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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's "Oh shining star testify"

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COMPTEs RENDUS

THE NONIDENTICAL IDENTICAL; OR, NOTES ON VIOLENCE AND ESCAPE IN BASEL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU- RAHME'S *OH SHINING STAR TESTIFY*

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Abstract | A review of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's installation, *Oh shining star testify*, at the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022) where the artists present Palestinian lives and deaths by disrupting the progressive chronologies of Palestinian's ongoing obliteration. The essay considers the representation of racist epistemologies through recourse to the work of Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten, while also situating the work within a lineage of cultural productions that respond to the histories of genocide.

Keywords | Basel Abbas – Ruanne Abou-Rahme – Berlin Biennale – Palestine – Saidiya Hartman – Fred Moten.

The darkened room of the three-channel video installation, *Oh shining star testify* (يا أيُّتها النجمة الساطعة اشهدي), as it was exhibited in the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022), is soaked in hues of sunset orange and electric purple emanating from three video projections. The colors flow forth accompanied by a two-channel sonic track, a dark, instrumental composition of found recordings, fuliginous electronic notes, and heart-throbbing beats. The light from each video channel, projected towards three walls gilded with deep peacock-green paint, illuminates three projectors and a subwoofer that lie bare at the center of the room. Otherwise unadorned, the installation space is punctuated only by nine freestanding plywood panels that partially obstruct the video projection directed towards the site-bound wall behind it. One wall is blocked by two freestanding panels, the second by three, and the third by four. *Oh shining star testify*, by the Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, re-sequences Palestinian lives, and deaths. Recordings of dark skies and pastoral fields, as well as found and documentary footage of Palestinian culture, are digitally edited to hover over one another in coordinated sequence. The distinct visual elements are reshuffled in and between the channels as foreground and background change place, one body of footage folding into another and vice versa. Each channel is further conjoined by textual fragments that repeat in large, blood-red fonts, poetic fragments such as “He treats me with a kiss/And he revives,” written in both English and Arabic.

The visual elements in the installation are arranged against one another in a syncopated discord that continually disturbs the linear progression and flow of the visuals and sound. For example, a recording of men shattering blocks of cement and picking up the smaller fragments floats over footage of a person walking through a lush green field, picking local flowers. Juxtaposed, the two bits of footage—the beautiful and the destructive—produce an off-beat syncopated rhythm, an interruption. This disturbed juxtaposition is linked by the camera’s angle, which points low to the ground. Some things are remain off-frame. The men, for example, are presumably breaking the cement blocks to throw rocks at the Israeli Military, but we cannot see that. Yet, *it is this* lowered point of view that further underscores the importance of the land, land on which both violent and pastoral actions take place, the land of Palestine.



Figure 1 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, installation view, 12th Berlin Biennale, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, 11.6.–18.9.2022
Photo: Laura Fiorio
Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh Shining Star Testify*, 2019/22
3-channel video installation, 2-channel sound, subwoofer, 10'05"; wooden boards

The syncopated elements operate like a visual concerto with a three-movement structure. Yet, unlike the more traditional forms of the genre, which are structured according to a chronological progression that consists of an exposition, a development, and a recapitulation, here, the three channels present multilayered anachronistic movements. For instance, black and white historical recordings of the Palestinian landscape and its local culture are superimposed to hover over a background of recent, found footage of an Israeli tractor demolishing a Palestinian home. The superimposition of the historical documentary over the more recent footage of the Israeli-sponsored demolition of Palestinian life (and vice versa) suggests, visually, a historical reversal wherein Palestine escapes—or is, perhaps, more specifically reborn from—its obliteration.

The disparate channels share an affinity with one another. Yet, the images on each screen do not unify to form a whole or complete picture, an assimilable whole. When I am looking at two of the projections, my back is invariably turned to the third. I can never see everything at once. Yet, there is one piece of footage that reappears continually in each channel. This is surveillance footage captured by Israeli military Closed Circuit Television cameras on March 19, 2014, just to the south of Hebron. The footage was publicly released, albeit briefly, at the request of the Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem when it was investigating the killing of 14-year-old Yusef Shawamreh.¹ Abbas and Abou-Rahme downloaded the footage, and returned it to public view in *Oh shining star testify* where it appears fragmented, punctured, and interrupted by the recordings mentioned earlier. In each of the three video channels, we see the boys breaking through the fence, jumping joyfully over a road barrier, and running into a field. These images of life are cut with footage depicting the soldiers carrying what we realize now is Shawamreh's—the boy we saw dancing over the fence—limp body into a jeep. In doing so, the installation presents a world-destroying loop, seen on repeat in scattered sequence across all the screens as a nearly closed circuit of the Palestinian past and present. In turn, the work encircles and confronts viewers—you, me, us—with the circular time of the disaster. Playing in a loop, *Oh shining star testify* forces us to grapple with the disaster that has happened, the disaster that is about to come, and the one we are living right now. (Figure 2)

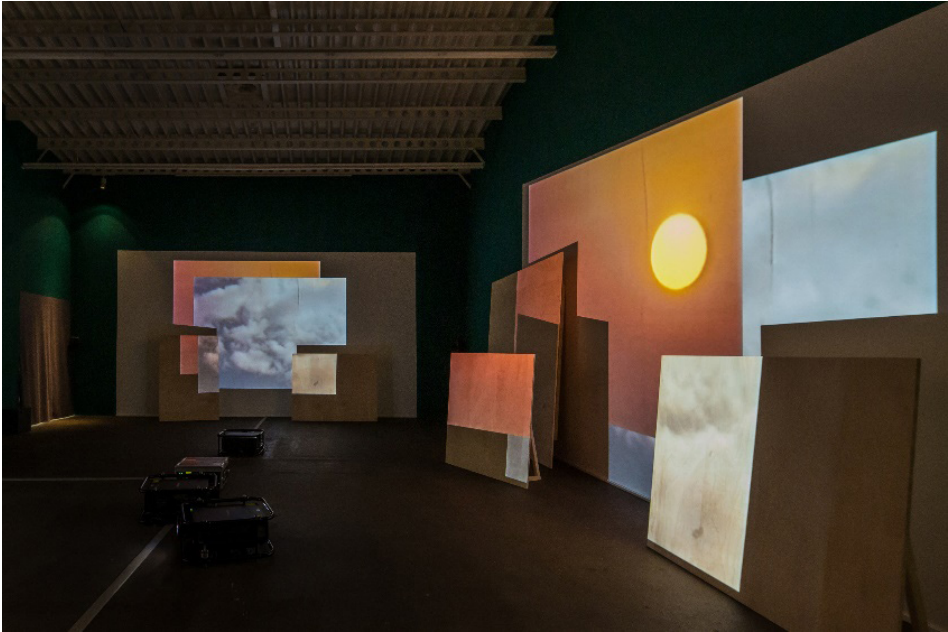


Figure 2 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh Shining Star Testify*, 2019/2022 installation view, 12th Berlin Biennale Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, 11.6.–18.9.2022
Photo: Laura Fiorio
Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh Shining Star Testify*, 2019/22
3-channel video installation, 2-channel sound, subwoofer, 10'05"; wooden boards

One might ask why the artists chose to represent footage that depicts the Palestinian people as targets to be killed? Why did they choose to do so given that our media environment is already over-saturated with images of Palestinians subjected to death as if it is an essential condition of life? Moreover, why did the artists choose to use the Israeli CCTV footage, given that Israeli surveillance adheres to a racist epistemology that reproduces the Palestinian body as predestined to maiming and death? Hasn't this kind of footage received enough viewing time? Perhaps, we might also ask—and here I am thinking along with the artists, and in mind of a question posed elsewhere by Saidiya Hartman in considering the reception of images of tortured Black bodies during and after slavery—“How does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?”²

By way of answering, and in the hopes it might align with the artists' thinking, I turn to Hartman's answer to her own question, and then to Fred Moten who

² HARTMAN Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

responds to both in the opening pages of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Faced with the horrible spectacle that yields the racialized subject, Hartman chooses “to look elsewhere... at the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle.”³ In Moten’s reading, Hartman’s “looking elsewhere,” is paramount to an evasion that becomes, in and of itself, a form of suppression. It is this suppression, he argues, that actually gives space for the “terrible spectacle” to return, which it does repeatedly in Hartman’s book, despite her own ambitions to avoid it. For Moten, the issue is not that Hartman made the wrong choice because there is no actual choice. For him, there is an “inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it.”⁴ Drawing on Moten’s insights, I would argue that in their wish to present Palestinian life, Abbas and Abou-Rahme are forced to also represent Palestinian death, since both are linked in an image regime in which one forms, reforms, and, by extension, also deforms the other.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the lives and deaths of Palestinians are not presented here as if in linear progression, wherein violence is imposed on soon-to-be-obliterated bodies. The work disrupts these progressive chronologies into syncopated, fragmented loops. The loops themselves are further broken within and across the three channels as they are interrupted in their projection on the uneven, overlapping surfaces of the plywood structures that fracture the visual field as each channel stutters, starts, and stops its the narration of the Palestinians’ life and death. Moreover, despite the CCTV being a technology of racist visual epistemology, it depicts more than the “crime” and “capture” of Shawrameh. It also presents the boys not as those who are to be killed (indeed Shawrameh’s death lies outside the frame and the edited footage), but those who are also living and, in fact, engaged in the pursuit of an indigenous ingredient that is a source for Palestinian cuisine and the nourishment it provides. The footage shows that on March 19, 2014, the youth went back to what used to be their families’ land to pick the seasonal Akub berries that grow there, and that therefor Yusuf Shawamreh was killed on his way for no reason other than he sought a source of life.

What I have been calling a sonic-visual concerto is punctuated not only by the CCTV video, but also, in a cross-rhythmic design, by saturated frames of color that pulse rhythmically throughout the work: sunset orange, electric purple, and peacock green wash across the screens, producing a visual break that draws my attention to lure me in. The color-soaked visual fields confront me with experiences that I cannot encounter, that I cannot see because they cannot be represented. They produce space for an unregistered, perhaps an even unregistrable experience. I feel this acutely while viewing the work in Berlin,

3- Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4

4- MOTEN Fred, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 4.

which, as it happens, is actually the second time—or so I think—that I have encountered the installation, which was also featured in “*If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust*,” the artists’ 2021/22 solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. Yet, in Berlin, I register the work anew, and it feels strangely unfamiliar. It is as if I have missed large parts of it upon first viewing. Yes, some structural elements remain the same: the freestanding plywood panels, the footage of the night sky, the red text that is superimposed on the layered videos, and of course the CCTV footage. Yet the work feels alien, almost as if it has mutated. Or perhaps, I begin to wonder, it is me that has mutated. Perhaps I forgot the work. What makes all of this confusion worse is the fact I wrote about the show in Chicago.⁵ I am supposed to know it. In the middle of the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, I begin questioning my memory and judgment. A chill, if not an outright terror, creeps in.

Standing in the gallery space paralyzed by the fear that I may be inflicted with amnesia, I hear: “You saw nothing,” a voice conjured from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais. The 1959 film, which is about, amongst other things, the bombing of Hiroshima and its subsequent photographic representations, opens with close-up, alternating shots of glittering, caressing limbs interwoven with seemingly dead bodies. A non-diegetic sound, that of a male voice, later proven to be attached to a Japanese man, declares in French to a woman later revealed to be French, “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.” Recalling the accusation of the man in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, I try to recollect specific details of the work I saw back in Chicago. I am pretty certain it did not feature the demolition of Palestinian homes. But I am not positive. My memory fails me. And with its failure, the installation confronts and challenges my experience while yielding something altogether new that I can neither relate to nor narrate. This, we might say, is the physical experience of trauma, and how the artists use it to communicate beyond what they can show.

While I remain still and terrified of an approaching paralysis, the accusation posed in *Hiroshima* continues to bounce in my mind. I do remember something. At the Art Institute, all four walls were utilized. Unlike here in Berlin, the projectors’ arrangement illuminated the space in a way that voided the possibility of darkened corners. I think of this as I retreat to a darkened corner in Beirut, hoping to hide. In Chicago, the installation shed light on me, and, by extension, it highlighted my position as an already and always implicated viewer. There, my illuminated body cast shadows on the already fractured surfaces and further interrupted the flow of the video projections while registering my silhouette in the frames. The interruptions emphasized the fact that viewing is not done passively, that it does not constitute an experience wherein one watches,

5- LICHTZIER Ruslana, “The Symphonious Fugitive: How to Represent That Which Is Not There?” *Lumpen* 139, vol. 30, no. 1(Spring 2022): 40-42.

untouched, a disastrous unfolding occurring “over there.” Yet, even though in Berlin I stand in the darkened corner, the darkness does not absolve me. Here, my shadow does not obstruct the flow of images. Here, it is memory itself that does it. I *have* seen these images before, perhaps not in this order, perhaps not in this work, but I have seen them before. We all have seen these images. We know these facts. And yet, the installation denies us the possibility of mastering them or mastering even our own memory of them not to mention the unassimilated and structurally traumatic history the videos present. Instead, the installation breaks our footing.

Cathy Caruth writes about cultural objects that present history as registered absence or as deferred in her now classic 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Importantly, one of the works that Caruth interprets is *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. In her analysis, “the [man’s] denial of the woman’s seeing is also, implicitly, a powerful assertion of what the man, in effect, has seen.”⁶ In splitting the act of seeing from that which is captured photographically, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, according to Caruth, opens the space of trauma. *Oh shining star testify* works in similar ways when the saturated frames of colors cut into sequences of sound footage depicting Palestinian lives. These traumatic cuts scale to a long durée of genocidal history that I am forced to confront, and yet cannot to comprehend. I sense it. I feel it. *Oh shining star* reverberates the ethical demand *Hiroshima Mon Amour* voiced many years earlier, to give new space to the traumatic constitution of genocidal history of which I am, we are, always and already a part. Using similar techniques of negation, both works propel openings, openings that call on deferred actions and compulsive, serial returns of latent traumatic events that nonetheless can never be fully realized.

Upon further investigation, I realize that the work I encountered in Chicago and the work I saw later in Berlin are two different works; or, rather, two distinct versions of the same. The video installation presented in Chicago dates to 2019, and it is ten minutes and nine seconds long, while the work presented in Berlin stands at a slightly shorter ten minutes and five seconds. More importantly, it is dated 2019/2022, suggesting the videos were reopened and re-edited after I saw them at the Art Institute of Chicago. This is an unusual move on the artists’ part, to create a non-identical identical. In keeping *Oh shining star testify* open to fragments that circulate in and out, the artists release the work from the constraints of the complete, rendering it as if a fugitive performance, subject to fluctuation and mutation across time and space. As such, the work is partially unrecognizable. Unidentical, it escapes itself as if in response to Edward Said, who writes on the state of Palestinian fugitivity in his 1986 book, *After the Last Sky*: “How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another.”⁷

6- CARUTH Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 28..

7- SAID Edward W., *After the Last Sky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 26.

In breaking—being *in the break*—it forcibly interrupts the linearity of the historical narrative that presents the genocidal history of Palestine as unavoidable. In breaking, it confronts our forgetful ease with which we let the spectacle of violence pass, only to see it anew and not know it is perpetuated, and that we are those who have perpetuated it. In breaking, it breaks me, and you, too. Through these multiple breaks, *Oh shining star testify* produces a space of non-exclusion, to refer once more to Moten. The breaks break the divide between the here and there, between the past and present. The breaks force me, force us, to face, once more, and see—even if not fully, not in the view of mastery—the disaster and the beauty of Palestine as not that which is somewhere over there, in that other place, but as that which is here, right now, in which we are implicated, and to which we belong.

Notice biographique | Ruslana Lichtzier (she/her) is an educator, curator, and doctoral student in Art History, a Mellon Fellow in Middle Eastern and North African Studies, and a member of the Critical Theory Cluster at Northwestern University. Lichtzier’s practice originates from her own non-place of migration, a condition that bestows an ethical commitment to states of statelessness. Lichtzier has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues and international art publications; her essays have appeared in English, Hebrew, Spanish, and Korean.