

ART SCHOOL PALESTINE

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In a time of intensified internationalism, when we here discuss the further breaking of boundaries and borders, I want to introduce you to a fact, of sorts, the story of an organisation and structure that have grown out of a specific response to need in a particular situation. Palestine is a unique place and no generalising on earth will make it the same as somewhere else. There is no general pattern, really. I might even dare to add that all the discussion in the world could not “help” the situation in Palestine, that a combination of nationalist pride and an international intellectual reluctance to act for others, has meant a great sense of rejection and isolation for Palestinian artists stuck there, a sense of frustration for Palestinian artists in the Diaspora, and way down the line, a sense of the impossible for interested parties elsewhere, the world over. Although it might be understood, at one level, that people feel isolated there, an art and academic world of much to-ing and fro-ing, with more money, ability, and freedom to move, it can still be difficult to grasp and appreciate the fact that people really can still be totally “cut off”.

This lecture about the formation of Art School Palestine, a website, carries within it elements of naive enthusiasm, great calculation, intense collaboration and single-minded optimism. Something that came out of a sense that “something had to be done” has resulted in a high level of achievement. I am going to explain how caution is not the answer ; how a well worn and somehow over-familiar, academicised, international milieu, can carry within it preconceptions resulting in total paralysis, a sort of numb feeling, that eventually renders the reality of somewhere invisible.

As the result, perhaps, of a sort of tragic detail fatigue, I have been asked by newspapers, friends even, not to repeat the “usual stuff” about road blocks, fear, pregnant women stuck on the impossible side of hospital access, that kind of thing. Perhaps I can save you from that too. Always the assumed split between personal detail and general understanding, which reminds me of a different political era, of the simplistic sense that emotional response can undermine calm rationale. The people there in the West Bank and Gaza that come forward to tell stories, like those offering yet the twentieth mint tea to Joe Sacco in his extended cartoon about his visit to Palestine during the First Intifada, certainly do have stories. Artists, too, have much to explain about the relevance, or irrelevance of making work in such a situation. It is just not really imaginable for most people outside and so, somehow the situation, in real practical terms, remains ignored, left alone to stand alone. The difficulty, too, of the national pride and the tendency not really to state the fact that there is no real effective Palestinian police force, and all policing is done by the enemy against the interests of the population, of course. I have just spoken to a friend who lives just outside Jerusalem in the West Bank, and she says that the notorious Khalendria Checkpoint is even worse now, less chaotic but more built up, with a more systematic and structured queuing “system” and much longer waiting; it is virtually impossible, impractical, to work, to move, even when in possession of the right papers.

Now for art and critical practice and, eventually, Art School Palestine. I went over there under no “auspices” whatsoever. You would not believe how strange it was for people when I said I was going to go there. Somewhere only known to us for a particular, extreme, political situation is seen somehow as almost off the edge of the world. Of course people go there; lawyers to try to track the abuse of movement and rights, the odd philanthropic business person feels he or she might be able to do useful business, soon to give up; the UN worker, the diplomat, the Norwegian wanting to invest and “help”, and the occasional artist. “Under whose auspices” they would say here. Under my own I would say, and this is where the naive bit came in. Somewhat gung-ho and innocent, I never

imagined what it would be like, how the Israelis do not appreciate busybody visitors, how they laugh. That may have changed a little now because in a bid to cut Jerusalem off completely from the rest of Palestine they are not beyond implying that Ramallah is some sort of cultural centre, the odd visitor allowed through is encouraged to entertain the myth of two equal states which exist side by side, one just with bad roads and the other ...

As I speak, overnight, the surprise election result shows a victory for Hamas, and this will change the political map of the area. Nobody knows what to think, it is too soon, but I want to add a note of caution about the scope and power of a democracy trapped behind an incredibly high wall.

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I arranged to do what I admit I am good at, a "crit" of the work. An artist friend in the West Bank managed to get as many artists as could possibly travel to come to Ramallah, to bring either their own work, or documentation of idea and thought. It was a difficult situation, because their work was removed from context and I was new to it; in a way this makes up a fair exchange. My openness displayed vulnerability, their vulnerability normal when facing criticism.

ASP is intended to work at many levels. It is practical; it can provide an umbrella, an overall structure, a virtual place for enquiries, interest, and the need to pass through. The situation has been, is, fragmented, and so this use of the Internet is very deliberate. There are some amazing institutions in Palestine that work with artists, but the principle of Art School Palestine, a website, is that it brings all together under one imaginary conceptual roof. If there is no school, if you can not move, if you are studying at Birzeit, for instance but from Gaza, and so there illegally, and there is a road block at the bottom of the hill, you keep a low profile and never venture off campus for three years. There needed to be a real unified place for contact about residencies abroad, as well as news of a nearby exhibition.

The web is brilliant for its range of possibility. Of course since a soft launch back in September, I think, we have had to cope with an amazing range of scope and possibility. We have one administrator in London and one in Ramallah, an editorial board in both London and Palestine; and, of course, articles are translated into Arabic. What started with a meeting between me and Charles Asprey and a desire to do something, has become a functioning, equal relationship between Palestinians in the Diaspora, artists in Palestine unable to move and with problems, and art organisations and individuals here. We have supported filmmakers coming to the Kerry Film festival, arranged for a residency for a young photographer in Delfina, set up relationships with many art schools in Britain. It seems that many people elsewhere had "wanted to do something", but only find it possible now that there is a sort of place, something called something, for institutions, especially, to work with and through.

There is also, of course, the political dimension, where the sheer impossibility of a situation can give birth to something totally different. ASP is not a substitute school, it is something else. So much happens in Palestine, there are many local workshops, much art is done by "young" people, taught by young artists, untrained themselves; there are exhibitions, of course, just no easy contact between the institutions and centres in which they are held; art centres are starved of funds and material. A day's work is not necessarily possible as the infrastructure is broken down, and with many people depending more heavily on the family structure for support, more traditional attitudes - to women especially - have started to prevail.

If you call some something, though, it becomes something and the very principle of the site, when it started, was that the structure be padded out by the fragments of reality, by action, art making and discussion. It is believed, in the end, that a different pattern will emerge, a different model which will mean that the old university art college model, given the situation, is not necessarily the perfect

answer.

Of course in Palestine there was some initial doubt about the idea and, to begin with a sense of threat. Also another kind of fatigue which comes with ruined opportunities, ideas squashed, grand gestures that implode and stand empty through lack of consistent attention and ability to act. Art centres, like the Peace Centre in Manger Square Bethlehem, have been opened, but have mainly stayed empty, unsupported, because of the impossibility of bringing people, let alone art works, in and out. Grand schemes, initiated by Norway, I think, in this case, are never able to maintain a programme, The once director of the Sakakini in Ramallah, Adila Laidi, was wary, exhausted, angry even, at the thought of our initiative, another fresh faced idea from outside which would soon founder from lack of support, equipment, funds, expertise, time.

Here are notes from the visit we made to Palestine in 2004, to discuss plans for the website with artists and organisations:

We go to the Sakakini Centre, showing photographs of Tibet by Richard Gere, to meet the thin, well turned-out director, who immediately explains her fears. She explains what is really the matter, Young artists lack contact between each other and the world. There is a real lack of facilities, there are no cameras, there is no etching press, there are no sculpture workshops, the public is not really into art, the education system is a major problem, and anyway, the artists do not have the conceptual tools. Every one ends up doing painting. She would like to educate children in visual arts, but is looking for the right teachers. "We are needing so much". We do not need another hit and run workshop conducted by an English/ German artist. Young males cannot travel; artists have a real problem with travel. Everything is left to the whim of the Israelis.

When asked by a newspaper journalist on my first visit, two years before, at the beginning of the second Intifada, if I liked Palestinian art I said not really, not necessarily, not particularly. There really is a massive range of art and experience there and now, anyway, no such thing as a generic Palestinian art, despite a once strong national and political need to characterise such a thing. Emily Jacir, for instance, an artist who can, and does, travel from her working life in Ramallah to New York and back again, through various Biennials exhibiting her work, does show an increasing dexterity with her medium and an ability to edit. Emily, who can travel, has gained experience and is able to make sophisticated work as a result of criticism, while other artists are still metaphorically making pictures from earth, a residue of the 1980s boycott on oil paint, because it had to come through Israel.

Well, some of the work is great, some old fashioned, some held back by a lack of discussion, criticism; some is made by those under pressure to represent the situation, some use sentimental language that can be embarrassing; but what matters is that people have the facility, opportunity, chance to make and develop work and place it in a context that extends the possibility for audience, understanding, and a greater level of sophistication. Still, if it is a matter of running from the front of the house to the back to protect a child from shrapnel, the painting with raw earth upon it can look meaning less, a little pointless, and an artist can feel a fury at such useless, inanimate images. Over the last few years much has changed, and a new generation of artists has started to emerge.

Art School Palestine uses the web for practical and conscious means. The web is the only medium, short of letters which don't get easily through, and the radio which is blocked, that at least provides a possible relationship with the world, despite the fact that on our last visit there, a group of young men were rounded up and taken out of an Internet café in Ramallah. Generally the need seemed, still seems, simple, and my impression was that something had to be done to counter the isolation felt by people who want to, do manage to, make art there. The object of Art School Palestine is not to make the everything the same, to encourage a false idea of an international language of art, easier access to the market, but to set up a situation in the which an artist in Gaza might have an idea of what is going on in Nablus, an artist in Bethlehem can see, with the aid of digital images placed on the site, an exhibition in Bethlehem.

The medium is virtual, to a certain extent, but the result, or results, are practical, multiple and complex. It ranges from the sense of contact through to real travel and discussion. The commonly held sense that we all live in an equally virtual world is counteracted by the fact that all is not equal,

in terms of access and understanding; that even in a virtual, let alone any other, world, real political differences and disjunctures exist.

As a title Art School Palestine has a deliberately blunt and naïve tone to it. It promises something different; an idealistic, optimistic, take on the impossibility of one thing being replaced by another. In the initial stage of developing the site, I argued that the Modern Institute in Scotland sounds really effective, and that all reality can happen around a name. Art School Palestine, a rather skippy, schooly-sounding title, makes a sweet conceptual place for the exchange, encouragement, debate, discussion; a centralising force for contemporary art. It was stated that the principle is to talk about what happens now, there, and here in England, about real happening and current process, rather than either a website or agency dedicated to individual artists and their imagery, or a homage to Palestine's considerable cultural heritage.

So often, when a young Palestinian is asked to participate in a project or scheme with a young Israeli artist, it is thought that these measures make a difference to "understanding". Art School Palestine has been adamant, from the start, that it is structurally, and strategically, about something else. The insistence that the site is purely for a relationship to and with Palestine has been crucial. The idea that this may cut down possibility is wrong. It extends possibility by being clear, in terms of place, space and function. When, for instance, an Israeli artist wants to use the site, and many do, that is good, but the possession and contact are concentrated, rather than liberalised out of existence. The site is accessed from everywhere; there are thousands of hits from all over the world.

The idea of a website such as this Art School Palestine holds within it a possibility for the future - a template, it has been suggested, to support artists in Burma, for instance. This at least creates the illusion of a structure, a reality that really can undermine any oppressive attempt to destroy or curtail independent creation, culture and communication.