

Picasso in Palestine

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Given the coverage and now political accusations around the project - I think it is worthwhile posting this essay on the bog which was published in the catalogue produced by the International Art Academy Palestine (IAAP) in Ramallah...

A Picasso in search of a cause

The exhibition of Picasso's 1943 painting in Ramallah is an auspicious occasion. It confirms the development of an already long-standing relationship between the Van Abbemuseum and the IAAP as well as between different colleagues in both institutions. More than that however, it represents a symbolic connection between European modernity and contemporary Palestinian culture; a connection that can serve, if understood well, as a way to imagine cultural globalism as mutuality rather than conformism to a single worldview. The story of modernity as told from Europe is aligned with colonialism and war, as much as it is represented by the liberating images of the artistic avant-garde. Palestine, like other non-European nations, was a bystander in the high modern world represented by Picasso and his comrades. Ramallah, Jerusalem, Hebron and many other cities in the region were, at that time, places to which things were done and rather than agents of their own destiny. First Ottomans then British, French, North Americans and European Israelis all took turns in determining the region's future, as many of them still try to do today. But change is afoot, modernity is over and the reactive Palestine of the past is becoming step by step a proactive community, taking on the burdens of national and cultural responsibility along the way. Fulfilling the request of the IAAP both momentarily normalises the situation in Ramallah and still depicts the nature of its state of exception. As V.I Lenin pointed out in the 2nd international Congress in 1920, 'the imperialist war has drawn the dependent peoples into world history'. Now, a century later, world history is being shaped as much by the peoples of the then colonial countries as by the imperialist wars that still continue around and about them. How that future will unfold is, of course, as unclear as it was in 1920, but in its modest way, *Picasso in Palestine* is part of a welcome trajectory in the course of which people in Palestine and elsewhere in the changing Middle East become the subjects of world history and learn to write their own scripts for the multi-polar planet we need to share.

Making an ambitious claim about world history for an art project is naturally not without its dangers. This is, after all, only strictly concerned with the shipment of a small amount of wood, canvas and paint from one country to another. Yet the elaborate processes that have had to be engaged in order to achieve it – processes that took nearly two years to complete – demonstrate that something other than the simple presentation of a painting are at stake. This whole project began as a dual investigation. On the one hand, it was a seemingly simple loan request from one organization (an art academy) to another (a museum). The direct nature of the request required the museum to deal with it in the way any other application for borrowing a work from our collection would be assessed. Asking questions about the condition of the space it was to be shown, the security of transport, the regulations around insurance and all the other issues that emerged as we did so, unlocked the strange, ambiguous legal and cultural status of this eastern part of the traditional Palestinian territory that still remains under external occupation. Even as I write this text in fact, the final approvals have yet to be received.

On the other hand, the project is equally an artistic work by the Palestinian artist and teacher, Khaled Hourani. It was his insight into the complex meanings that the movement of a Picasso to Palestine would create that, supported by his colleagues and the students in the academy, allowed

the project to negotiate all the hurdles put in its way. To be clear about the peculiar circumstances of this loan, it is worth recalling that lending a work to the Israel Museum some 25 kilometres away from the academy would have elicited very different responses from insurers, transporters, the press and the politicians. The simple act of contemplating going to Ramallah immediately created political and juridical questions on all sides, alongside an international media attention that was very welcome but out of all proportion to the capacities of a provincial institutions to handle. Dealing with these events one by one took patience, skill and hard work on behalf of everyone involved but it ultimately rested on the continued artistic drive that Khaled's initial insight injected into the request from its inception. Without his commitment, we could never have completed the tasks at hand.

In this way, the project clearly reveals far more about the given situation than might be expected from its simple premise. In these circumstances, to claim that, by exhibiting a painting by arguably the most famous artist of the 20th century in a country that is arguably the most monitored spot on the face of the earth today, we do indeed place art in relation to history-in-the-making does not seem quite so absurd. Yet this project does not only comment on or even create a real effect on the situation in Palestine. It also has an influence on the future of the Picasso painting and on the museum collection of which it is part. The Van Abbemuseum has invested time and energy in building relationships across the Middle East for the last 3-4 years, though much of this has been invisible to the visiting public. Behind the scenes however, we have slowly built a genuine exchange between very different cultural conditions, establishing mutual understandings where none existed before. Though the course of the meetings, we began to speak of the idea of a dispersed museum, one that was present in the relations forged across cultural regions rather than in the art objects held in the collection. That this dispersed museum should manifest itself elsewhere than Eindhoven was a logical consequence of that thinking and that it should appear not as the museum itself but in more co-operation with (one could even in the guise of) the International Art Academy Palestine was also an obvious if less publicly explicable development.

In parallel to this process of encountering new influences in the Middle East meetings, the workers at the museum have been investigating a separate but connected question for ourselves; that is, what are the potential capacities of the European art museum of the 21st century? While western modernist universalism and European cultural hegemony are discredited concepts, the image of what may come to replace them is still barely discernable. One result is that in Europe we are forced to think about what we want to preserve or pass on to an emerging cosmopolitanism from this modern culture for which we were largely responsible. We can assume that the cultural values in formation will no longer be only 'western' in origin, but we do not know which precise elements of former western ethical and cultural inventions will be valid for the future. To make an attempt to discover what might be appropriate, we felt at the museum that we needed to redeploy the collection in different public ways. We suspected that through the insights and actions of artists from very different cultural backgrounds we might understand what would otherwise remain unimaginable to us. Particularly, we wanted to think about what we had in our archives and how this might be used in ways to which we were simply blind.

Picasso in Palestine emerged out of the confluence of these two long-term trajectories. For the Van Abbemuseum, the most pertinent questions are framed by the project. How a European art museum could become meaningful to a wider context than its own homeground? How can the works of Picasso, which have long since lost their radical edge and become familiar old classics, be reimagined or recontextualised in ways that would restore something of the old feelings of physical alienation and the sense of a strange yet close emotional distancing that they produced in their own time? We do not yet know what kind of 1943 Picasso we will get back once it has been shown in

Ramallah. Materially it will be same, but will we address it in the same way as before knowing where it has been and what it has come to represent? By following this journey, we feel we are making a constructive response to the question of the museum of the 21st century. It feels like we are constructing new histories at the same time as preserving old ones. In the process, we are satisfying a request from a group of colleagues that we would never have dreamed of doing ourselves. The element of hospitality here, of, in Derrida's words, "saying yes to who or what turns up" is crucial for understanding what we can learn from Picasso in Palestine, just as it will inform what we do in Eindhoven from this moment on.

I would like to thank all the museum staff who have contributed in many ways to this project and in particular Louis Balthussen, Christiane Berndes, Remco de Blaaij, Ilse Cornelis, Ulrike Erbslöh and Bettine Verkuijlen. Without them none of this would have happened. I would also like to sincerely thank our funders especially Doen Foundation in Amsterdam and Outset in London for their exceptional support and sympathy for the project at all stages as well as the Mondriaan Foundation for their support of *A Prior* and the film. Finally, a big thank you to Khaled Hourani, Fatima Abdul Karim, the IAAP students and all the funding gathered directly in Palestine from the Palestinian Authority and the local foundations.