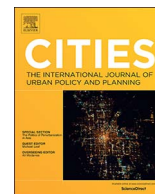


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Contemporary art from a city at war: The case of Gaza (Palestine)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the political and economic turmoil since the beginning of the 2000's, the Gaza Strip has witnessed great vitality in its artistic scene. Most Palestinian artists actually come from Gaza, and a significant number of them have recently managed to gain international visibility. Besides the capacity of art to provide alternative visual narratives of a besieged city, art in this context is a tool that participates in construction of the city itself. This article aims to explore the interaction between art production and the backdrop of war within an urban landscape. It bears witness to the great artistic vitality of the Gazan people and moreover highlights Gaza's emerging cultural scene and the role increasingly played by the media and social networks, in contrast with the simplistic images often being conveyed. Based on both semi-structured interviews held with Gazan artists and participant observation in the local visual arts scene, this article seeks to shed light on the relationship between art and city in a context of urban crisis, through recognising Gaza's place as a Palestinian urban centre. Central to the issue of Palestinian national question and to potential breakthroughs in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gaza is also relevant to understanding a number of challenges facing Arab and Muslim societies. Examining Gaza's art production in this specific context is crucial to comprehending how art participates in building a new city, beyond the media's narrowly stereotyped images.

1. Introduction

At first glance, art and war make an unlikely pair: the former creates while the latter destroys. Yet their encounter has nourished the history of painting. In the works of Spanish artists from Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) to Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), or among German painters such as Otto Dix (1891–1969) and Georges Grosz (1893–1959), war stands out as one of the main themes of modern and contemporary art. In February 2015, a few months after Israel's military assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014, the British street artist Banksy decided to cross Rafah - the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip - through the tunnels. His intention was to cover Gaza's walls with his renowned graffiti, as a denunciation of the city's destruction: "*Gaza is often described as 'the world's largest open air prison' because no one is allowed to enter or leave. But that seems a bit unfair to prisons - they don't have their electricity and drinking water cut off randomly almost every day*".¹ On one of the ravaged walls, the street artist wrote: "*If we wash our hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, we side with the powerful - we don't remain neutral*". In so doing, Banksy wanted to change the stereotyped image of Gaza that the mainstream media reflects, as have

many other artists living through this situation of permanent war.

Besides the capacity of art to provide alternative visual narratives of a city at war, I argue in this article that art can be used as a participatory tool to in the making of the city itself. The aim herein is to explore the interaction between art production and the context of hostilities in an urban setting. A testimonial will be offered to the Gazan people's great artistic vitality, as found in other contexts where "the exacerbation of closure happens through the proliferation of walls".² As Novosseloff and Neisse wrote, the closure of a frontier can re-activate cultural production and transform its meaning (as is the case for example at the US/Mexico border). Along these lines, the present article will therefore highlight Gaza's emerging cultural scene and the role being increasingly played by the media and social networks, in contrast with the simplistic images often conveyed. Through their images and words, these artists deliver messages that resonate beyond borders; they reveal their native land in another light, despite the constrained conditions of creation and circulation in effect. In a nutshell, the artists are seeking to have their voices heard beyond the borders that confine them, in portraying their native land through another lens. Based on semi-structured interviews held with Gazan artists³ and participant

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¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/banksy/11436286/Banksy-in-Gaza-Street-artist-goes-undercover-in-the-Strip.html>.

² Novosseloff, A. & Neisse, F., *Des murs entre les hommes*, Paris, La Documentation française, 2007, p. 102.

³ All artists' quotes have been extracted from interviews conducted in Gaza between 2013 and 2015. They have been translated from Arabic by the author. The participant observations have been specially compiled via a professional mission as Cultural Officer at the French Institute in Jerusalem (2011 – 2012).

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observations within the local visual arts scene, the article will expose the relationship between art and city against a backdrop of urban crisis.

A small piece of land amidst a tormented region, the Gaza Strip is an essential part of Palestine's future,⁴ endowed with its own social-cultural dynamics and resistance strategies. Central to the issue of Palestinian national question and to potential breakthroughs in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gaza is also relevant to understanding a number of challenges facing Arab and Muslim societies. Examining Gaza's art production in this specific context is crucial to comprehending how art participates in building a new city, beyond the distorted vision all too often being spread (Filiu, 2015).

2. "Urbicide" and besieged culture

Under Israeli blockade⁵ and having weathered four wars since 2006,⁶ Gaza now appears to be left to its own fate. It is even subject to "urbicide", a term applied by Stephen Graham to describe the deliberate wrecking or killing of a city.⁷ This term could be defined as the act of destroying buildings and cities that do not contain any military targets:

*"Urbicide is rather an act that is supposed to affect the very life of the population in such a way that war cannot be ignored by anybody and must be experienced on a daily basis by a nation's civilians. Urbicide had thus become a scientific, surgical, military operation in architecture that either simply murders a civilian population by the means of architecture, or practically and symbolically destroys the organisational and cultural aspects of the city in a biopolitical attack on a population."*⁸

The extreme vulnerability of this minuscule strip of land (360 km² with one of the highest population densities in the world) does not a priori encourage artistic creation, and being an artist in Gaza is far from an easy vocation. Yet despite a context so unfavourable to practicing art, the local visual arts scene (photography, painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, installations) has been vibrant since 2000. Through the use of heterogeneous aesthetics, young artists – all those mentioned in this article are younger than forty – are able to document, denounce and transgress their local reality by means of art.

For nearly 2 million inhabitants, entering and exiting the Gaza strip is practically impossible and depends on a system of permits⁹ created and run by Israeli authorities, thus drastically limiting the circulation of people and culture. Gaza artists, though often invited abroad, are rarely authorised to leave the territory.¹⁰ The blockade has also adversely

⁴ "Gaza [is] an inseparable part of Palestine's past, present and future", Tawil-Souri, Helga, in "Larger-than-life-Gaza", in Tawil-Souri Helga & Matar Dina (dir.), *Gaza's metaphor*, Hurst & Company London, London, 2016, p. 11.

⁵ Hamas won the January 2006 elections, defeating Fatah which had run the territory for the previous ten years. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was obliged to cede control of the government in Gaza to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. However, conflict between the two camps persisted. In June 2007, Hamas controlled the government in Gaza, while Fatah was in control of the West Bank. Since that time, the two territories have been administered by rival factions. In October 2017, Hamas and Fatah signed a reconciliation deal in Cairo, after Egyptian-brokered negotiations.

⁶ These were 'Summer Rains' (28 June 2006), 'Cast Lead' (27 December 2008–18 January 2009), 'Pillar of Defense' (14–21 November 2012), and 'Protective Edge' (8 July–26 August 2014). The most recent operation caused the deaths of more than two thousand Palestinians.

⁷ Graham, Stephen, "Introduction to Urbicide: The Killing of Cities?", in *Theory & Event*, January 2007: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240967991>.

⁸ Lambert, Leopold, *Weaponised Architecture: The Impossibility of Innocence*. Barcelona, Spain: DPR-Barcelona, 2013.

⁹ The Gazan population has been regularly prevented from moving since the beginning of the Israeli occupation in 1967. However, it was only in June 1989 during the First Intifada that exit permits were actually restricted, with Israel allowing only humanitarian aid and commercial dealings with the Strip. In January 1991, the Israeli authorities suspended all exit permits during the Gulf War, and all such permits were revoked altogether after 2000 and the Second Intifada, meaning that the entire territory was hemmed in (www.ochaopt.org).

¹⁰ Schneider, Mirjam, *Rapport de l'Union Européenne, Preparatory action Culture in EU External Relations*, Palestine Country Report, 2013–2014.

affected the supply of materials necessary for artistic creation. Until 2015, only one shop in all of Gaza was selling acrylic colours, and at a price of 10 dollars a tube (double that of 2007, when Israel imposed import restrictions in response to Hamas' victory in the 2006 legislative elections and the organisation's takeover of Gaza in June 2007).

Above and beyond the blockade, moral barriers within Palestinian society itself burden artists' lives and activities: censorship of contemporary artists is frequent in Gaza. At the graduation ceremony of the Al-Aqsa Fine Arts College in 2009, the expressionist canvasses of twin brothers Arab and Tarzan Nasser¹¹ were destroyed during the night because "it spoke about women, about love and not just about the sufferings of the Palestinian people".¹² Images of – nude and unveiled – women in fine arts textbooks have been erased while the painting of live models has been prohibited. In 2010, the Department of Fine Arts was closed by Hamas due to its gender diversity and liberality, which were perceived to be excessive.¹³ Several cases of artists incarcerated and imprisoned by local authorities for producing an "art of transgression" have been recorded. An employee of the (Hamas) Ministry of Culture justified this authoritarian policy of controlling local cultural forms: "One can speak about everything, but in compliance with our values, with our religion. We don't want any nudity, no pornographic scenes [rap music is considered to belong to this category]. It's about not going beyond the ways outlined by our traditions".¹⁴ For the time being, "making contemporary art" in Gaza can be considered as an act of subversion and protest against the powers in place, as stated by the artist Mohammed Hawajri in 2014: "Practicing this kind of art [contemporary art] in Gaza is dangerous. Some say that it is haram [a sin] but we resist, we continue".¹⁵

As Jean-François Legrain wrote, Hamas' proactive policy in the media field can be explained as the result of exacerbating tensions with the Fatah Party that "reinforced Hamas' drive to endow a media apparatus with as much diversity and efficiency as possible, in a context of active marginalization at either the local, regional or international level" (Legrain, 2009). Cultural activities benefit from even a minimal amount of government support, which is basically limited to the production of official art. While the Palestinian Ministry of Culture has withdrawn from overseeing culture (the Ministry of Culture budget represented just 0.003% of the total territorial budget in 2013¹⁶), this situation has been reversed since 2010 by international organisations, civil society and, to a lesser extent, the private sector. Despite some investments by Hamas authorities in cultural activities, such as the organisation of collective exhibitions at the local level, support for art collectives and the creation of art centres (e.g. Asda City¹⁷), the cultural offering in Gaza remains confined to networks dependent on limited and discontinuous international aid. In 2014, Gaza only counted a few art galleries, no active art museums and zero cinemas (as all them were shut down by radical groups back in the 1980's¹⁸). In such a precarious cultural climate, the French Institute of Gaza,¹⁹ created in 1982, has

¹¹ Coming from a modest background, Ahmad and Mohammed Abu Nasser (their real names) were born in Gaza in 1988 in the Jabalia Refugee Camp. After graduating from the Al-Aqsa University Faculty of Fine Arts, they were forced to leave Gaza in 2011 due to threats against them from the Hamas government, travelling first to Jordan and then to France, where they have been living since 2015.

¹² Interview with Arab & Tarzan Nasser, Amman, January 2013.

¹³ Interview with Mohammed Musallam (Artist and Art History professor at Al-Aqsa University), March 2013.

¹⁴ Interview with Atef Askul, Gaza, June 2014.

¹⁵ Interview with Mohammed Hawajri, Gaza, February 2013.

¹⁶ Funding for the PLO from the international community fell with the First Intifada (See *Culture in the EU's External Relations*, Palestine Country Report, November 2013).

¹⁷ Asda City, for the promotion of cinema in Gaza, was created in 2007 by the Interior Minister, Fathi Hammad (Legrain, 2009).

¹⁸ Ghoul, Asma, "The Death of Cinema in Gaza", in *Al-Monitor*, February 6, 2013: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/cinema-gaza-demise.html>; see also the film "Gaza 36 mm" by Khalil Mozaeni on the destruction of the cinematographic industry in the 1980's by a number of Salafist groups.

¹⁹ The IFG is affiliated with the French Consulate in Jerusalem and since the beginning of the current decade has assumed the role previously played by the French Cultural

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