

OVERGADEN.

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12 NOVEMBER, 5-8PM

Photographs, cast architectural fragments and recorded memories are part of this exhibition investigating how everyday life is lived in Israel and Palestine.

INTERVIEW

By Karen Mette Fog Pedersen, Overgaden

Karen Mette Fog Pedersen Your exhibition at Overgaden is a continuation of your extensive project, *Between Here & Somewhere Else*, which has included joint exhibitions in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah earlier this year. How did the project come about and what does the title refer to?

Maj Hasager We have worked together for a number of years as curators but the project came out of a desire to work together as artists as well. Since 2007 we have both been on several residencies in the occupied Palestinian territories and we wanted to define a project, which could allow our working methods to develop jointly, whilst maintaining our individual practices. Thus the residencies in a location away from our home countries, that is, Denmark and the UK, became our meeting point, where we could focus entirely on the project in its immediate context.

In relation to the title *Between Here & Somewhere Else*, it almost functions as an abstract map where you position yourself in an uncertainty between a 'here' and a 'somewhere else'. This is something you feel quite strongly when you travel in the Palestinian territories, where you never know if you will manage to get from A to B or how long it will take to get there.

Helen de Main The title also came to represent our own position as foreigners within this environment, as well as referring to the Palestinian situation of being caught in a position of becoming. It wasn't until later on in the process that we came up with the idea of subtling each of the shows in Palestine: *Here* (Jerusalem), *Somewhere Else* (Bethlehem) and *Between* (Ramallah). This allowed them to be differentiated as distinct exhibitions, but also, fortuitously enough, they reflected something of our experience of spending time in each of the places.

Going back to 2007 and how the project began, I originally spent 4 months in Tel Aviv in Israel, studying at the art academy there. I was looking at how architecture and the built environment were playing a role in the conflict. I am very interested in the way that our physical surroundings affect us and can be used as a means of controlling behaviour and of course the environment within Israel and Palestine seemed to be an extreme example of this.

This began my relationship and involvement with the area, but it wasn't until Maj and I started spending longer periods in Palestine that I appreciated fully the stark differences and hierarchies

between the two places and the effects that the Israeli occupation is having on almost every aspect of Palestinian life. I began to understand how much of a bubble Tel Aviv is and how necessary its existence is for Israeli society to convince itself that it is living in some kind of normality.

MH For my part I was interested in understanding the current situation in the region, and how this contested small strip of land has played and still is playing a large role both in the media and in European history, culture and religion. This has led to an ongoing investigation of refugee issues, inherited memory and the formation of national identity in a place where no state exists.

You could say that in the project we share an interest in investigating notions of space, objects and movement in relation to, and as a way of trying to understand, the current reality and environment of the occupied Palestinian territories, as viewed from the position of a foreigner.

KMFP Could you elaborate on that? How has working in this foreign cultural setting influenced your work?

HdM We both investigate the realities of being artists working outside of our native cultural environment, and how this offers huge opportunities to enrich the creative practice, but simultaneously presents a number of potential obstacles when understanding the new cultural space in which you are operating.

For me personally as a British citizen, it was necessary to be very aware of the huge role that the British have played in the area, specifically during the British Mandate of Palestine in the first half of the 20th century. However, I was also interested to acknowledge the role that British archaeologists and explorers have historically played in the acquisition of artefacts from many foreign places, resulting in numerous objects being held within the British Museum's collection in London without the permission of the country from which they originated.

In the work *Silwan Hoard - Abasi Family* I wanted to play with this idea and collect fragments of the Abasi family home, which the Jerusalem municipality had destroyed. The building itself was of no known cultural worth, built only 3 years previously out of cheap building materials. So it seemed quite significant within this British history, for me to go onto the site and fill my rucksack with some of the final remnants of what had been the fabric of this family's home and ship them back thousands of miles to my studio in Scotland. The subsequent transformation into bronze that the objects underwent gave them a cultural status and worth



Maj Hasager On Site, 2010 (stills)

that they previously lacked as objects, but what was most significant for me was the action of returning them back to Jerusalem and presenting them to the family and community where they originated from as a symbol of strength and resistance.

MH I also think that the very different realities Palestine and in my case Denmark present have added to an new understanding of my own position as an artist, a foreigner and a witness to the everyday life in these two parts of the world.

I teach regularly at the art academy in Ramallah, and it sometimes feels strange how the West Bank has become a place where I go to work. This has created an everyday life in both places, since my daily life has been divided in two. In order for me to keep a certain level of sanity when in Palestine, I find small breathing spaces, for example a local coffee shop or a library. It comes down to basics and has made me change my own perception and approach to this place, and also reflects a completely different image than the one distributed through the media.

In the beginning my visual outcome was much more a reaction to the current situation in the area - a way of understanding and processing the harsh reality of this place. Through ongoing research over several years and by living a daily life in Palestinian cities, I find myself making works, which are informed by long-term relationships, everyday life and a different way of coping with the situation.

KMFP When hearing about Israel and Palestine we tend to be presented with a specific set of mediated or stereotypical narratives and images from two conflicting perspectives. What narratives and images of the situation were important for you to present?

HdM Neither of us are interested in perpetuating a stereotypical image of conflict as so often presented through the media. I am interested in creating a very personal image of this place, one that is based on my own experience of spending long periods of time there. It's an individual's view that reflects responses to the environment physically and emotionally. Even in a work like *One Month in Ramallah - Al Quds/*

Guardian, which presents images directly from the Palestinian and British media, the images have been subject to my own personal filter, through their selection and reproduction by hand. The work consists of large-scale photo prints made up of over 60 images collected from the media that have been assembled together in a composite of dense imagery. They talk about my attempts to assimilate my experience of being in a place with the images that are being created about it through the media both in Palestine and those that I am more familiar with, through the British press. Alongside these media images are geometric coloured prints that leave gaps in which the viewer can project their own image of a place, their thoughts and ideas.

MH I think that my constant movement between two completely different realities has contributed to the images that were produced in my mind beforehand being shattered and replaced by images different from the media images and those of my original imagination. For instance my work *Memories of Imagined Places*, which comes out of a long process of meetings



Helen de Main *Silwan Hoard - Abasi Family, 2010*

and interviews with young Palestinians, most of them third generation refugees living in camps, investigates their inherited memory of the villages their grandparents were forced from in 1948. When you look at the series of photographs and texts the refugee issues are not the first thing, which spring to mind. A key concern for me is to remove myself from the spectacle of a conflict, to a more personal relationship with the people and the stories they generously share with me, allowing the work to develop over a long period of time. For me this aspect of time is relevant, to let the material and the relationships develop, and to allow questions to be raised over and over. In my view this has entailed a different perspective within the narrative I am taking part in.

KMFP You work with different media and have different approaches to the material at hand. What is the significance of your different art practices within the context of this project?

MH Our different artistic perspectives have inspired and led to intense discussions throughout the years and have informed the project on a broader level. The strength in our collaboration, as I see it, is the diversity in our working methods and it becomes quite visible in the exhibition how our different approaches to the process of making art inform our work. My work has a strong conceptual outline, predominately working in photography, film and text, and the process often involves quite a lot of people, either for interviews or in the collection of the research material.

HdM I was interested to play with the physical presence of the sculpture and how it often evokes an immediate response in the viewer. I have not seen much contemporary sculpture in Palestine, and the mu-

seum culture there is also something that is still very much developing at the moment. Within this context audiences weren't necessarily used to encountering objects presented formally to them in the exhibition space. It will be interesting to see how some of these works translate into a Danish context, where people are much more familiar with this format of presentation, but the subject matter is more outside of their field of experience.

KMFP Why have you chosen to present the project outside Palestine and what do you think are the implications of showing the work in a different cultural context?

MH From the beginning it has been important to both of us that the works were exhibited in Palestine before being shown in Europe, to present the works in a local and critical context, where the motif of the foreigner working in a zone of conflict is being questioned. But to show the works at Overgaden is important in terms of expanding the exhibition concept by re-contextualizing the selected works for a Danish audience. This challenges the material, our working methods in the project and our way of thinking around the produced works. For example working on the documentary film project *On Site* brought up a few issues for me in relation to different audiences: Was I making an informative film about Palestine for an international audience, or a film for the Palestinians I was working with, showing them places from which they are exiled?

KMFP The exhibition also contains background information about the situation in Israel and Palestine in the form of an archive, created specifically for the exhibition by British artist James McLardy. Why did you bring this element into play?

MH We are interested in introduc-

ing an informative context for the exhibition through an archive of our research material and other collected information about Palestinian culture, history and the situation. We wanted to make this accessible within the exhibition as a space where audiences were able to sit, read and reflect and we invited artist James McLardy to create a sculptural response to this context. James has approached this in the form of a functional installation, which we feel creates a dialogue between our works in the exhibition, the collected material and the audience.

HdM We were specifically interested in James' approach to working with different materials, and how his practice is involved in questioning the authenticity of these, where he might for example painstakingly paint MDF to appear like marble. This seemed relevant to a Palestinian context where high-end buildings shoot up next to makeshift shelters in the landscape, and pristine Palestinian granite is found alongside faded fragments of plastic in a collage of contradictions. When James came on a research trip to Palestine earlier in the year he was interested in the architectural language of water features, such as public fountains, hamams and water parks found across the area. The objects within his work borrow from the materiality of these sites, whilst questioning the role of social and leisure space and time, in an area that is so often defined by conflict.

KMFP A final question: Through this project you deal with very political questions. What is in your view the potential of art in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict?

HdM I think that art offers the opportunity to present an alternative image of a place that is seemingly so familiar to us in Europe from the media and press. Our opinions and perceptions are so much formed by these, that is was important for me to try and create my own image of this place. An image that is not attached to the agenda of an organization or institution, but is based upon what I have seen over the many months of living in the area and to use the exhibition in Copenhagen as a means with which to share this image with a wider audience.

MH Yes, I agree with this image of the individual. But as a final point I would also like to mention a larger discussion that is taking place within Palestine, about a third intifada - a nonviolent uprising against the Israeli occupation, which has the potential to create social change through art and culture. This third uprising is very interesting to me in relation to how art and culture, through mobilizing a collective from within, can function as a form of resistance.

The interview was conducted via e-mail in October 2010.

CV

Helen de Main (b. 1980) studied Fine Art Sculpture at Sheffield Hallam University 1999-2002 and graduated from the MFA programme at Glasgow School of Art in 2008. In 2009 she had a solo exhibition at Northcabin, Bristol and her works have been shown in group exhibitions at Glue Factory, Glasgow, 2010; SWG3, Glasgow, 2009; ReMap 2, Athens, 2009; Artnews Projects, Berlin, 2008; Galerie 5020, Salzburg, 2006 and akau.inc., Toronto, 2006. She has undertaken a number of residencies including A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah and The Danish Arts Workshops in Copenhagen in 2009 and she is currently undertaking a DIVA residency in Copenhagen. Helen de Main lives in Glasgow. www.helendemain.net

Maj Hasager (b. 1977) studied at Glasgow School of Art in 2006 and at Malmö Art Academy 2003-2008 where she graduated from the MFA programme. She has had solo exhibitions at Landings, Vestfossen, 2009; KHM Gallery, Malmö, 2008 and EMERGED Space, Glasgow, 2007. Her work has also been shown in group exhibitions at Parkingallery, Tehran, 2009; The Third Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou, 2008; Gallery 21, Malmö, 2008; Loop Film Festival, Barcelona, 2008 and KargArt Festival, Istanbul, 2007. Recent residencies include A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah and ArtSchool Palestine in Jerusalem. Maj Hasager is currently participating in the 6th Liverpool Biennial. She lives in Copenhagen. www.majhasager.net

ARTIST TALK & FILM SCREENING

Thursday 6 January 2011 at 5.30pm Helen de Main and Maj Hasager will introduce and discuss their exhibition. Afterwards Jørgen Flindt Pedersen will show his film *The Occupied* from 2003 (98 min.), where depictions of the everyday of five Palestinians is intertwined with a description of the history of the Palestinian people.

INVITATION TO THE POSSIBLE

Invitation to the Possible is a four-week event programme, which focuses on intercultural art environments in Denmark. Initiated by the Danish Arts Council's intercultural advisory project the programme is led by Khaled Ramadan and curated by Helen de Main and Maj Hasager. Four groups, from music, visual art, literature and performing arts respectively, will present events such as exhibitions, performances, readings and discussions.

Thursday 18 November 4-5.30pm the music group will create a hybrid of Western electronic beats and world music, using the Arabic quarter tone system together with folk music.

Tuesday 23 November-Friday 26 November 1-5pm members of the literature group will read poems and other prose.

Tuesday 30 November-Friday 3 December 1-5pm the performing arts group will involve the audience in a state of waiting.

Thursday 2 December 5-7pm the performing arts group offers an active gymnastic exercise followed by warm home-made food for all.

Thursday 9 December at 4pm the visual arts group sets the stage for a debate with their video performance *Stempler du kunstneren?*

For more information: www.overgaden.org

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 5 February 2011 Overgaden presents an exhibition with Søren Andreasen, Johannes Christoffersen and Sebastian Schiørring and the solo exhibition *Der Stadtneurotiker* by Jacob Borges. The last day of the exhibitions is 27 March 2011.

Helen de Main and Maj Hasager would like to thank the Abasi family, Salam Abu Limon, Ayed Arafah, Falestine Arafat, Daniel Bar, Amani Baraket, Simon Barkworth, Sarah Beddington, Ibrahim Dawood, Charles Engebretsen, Kefah Fanni, Eva Frese, Lars Frese, Glasgow Print Studios, Kamal Habash, Majdi Hadid, Amer Hasan, Khaled Hourani, Dima Hurani, Noga Kadman, Kristina Kvalvik, Ask Kæreby, Mike Marshall, James McLardy, Simon Möller, Astrid Mette Tejdell Raba, Maher Shaheen, Layan Shawabkeh, Adania Shibli, Razan Shawabkeh, Hussein Shtewi, Raia Stoicheva, Mahmoud Subuh, Reema Tawil, Sergey Vlasov and Sary Zananiri.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from www.overgaden.org



THE DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION



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