

GEOGRAPHIES WITHOUT BODIES, BODIES WITHOUT LAND: VIDEO ART IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The weight of a hundred bodies; the search for a physical presence; and the evidence of a suitable location – these are some of the potent images found in the work of three artists explored in this paper. With location as the overarching theme of the 2014 International Symposium of Electronic Art, this paper understands the complex term in two ways. One is in the more conventional definition as a place out in the world. Another posits the body as a site of contestation – the human physique as the location of societal considerations and politics. The three artists examined provide these differing but related ways of looking at position. Born in different parts of the Islamic world – Iraq, Pakistan and Palestine – their works connect with highly charged issues affecting this region.

Using video as a medium, three artists from the Islamic world offer bodies without a stable location and landscapes that are unpopulated by humans. Jananne Al-Ani (Iraq/Germany), Basir Mahmood (Pakistan) and Larissa Sansour (Palestine) interrogate contemporary geopolitics, particularly ones associated with the Islamic world, in works of video art ranging from hi-tech, science fiction fantasies to more simplistic techniques and narratives. It is important to consider these works under the umbrella of art from the Islamic world, even though it may seem to be a limiting scope. Oftentimes, artists do not want to be labeled as an artist from a particular part of the world or a nation—and the ones discussed in the essay might feel this way. These kinds of parameters were debated in the global art world of the 1980s and 1990s and were claimed to be insufficient, incorrect and sometimes false frameworks. Nonetheless, certain categories might be useful in understanding art today. Viewing works from different parts of the Islamic world together helps in framing an analysis of art that deals with issues plaguing Muslim societies in the 21st century, such as the Orientalist view of the Muslim Middle East. And thus it is necessary to use the term “Islamic world.” The concerns investigated in this paper are ones exploring political dimensions, from the framing of the struggle of Palestinians to the contemporary battles that have been fought in Muslim nations and the difficulty that Muslims face when attempting to migrate internationally.

Larissa Sansour denies the ongoing tension between Israel and Palestine and instead provides a skyscraper as the homeland. No longer are Palestinians vying for a piece of land. Rather, the solution is for them to populate an extremely tall tower – all of them living together at last. Sansour’s futuristic story is a hi-tech response to current politics in which an entire population is denied a piece of earth. The project takes on special meaning now as the conflict between Israel and Palestine only seems to heighten.

Nation Estate is a film that offers a sci-fi vision of the future along the lines of the popular genre in films. However, the exhibition in

which it was presented was called *Science Fiction*. Therefore, it denies the fantasy, even as it encourages it. It is a fictional rendering, but based on factual scenarios. From the artist’s statement: With its glossy mixture of computer-generated imagery, live actors and an arabesque electronica soundtrack, the *Nation Estate* film explores a vertical solution to Palestinian statehood. Palestinians have their state in the form of a single skyscraper: the Nation Estate. One colossal high-rise houses the entire Palestinian population – now finally living the high life. [1]

The solution, as offered in the film, is a humorous answer to the struggle that Palestinians have faced in establishing a nation. The violent and traumatic fight finds a simple answer in Sansour’s project; however, rather than it just being an easy solution, the video and accompanying digital prints in fact point to the complexity of the situation. Could one nation actually live in a skyscraper – even an extremely tall one? It is the point of view of the Palestinians who are not offered anything in the way of a compromise. So what is left for them to do but come up with a ridiculous answer? In video and photographs, the artist literally shows that this solution is full of cracks, perhaps like the other ones provided as a way to resolve the difficult situation.

Meanwhile, Janane Al-Ani explores a landscape that has no trace of people. The extensive area seen from above, as in sophisticated military satellite imagery, talks about the missing, referencing the result of war. She has been researching this concept through a series entitled *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People* since 2007. It focuses on the Middle East, the site of multiple wars initiated by the West. The desert landscape is a hotbed of imagined and actual activity in both the contemporary world, as well as more historical settings. It is the site of Orientalist depictions of the exotic East from the past and military actions of more recent years. In order to carry out research, Al-Ani investigated the archives of the Smithsonian Museum for aerial photography from the early twentieth century, developed during the time of World War I. The artist also researched the technology utilized in the *Desert Storm* operations. As the artist explains: The prominent role of digital technology in the 1991 *Desert Storm* campaign was a watershed in the history of warfare and changed the way war was to be seen in the future. Within hours of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Western media machine had mobilized its forces and set its sights firmly on the region. Through the portrayal of the population, the culture and, crucially, the landscape of the Middle East, it revealed that the nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotype of the Arab and the desert remained firmly embedded in Western consciousness. The site of the war was shown to be a desert, a place with no history and no population – an empty space, a blank canvas. [2]

What is found in the films is a human element – there are remains of human activity both from the past and the present. We see both ancient and contemporary structures. There is flatness in the landscape, as caused when seen from above and although we can see the results of human development, there is no trace of a human body.

On conceptual and formal levels, the films simultaneously draw and prohibit the entrance of the viewers into the mysteries of the Middle East. With the vantage point from above, the landscape is unfamiliar and the artist does not permit the viewer to get to know what is actually there. Perhaps for a moment one can discern the scenery, but as soon as one does, the image changes. Viewers are constantly kept at a distance. This recalls the history of Western interaction with the East. Nineteenth-century painters showed exotic scenes depicting the people of the hot, desert regions in Northern Africa and the Middle East; however, an initial analysis of the images instantly revealed the lack of contact and knowledge about them.

Brought to the contemporary moment, the limited interaction and understanding of actual people continues during the times of Western encounters with the East. Recent military actions utilizing sophisticated cameras allowed for a war executed from a distance. This approach to warfare is controversial, especially given the newer forms of technology like drones (unmanned airplanes that drop bombs on remote sites). In Al-Ani's films, the dominant sound is one of drone. Combined with rapidly shifting images of aerial views zooming in to ground level, an environment of impending doom is created. It is one in which contemporary geopolitics are addressed and questioned.

Basir Mahmood looks into today's global political dynamics as well. He investigates the notion of bodies in search of a land without showing either. Inspired by a recent event in which young Pakistani men died while illegally crossing borders in a container, his video captures a seemingly modest undertaking – moving something from here to there. The immense size of the object (the same dimensions as the container) shifts this simple task into the realm of the impossible. According to the press release for the exhibition at Grey Noise Gallery, Dubai: He recreated the event, working with three basic elements: weight, movement and repetition – weight as ideology, movement as hope to reach a better side and repetition as belief or ritual. The repetition represents the people's stubborn belief in the possibility of change and the efficacy of movement. [3]

In the video, a group of people lifts up the object symbolizing the container and attempt to move it. With tremendous effort and endurance, they struggle to shift its location to its destination – a mere few feet. In this work, as well as in the work of Jananne Al-Ani, we find the absence of bodies, even as it is talking about humans and the human condition. Alternatively, Larissa Sansour presents bodies that struggle to find a piece of land to call their

own. The latter artist also talks of humans and the human condition. The need for a home; the destruction of a society; the desire for a better life – these are the basic requirements and concerns of a people. Through simple issues, these artists address the inadequacies of the larger and more complex system of global geopolitics.

REFERENCES

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3. "We are what we eat," Greynoise Gallery, October 2013, <http://www.greynoise.org/PressReleases.aspx?ID=24> .