Tales of the Dead

Emily Jacir’s and Jumana Manna’s shows, both now on view in London, invite viewers to an encounter with opposing strategies for dealing with the limitations of archived memory. Bar Yerushalmi on the two shows.

Critique / Bar Yerushalmi November 12, 2015

The way we understand our past is contingent on the past being distinct from the present. The possibility of reliving the past evokes magic but is also paradoxical – the paradox of the Last Judgement, when the dead will rejoin the living.

About a decade ago, scientists succeeded in germinating an ancient strain of date palm, 2000 years old. Beyond the impressive scientific breakthrough, the publication of the research has raised substantial ethical questions about the revival of extinct life forms and its implications regarding the field of archeology – a field founded on the attempt to imagine, or recall, the practices of the past. Speaking with the dead has long exceeded the purview of shamans or grave explorers. The methodology of referring to an archive, whether physical, biological, or cultural, has become integral to the creation and confirmation of knowledge. Can we bring back to life what has been lost and forgotten?

מבט הצבה: אמילי ג'סיר, אירופה (חומרים לסרט, 2004-) גלריה ווייטצ'אפל, לונדון. 30 בספטמבר 2015 -3 בינואר 2016.. באדיבות האמנית צילום: דן ווייל

[1]Installation view: Emily Jacir: Europa (Material for a film, 2004 -)
Whitechapel Gallery, London 30 September 2015 – 3 January 2016 Courtesy of the artist Photo: Dan Weill

Two solo shows, currently on view in London, deal with the seemingly dark art of reviving the dead. Emily Jacir and Jumana Manna, two artists with deep roots in the Israeli-Palestinian tangle, use archives in their shows, as a tool for investigating past identities.

“Europe,” Emily Jacir’s retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, identifies processes of immigration and of silencing in Europe. The work which opens the show, Material for a Film (2014), the artist tells the story of Wael Adel Zwaiter (زعيتر وائل), a Palestinian writer and theorist, who was murdered in 1972 by Mossad assassins after having been identified as having connections to Black September.1 Jacir uses archival details from Zwaiter’s life, and goes on a journey in the intellectual’s footsteps through interviews with relatives and with other people who had known him.

At the entrance to the exhibition space we face a photograph of Zwaiter’s body as it lies in the road, covered with blood. The violent death cannot be obscured, the artist would have us know, and its explicit mention is unavoidable. Further on, the show is constructed as a round room which dictates its viewing order, creating a chronicle of a pre-determined death. The basic newspaper information regarding the circumstances of Zwaiter’s death reveals a peaceable, scholarly intellectual, in contrast with the controversial persona of a terrorist.

One of the moving items on display is a photograph of a copy of One thousand and One Nights, the Arab book of folk tales which has functioned both as a mythology and a source of inspiration for many of the thinkers of Zwaiter’s generation, who saw it as a political masterpiece (Pier Paolo Pasolini, for example, made a movie based on the book in 1974, only two years after Zwaiter’s death). A copy of the book, which Zwaiter has been working on translating into Italian, was in his breast pocket at the time of the shooting; a gaping hole appeared in its right side.

Upon seeing the photograph of the pierced book, anyone familiar with the iconography of Israeli practices of commemoration would be reminded of the piece of paper with the lyrics to the Song for Peace[2] which had been in Yitzhak Rabin's pocket on the day of his murder. Together, these two are poetic protective vests, born besides the shot-down body, reincarnating as symbolic objects to be added to the national hall of memory. This is the Lieu de memoir (memory site) which Pierre Nora[3] discusses in his essay on the mechanics of constructing the national memory, and on the unbridgeable distance between history as a solid mass and memory - a complex, elusive element.

אמילי ג'סיר חומרים לסרט (פרט) (מברק: 18.10.1972)) 2004- מיצב מולטימדיה, 3 עבודות קול, עבודת וידאו אחת, טקסט, תצלומים וחומר ארכיוני. הוקם בחלקו בתמיכת הביאנלה של ווניציה. © אמילי ג'סיר **[2]**

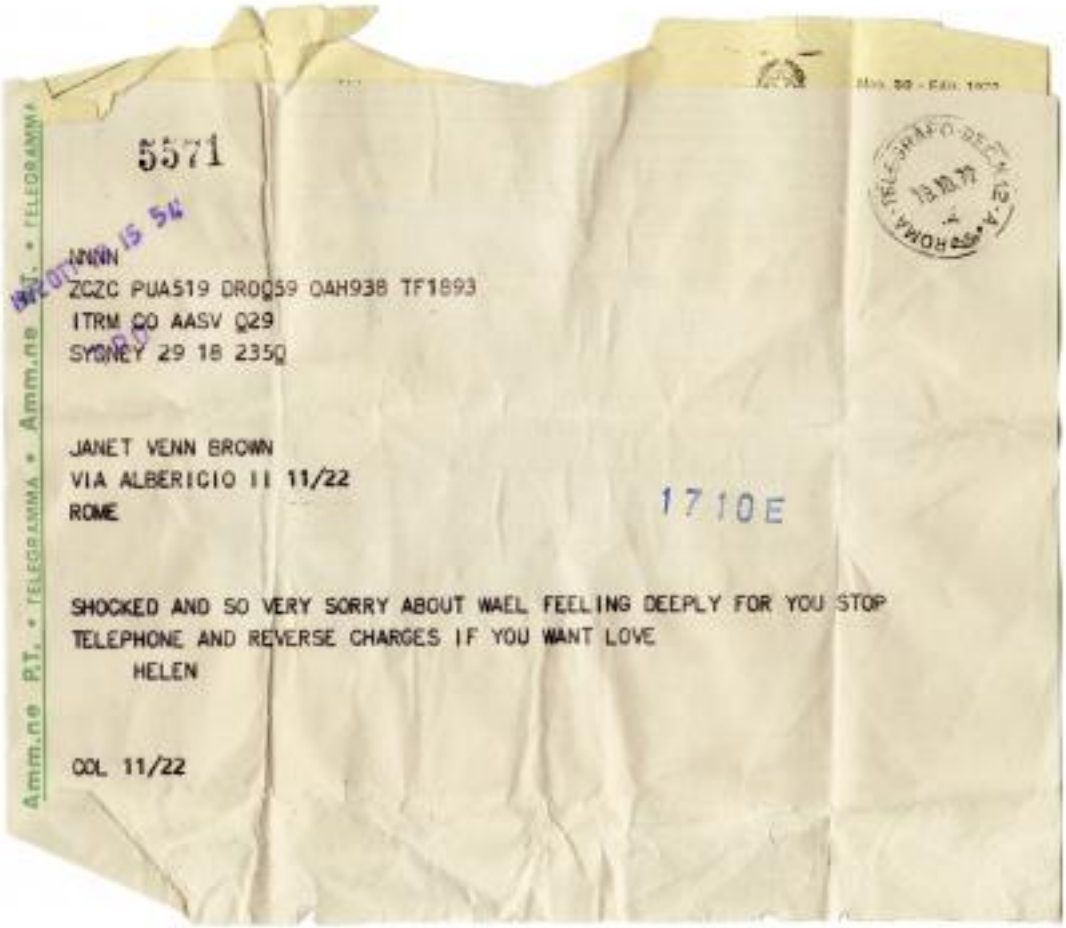
[3]Emily Jacir Material for a film (detail) (Wael Zuaiter's 1001 Nights)

2004 – Multimedia installation, 3 sound pieces, 1 video, texts, photos, archival material. Devised in part with the support of La Biennale di Venezia. ©Emily Jacir

In an earlier work, Ex libris (2010-2012), first produced and presented at dOCUMENTA (13), the artist

explores an archive of books in the National Library in Jerusalem. The books used to belong to Palestinians, who were deported or have escaped their homes after 1948, and had been nationalized by the Israeli State.4 The photographs of the books sit on shelves as nameless tombstones. The double meaning of “ex libris” – a Latin term indicating ownership of a book by a person or a library – ironically hints at the cataloguing of the confiscated books with the letters AP (for abandoned property). Jacir’s work and her research reflect the deep frustration characteristic of rummaging through an archive, frustration born out of the inherent distance between the object and its original context, which are forever to be disconnected and pulled apart.

אמילי ג'סיר חומרים לסרט (פרט) (מברק: 18.10.1972)) 2004- מיצב מולטימדיה, 3 עבודות קול, עבודת וידאו אחת, טקסט, תצלומים וחומר ארכיוני. הוקם בחלקו בתמיכת הביאנלה של ווניציה. © אמילי ג'סיר **[4]**



[5]Material for a film (detail) (Telegram: 18/10/1972)

2004 – Multimedia installation, 3 sound pieces, 1 video, texts, photos, archival material Devised in part with the support of La Biennale di Venezia ©Emily Jacir

Jacir laboriously removes the dust covering those hidden books, and picks out pencil doodles, tattered page corners, stains, and initials of owners long forgotten. Voices from the past murmur in her ear, all around her, and she hovers like a ghost among the forsaken books, her presence evoking the anonymous history of those who had been forced to leave their homes.

Although Jacir is whispering the stories of the dead in our ears, they remain fragmented and faceless. In this sense, her act of restoration is effective but deficient. Is looking achingly at the obstructed past all that's left?

Conversely, Jumana Manna's show offers a way out of that historical deadlock. In her latest film, A Magical Substance Flows into Me (2015), now showing at London's Chisenhale gallery, she examines the life of the anthropologist Robert Lachmann (1892-1939), who had studied oriental music in Palestine during the British Mandate.

Manna studies Lachmann's notes, as well as tapes from a radio show in which he had played and analyzed recordings of various communities living in Palestine at the time. She goes on a photographic journey in the footsteps of those communities, trying to understand his research through her local eye, in the present. The film is divided into chapters, each describing a different community: Samaritans, Bedouin, Moroccan Jews, Yemenites, and Palestinian communities from the west bank of the Jordan River. As they face the camera, she asks them to tell her about their cultures and about the ancient musical traditions, which they continue to preserve. They respond by demonstrating for her moments from their musical identity. As they sing and play, they deposit in her hands all that inter-generational knowledge, which cannot be acquired from books, and which no library can store.

ג'ומאנה מאנע חומר קסום זורם אל תוכי (2015). תצלום הפקה. הוזמן בשיתוף פעולה של המכון לאמנות שארג'ה וגלריה צ'יזנהייל עם מוזיאון מאלמו והביאנלה בסידני. באדיבות האמנית וגלריה CRG (ניו יורק). **[6]**

[7]Jumana Manna A magical substance flows into me

2015. Production still. Co-commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation and Chisenhale Gallery with Malmö Konsthall and the Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery (NY)
In the photograph: Singer Netta Elkayam

In one scene Manna documents a Bedouin community. She approaches a man who appears to be the elder, and plays a rabab (a single-string musical instrument) recording, made by Lachmann in that same community 70 years before. The elder, who hasn't played in 20 years, is moved by the gesture and wants to play for her, but he's having trouble recreating the same quality of sound.

Watching the film provides a bird's-eye view of the various identities the artist is visiting. Patiently, she weaves an oblique picture of the communities of Jerusalem and environs, using the rich folklore, singing and various sounds. Her camera looks at the interior, the intimate: here's a kitchen, here's a courtyard, a tent. It seems that in order to document the melodies she must go into the innermost places. Life outside does not allow for these moments of grace; those conversations and melodies cannot be heard over the shouting multitudes.

"What do your parents think of what you're doing?" her partner's father asks the artist at the start of the film, and she explains her work at length. It appears that she herself has trouble describing the magnitude of the project she had undertaken. She reads from the yellowing pages of Lachmann's notes, as if trying, through his voice, to understand the secrets of the dead musicologist with whom she's having a dialog. The Orient, she claims over and over again in her film, is nothing but a Western illusion, which encourages separation. The surface may be frayed but underneath, she demonstrates, there's a network of underground interwoven connections and bifurcations, bridging over that which the surface cannot hold together.

ג'ומאנה מאנע חומר קסום זורם אל תוכי (2015). תצלום הפקה. הוזמן בשיתוף פעולה של המכון לאמנות שארג'ה וגלריה צ'יזנהייל עם מוזיאון מאלמו והביאנלה בסידני. באדיבות האמנית וגלריה CRG (ניו יורק). **[8]**

[9]Jumana Manna A magical substance flows into me

2015. Production still. Co-commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation and Chisenhale Gallery with Malmö Konsthall and the Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery (NY)

The two simultaneous shows, by Jacir and Manna, invite viewers to an encounter with opposing strategies for dealing with the limitations of archival memory. While Jacir uses archival materials to point to what is absent, to obliterations of information, and to missing narratives, Manna adopts a braver approach by looking at the archival material as a point of origin or a as road map. She attempts, through her camera and the interviews she conducts, to understand the complex topography of the place where she is living in the present. She follows the dry riverbed, skillfully tracking the hidden water source. The dead, apparently, do not need to be awakened; they walk among us, living fossils of extinct histories.

Emiliy Jacir's show [10] at the Whitechapel gallery in London will be on display through January 3rd. 2016.

Jumana Manna's show [11] at the Chisenhale gallery in London will be on display through December 13th, 2015.

- 1. A Palestinian terrorist organization, active in the 1970s. Known mostly for the kidnapping and killing of 11 Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich.
- 2. A Song for Peace (Shir LaShalom) - an popular Israeli song which was sung during a peace rally in November 4, 1995, minutes before the assassination of Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin
- 3. Nora, P. (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. Representations, (26), 7-24.
- 4. It is worth mentioning here the study by Gish Amit, PhD, who had exposed the affair a few years ago: Gish Amit, Selling the Books to the Winners of a Tender to Purchase Paper Waste, Mita'am 12, 2007. See also: Ex Libris: Chronicles of Theft, Preservation, and Appropriating at the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem, by Gish Amit. The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 220 pp. In Hebrew

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Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Image%204%20-Emily%20Jacir-Whitechapel_Dan%20Weill%20Photography-10%20%281%29_0.jpg
[2] http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99-%D7%92%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%A8-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D7%A1%D7%A8%D7%98-%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%98-%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%A7-18101972-2004-%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%91-%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%94-3-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%95%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%9C-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%95%D7%93%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%93%D7%90%D7%95-%D7%90%D7%97%D7%AA-%D7%98%D7%A7%D7%A1%D7%98
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Image%202%20-%20Material%20for%20a%20Film_Wael%20Zuaiter%27s%201001%20Nights.jpg
[4] http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99-%D7%92%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%A8-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D7%A1%D7%A8%D7%98-%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%98-%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%A7-18101972-2004-%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%91-%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%94-3-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%95%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%9C-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%95%D7%93%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%93%D7%90%D7%95-%D7%90%D7%97%D7%AA-0
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Image%203%20-%20Material%20for%20a%20Film_Telegram%20%281%29.jpg
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[7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Jumana%20Manna%20at%20Chisenhale%20Gallery_still_02_0.png
[8] http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/%D7%92%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%94-%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%A2-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%A8-%D7%A7%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%9D-%D7%96%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%9D-%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%99-2015-%D7%AA%D7%A6%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9D-%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%A7%D7%94-%D7%94%D7%95%D7%96%D7%9E%D7%9F-%D7%91%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A3-%D7%A4%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%92%D7%94-0
[9] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Jumana%20Manna%20at%20Chisenhale%20Gallery_still_05.png

[10] http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/emily-jacir-europa/
[11] http://chisenhale.org.uk/exhibitions/forthcoming.php?id=176