of course radically different, but at the same time, people living in the Gulf as guest workers for their entire lives might understand the state of permanent temporariness we were speaking of. This allowed us to find an equilibrium between the fact that all the works had emerged from a specific place, Palestine, and going beyond the site-specificity of the works themselves. The exhibition was a way to create a space for discussions that were absent in the public sphere, and being embedded in an academic context increased the possibility of deepening its experience and possibilities. The works were spread around the campus to multiply the sites of discussion and debate, enabling the work to operate in a new context and speak a different language.

SM The Palestinian cause was once on top of the agenda of many Arab countries, but more recently it has become overshadowed by other regional conflicts and forced migrations. However, the resulting loss, dispossession, despair, and impermanence is commonly shared with the current crisis. *Permanent Temporariness* brings back the Palestinians' loss into the foreground and links it with other conditions that we're living in; this impermanence you mention which is so typical of our temporary lives. It is a condition I inhabit while living temporarily in Abu Dhabi. Some people only realized later on that this is not just about politics, it is not just about the Palestinian condition, but much more. Your work raises an issue that has become central to life in the second decade of twenty-first century.

SH I would like to ask you, Salwa, about your own history in the Arab world. You told me once that your father went to Kuwait in the 1950s to set up the school curriculum for the entire country, but that you stayed in Jerusalem to study. So, since your childhood, the Arab world for you has contained both Palestine and the Gulf. Now, after having been in so many other Arab countries and in the West, you are contributing, similarly to your father, to shaping culture in the Gulf. Could you tell us more about your history in the Gulf and in Palestine and how you move between the two? The exhibition tries to do this in many ways as well.

SM You're right about my father, and actually my mother worked in education as well. My father helped establish the educational system in Kuwait. He travelled across the Arab world, from Gaza and Beirut to Baghdad and Cairo hiring teachers to teach in Kuwait. It was interesting that Kuwait served as a model in education for the rest of the Gulf. Both of my parents worked there, but my mother wanted me to study in

the same school she graduated from in 1937 to maintain the family ties to Jerusalem, where she was born. The first time I saw a refugee camp was when I accompanied a family friend who was a social worker with UNRWA on his daily visits to refugees. For a nine-year old, the ride in the bluish-grey UNRWA car was an experience in itself. Yet, what was most memorable was the encounter with the women refugees, several of whom were wearing beautifully embroidered dresses. Some were still living in tents. These trips became more frequent and I became interested in the costumes and their origins. That was what first drew me to Palestinian heritage.

In Kuwait, my first experience with culture and heritage was through my father's work on the first museum in Kuwait and a memorable trip to visit recently excavated archaeological sites. As a child growing up between Kuwait and Jerusalem, I felt that both cities together were home; a combination of experiences linked by the adventure of flying from Qalandia airport to Kuwait and back. The war in 1967 shattered this construct and separated my worlds. Returning to the Gulf and living in the UAE was like returning home, but going to Jerusalem is another matter.

AP Coming back to the exhibition—as you know, we had these very important and intensive weeks in Abu Dhabi before the opening. It's always very strange when you work so hard on something as you imagine it, but then, of course, it's a creature that has a life of its own. Do you have a sense of what happened after we left?

SM There is an important form of curation that takes place after the opening. It's only then that critical discourse activates each installation. Ideally, I would have recorded the many conversations that took place around them, such as the meetings that took place in *Al Madafeh/The Living Room*. Both Bana Kattan and I tried to engage the faculty and student clubs with the topics prior to the opening to ensure such activation of the spaces. The exhibition became part of the campus life, through the *madafeh* but also even after the closing of the exhibition; *The Concrete Tent* remains on campus, we hope as a "permanent" structure, The Tree of Knowledge from *The Tree School* is rooted in the campus, and *The Book of Exile* is in our library, still on exhibit. *Permanent Temporariness* became part of the university. But we could only do that because the conceptual framework of your work and its decolonization of space and discourse, which encouraged a wider and more egalitarian conversation that is relevant to all audiences.

Curating *Permanent Temporariness* was a collaboration between us as a team of four curators and many collaborators. Your work has been curated over many years in collaboration with communities living in different camps, with the residency program, and other communities across the West Bank. There's a quote by Ernst Fischer in the book *The Necessity of Art* where he says: "art is the individual's way back to the collective." Your work reminds me of this book, which is how I view your art. The on-going challenge is how to give a voice to all these collaborators during the exhibition and how to historicize the discourse.



To obtain a full copy of the book, please go to [Art and Theory Publishing](#).

Since their first work, *Stateless Nation* at the Venice Biennial in 2003, and throughout their more recent architectural interventions in refugee camps, the artistic practice of Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti has explored and acted within and against the condition of permanent temporariness that permeates contemporary forms of life. In their ambitious research and project-based practice, art exhibitions are both sites of display and sites of action that spill over into other contexts: built architectural structures, the shaping of critical learning environments, interventions that challenge dominant collective narratives, the production of new political imaginations, the re-definition of words, and the formation of civic spaces.

This book is organized around fourteen concepts that activate seventeen different projects. Each project is the result of a larger process of collaboration and is accompanied by individual and collective texts and interviews that contextualize and expand the reach of every intervention. Contributors to projects and texts include Maria Nadotti, Charles Esche, Robert Latham, Salwa Mikdadi, Eyal Weizman, Okwui Enwezor, Munir Fasheh, Grupo Contrafile, Murad Odeh, and Rana Abughannam. Edited by Maria Nadotti and Nick Axel.



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