Potential of the Moment

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme

By Kevin Jones
If you have been to a biennial in the past couple of years, chances are you have encountered the work of Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme. Riding a wave of curatorial interest that has curled since they showed their mixed-media installation Ramallah Syndrome (2009) at the Palestine Pavilion in Venice (2009), the duo went on to show in biennials in Liverpool (2010), with the immersive sound installation Contwary (2010), in Istanbul and São Paulo (2013 & 2014), with the first chapters of their acclaimed three-part installation The Incidental Insurgents (2012–2013), continuing in Guangzhou (2014) and now creating at the Sharjah Biennial in March, where they are debuting their final piece of the trilogy. Additionally, with a host of international group shows under their belts—from Home Works 5 in Beirut (2010) to the Jerusalem Show (2012) and London’s Institute of Contemporary Art (2013) to a Raqs Media Collective-curated exhibit in New Delhi (2014)—the New York-based Abbas and Abou-Rahme have been solidly positioned on the lists of curators looking for multilayered, multimedia work exploring the legacy of anti-imperialist struggles. But with solo shows planned in 2015 at the ICA in London and their individual practices somehow already overlapped. The glue was a shared sense of politics as personal expression. “Politics is an act of resistance,” the yellow supertitles read at one point in The Incidental Insurgents. It is ultimately sidelined, rendered impotent, broken. The Belle Époque bandit “impulse,” as the stories move across time and voices bleed into montages of historical and contemporary depictions of Palestine. Written out of history or refamed as a mere criminal, the bandit is thwarted in his radical opposition, leaving death as the antithesis’s only viable outcome.

The Incidental Insurgents are complemented by a six-minute, single-channel video of two figures, seen only from behind, posed against graffiti-scarred walls, driving in a car or ambling through and landscapes as the camera follows them. The bright yellow, all-caps superitles scream a silent angst: “They were wandering through the city-without-escape. Ready to be killed somewhere, anywhere [. . .] All they could be were outlaw in quest of some impossible new dignity.” The figures enable the artists to explore both what they feel is possible in the world—a new political imaginary and language, a different way of mobilizing—and the inadequacies of what exists at the present moment. The impossibility of a future is hinged to a present insufficiency (of language, of agency), underscoring the video in which the mere protagonists are somehow trapped in the “No Exit” present—young wolves that are “no more than castrated dogs.” The desire to actualize how we mobilize politically. They are buoyed by their belief in radical alternatives, yet mired in a moment whose layers they peel back with sharp artistry. “The impotence of action and the search for the poetic act,” the yellow supertitles read at one point in The Incidental Insurgents.

Despite all their work—from the early video Collage (2009) to a project still in the research phase of conception, Future architect(s)—reflects how deeply connected each piece is to the duo’s idea of the potential of the present moment and the temporal tension between what is projected forward and what stems from our own making. Like the bandits they spotlight in The Incidental Insurgents, Abbas and Abou-Rahme are living in a fraught moment for actualizing how we mobilize politically. They are buoyed by their belief in radical alternatives, yet mired in a moment whose layers they peel back with sharp artistry. “The impotence of action and the search for the poetic act,” the yellow supertitles read at one point in The Incidental Insurgents.

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perhaps more tellingly, the need to make regular excursions from the confines of the gallery space and the claustrophobia of the art world. In 2010, with a smattering of shows already under their belts as an artistic duo, they founded Ta’churresh (an onomatopoeic Arabic word for interference), a self proclaimed “sound and image performance group” with a third member, a performer called boikutt. They continue to perform, increasingly outside of typical art-world haunts, at places such as the Cave in Reclut and Beit Annesheh in Ramallah, and at even more underground, unnamed spaces.

Over time, their work has acquired a marked density. The Incidental Insurgents being its current apex. From the outset, however, the layering of borrowed imagery and the overlapping of spatiotemporal folds distinguished their work, evidenced by early videos such as Collapse and Lost Objects of Desire (2010). As in The Incidental Insurgents, their preceding works draw their richness from the artists’ conception of time as a coexistence of the past within the present, expressed through how they work with material. “We are very interested in the idea of resonance between moments,” says Abu-Rahme in our conversation. While The Incidental Insurgents explores how the resurgence of an “impulse,” or a way of relating to the world—specifically, the outsider rogue characteristics of the bandit—recurs in different forms, the earlier works collapse multiple moments from the past, evoked through sampling recorded images and sounds, into a single performance in the present. “We are always seeing the past and the present as part of the same moment,” explains Abbas. “They are deeply connected.”

Their first official work as an artistic duo, Collapse is misleadingly poetic. Lacking any linear narrative, the work connects and overlaps scenes of resistance and loss, excavating and intermingling footage from films such as Egyptian director Henry Razik’s 1964 classic The Open Door, about a young woman’s struggle against societal conventions amid Egypt’s fight for independence. Sergei Eisenstein’s iconic film about the Bolshevik’s October Revolution, Battleship Potemkin (1925), and Gillo Pontecorvo’s anticolonialist classic Battle of Algiers (1966). Shown at the Delfina Foundation in London the year it was made, Collapse demonstrates how nimble the method of sampling can be in the hands of artists with a rich visual culture and a clear sensitivity to sound as a form of content itself. The ongoing anti-imperialist struggle (excerpted from the film near its end, morphing into mere blobs of black and white, as both form and content dissolve into themselves. Through the use of samples, perpetual struggles flood into the now, undecoring the impossibility of a future, or spotlighting the multiplicity of futures that never were. Considered within their larger body of work, this eight-minute, single-channel video is distinct, though certain commonalities with works to come are evident, such as the deadening repetition of certain images—actors Faten Hamama and her daughter Nelly Shame who appear as the futility of resistance to occupation and oppression, in the cases of the Jordanian or freedom fighters, undercover Collapse, there is a lingering sense of authority in Lost Objects of Desire—the quelled demonstration, compliant children and the images of a domineering meta-system. This disjuncture is subtly afoot in Lost Objects of Desire, a lesser-known, seven-minute, three-channel video. The genesis goes like this: on the fringes of a violent demonstration in Ramallah in 2010, a woman tells Abu-Rahme, freshly arrived on the scene, what occurred in the protest. In the video, a fragmented, potentially fictionalized story is told by a sometimes inaudible voice, with no corroborating images of the scenes it describes, breaking any narrative-image link. “It’s about the possibility of speech under multiple forms of oppression and silencing,” explains Abbas. The mythical past as past and present bleed together.

“Poor images,” as Hito Steyerl calls the low-resolution visuals that populate our daily image stream, are “ghosts of images,” that are “compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, then copied and pasted into other channels of distribution” and endowed with multiple lives. They come to us having been uploaded, downloaded, consumed and converted many times before. “The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty,” Steyerl writes in her essay “In Defense of the Poor Image” (2009). But beyond simply endowing these images with another life, the sampling in Abbas and Abu-Rahme’s practice actually subverts this imagery, re-narrating it for the present. “We use sampling in different ways,” explains Abu-Rahme. “Sometimes for subverting, questioning or simply endowing these images with another life, the sampling in Abbas and Abu-Rahme’s practice actually subverts this imagery, re-narrating it for the present. “We use sampling in different ways,” explains Abu-Rahme. “Sometimes for subverting, questioning or directly thinking about material. Sometimes we create disjuncture between the text and the image presented.” For example, in Collapse scenes of anticollonial struggles are booked by little-known footage of, on one hand, a sprightly Edward Said frolicking in front of his pre-1948 Jerusalem home—are set against the wider political struggles implicit in the footage, including the Algerian War, the Bolshevik’s October Revolution, etcetera. The same figures blur as the film nears its end, morphing into mere blobs of black and white, as both form and content dissolve into themselves. Through the use of samples, perpetual struggles flood into the now, undecoring the impossibility of a future, or spotlighting the multiplicity of futures that never were. Considered within their larger body of work, this eight-minute, single-channel video is distinct, though certain commonalities with works to come are evident, such as the deadening repetition of certain images—actors Faten Hamama and her daughter Nelly Shame, as past and present bleed together.

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instead foregrounds the sonic materiality of the waiting area of the Ramallah–Jerusalem transit checkpoint in Qalandiya. An exploration of sound as an instrument of power, the work adopts a strategy akin to science fiction. “The Israelis have made the landscape strange and alien,” says Abu-Rahme, “yet it has become accepted and invisible. We use that same strategy of making things strange, of defamiliarizing them and exposing the absurdity.” That the actual checkpoint is largely unmanned, and that a regime of self-discipline has insidiously conquered Palestinian travelers, is testament not only to the normalization of the process, but also to the need to destabilize it. With The Zone (2011–14), a two-channel video, the pair shifted from sampling to shooting, from layering sweeping moments across time and space to focusing on the everyday in a single location—the West Bank. It is perhaps their most critical work, born of the urgency to react to a moment they describe as one of the darkest in Palestinians’ lived history. Each having left Palestine during the Second Intifada (2000–05), Abbas and Abu-Rahme returned in 2006 to find that ‘All of a sudden,’ recalls Abou-Rahme. “People felt it was speaking to them about the city, a great neobrechtish dream that turned out to be a nightmare.” Palestine, for the pair, is so raw, and so much is completely unconcealed—“You can see on a billboard for an insurance company with a tank sitting right next to it.” The archive, the silent backbone of much of the pair’s work, is the site of a research project that has yet to take a definitive form. Currently entitled Future Archivists, the project is about a “living archive,” in which the archive–activist is more important than the archive itself, as acts of resistance generate not only images but multiple inscriptions around them (re-tweets, re-posts, re-contextualizations). It plays on the ability of individuals to subvert representations of the state—a potential that reached its climax during the revolts of the so-called Arab Spring, when unmediated imagery instantly bore witness to events, rupturing official discourse and unhinging a static symbolic order. Although the project is still formless, even as an articulated research project, it holds the kind of radical potential that the pair relish. “Our work emerges out of our own crisis, not just as artists,” explains Abu-Rahme, “but as people.” A link to reality, to what might be called the activism of everyday life, runs deep in the work and thinking of the artistic duo, who clearly avoid cornering themselves into the realm of representation. Their work stems from an intimate space, spawned sometimes by personal anger but nourished by the reading lists and conversations that constitute their collaborative method. Are they themselves bandits? Perhaps. They certainly have a defiant streak, and their intelligent outrage heeds to an enduring activist bent. Yet their breed of bande-ism is tinged with the optimism that we are entering a moment of genuine potential for people to, in their words, “start thinking radically about how much they can actualize their relationship with the world.” They have done much to shatter the easy categorization of politically engaged art from the Middle East, through their decoding and recoding of the Palestinian ‘absurdist’ yet over-used imagery, but also through the different positions they occupy across art production, performance and slow-burn activism. “It is not enough for a work to stay in art circles,” they explain. “A lot of our practice is extending out, away from the art context—and not necessarily as artists,” the pair says, referring to certain grass-roots actions they lead anonymously. Like the bandits whose lives they unack and unravel in their trilogy, the duo are poised on the cusp of a dramatic denouement—at both the third and final chapter of The Incidental Insurgents is unveiled in the Sharjah Biennial and an upcoming space of international solo shows bolsters interest in their activities. It is a moment of great potential, in which the intelligently radical edge they have cultivated in their practice over the years finally comes into its own.