

Abstract

The Riwaq Biennale marked Riwaq's new approach and image of openness, networking and dialogue, not only with cultural heritage organisations, but also with the community at large, locally and internationally. This essay sheds light on the biennales in Palestine that have a responsive/radical perception of space (where things happen) and time (when things happen and for how long), and against the practices of artistic production and biennales that lend themselves to already formulated agendas. I critically engage with the Riwaq Biennale (RB) and Qalandiya International (Qi) to further speculate on the role of biennales and art in changing not only the content and form, but also the management modalities and the managerial structures of events in the public sphere. Biennales in Palestine, I claim, have a management twist to the artistic events and artistic production, and are therefore permanently oscillating between creative (thinking) and non-creative (making) artistic work. This twist acknowledges the inherent dialectical relation in the field of artistic production that strives to alternately celebrate and conceal the art and the practical world behind it. This turn also tries to make visible the structures that shape the lives and the practices of people, while making use of symbolic enterprise to point at the debilitating conditions that the artists, the managers and the audiences alike have to endure.

Biennales in Palestine: Thinking Art and Making Art

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Introduction

In 2005, Riwaq – Centre for Architectural Conservation launched the first edition of the biennale that was named after the institution itself. The Riwaq Biennale marked the NGO's new approach and new image of openness, networking and dialoguing, not only with cultural heritage organisations, but also with a community at large, locally and internationally. This essay sheds light on biennales in Palestine that have a flexible/radical perception of space and time, and against the practices of artistic production. In other words, biennales that lend themselves to already formulated agendas, and biennales that implicitly and sometimes explicitly are complicit in politics/Politics locally and internationally. I critically engage with Riwaq Biennale (RB) and Qalandiya International (QI) as a medium to further speculate on the role of the biennale, civil society and art in changing not only the content but also the form and managerial structures of events in the public sphere.

Riwaq Centre and Mainstreaming Heritage in Palestine

In Palestine, most cultural projects are carried out by civil society organisations. The long years of Israeli occupation left Palestine with vibrant and active non-governmental bodies that functioned as a shadow government in the absence of a formal political body. Heritage conservation is part of these projects: Riwaq, and similar NGOs throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, implement most of the historical preservation initiatives. The lack of human and financial resources within the newly established Palestinian National Authority (PNA) created a fertile environment for civil society to intervene and establish itself as the main player in heritage discourse.

Since 1991, Riwaq has recognised the challenging complexities of preserving Palestinian collective memory through projects that document and restore

architectural heritage sites across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Between 1994 and 2004, Riwaq embarked on the “Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine” project, resulting in the publication of detailed histories, maps, and photos of over 400 villages and towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Parallel to these documentation efforts, Riwaq has been exploring ways through which heritage could be part of everyday life in Palestine. Riwaq’s “Job Creation Through Conservation” programme, for example, shifted the concept of architectural conservation from an activity exclusive to affluence, to one that provides skill-building opportunities and development of local economies. Realising the needs of communities and challenges to heritage (most importantly the lack of legal protection, the lack of human and financial resources, and the lack of heritage awareness among average Palestinians), Riwaq shifted its efforts from the conservation of single historic buildings to an integrated approach that engages entire sites and communities. This new approach has been manifested through “50 Historic Centres”, a project that aims at protecting 50 per cent of the 50,230 historic buildings in Palestine by rationalising resources and prioritising 50 villages in Palestine.¹

Acknowledging the importance of the public sphere² as a means for communal interaction and arenas for social change, Riwaq initiated the Riwaq Biennale (RB) in 2005 and co-founded Qalandiya International (Qi) in 2012 as multidisciplinary platforms that address urgent topics and community concerns. Now in their fifth and third editions respectively, these platforms triggered a multitude of collaborations within and beyond Palestine.

Riwaq’s approach integrates a combination of interventions – physical (restoration, adaptive reuse, rehabilitation...), non-physical (documentation, research, publications...) and cultural (RB, Qi, workshops...) – aims at mainstreaming cultural heritage among the general public. Cultural interventions in the public sphere, such as the RB and the Qi, aspire to

produce caring and culturally conscious individuals, who will have a higher appreciation of the historical built environment and therefore contribute to the protection and conservation of heritage in Palestine.

Biennale: Unconventional Entry Point to a Conventional Question

Large-scale exhibitions are often defined as “biennales” regardless of their periodicity, in honour of the Venice Biennale (initiated in 1895). Since its establishment as a format, biennales have striven to exhibit art of the present and to narrate places and cultural contexts in which art is created, emphasising the questions and discussions presiding over the production of art. According to Timothy Michel though, biennales risk the reduction of the world to a system of objects, but they still have the capacity of condensing and connecting places and works of art, as well as diverse ideas about nations and cultural identity, in an exhibition context.³

In her article “Looking at Biennials”, Marieke van Hal asks: “Where does Riwaq Biennial belong in the landscape of biennials?” And she concludes: “The Riwaq Biennial doesn’t fit into any categorisation. Perhaps categories [as Charles Esche, the co-curator of the 3RB suggests] are tragedies, in the end”.⁴ Khalil Rabah, the director of four RB editions (the first, second, third and fifth) in an interview with Mai Abu El-Dahab (for *Bidoun*, in autumn 2006), puts his intentions behind the making of the RB as follows:

*One of the things I am trying to do and the reason I am trying to have a biennale in Palestine, is because maybe we will recognize the urgent need for such an industry, cultural production, knowledge dissemination, and participation. You know when we started to establish the al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem, people were asking us what a contemporary art foundation was in the first place.*⁵ (emphasis added by author)

In internal discussions with the Riwaq team, Rabah insists on the possibilities inherent in a structure like that of the biennale to help Riwaq achieve its goals. He always asserts, “What can Riwaq do with the biennial that Riwaq cannot do without?” In other words, it is concerned with the offerings of a biennale platform that can help Riwaq pursue or advance its “non-artistic” agenda. Riwaq’s agenda is part of the civil society heritage organisations’ agenda, which has been the documentation, protection and conservation of built historic environment, and to use it as a resource to draw on in its socio-economic politico-cultural development project. In this way the heritage agenda fundamentally coincides with the nation-building process in post-Oslo era Palestine. Therefore there are implicit and explicit goals attached to the RB; for artist Rabah, it is “the urgent need for such an industry.” For Riwaq, it is to set the institution’s agenda closer to that of average Palestinians. Therefore, the RB is in effect an unconventional entry point (art) to an essentially conventional question (heritage).

1. A historic centre is considered one of the most significant centres in Palestine if its fabric is still intact, the concentration of historic buildings is great, the architectural and historical value of the centre is evident, and it has the possibility of serving as part of socio-economic-cultural clusters in Palestine.

2. I use public sphere, following Jürgen Habermas, to note the area where individuals can come together and freely discuss societal problems, and through these discussions influence political action and change. Habermas argues that public sphere can be constituted in “discussions (lexis)... or in common action (praxis)”. Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1991. p. 3.

3. Martini, Federica. “One Biennale, Many Biennials”. In *Just another Exhibition: Histories and Politics of Biennials*. Vittoria Martini and Federica Martini (eds.). Milan: Postmedia Books. pp. 99-100.

4. Rabah, Khalil (ed.). *Geography 102: Biennale*. Ramallah: Riwaq. 2009. pp. 130-131.

5. Rabah, Khalil. “Geography 403: with Mai Abu El-Dahab”. In Rabah, *ibid.* p. 113.

Riwaq Biennale: Historical Background

The RB was launched in 2005 as a way to bring in audiences to Riwaq's sites of intervention. The biennale put forward to create awareness about Riwaq's agenda predicated upon the importance of heritage protection and development among the general Palestinian public, which knows very little about Riwaq, or about heritage in Palestine for that matter. By then, Riwaq had been working for fourteen years, compiling the registry of historic buildings in Palestine, and had implemented the creation of tens of jobs through restoration projects that touched upon the lives of the marginalised sectors of Palestinian communities in the most vulnerable areas of rural Palestine.

The First Riwaq Biennale

The first Riwaq Biennale, which took place between 9 June and 6 September 2005 focused on “architecture: installations and interventions”, evolving around talks, walks, and interventions, and paved the grounds for the coming RBs. The first RB, remembered with a colourful logo on T-shirts and gigantic banners in historic centres⁶ (see Figs. 1-3) aimed at opening up the heritage sites for Palestinians to appreciate, enjoy, and rethink their relation to the built and unbuilt environment. The first RB can be called an “in-side-in” platform, in other words it drove Palestinians through Palestine and led them through curated visits to villages where Riwaq has been able to create jobs through restoration projects.



Fig 1 Banner at al Mazraa Historic Centre-1RB-2005



Fig 2 T-shirt-1RB-2005



Fig 3 Gathering at Dair Ghassana Historic Centre-1RB-2005

The Second Riwaq Biennale

The second Riwaq Biennale was titled “To set in motion” and ran from 17 until 24 October 2007 in various venues throughout the West Bank and aimed at challenging the perceptions and expectations of what a biennale can be – other than monumental spectacles and eye-catching installations. The second RB brought creative forces from beyond Palestine into the bounded territories, and momentarily and temporally engaged with debates and knowledge exchange that cut across disciplines and

perhaps had impact beyond Palestine. Politically speaking, it undermined colonial measures and put forward a new reading of a falsified history and fragmented geography by considering Palestinian practices as part of broader heritage and art industry. The second RB can be described as an “outside-in” platform, as it brought experts, artists and planners from outside Palestine into formal and informal settings (such as seminars, symposiums, tours, hikes...) to discuss Riwaq’s approach and the state of heritage, art and architecture in Palestine (see Figs. 4-6).

6. Charles Esche, co-curator of the third RB comically writes, “Was the first Riwaq Biennial already fully formed? All we have of it, as far as I know, is a T-shirt”. Esche, Charles. “Dissemblance or Sincerity?” In Rabah, *ibid.*, p. 33.



Fig 4 Logo-2RB-2007



Fig 5 Conference at Birzeit University-2RB-2007



Fig 6 Tour in Ramallah Historic Centre-2RB-2007

The Third Riwaq Biennale

“A Geography: 50 Villages” ran from 3 June until 30 September 2009, at the Palestine pavilion in Venice and from 12 until 16 October 2009 at various venues in Palestine. I had a speculative spirit about the biennale identity itself – a biennale as an artwork, an artistic imaginary of the concrete agenda of connecting the fragmented enclaves of Palestine, by way of a new reading of territory and landscape, coupled with Riwaq’s large-scale plan for regenerating the 50 most significant historic centres in Palestine (see Figs. 7-9). “What if”, co-curator of the third RB Reem Fadda writes, “this idea can be understood as an artwork itself, leaving room to speculate on its own conception, validity and continuity?” This radical and controversial understanding of the biennale as an artwork rather than a home to artworks made the biennale into a structure that questions itself. Riwaq’s concrete takes on heritage preservation were translated into “A Geography: 50 Villages” – an artwork by artist

Khalil Rabah.⁷ The shift (from the concrete goal of restoring 50 villages to the symbolic representation of this imaginary in “A Geography: 50 Villages”) allowed for multiple readings of the project itself. It put the offerings of the biennale at the service of an already established agenda, defying the artistic production business as usual (claiming to be free from agendas or limitations). The performing of the third RB within the 53rd Venice Biennale of Art created this tension; of what it means to be a biennale that functions outside the normative structures and yet is incorporated within the structures that it claims to depart from. Or as Reem Fadda eloquently put it: “Can we think outside the box while being immersed within it?”⁸ The third RB can be described as an “inside-outside-in” platform, by which I mean the nomadic identity the biennale occupied in its third edition, moving agents and actors across borders, constructing (a new geography of 50 villages), and dismantling fictitious boundaries and geographies (colonial measures).



Fig 7 Logo-3RB-2009



Fig 8 PNA Prime Minister at Birzeit University Conference-3RB-2009



Fig 9 50 villages postcards-installation by Khalil Rabah in Beirut

The Fourth Riwaq Biennale and Qalandiya International

The fourth RB merged with the Jerusalem Show VI to produce “Gestures in Time”, which ran between 1 and 15 November 2012, as part of the first Qalandiya International (Qi) (see Figs. 10-12). While the first three editions of RB celebrated networking and partnership with other local institutions that served as sites for the RB’s interventions, installations and activities, “Gestures in Time”, curated by Jack Persekian, gestured towards celebrating a more rigorous partnership and collaboration with sister organisations. And while maintaining the autonomy of partners’ programmes, the Qi served as a platform where these autonomous programmes were brought together within one large coordinated programme with a unifying theme – echoing the 1976 Venice Biennale.⁹ In doing so, the individual programmes gained wider publicity, more exposure and a larger audience. In terms of management, Qi departed from the “mothership” figure (of a biennale structure) to a more participatory horizontal structure. Qi’s structure can be described as “practical sociocracy”¹⁰

or “sociocracy in practice” where all partners get heard, their needs met, and decisions are collectively made. Rather than rationalising power in terms of magnitude and centralisation, power is diffused and hierarchy is dismantled to allow new models of governance to emerge. The collective selection of a theme and the production/write up of the curatorial statement for example hinted towards the possibility of co-creation of the otherwise individualistic faculty (of the curator). The involvement of all partners in the making of the statement and the selection of the theme and the visual identity of the Qi blurred boundaries between those who envision and those who create the artistic platform, the biennale.

The implementation of the fourth RB within the Qi was the end of the autonomy of the RB from the perspective of the ecology of cultural production structures in Palestine. The RB, which has been connected to heritage via Riwaq’s agenda, has become part of a larger event concerned more with visual arts, and that gathers more audiences and resources, and that, moreover, appealed to sister institutions in terms of concrete collaboration.



Fig 10 Qi visuals-1Qi-2012



Fig 11 Opening at Qalandiya village-1Qi-2012



Fig 12 Gestures in Time -Dhabiriyya underground cave museum and performance-4RB-2012

7. Artist Khalil Rabah participated with “A Geography: 50 villages”, as an artwork, in the collateral event of Palestine, within the 53rd Venice Biennale of Art.

8. Rabah, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

9. The 1976 Biennale was the point of rupture in the history of the Venice Biennale as it marked the beginning of theme-based exhibitions as a solution to the fragmented exhibition space brought about by national pavilions. See Martini and Martini, *op. cit.* p. 98.

10. Sociocracy: a theoretical system of government in which the interests of all members of society are served equally. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House Inc. See <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/sociocracy> (Accessed 2016-12-28.)

Riwaq, Riwaq Biennale and Qi

In 2014, while exploring the possibility of re-institutionalising the RB as an autonomous entity, Riwaq (the institution) partnered with the second Qi with “In Situ” – an event that, like the previous four editions of the RB, drove masses through towns in the southern West Bank enjoying curated visits to recently restored structures (see Figs. 13-15). In these events, Riwaq’s architects and site engineers were, in effect, the artists and performers of these interventions, perhaps to further complicate notions of artwork/biennale, and artist/maker. This “new set-up” would leave an impact on the future of the RB, as I will show later. In the second Qi, Riwaq as institution was part of two competitive happenings: the fourth RB and the second Qi. This double-bind relation enunciated an uncomfortable subject position for Riwaq, which on the one hand wanted to reconstitute the RB anew, and on the other hand found it awkward to depart from an initiative that Riwaq co-founded.

Art and Art Production: The Realms of the Real and Unreal

Throughout the different RB editions, there were always two complementary components that



Fig 13 in situ activity logo-2Qi-2014

went hand in hand and made up the biennale: the content of the biennale and the form through which the biennale manifested itself. That is to say, the underlying premise of the biennale and the activities that made this premise visible. By content I do not mean what happens with a specific edition of RB in terms of talks, walks and interventions, but Riwaq’s agenda or the RB’s agenda itself.

Content and form were brought together in the person of the artist Khalil Rabah who envisaged the RB and served as its director or artistic director for four editions. Rabah had a double identity: he was an architect and an artist. He acknowledges Riwaq’s politics and intentions and at the same time insists on his identity as an artist (*fannan*, as he used to say), and by extension pursues his artistic stake through the RB.

It is only by the third RB (2009) that the biennale content and form took an explicit and intentional



Fig 14 in situ tour in Hebron-2Qi-2014



Fig 15 In Situ activity at Dhabiriyya-2Qi-2014

artistic direction. The RB itself had become an art project. Charles Esche, the co-curator of the third RB, writes: “[The RBs] loosen their ties to known conditions and assume another kind of life – a life of the artwork perhaps but even this is never explicitly clarified.”¹¹

Reem Fadda, the co-curator of the third RB, writes:

What if this idea [the biennale] can be understood as an art project itself, leaving urgent room to speculate on its own conception, validity and continuity?¹² [...] So there becomes a conflation between the unreal institution (i.e. the biennale) and the very real one, which is Riwaq, and a hybrid that also is quite fascinating, which is the merger of the two together.¹³

Having a biennale that is already tied to a predefined agenda seemed to be limiting, and therefore the co-curators of the third RB found a way out of the impasse by thinking of RB as an *unreal* institution or an artwork that leaves the door wide open for speculation. The curators’ statements show that there are limits inherent to the *real* world compared to the liberating artistic world. Therefore, a tension – a dialectical relation – was created between creative and “uncreative” forces. But Riwaq and RB are equally *real*, they operate within the world, and have certain goals to achieve. It follows, then, that the division, though artistically liberating, is *artificial* and leads to confusion about the concreteness of the whole field.

In spite of the artificiality of the division,

there are certain implications to such an artistic turn for both the real institution (Riwaq) and for the unreal one (Riwaq Biennale). Riwaq gained more exposure, beyond the heritage world. Riwaq also gained more support for its heritage agenda since the RB opened new funding possibilities.¹⁴ The RB itself enjoyed a more relaxed and comfortable subject position that is closer to its intentions (outlined by artist Khalil Rabah in *Bidoun* in 2006). The conflation of (or interplay between) the *real* and *unreal*¹⁵ produced an emancipatory environment and gave Riwaq, the real institution, a speculative spirit allowing it to venture into new possibilities and approaches towards its concrete agenda. The negotiations and the superimposition of the creative forces vis-à-vis the concrete forces and practices have become part of everyday discourse within the RB field of production.

The third RB influenced the future of the RB and its relation to Riwaq and to the broader ecology (such as the Qi). Institutionalising the RB as *living art* did not pass without resistance within Riwaq, and as a result there was no fourth RB in 2011. Who is the mind, who is the muscle, who owns the RB? Is the RB an artwork? If yes, who is the author? Who does the dirty administration and funding applications and who makes the inaugural speech? Who gets mentioned and in what order? Where and when does collective ownership give way to individual artists? What is a director, artistic director, curator, coordinator, artist, consultant, discussant, assistant and technical assistant...? These questions were directed at the structure of the biennale itself, and whether it

11. Esche, *op. cit.* p. 33.

12. Fadda, Reem. “3rd Riwaq Biennale: History, the Imaginary/Nation and Living Art”. In Rabah, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

14. For example, the then Palestinian Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, addressed the third RB and pledged financial support to the “national plan” of renovating the 50 most significant historic centres.

15. Rabah’s artworks usually play around the real-factual and unreal-fictional enterprises trying to find new entry points to existing problems. “The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Human Kind” is but one of his exemplary artworks that make use of such interplay.

brought about democratic and fair conditions that recognised the contributions of a multitude of actors. With all RB's efforts to make these recognitions visible, there is already a formal code that values the artistic and creative forces more than the concrete forces that render the artistic visions possible.

The questioning of the biennale, as a structure, is in effect a questioning of the goals put forward by the biennale, since goals would not be achieved without a matching structure. Three important goals formed the skeleton of the RB's different editions. First, to challenge the notion of what a biennale is and what it can be, and therefore providing alternative meaning to this structure called "biennale". Second, to blur artificial disciplinary divides that so far hindered the possibility of bringing multiple perspectives to the table, and therefore increasing the complexity of site-specific situations in search for renewed enquiries/terminologies for emerging concerns. Third, to provide Riwaq – centre for architectural conservation – with tools, platforms and networks that were inaccessible otherwise. In short, it is about the biennale as a structure, about how things are carried out in different fields, including heritage, and about Riwaq's approach to heritage. This was not the straightforward vision and mission of the biennale, rather it has been always an unfinished business, a work in progress and a medium for thinking through. Perplexed about such structure, Charles Esche, co-curator of the third RB writes:

Khalil [Rabah] has set a scene for characters who have yet to find the script and are thinking about writing one themselves if nothing else turns up. Meanwhile, the back stage announcer calls for positions and curtain up in 5 minutes.¹⁶

Such modality – the script that is not yet written – means that the RB is "managed" rather than "envisaged". Further, this management is not well structured, rather it comes with an *ad hoc* spirit that allows for a multitude of possibilities.¹⁷

Tabkha: Thinking Art and Making Art

In relation to the fifth Riwaq Biennale, which took place between 1 June 2014 and 1 June 2016 it was



Fig 16 Logo-5RB-2014



Fig 17 Tabkha Banner-5RB-2014

stated repeatedly that “it comes with an agenda (see Figs. 16-17). It is invested in Riwaq’s efforts to clarify the growing political and epistemic significance of architectural heritage in local towns and villages”. It also became explicitly “Political”, underscoring the conditions under which the biennale was implemented. It claims that the intentional tensions produced by the biennale between autonomy and history, art and language “mean something very different when the terms at hand are colonialism or ethnic cleansing”. While acknowledging the setbacks of political structures in Palestine, the fifth RB does not want to think “about” or “against” them, instead it wants to think “through”, to exemplify the agency of structures per se, and to help shape the audiences that these structures produce.²⁰ In this renewed imaginary, the RB as a structure becomes a medium for thinking through. And to this end, the fifth RB focuses on bodies in space: who was here before, who is still around, and what could structures like Riwaq have to do with that?²¹

The grand opening of the fifth RB was the Tabkha (meal) on 20 September 2014 in which Riwaq’s staff occupied a double (if not triple) function; first of all they were Riwaq architects, restorers, and staff present in this capacity. Then they were present in their capacity as the chefs/cooks who were, because of the potluck tradition that they so often practised, able to provide as they claimed “the best BBQ in Ramallah”. Then they were also interested in art in general and in RB’s offerings that took them outside their routine/comfort zone to different horizons while standing at stations named after the ingredients of the fifth RB. In such instant “who is

who” in the process of cultural production scene blurs. The brochure of the event introduced the event in a brief description of white text in a black box in the middle of a white page:

Tabkha is an evening of food, conversation, and the five ingredients of the 5th Riwaq Biennale. It features contributions by Ranya Baramki, Etaf Barghouti, Alaa Khanjar, Aya Tahhan, Lanan Judeh, Michael al Far, Michel Salameh, Mohammad Subhi, Rania Al Djejab, Renad Shqeirat, Ruba Salim, Samah Daraghme, Tariq Dar Nasser, Yara Bamie, Yousef Taha, and a projection of So Is This, by Michael Snow (1982).

If we rewrite this description using the professions/occupations of the people contributing to this event, it looks like this:

Tabkha is an evening of food, conversation, and the five ingredients of the 5th Riwaq Biennale. It features contributions by chef de dessert Ranya Baramki, neighbour/school teacher/cook Etaf Barghouti, graphic designer Alaa Khanjar, architect Aya Tahhan, architect/planner Lana Judeh, financial manager Michael al Far, architect restorer Michel Salameh, office assistant Mohammad Subhi, architect intern Rania Al Djejab, environmental architect Renad Shqeirat, designer Ruba Salim, secretary Samah Daraghme, site engineer Tariq Dar Nasser, architect and illustrator Yara Bamie, architect Yousef Taha, and a projection of So Is This, by Michael Snow (1982).

16. Esche, *op. cit.* p. 35.

17. By ad hoc I refer to a type of planning that is flexible, responsive, spontaneous and situation-specific.

18. The first RB curatorial statement, 2005.

19. *Ibid.*

20. “Our curatorial premise is to think ‘through’ the structures at our disposal. Thinking through structures is not the same as thinking ‘about’ or ‘against’ them. This project does not see structures as topics, or as objects of critique necessarily. It aims to exemplify the agency of structures per se, and to help shape the audiences these structures produce”. The fifth RB curatorial statement, 2014.

21. *Ibid.*



Fig 18 Cinema Sayyara Scene from the cars-5RB-2015



Fig 19 Traction 2 Beirut Tour-5RB-2015

Two things are happening at the same time in this Tabkha description: concealing and revealing. In the original Tabkha description the specificity of the contributions (other than that of Michael Snow) was concealed. It nevertheless revealed all individuals contributing to the event, but without mentioning in what capacity. For fifth RB artistic director Khalil Rabah and curator Tirdad Zolghadr, it seems that these were the architects/artists of the event who are normally dropped from statements and declarations. For them, labelling neighbour/school teacher/cook Etaf Barghouti as a contributor to the event achieves their intentions to problematise the form and the content of the biennale's kick-off events.²² This way of carrying out activities and performances implies the recognition of the makers/doers/administrators in the field of cultural and artistic production.

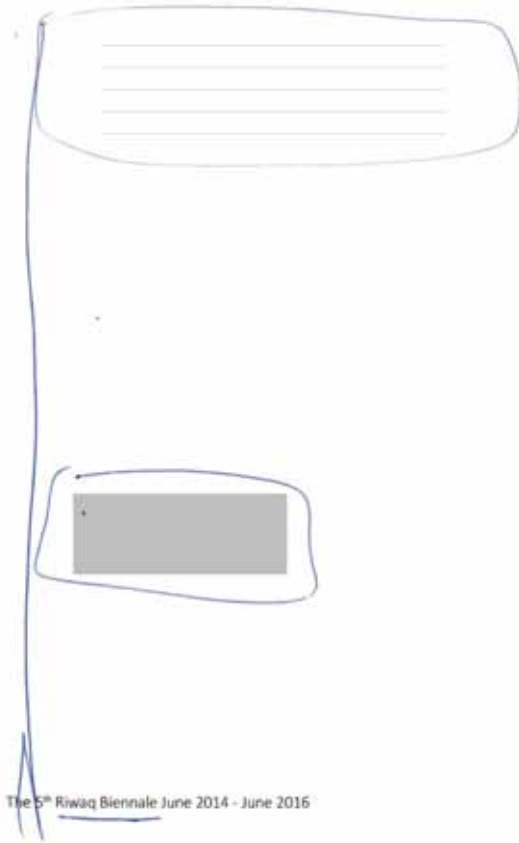


Fig 20 Traction 2 Beirut Booklet-5RB-2015

A similar experience was repeated in Phil Collins' commissioned artwork *Cinema Sayyara*²³ (drive-in cinema) in which architects, engineers, contractors, neighbours, local gangs, technicians and guards occupied a central space in the production and management of the one-month long artwork (see Fig. 18). Similarly, *Traction 2: Beirut*²⁴ introduced the activity and the fifth RB with a brochure that left room for audiences to personalise and take notes on, in a collaborative gesture that has a loose outline but allows for improvisations (see Figs. 19-20). Workshopping the biennale itself within a biennale activity designed by the biennale itself speaks to the fifth RB statement and the "thinking through structures... to help shape the audiences these structures produce." In this way, the RB engaged the audiences, rather than feeding them, with currents of visual arts and performances.

Discussions

According to Vittoria and Federica Martini, biennales have become the Esperanto and sometimes the newspeak of contemporary art due to their hybrid nature, halfway between a museum and an art fair.²⁵ The authority of such structure cannot be challenged easily. The practitioners in the world of contemporary art cannot overlook their potency. On the contrary, participation in biennales has become the rite of passage for artists to be recognised internationally and locally, in this order. Therefore, the question “if it is possible to think outside the box while we are immersed within” is still a valid interrogation of the structure that structures our relation to the structure itself. A kind of discursive relation with the art scene needs to be uncovered. Pierre Bourdieu cautioned about the acceptance of dominant forms of taste referring to it as a form of “symbolic violence”.²⁶ The naturalisation of this distinction of taste denies the dominated classes the means of defining their own world, which leads to the disadvantage of those with less overall capital. The Tabkha and other events of the fifth RB could be seen as defying such distinction by role-switching mechanism, which blurs the boundary between those who are already enjoying recognised cultural capital – those who according to Bourdieu “identify with the established (moral) order”²⁷ – and those enjoying equally recognised capital, yet in other fields. In this way, who produces the artwork and who administers the production and the audiences become equally important to the whole biennale’s undertaking, and thus the cultural scene in Palestine and beyond.

The second epic roundtable of the fifth RB took place at Riwaq’s meeting room on 27 March 2015 with the aim to workshop the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement in the field of art. The sexy Scarlet Johansson advertisement for SodaStream (a fizzy drink brand produced in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank)²⁸ decorated the only banner in the highly decorated meeting room (see Fig. 21). Earlier in the day, Riwaq received an email note from the artistic

22. In my opinion, it would have been even more provocative to drop the contribution of Michael Snow to achieve a higher level of confusion. Seemingly this could not be done because of the copyright rules.

23. “*Cinema Sayyara!* Rooftop drive-in cinema by artist Phil Collins, commissioned by the fifth Riwaq Biennale. It is the latest edition of Collins’ *Auto-Kino!*, a project which was rolled out in Berlin five years ago. *Cinema Sayyara!* thinks through existing structures in order to produce new forms of public display, and to create new audiences in the process. Its host venue, Beit Saa, is a 1910 edifice newly renovated by Riwaq. Eventually, Beit Saa is planned to join the ranks of the many ‘museums’ in Palestine. But instead of an homage to the past, in the name of some faraway future, *Cinema Sayyara!* proposes a celebration of the here and now. It suggests that contemporary art, architectural conservation and cultural policy need not be in conflict with dynamic local engagements. And it is ready to spark a sense of curiosity, enthusiasm and collective ownership, within the neighbourhood and beyond.” Excerpts from the final report on *Cinema Sayyara!*, Riwaq, August 2015.

24. “Traction 2 doubles as the 5th Riwaq Biennale’s contribution

(RB5) to Home Workspace Program 2014-15 at Ashkal Alwan, Beirut. As a whole, the five days of the seminar will reflect all the key components of RB5. It begins with an introduction to the biennale program and the Riwaq agenda, and features extensive tours of sites that were pivotal to the Palestinian experience in and around Beirut. In an exploration of HWP and the RB5 educational program NADI, Traction 2 also addresses the promises and pitfalls of informal art education over recent decades. Finally, the seminar ends with a trans-regional investigation of the institutional memory of contemporary art since the 1990s.” Excerpts from the event brochure. Riwaq, 2015.

25. Martini and Martini, *op.cit.* p. 98.

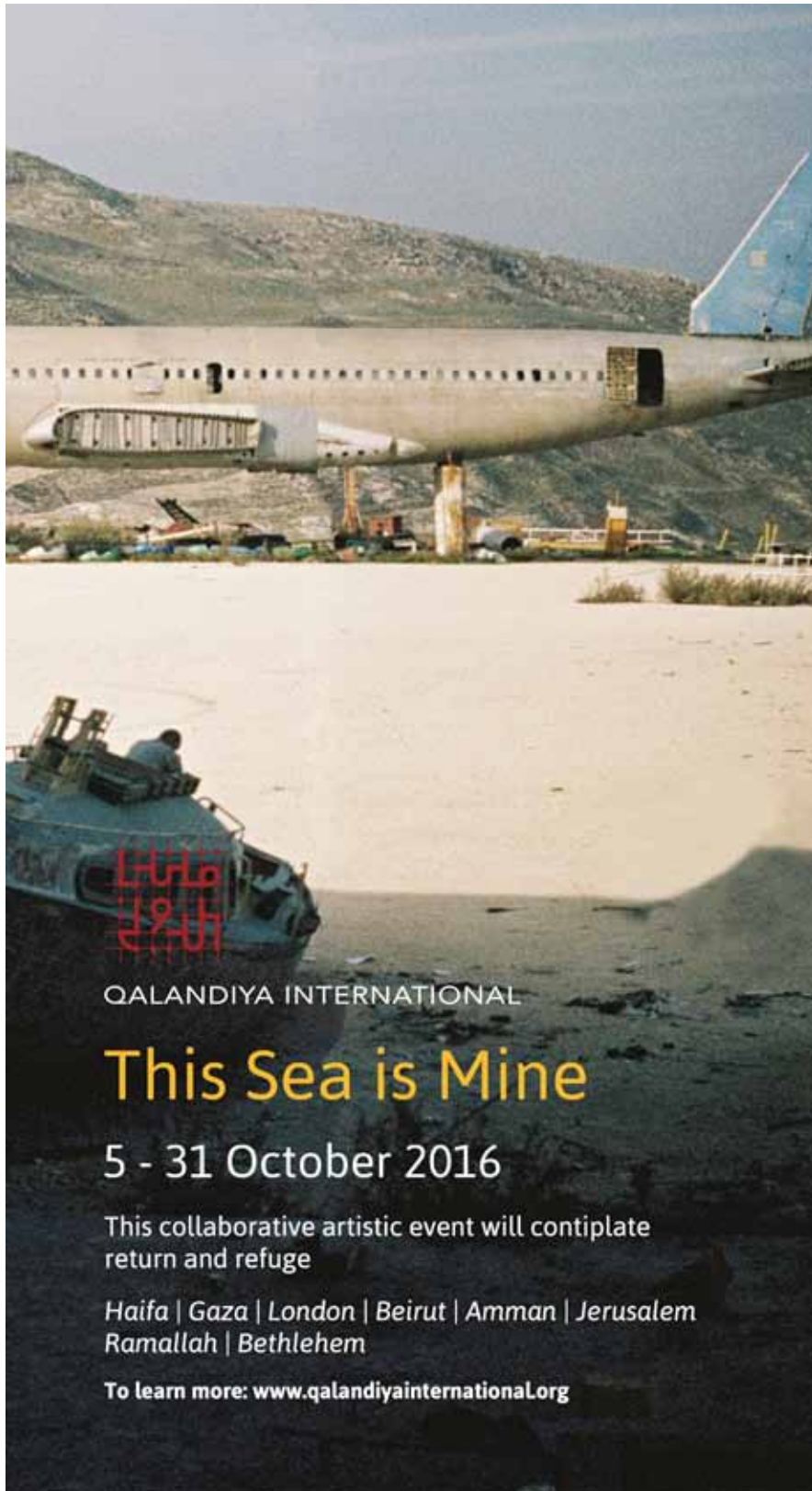
26. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Abingdon: Routledge. p. 512.

27. *Ibid.* p. 289.

28. For more on the controversial ad see Kalman, Matthew. “Oxfam under pressure to cut ties with Scarlett Johansson over SodaStream ad”. January 29, 2014. See <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jan/29/oxfam-pressure-scarlett-johansson-sodastream-israel> (Accessed April 2016).



Fig 21 BDS 2nd Epic Round Table roll up-5RB-2014



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Fig 22 This Sea is Mine visual-3Qi-2016

director of the fifth RB, Khalil Rabah, saying, “I will be boycotting the boycott epic roundtable, and therefore I will not be returning to Ramallah to participate.” To this moment the Riwaq team does not know whether Khalil was serious or sarcastic. He did not talk about it later, adding to the confusion. Perhaps this was a performance, an artwork, or something that we will figure out in the future. However, the managerial implications were not as simple as the “performative” email itself: administrators, curators and coordinators had to deal with such provocation/performance. How could or would staff involved administer and produce something that had such a dialectical relation to the product itself? Would this be possible at the Venice Biennale or in similar structures? Perhaps this is the strength of less established biennales: they have the possibility to loosen their relation to the norms and to the undertaking itself.

In 2016, Riwaq (the institution) partnered with 15 organisations to produce the third edition of the Qi, which evolved around “refugees’ right of return” and was entitled “This Sea

is Mine.” Following past experiences, Riwaq’s contribution took the form of a “series of un-curated events”²⁹ and ran in various venues throughout Palestine between 6 and 26 October 2016. The “series of un-curated events” were envisaged collectively, produced and managed by Riwaq’s team, to further develop the relation between who comes up with the vision and who implements these artistic or non-artistic events. In the absence of an artistic director and curator, Riwaq countered this by management processes through which activities were discussed, described, written out, and implemented. The talks, hikes, and exhibitions partially engaged with the Qi’s theme and partially engaged with Riwaq’s heritage agenda (see Figs. 22-26). The interventions brought to the fore notions of space, mobility, memory and heritage, “questioning taken-for-granted concepts, and allowing for renewed meanings and relations to emerge”.³⁰ The “un-curated” adventure pointed at the possibility of questioning not only the role of structure but also the role of certain actors within the biennale enterprise such as the artistic director and the curator and

29. “In the geopolitical and historical circumstances we have been living and experiencing in Palestine, memory, heritage, mobility, space, home, and return are concepts loaded with multitude of meanings and significance. Their signification in Palestine context mainly stems from their concrete absence or the lack of concrete relations to these concepts. And like the catastrophe that had been producing and conditioning their meanings and signification, they cannot be objectively and systematically captured. The current discourses, approaches, and for that matter speculations, neither can capture nor conceal such absence. Within the 3rd Qalandiya International, Riwaq proposes a series of un-curated events in the form of hikes, sessions of knowledge exchange and exhibitions that question these taken-for-granted concepts, allowing for renewed meanings and relations to emerge and intermingle with the concrete landscapes of Palestine.” Riwaq Statement to third Qi, 2016.

30. *Ibid.*



Fig 23 Series of Uncurated Events exhibition at Birzeit historic centre-3Qi-2016



Fig 24 Sarab 4by4 wheel drive to the Dead Sea-3Qi-2016

hinted at a managerial twist. “Who is the *un-curator* of the un-curated events?” curator Yazan Khalili sarcastically questioned. His question conveyed a hidden critique not only at the title of Riwaq’s contribution to the third Qi but also to the modality of cultural production in Palestine, which seems not ready to depart from acknowledged forms/formulas.

Although the fifth RB statement insists on the contrary, defying structures seems to be the common thread that has evolved throughout the RB editions, including the biennale structure itself. Through the interplay between content and form and between structures and concrete practices, between the real and unreal institutions, the biennales in Palestine can hardly fit in stereotypical biennale models. The intentions of the RB and the Qi are to produce artistic events that can contribute to the making visible of webs of power while helping ordinary people visualise structures that have been shaping their lives.

In the essay “Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGOs and Defiant Arts of Government” Chiara De Cesari persuasively argues that while the art biennales in Palestine highlight the creativity of a new generation of heritage NGOs, heritage-informed art, she points out, functions as a platform for performing the future Palestinian nation-state and therefore for engaging in non-state governmentality.³¹ While I agree with De Cesari’s premise, I

believe that engaging in what rightly appears as the enacting/performing of non-state governmentality has multiple and complex meanings that amount to a contradictory claim, i.e. an anti-normalising processes. If governmentality – in the Foucauldian sense of the word – is characterised by defusing power and producing subjects through discursive processes,³² I see the biennales in Palestine as ways/processes that uncover the webs of power by highlighting subjectivities and pointing out alternative ways of thinking about practices and about the subjects shaped by these practices/structures.

Within the conditions of possibility created in the post-Oslo Agreement era (after 1993),³³ or those created in the 1990s in the region (as argued by the fifth RB curatorial statement),³⁴ I claim that the RB is part of Riwaq’s heritage practices. While they have an apolitical form (art and restoration), they have obvious political intentions – advancing the institution’s vision towards the heritage scene in Palestine triggering socio-economic-political-cultural developments. Of course it is possible that such politics are already entrenched in a discursive aestheticism that softly reproduces normalised subjects in normalised fields.³⁵ However, I claim that the leftovers from the discursive reproduction of knowledge and the field itself are the actual surplus of the heritage practices in Palestine, and can have multiple emancipatory possibilities.³⁶



Fig 25 Sarab 4by4 wheel drive to the Dead Sea-3Qi-2016



Fig 26 School kids walking towards the Sea View exhibition at Rantis historic centre-3Qi-2016

By the end of the third Qi (2016), partners held an evaluation of that edition in the form of reflections and collective feedback. Some emerging issues were concerned with the quality of productions, the capacity to reach and sustain audiences, the responsiveness of contributions to the theme (the right of return), and whether Qi needs to have a theme. And whether it should focus more on visual art in the next edition? How could Qi best be managed, as it gets larger? These reflections bring to the fore questions about the structure of the biennale, notions of art and its relation to its context (themes and agendas), and management as part of art production in Palestine. For Riwaq's team, the evaluation has to do with the responsiveness of the Riwaq activities within Qi in relation to Riwaq's heritage agenda, more specifically, the regeneration of historic centres in rural Palestine. In other words, as long as Riwaq activities respond to Riwaq's agenda, it is not important under which umbrella or management modality they are carried out, be it a mothership biennale structure or a more autonomous sociocratic enterprise.

Biennales in Palestine are not solely about networks and artworks, "just another exhibition" or grand openings the form and the content of which can be only deciphered in the realm of the symbolic or understood as unreal institutions that furnish the present tense with speculative, perhaps, better futures. The field of artistic production and such speculative turns try to render visible the structures that shape lives and practices of people, while making use of the symbolic enterprise to highlight the debilitating conditions that shape the imaginaries of audiences, structures such as biennales produce – or so the fifth Riwaq Biennale claimed.

31. De Cesari, Chiara. "Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGOs and Defiant Arts of Government". *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 112. No. 4. p. 625.

32. Foucault, Michel. "Governmentality". In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: with two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*. Graham Burchill, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf. 1991 [1978].

33. The Oslo Agreement (1993) was signed between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the State of Israel creating a quasi-autonomous Palestinian Authority.

34. "1990+": A series of informal conversations, some public, some private, all meticulously documented, with the aim of assembling a concise history of cultural production in and around Ramallah since the 1990s. The nineties mark a conspicuous generational shift among cultural producers and the institutions they created. A surprising number

of shared ideological, professional, even architectural parameters emerge, most of them under-examined. These commonalities seem to exist far beyond Ramallah - in Jerusalem, Beirut, Amman, Sharjah, Cairo and Istanbul alike. What were the key decisions leading to these common grounds, and vice versa? What are the 'What If' scenarios here? With luck, an archive of amnesia will gradually emerge..." The fifth RB curatorial statement, 2014.

35. Bourdieu cf. Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Random House, Inc. 1994 [1970].

36. I have argued elsewhere that the practices of heritage NGOs in Palestine show that heritage has been used as a medium to bring about wholesale of actions and values beyond the celebrated normative heritage's surpluses. See Bshara, Khalidun. "Heritage in Palestine: Colonial Legacy in Postcolonial Discourse". *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*. Vol. 9. No. 2. p. 314.