

Be Still My Beating Heart, Again, a Fugue

Rasha Salti

Our companionship with Rasha Salti began in 2012, before Qalqalah was even born. That year, the “Love Collective” was formed, bringing together Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Virginie Bobin and Rasha around gossips, sweets and the manufacture of three issues of *Manifesta Journal*. In 2017, we were mesmerized by Rasha’s reading of *Be Still My Beating Heart, part 3*, a polyphonic fable that acutely questioned the deprived humanist speech attached to the promotion of art as civilizational project in the Middle East – with some significant colonial resonances. This prompted the editorial team of *Qalqalah #3* (one of Qalqalah’s past lives as an online reader published by Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research and Kadist Paris), with Lotte Arndt as guest editor, to host a version of the text and translate it into French. A new invitation was extended to Rasha to join us in November 2018 in Paris for a public reading at Kadist. The event marked a very special moment in Qalqalah’s multiple lives: it celebrated the release of *Qalqalah #3*, the end of the project as it had existed until then, and announced that it would soon be reborn as Qalqalah قَلْقَلَة – the one that you are currently reading. Many of the past contributors to Qalqalah were present, and there we also met or tightened bonds with some of our current accomplices. Rasha graced us with a new gift, interlacing a lucid and utterly moving reflection on her curatorial work with a series of poetic vignettes sprinkled with a bittersweet sense of humor. Such texts “don’t quite have a place to exist,” she said. We are all the more delighted to share them with you for Qalqalah قَلْقَلَة’s new debut, and we hope for many more fugues, sweets and beating hearts in the future.

Be Still My Beating Heart, Again, a Fugue

I want to begin with thanking the marvelous team behind Qalqalah, especially Virginie Bobin and Lotte Arndt, for their invitation. And the great team at Kadist for hosting this reading. It is hard to claim a place of one’s own in Paris, but I have been privileged to claim a community of my own, a ‘tribe’ so to speak. It started at the Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, with the luminous Natasa Petrešin-Bachelez and Virginie Bobin. And I remain grateful for their generosity, friendship and relentless support.

“The question running through my book is this: “What is ‘today’, and what are we, today?” What are the lines of fragility, the lines of precariousness, the fissures in contemporary African life? And, possibly, how could what is, be no more, how could it give birth to something else? And so, if you like, it’s a way of reflecting on the fractures, on what remains of the promise of life when the enemy is no longer the colonist in a strict sense, but the “brother”? So the book is a critique of the African discourse on community and

brotherhood. So it can be said that it is concerned with memory only insofar as the latter is a question, first of all, of responsibility towards oneself and towards an inheritance. I'd say that memory is, above all else, a question of responsibility with respect to something of which one is often not the author. Moreover, I believe that one only truly becomes a human being to the degree that one is capable of answering to what one is not the direct author of, and to the person with whom one has, seemingly, nothing in common. There is, truly, no memory except in the body of commands and demands that the past not only transmits to us but also requires us to contemplate. I suppose the past obliges us to reply in a responsible manner. So there is no memory except in the assignment of such a responsibility.”¹

Be Still My Beating Heart was composed like a fugue, in three movements, or three parts. The first two were written upon an invitation to give a curator's talk at the HomeWorks Program in Beirut by the Zagreb-based curatorial collective WhW, in 2015. The third part was written on the invitation to the conference *Curating the Global*². I cite the long passage from the interview with Achille Mbembe because it contains several of the cardinal motifs that serve as anchors, or coordinates to my own curatorial practice: living and working in geographies of precariousness, fractured social bodies, where the enemy is the brother, rather than the outsider and the futures in ruin. Memory, responsibility, transmission and bequeathal. These are recurring notions and questions that inform — and torment — how I perceive meaningful, urgent and subversive curatorial practice. Contemporary art theory, curatorial and artistic practices have engaged in many ways and at several levels with the complexities and mysteries of memory, remembrance, affect, archival traces, documents, rumors, hearsay, forensics, etc. In the end, the stakes lie in the act of re-telling and in the reconstitution of a forgotten, silenced, or unwritten event or practice. In the course of various research projects that have preceded or shaped my curatorial projects in film and art, I have come across situations (sometimes during interviews), where I have totally failed to find the right framework or syntax to transmit what I have been intimated. Interviews involve delicate staging, there is a form of seduction, indulging the vanity of an interviewee, building trust and complicity to frame the bequeathing of private information or knowledge... We always fictionalize past, present, and future, but when I have been entrusted with secrets and promised not to repeat them, the only guise in which I have been able to retell them is fiction. Fiction has afforded me the safety and impunity to reiterate the unsayable and unlock secrets by exploring a recent past that has been severed from its facts and documentary traces. Fiction also allowed me to unbraided the complicated weave of 'double' language that shapes our perception of the world, the pervasive hegemonic language used by officialdom (governments, media, global corporations) and the language of our lived experience that sometimes challenges or undermines the first.

The first part was written in the first-person singular and assumed the voice of an Iraqi artist who had lived in exile outside his homeland since the early 1980s. In his old age, he had set up an atelier in Amman where he secretly made artworks that he attributed to deceased Iraqi artists, his once very close friends, who had stayed in Iraq. These works were presented to auction houses as “recent findings” and sold as “rare discoveries”; the artist who forged them was also the authenticator on whom the auction houses relied. In truth, rumors of such forgeries abound in the world of modern Arab art collecting and some galleries have been severely chastised for partaking in fraud. In the first part of my fugue in fictional art story, the conceit is displaced: what if the aging artist was making these “forgeries” out of love rather than greed, what if “re-enacting” their practice was like slipping under their skin, reanimating their practice, their world, a rekindling of the complicity they once shared? What if that old artist was motivated by longing?

In the second part of the fugue, I attempted an impossible dialogue with a book titled *Maalesh, the Journal of a Theatrical Tour*, by Jean Cocteau. I, for one, never suspected Cocteau would write a journal and title it *Maalesh*, Arabic dialect for “it’s okay,” or “it will pass”, “I will let it pass,” or even “it does not matter.” I found the book in the 1-Euro shelves of a second-hand bookstore in Paris. It’s full of self-assured, serious and thorough annotations in pencil that suggest they might have been made by an editor. Between the months of March and May in 1949, Jean Cocteau and a troupe of actors visited Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Istanbul and Ankara to present several of his plays. *Maalesh* is the diary of this travel, written on planes, boats, while riding cars, or in the hallways of hotels. Cocteau wrote: “For the span of two months and ten days, I was assigned all sorts of titles and names”. I left a Man, and I return a Man. Not a man of letters, just a man.”³ *Maalesh* is dedicated to A. S. E. Mohamed Wahid-El-Din, the epigraph reads: “Dear Wahid, you asked, one night, if I would accept to sign a book for you. So many of this book’s pages were written only because of you.”⁴ *Maalesh* is a very interesting read; it is at times amusing, at other times infuriating, and in the final instance, compelling because of the lack of inhibition. If it was reviewed by an editor prior to publishing, then hers or his must have been a very quick and forgiving eye/hand. The epigraph ends with: “Accept this theatre’s journal, with my apologies for the notes that transgress the codes of hospitality. Can the garrulous be reduced to silence? Blame me in public. Love me in secret.”⁵ I have not done enough research to find out who Mohamed Wahid-El-Din was, but clearly, he hailed from the elite and was extremely wealthy. He dedicated several cars to Cocteau and his troupe, and assigned his personal secretary, Carullo, to accompany Cocteau everywhere —at the cost of irritating him at times. (Needless to point out that the idea of an Italian-Egyptian personal secretary running after this temperamental French diva prince in the streets of Cairo amused me to no end.) As I am inclined to superstition, I decided that this book, in fact, this particular edition of the book (with the compulsive penciled annotations), did not fall in my hands by meaningless coincidence. The fugue attempts to imagine Carullo’s diary while he accompanied Jean Cocteau.

This third part is more a parable of perennial questions that continue to nag us in our present. The title I gave it originally, “Shooting an Elephant in an Arab Museum”, was an homage to a text that has marked me a great deal, namely, George Orwell’s short story “Shooting an Elephant,” which appears in *Burmese Days*, his personal chronicle of serving in the British colonial police force in Burma — a text I find seminal for thinking the colonial enterprise, and one that should be studied more thoroughly and more often.



Lazy people like me wait for such generous and affectionate invitations to dare an experiment. When Lotte and Virginie contacted me to take part in the public launch of *Qalqalah*, I first assumed that reading the text published in the journal would be the most obvious thing. On second thought, I realized that over time, and especially because of frequent travel, I have been accumulating small texts, that don’t quite have a place to exist, that are neither material for conferences, nor for serious papers/arguments, and yet they are vital, because they testify to my own lived experience —events I have witnessed or observed— and inform my curatorial practice at its core. How I read images, decode poetics and signification, and perceive urgency. So tonight, for the first time, I want to read a series of anecdotes, vignettes from my quotidian that have marked me for one reason or other. I think of them as the inside lining and the seams of my curatorial practice. I thank you for your patience.

Rabat 2004

The troupe had rehearsed in the hallways of the national theater for weeks. They were only allowed to use the theater itself on the day before the première. National theater troupe and national theater are two distinct entities in Morocco, a tribe and a space, with separate destinies. Their national missions merge strictly on the occasion of performance.

The première was planned to inaugurate a revisited performance of Molière's *Tartuffe*, restaged in vernacular, and with a tribute to Bertold Brecht. The director of the national troupe was of that generation, to whom Brecht provided a limitless wealth of imagining new representational and expressive fields. The director of the national theater, of the same generational bracket, professed to being an adept of Brecht, too.

Tartuffe was cast as he appears to us all in our present-day world where conservative religiosity gives moral high ground and authority for men to sermonize, censor, and minister violence and abuse. At the national theater that night, Tartuffe was cast as one of the hordes of the commonplace fundamentalist Islamist. In honor of Brecht, he was lodged in the front rows, between officials, ministers, and notables to whom front-row seats are customarily reserved. He sat, seemingly unobtrusive; no one took particular notice of a social agent in that demeanor lodged in a seat in the front rows. The audience of the première streamed in, and the play opened.

As the performance unraveled and everyone waited for the notorious "Cachez ce sein que je ne saurais voir," a menacing man, cloaked in the code of fundamentalists, rose from his seat in the front rows of the theater and shouted: "Tsettri ya horma!" ("Woman, cover yourself!") The audience gasped and froze in horror; the man continued ranting, sermonizing, and walking toward the stage. The director of the national theater leapt from his seat towards the security guards. His worst nightmare had become real, Islamists had invaded his theater and officialdom was in harm's way. Tartuffe continued his performance and climbed to the stage. The audience applauded. Barely a few minutes had passed when the director of the national theater erupted into the room, breathless and flanked by security guards brandishing their weapons. He froze as he saw the fundamentalist terrorist standing on stage, in the midst of the performance. The audience exploded in laughter.

Damascus 2005

To many, Youssef Abdelké exhibited exactly what the images of his drawings represent: skulls of animals, dead fish, shoes, a banana, a rose, a lily, porcelain tea sets, and a fist—exactly what the title of each drawing announces. All except for the fist. Clenched tightly—stubbornly as it were—amputated right above the elbow, the drawing's title read, "Homage to the Generation of the Seventies." *Natures Mortes* displayed masterful craftsmanship, in crosshatched charcoal, in sinister octaves of a chiaroscuro, darker than is warranted by the conventions of *natures mortes*. The exhibit, displayed in Khan Assaad Basha, in the heart of the Hamidiyé Suq, marked Abdelké's long-awaited return to Damascus. On a first walk-through, these seemingly unfeigned drawings left one with the unexpected chill of a muffled horror, a still fear. The scent of dread was not only evoked in the macabre echoes of the palette, but also in the serial scales of surreptitious departures from convention that the artist has undertaken. The perspective, for instance, was gently askew, enough to sidestep realism, enough to betray the rules of perspective. The compositional elements were coupled uncannily: a dead butterfly lay next to the skull of an animal; not far from the graceful lily sprouting from a thin vase, lay a bare bone. The size of each image, either larger than customary for drawings or disproportionately tall or wide, was also a departure from convention. Certainly, the persistence of dead fish and the

animal skull as subjects for representation, their eye sockets agape and teeth protruding, accentuates that grisly chill.

On the second walk-through, the charcoal cross-hatching seemed to have magnetic power. The rendering of the objects was realistic enough that one could still identify the form for what it was—the fish for a fish, the shoe for a shoe—but they breathed with life. The fish, although dead, seemed to gaze back with the incriminating despair of a living being that was just robbed of life. The hollowed eye sockets of the skulls stared back as well. The masculine shoe, its broken leather exhausted from wear, its laces undone, spoke to the everyday burdens of white-collar work. The feminine shoe, its uneven bulges molded from endless pain-stricken hours of wear, spoke to the temerarious attachment to social status. Carved from darkness not light, as they faintly, slowly begin to pulse with life, these commonplace objects, staged as *natures mortes*, were emblems. The identification with the object they depicted morphed: no longer was the fish merely a fish, it was a life robbed; no longer was the skull merely a skull, but the carcass of a life, caged in a closed and dark box; and the shoe no longer merely a shoe, but the outfit for the dream of a life with dignity postponed, worn out. Signifiers morphed into signifieds. The fish, the lily, the shoe, and the dainty porcelain set, began to unravel other identifications, they resurrected echoes of what they represented in essence—that frozen, frightful moment of bearing witness to lives being robbed, lives imprisoned in dark boxes, and dreams expired to a last sigh from obeying to the rules of a system. The shoe was no longer a shoe one had seen, a shoe one knew, a shoe one owned; it became the emblem of what one had always been too scared to see, the representation of one's life, anonymous, dispirited from one's subservience to a system that swallows human beings and turns them into anodyne emblems. That system where grace and beauty, such as of the lithe and proud lily, cannot be dissociated from the death of some other life. These are not charcoal renderings of *natures mortes*, they are visual representations of the metaphorical power of emblems. Far from being *mortes*, they thumped with a life at the liminal edge of death, which stubbornly refused to surrender—a life haunting to bear witness, unmask, attest.

Nothing was what it seemed to be, except for the singular drawing of the fisted hand, titled explicitly as homage from the artist to the generation of the seventies. Its power was allegorical, its story told by all the other drawings in the show. The fist was defiantly stiff, its muscles and veins tightened with fierce strength despite the fact of its amputation. The generation of the seventies in Syria — broken, humiliated, defeated, exiled, jailed, tortured, killed, betrayed — still had the fight in its soul, its fist yet to be undone. Its body rendered to carcasses, skulls, shoes, will always be haunting, with its incriminating gaze.

On the night of the opening of the exhibition, thousands streamed in, from all walks of life. Among the thousands, were hundreds of that generation from the seventies who traveled from all over the country to come and pay homage to their brother-in-arms. Youssef Abdelké, jailed numerous times for his political beliefs, had been forced into exile twenty-five years earlier. This exhibition of drawings was the first occasion for his return. Writing in *Mulhaq al-Nahar*, Mohamad Ali Atassi tried to count the years robbed from their collective lives, spent in detention. He titled his piece “A Thousand Years in Detention and Hope Under the Same Roof” (May 15, 2005). One after the other, they took pictures of themselves with him, their hands clutched together, their fists hugging warmly, against the background of ashen renderings that dared to represent what has been forbidden from representation.

Her long curly red hair seemed like a mane on fire under the projectors. She dyed it in red, it amplified the aura of a diva. Lena Chamamyan was born in Aleppo to Armenian survivors of the genocide but had been living in Paris for a few years. A well-known soprano, she sang in Arabic and Armenian, the range of her repertoire was impressive, it extended from classic Arabic music, traditional Armenian folk song and western opera. The year was 2016, I was with my family attending her concert at the Beiteddine Festival. Aleppo was under siege and Lebanon hosted more than a million Syrian refugees, the largest bulk of whom lived in camps. In tents. After the first song, she spoke in Arabic. Her accent was distinct. She evoked Aleppo, under siege. Lebanon's population (including Armenian communities) is divided over taking sides in the Syrian conflict, almost half support the Assad regime, and the other half wants to see him unseated, finished. There was no way to decrypt the political leanings of the audience, Chamamyan's repertoire was rarely political or polarizing. There was unspoken consensus however, that the 1.1 million refugees were a genuine burden on the country's economy and political future, even though international aid disbursed through Lebanese organizations had actually generated concrete benefits. After the third song, Chamamyan paused and told us that she wanted to sing an old Armenian folk song, a cappella. Her voice dropped an octave, it was grave, somber and lamenting, and when the refrain came, she translated one sentence to English: "Soon we will be gone, over the mountains."

I was intrigued by her choice of a lament, for Armenians, the promise of return is so crucial because it anchors their identity and keeps the memory of genocide and forced displacement alive. Their national mountain, almost sacred, is Mount Ararat. I sensed that the audience did not see her as an Armenian, but rather as a refugee, from the ruins of Aleppo, who was promising them that all refugees would be going home soon. The daughter of children of survivors of genocide had flown all the way from Paris, dyed her hair red, sung songs to lull the elite of a country in tatters, suddenly transformed into a refugee, ashamed to have overstayed, promising her "benefactors" that soon, she and the other million refugees would go home, across the mountain. *Be still my beating heart.*

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1. Achille Mbembe, "What Is Postcolonial Thinking?", in *Esprit* (January 9, 2008) ↩
 2. Convened by Fondation Luma in association with several international curatorial training programs in 2017 in Arles. ↩
 3. Translation from French is my own. ↩
 4. Translation from French is my own. ↩
 5. Same. ↩

Rasha Salti

Rasha Salti is an independent film and visual arts curator and writer, working and living between Beirut and Berlin. She co-curated *The Road to Damascus*, with Richard Peña, a retrospective of Syrian cinema that toured worldwide (2006), and *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s until Now*, with Jytte Jensen (2010-2012) showcased at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. She co-curated with Kristine Khouri *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the Exhibition of International Art for Palestine (Beirut, 1978)*, at the *Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)* in 2015, at *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, in 2016, at the *Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA)* in Santiago de Chile and at the *Sursock Museum* both in 2018. Salti edited *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Filmmakers* (2006, *ArteEast and Rattapallax Press*), Beirut Bereft, *The Architecture of the Forsaken and Map of the Derelict a collaboration with photographer Ziad Antar (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2010)*, and *I Would Have Smiled: A Tribute to Myrtle Winter-Chaumeny* *co-edited with Issam Nassar, in 2010.

