

Art and War

"Nowadays, I film people being shot, then being taken to hospital.
I record their moment of death and then I film their mothers mourning.
I also film in the graveyards while families bury their loved ones."

(Abdul Salam Shihada / News Time / 2001, Palestine)

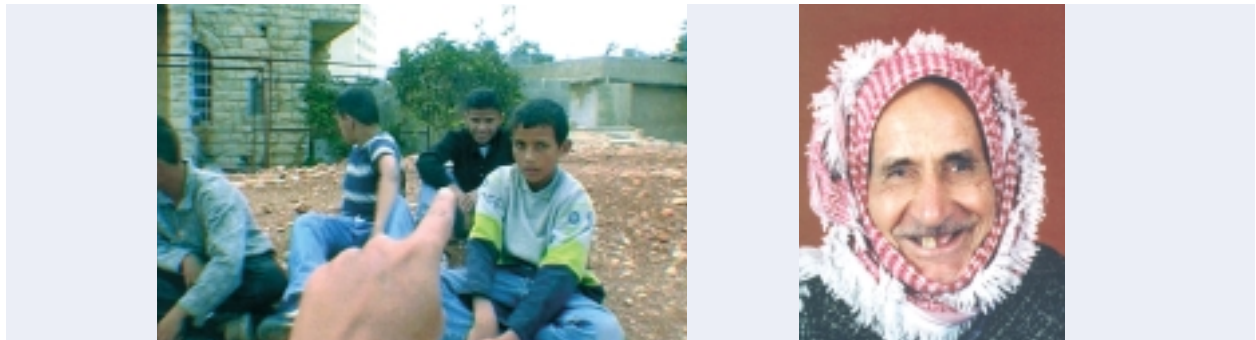
When I called Abdel-Salam, a cameraman from Gaza, and asked him about what he is filming, I knew that he was going to recall locations of death. My telephone conversation with Abdul-Salam, that is my opening sequence in *News Time* (2001, Palestine), developed to be like a promise to myself and to my viewers that none of the locations or themes suggested by Abdul Salam will be part of my filming journey. I was trying to tell myself that I would not react to the immediate extreme situation of life and death. It was my wish to maintain a space for reflection in a set-up that makes it impossible for individuals to go beyond the immediate event.

War usually creates a reality that is more dramatic than any fictional thought. The event itself is so over-powering that as an artist you find yourself a slave of observation and documentation. Your ritual of documenting and observing what's happening around you becomes like an exercise of faith that denounces injustice. Yet, as you observe and document you create "little art." You do not ask or rearrange, you just collect.

The sense of emergency that controls a society which is experiencing a national tragedy takes over every other aspect in life. The public issue invades the private space of individuals. As an artist it becomes impossible for you to ignore what is happening around you and to focus on a different theme. War develops to be your main material, which is why you sometimes wish to escape it in order to allow yourself a space to entertain other themes and to go beyond the immediate. Yet, few escape routes are offered.

But most threatening of all is the role which your society demands of you. The intensity of the experience usually creates a national illusion that the world must not know what is happening; it is the belief of the weak that if the world knew then it could not remain silent. As a result, members of an injured society develop an urge to inform the world. As an artist you are expected to mobilize your medium of expression to tell the world "the truth". People around you tell you "Show the world what is happening to us." And hence, they then demote you from an artist into an informer. You are left to struggle in an attempt to belittle your thoughts and medium in order to change them into tools of information.

For more than fifty years now, Palestinian reality has constantly deteriorated. The national tragedy that has caged us (as a nation) inside it has left very little space for Palestinian art and artists to revolt against the role assigned to them by their society. Three generations now of Palestinians have had to grow up under occupation or in exile. Our reality doesn't seem to change; yet, the world does change. So can the global changes affect the reality of an artist living in a situation of war? Suddenly the technological changes in the world of information have globalized the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. If you go to the Internet and type the word Palestine,



Azza El-Hassan: *News Time*

or Israeli, for that matter, you are guaranteed to find thousands of sites that tell you what is happening. Some are pro, others are against. Yet, it no longer matters because the number of sites will probably equal up. As for TV news networks, it is estimated that the number of news crews operating in Jerusalem makes it the second city in the world after Washington in the number of journalists. So can this liberate an artist who lives within a conflict from the role of an informer?

The idea that the world knows is evident in my telephone conversation with Abdul Salam (*News Time*, 2001), with an abstract from which I started this article. In the film Abdul Salam expresses his stress from documenting reality in bold, news-like manner. So I ask him to leave what he is doing and to join me in making a documentary film. But Abdul Salam rejects my offer because he is committed to a Japanese news crew. His reason soon becomes my excuse to challenge the role of an informer. After all, the Japanese are now the informers, so maybe I can do something else.

I began shooting *News Time* in October 2000, that is the first month of the 2nd Palestinian Uprising against Israeli occupation. In the film I depict the changes in the life of my neighbors as the situation worsens in the city of Ramallah. While I am filming I find it impossible to ignore that a new visiting population has arrived in the city just as Israeli tanks began approaching it. Journalists and TV reporters from all over the world are evident in the film. They are the seekers of our image, for whom we dress up to look in our element and hence be presented in the best form.

The world gazing at us soon becomes a new theme in my work. As I sit watching news coverage of my hometown in *News Time* I find myself trying to rearrange my reality and the reality of people around me from a different point of view than the one proposed by the global gaze. It becomes my attempt to negotiate how war is affecting my well being and that of the people around me. My dissatisfaction with the way that we are represented in daily news becomes my attempt to resist a time in which news, a symptom of war, dominates our being.

To me there are no illusions regarding the presence of TV reporters, while in the film it is clearly stated that they are here simply because they think we make good news. Yet, their presence allows me to establish a consensus with my viewer that the daily events are public knowledge. I no longer need to start the story from the beginning. I do not need to explain why and how. Instead, I can go beyond and try to propose a different view on a matter we all know.

It's been more than two years now since the 2nd Palestinian Intifada started through which the global coverage of the conflict reached its peak. In the Palestinian psyche, that is the psyche of the weak, there has been a deep wish that knowledge will lead to action. People used to take journalists into morgues in order to show them the bodies of their loved ones, an act that dehumanized the naked bodies but expressed the desire to tell. The demand for international intervention by Palestinians and some of the Israeli left wing groups was based on the idea that the world knows, hence, it should act. Yet, nothing happened. It soon became evident that the act of watching exercised by the world is an act by itself. It will never be a cause

for anything. The world seems to enjoy gazing at the "other". The tragedies that were being revealed in front of them seemed to give them a unique drama in itself. To people here this meant a simple message: "The world finally knows. The world has decided not to act."

As depressing as this notion is and with my full knowledge of the negative effects it has on the Palestinian society's well-being in terms of how it will react to it internally and externally, it is still a very liberating notion for my work.

A few months ago I began shooting a documentary film with the working title *A Cathartic Act*. This title expresses the main idea behind the film. It is made up of three separate stories featuring people who wish to make public their private pain which is caused by national tragedy. Each character in the film is seen requesting that a film be made about them. Yet, the force behind their action is not the desire to tell but it is more the desire to deal with what is happening to them.

In *A Cathartic Act* the desire to inform, which has sometimes taken extreme shapes within Palestinian history, becomes itself an issue for questioning. In the seventies Palestinian political movements began hijacking planes, and when asked about the reason for doing so they used to explain, saying, "It is so the world will know that we are here. The world will be forced to ask, Who are the Palestinians? And why are they doing such awful things?" It was the wish of the hijackers violently to seize media attention and to capture world artists' imagination, which they thought in turn would reveal the truth to the world. The hijackers were simply seeking propaganda in a "revolutionary style." "Was it worth the pain?" Raeda wonders in *A Cathartic Act* as she tries to reconcile herself with her dead father thirty years after he hijacked a plane and was killed in the process. Raeda's anger toward her father does not spring from the fact that he hijacked a plane, but that he died in the process and left her as a child to fend for herself. As the film works on helping Raeda to search for a rationale to her father Ali's action, she finds herself continuously moving between two positions where she attacks him one minute only to defend him the next.

The price of Ali's desire to tell was too high as far as Raeda is concerned. His absence from her life remains an issue which she is incapable of overcoming. Desperate to go beyond it Raeda employs me, to capture her on tape trying to reconcile herself with her dead father. It is because she hopes that by transferring her attempt onto a solid form, in this case video, she will be able to see it and feel it, hence making out of her attempt a concrete matter.

It is true that "world knowledge" liberates an artist living in a situation of war from being the narrator of the grand story, but that does not remove the pressure put on her/him by their society to constantly focus on war. The fact that Raeda employs me is a bold translation of this pressure. I am not free to reorganize the world as I wish it to be. I am here to serve a society and its individuals who are in a constant state of emergency.

Raeda is not my only film character who pressurizes me in an extreme form. There are also Samia, Surida, Sarah and Asperianca, four sisters who also employ me in *A Cathartic Act* to do a film about their mother. They are worried that at the age of seventy-five their mother is approaching death. Their wish to do a film about her is motivated by two contradictory factors. On one hand, they have the desire to create a memorial for her while she is still alive, while on the other hand, they also wish that the power of the camera would allow them to put her on trial for abandoning them as children. Hagar, their mother, put her nine children in an orphan-

age because she didn't have the time to take care of them while at the same time fight the Israelis for the right to bring back her husband's dead body from exile. In the film *Surida* is seen explaining how because they have the right contacts and know the right people they can commission me to do this film. As for Samia, who is a friend of mine, she is seen ordering me during an interview to put this in the film and not other things.

This dominates a good part of *A Cathartic Act*. It is me debating with my immediate surroundings my own freedom as an artist. As the film progresses it becomes evident to me that just like my film characters, whose personal family matters have been taken over by the national issue, I am incapable of escaping the tragedies around me. I have no choice but to work with war as a discourse. Resigned to this fact, I realize that at least I have a choice to decide on what aspect of war I would like to focus my energy. In other words, in *A Cathartic Act* I take the decision of who gets to employ me.

Leaving Palestine to go to Lebanon where thousands of Palestinian refugees live is a journey that I have repeatedly taken in my films. It is my own cathartic act, from feeling guilty. I am the privileged refugee who in 1996 managed to return to Palestine leaving behind thousands of refugees who are unable to return.

Yet, previously my journey remained an inner quest. In *Title Deed from Moses* (1997) and in *The Place* (2000) I returned to the space from which these refugees were dispossessed. It was my note to them that I still remember. In *News Time* (2001) I returned in my own memory to remember life in Lebanon. This time in *A Cathartic Act* my journey takes on a physical form.

In Lebanon I meet Sana, who with her mother and aunt was involved for years in their own cathartic act to overcome the pain created by their separation. Latifa, who is Sana's mother and Meriem, her sister, communicated for more than twenty years after their separation through a radio program entitled "On Air." The two sisters who were separated following the 1948 war maintained contact until they died. Today, Sana seeks knowledge of Palestine and of her relatives through me and my camera.

A Cathartic Act is a documentary project in which one generation, that is my generation, is putting the previous one on trial. It is a film in which one is saying to the other that war should not have taken priority over life important matters like family relationships. Yet, within the film it is evident that the children are just like their parents; they are still stuck in a situation of war. It is an abnormal state of being in which without a doubt the sense of what is important is lost.

Yet, there is a great difference between my film characters and their parents. In the new global world there is very little illusion left. None of my characters is worried about being misunderstood by the world. No one is seeking world approval or understanding. Instead, this is a very self-obsessed piece about individuals departing from the national issue to talk about their own immediate pain.

For me liberation comes from the notion that art cannot do much in challenging war. Yet, it can dismantle its discourses in order to understand its effect on our being as humans. Art then becomes the only space in a war situation where dignity can be retained. This is because you are not only receiving the effects of war but you are also interrogating it. The story I tell becomes my way to try and create a rationale for myself and for my film characters in an irrational existence. I am no longer motivated by the desire to reveal or to inform.