



# Beyond Any Doubt



Majd Abdel Hamid's Hourglass. Photo by Issa Freij.

By Jack Persekian



Limited and ever-dwindling resources allocated to cultural institutions and art programmes, a desolate political horizon, an economy in crisis, fragmentation and targeted destruction of the social fabric, factional polarisation ... Palestine is a place where everything can shift from one day to the next, and where the ground sometimes seems more like quicksand than a springboard for the future. I have no solutions: all we can do is think of ways that we, as members of the art movement in Palestine, might turn impossibilities into possibilities, set real examples for progress, cooperation, and unity, and so defy the regressive and racist forces that are trying to rid this land of any future at all.

This is the goal. But there are all too many art projects and events that do not share it. They are little more than ways to spend money, slots to be filled on programmes, and files to be stored away; such projects leave no trace behind them. Although I am convinced of the role of artists and intellectuals as the soul and conscience of society, I am also aware that there are those who lag behind the civil rights movement, or perhaps even have no interest in it. For instance, though such artists might reflect in their work on the issues and concerns of our society, they do so from the position of uninvolved bystanders and observers rather than advocates and activists. At times I could almost believe that, as someone once said, becoming an artist is an excellent excuse never to work.

Yet surely cultural institutions and artists' associations have a role in their societies, a duty to contribute to them. In Palestine more than anywhere else we should expect them to lead by setting

examples, seeking alternative routes to overcoming current impasses, and – above all – finding creative and thoughtful ways to deal with injustice, corruption, and regressive forces. Artists and intellectuals must reflect on what they do, questioning constantly whether they are living up to the hopes and expectations their communities have pinned on them.

## Re-active verses pro-active

It's very easy simply to react to the things happening around us. Far more challenging and difficult a task is taking risks, perhaps venturing into uncharted territory and trying to lay out new paths or alternative solutions to our society's enduring problems, aggravated now by the collapse of the systems around them.

One of these persistent problems is, of course, the lack of funding; and there is little chance of this being resolved in the near future. Coupled with the state of isolation and siege that face the country as a whole, this makes for a gloomy outlook! So we have found that the only way even to try to combat such issues is to pull together: to partner with each other, to pool resources, and to bank on the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This allows us to utilise better our limited resources, not only financial but also

in terms of connections and expertise; it provides us with far greater outreach and exposure; and it creates an atmosphere of accountability, collective responsibility, and commitment shared by all members of the group. Crucially, it is a means of creating a critical mass, one that is capable of asserting leverage and influence over other sectors of society.

## Qalandiya International (Qi) is born

Qi Biennale 2014 encompassed a series of newly commissioned projects and presentations as diverse as the thirteen institutions organising it. Interdisciplinary and open, inclusive rather than exclusive, Qi's format allowed for a creative and productive engagement with local communities and contexts in seventeen cities, towns, and villages across historic Palestine. The events ran from October 22 to November 15, and included exhibitions, performances, symposia, film screenings, tours and walks, book launches, and several projects to explore and excavate archives, inspired by this year's theme – Archives, lived and shared.

Yet Qi was held not long after the most recent war on Gaza had ended, and it therefore came to stand also as



Musa Hadid addressing Qi opening. Photo by Issa Freij.

a response to this terrifying assault on Palestinian lives and livelihood. It embodied our commitment to raising our voices to the world not only in defiance but also in an attempt to inspire people, particularly the younger generation, with our pledge to fight death with life, creativity, and unity.

Other festivals in Palestine, meanwhile, had to cancel their programmes, which had been scheduled to take place during the time when the war was still raging and death, destruction, and atrocity were daily occurrences. The Popular Art Center and Yabous, for instance, made the difficult decision to cancel both the Palestine Festival and the Yabous Music Festival. Palestine usually also has an extraordinarily diverse selection of festivals over the spring/summer months that focus on folklore and heritage as well as the arts, theatre, music, and dance; there

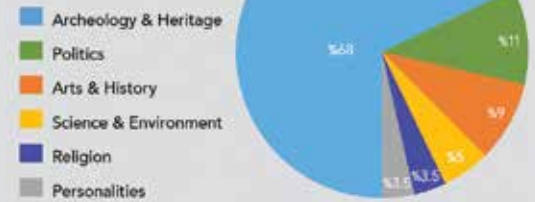
are also popular festivals that celebrate seasonal produce and products, such as the Lettuce Festival in Artas, the Grapes Festival in Hebron, the Apricot Festival in Jifna, the Maftoul Festival in Jammain, and, of course, the Beer Festival that usually takes place in Taybeh. Many of these were still able to take place, but the war led to the cancellation of, among others, the Fig Festival in Bureen and the Aubergine Festival in Battir.

### Art in Palestine

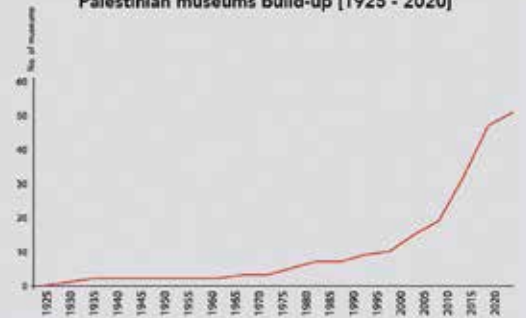
In happier times, music and visual arts in particular are hugely important and prolific in Palestine. According to *This Week In Palestine*, at least 50 exhibitions were organised across Palestine this year, including individual and group shows, as well as a slightly higher number of music performances,

concerts, and gigs. And the TWIP listings only reflect a small section of the events that actually take place. At any given time you can find a host of other, often smaller, shows and concerts held in centres, halls, restaurants, and cafes (not to mention at weddings and other private functions) across the country, none of which are listed in TWIP or indeed anywhere. In particular, I am acutely aware that exhibitions and music events organised in Gaza and in the northern and southern areas of the country get far less publicity than they should, so that we who live in the centre of this fragmented landscape never have the chance to experience them. Restrictions on mobility are directly affecting communications, the dissemination of information, and consequently our opportunities for exchanging knowledge and experience within the cultural sector and beyond.

The Palestinian Museums according to field of specialisation



Palestinian museums build-up [1925 - 2020]



On a lighter note, several books were published this year, and there were also a number of public readings and book-signing events. To my dismay, however, poetry is still in steady decline in terms both of production and popularity. What two or three decades ago was the most prevalent form of literary expression in Palestine is now being challenged and is all too swiftly losing ground to other, newer disciplines.

Theatre, meanwhile, has seen a revival: I am aware of at least 18 new productions, although again my information is mainly from the centre of the country. Given that theatrical productions take a huge amount of work and consume large budgets, and at the same time must deal with ever-dwindling audience numbers, it is thoroughly inspiring to see that



*Hera Büyüктаşçıyan's The Recovery of an Early Water.  
Photo by Issa Freij.*

there are currently so many new plays being performed across Jerusalem, Ramallah, Hebron, and Gaza.

The year 2014 was also a triumphal year for Palestinian cinema. Nominated for the second time in the Academy Awards, winning Best Documentary Film at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, Best Actor at Cairo International Film Festival, Best Long Documentary at Al-Jazeera International Film Festival, Palestinian cinema is making huge progress, and everybody is super proud of its achievements, and the best is yet to come.

Dance, too, has seen some extraordinary interventions in 2014 – innovative performances that have challenged our conception of an art form we had long considered an unswerving marker of heritage and tradition. These new works were able to take contemporary art as an accomplice and an alibi, a relationship that would have been unthinkable a mere two decades ago. These collaborations had an effect

on form that was both liberating and challenging, taking it far beyond the safe zone of tradition and into a realm as yet unexplored.

Of course, this discussion of art in Palestine cannot be considered complete without the full recognition of all the art projects that have been created and organised by Palestinians outside Palestine. More than half of the Palestinian population currently reside in the diaspora; a large number of these are denied entry to their country by the Israeli occupation, which has for more than 66 years been systematically working to get rid of Palestinians and transform the country into a safe haven for Jews alone. The level of destruction to which Palestinian society has been subjected is unfathomable; it amounts to genocide. I tried some time ago to calculate the total number of years that Palestinian prisoners had spent in Israeli prisons, and the figure I came out with was incredible: 1,000,000 years. This means 1,000,000 years that Palestinians have collectively lost. Not only is the land transformed, the space seized, but time itself is incarcerated; time to build, time to learn, time to live. When one cries out that the occupation is taking life, it is for real: it is taking our human lives in a thousand ways, and we cannot get them back.

Yet we persevere. We won't give in and we won't give up. The level and intensity of the art production in Palestine this year proves this beyond any doubt. If we can still strive to create beauty and meaning when so much that makes life meaningful is threatened or already lost to us, what hope is there for those who still seek to defeat us?

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