

“Fiction and Art practice” Interview with Larissa Sansour “A Space Exodus”

By Wafa Gabsi



bright floating, A Space Exodus series, 2009, C Print, Edition of 10, 45x80cm - Courtesy of Wafa Gabsi & the artist Symposium dates 19 to 21 March 2011

Born in Jerusalem, Larissa Sansour studied Fine Art in Copenhagen, London and New York, and earned an MA from New York University. Her work is interdisciplinary and utilizes video art, photography, experimental documentary, the book form and the internet. Sansour’s work has been exhibited worldwide in galleries, museums and film festivals. Her work recently featured at the biennials in Istanbul, Busan and Liverpool. Within the last year, she had solo shows in New York, Istanbul, Paris and Stockholm. She has shown her work at the Tate Modern in London, the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Her film *A Space Exodus* was nominated in the short film category at the Dubai International Film Festival.

Sansour borrows heavily from the language of film and pop culture. By approximating the nature, reality

and complexity of life in Palestine and the Middle East in general to visual forms normally associated with entertainment, cinema and televised pastime, her grandiose and often humorous schemes clash with the gravity expected from works commenting on the region. In much of Sansour’s work she uses herself as an oddly misplaced protagonist carrying out absurd political actions. References and details ranging from sci-fi and spaghetti westerns to horror films converge with Middle East politics and social issues to create intricate parallel universes in which a new value system can be decoded. The dichotomy of belonging to and being removed from the very same piece of land is central to her work. While ordinary understandings of identity are linked to the idea of belonging to some kind of geographical unit – a region, a land, a country – for most Palestinians, the

experience of being removed, exiled from the very same place they belong to and identify with is just as crucial for their self-understanding. Video is very present as a medium in her work. In the case of Palestine, Larissa feels a great need not just to document, but also after, flip, exaggerate and fictionalize reality on the ground and thinks that video is capable of engraving this reality better than any other medium. “When you are confronted with the reality of the erosion of your own cultural landscape right in front of your eyes and with tremendous speed, then a camera seems to be the most readily available and comprehensive tool of recording.”

WG: A large part of your work is based on science fiction. It borrows much from the language of cinema to create a parallel universe where a new system of values is built. Could you tell us more about this universe?

LS: I attempt to create scenarios where the Palestinian is no longer the victim, but instead enjoys the same power as anyone else in our media-driven, entertainment-led world. Works like *Bethlehem Bandolero*, where I enter town like the lone gunslinger of spaghetti westerns, or *Happy Days*, which shows the military occupation in a series of cozy vignettes, turn the world upside down. The people who are usually the subject of news reports and diplomatic initiatives instead become the commentators. No longer the underdogs, they stand at the same level as the rest of the world’s media and power-players.

The double irony is that something is lost in the translation to a more fluent, funny and glossy medium. In doing so, I try to foreground an unspoken absence. Smiling through its pain, one might say.

WG: Would you rather describe the connection between an actual fact or discourse and its rendering as a video as an illusory link or a genuine link?

LS: I think that reality in some cases could become so fictional that the only way to address it is to make work that exaggerates it even more. I find that this is truly the case when you look at the Israeli occupation of Palestine. I feel that work that attempts to be rationally grounded with facts and documentation fails to deliver an adequate and genuine picture of the surreal, absurd atrocities on the ground. I think this is the case in most situations where reality becomes stranger than fiction.

WG: Do you think virtual images such as Nonel and Vovel’s *Inferno* (2010) and the 2009 film *A Space Exodus* can lead us to think again about our relationship with reality? If so, how do you explain that? If not, why?

LS: I think images have an easier time depicting history than a historical document can. When you study art history, there is a historical dimension in that that one can only grasp through the image. Nonel and Vovel’s *Inferno* was inspired by the 15th century Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch. You can read a thousand documents about religion and history, but I think you get a true picture of society’s stand towards these issues when you look at a painting such as the *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

I feel that *A Space Exodus* continues this line by re-imagining one of America’s finest moment – the moon landing – as a Palestinian triumph. Everything is the same yet with a Palestinian touch, from the details of embroidery to the curl of the space boots. Yet the sadness that pervades the film is not necessarily Palestinian. Of course, the work reflects the fact that Palestinians are in limbo without a state, as their homeland shrinks like a spot on the horizon. Yet the sadness of *A Space Exodus* is also implicit in the contemporary reactions to the US space program, from Kubrick’s 2001: *A Space Odyssey* to Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* and even David Bowie’s *Space Oddity*. The moon landings reflected a widespread anxiety that, in leaving earth, we risked never being able to return home again. Yet because this anxiety is universal, the pain of the real, forced exodus of the Palestinians is doomed to remain a private grief, forgotten by the rest of the world.

WG: Why and how did you resort to fiction?

LS: I think my art practice started becoming more and more enveloped in the realm of fantasy around 2002. The reality of the occupation of Palestine manifested itself in the most absurd and heartbreaking ways. It was hard to relate to the world what really was going on. The siege of Bethlehem, the erection of the Israeli apartheid wall, the prohibition of Palestinians to enter the Israeli airport, the erection of checkpoints between Israeli territories and Palestinian territories, or Palestinians territories from other Palestinian territories all contributed to a sense of powerlessness and an

eradication of one's humanity. I think in the face of such acceleration and direct confrontation with an abject reality, there is a need to resort to a parallel place or fictional space where rational and normative relational deductions can be made.

WG: In your opinion, how and how far does “thinking fiction in its relationship with art” alter our perception of how an already established fiction functions as a ‘belief’?

LS: In our digital age, this distinction between reality and fiction is even more blurred. It is hard to know if fiction mimics reality or the other way around or if they are just interdependent. After all fiction is a fragment of our rational reality and maybe should be trusted even more. I think of fiction as a mathematical equation. In certain situations, the only way to proceed is to posit a theory or an alternative space, this could work along abstract terms, but could also yield a greater understanding of the problem at hand. An end that would not have transpired without a fictional or abstract intervention.

WG: How did the project *A space Exodus* start? Could you tell us more about the spatial framework of this work, its design, the choice of the sets, costumes and music?

LS: I wanted to make a video on power play or the reversal of power roles; I wanted to put the Palestinian in a context that we all associate with progress, might and innovation. A Palestinian space program seemed the way to go. I wanted to film it somewhere in the Arizona desert to somehow have the boundary of reality and fiction spun in even further, but upon further consideration, I decided that I don't want my work to be a comment on the American space program and I don't want my work to be interpreted as such. So, I ended up filming the moon landing part on a very strange looking chalk farm in Denmark with a Danish film crew. Other scenes were filmed in a circus where we managed to achieve the feeling of me floating into space. I somehow loved the idea of taking art making into a big production. I thought this idea would only work if it is carried out in a grand way. One of the things I wanted to concentrate on most is

to have the work speak a language that the majority of the world can relate to do, but at the same time maintain a strictly cool Palestinian perspective. In this piece there is a lot of play on power relations, traditional roles of victim and oppressor, analyzer and analyzed. The power of context in all these considerations is very important. The Palestinian flag framed in a fashionable space suit gives it a new meaning, the Oriental boots and the planting of a big Palestinian flag on the moon all re-contextualise Palestine and Palestinian-hood. The costume is gender specific and was designed especially for this video to include Palestinian traditional folklore patterns, but raise the design to a new realm not restricted to a marginal ethnic group but to a space that we can all relate to. The music is a reinterpretation of Stanley Kubrick's *A Space Odyssey* music, but of course electronified with an Arabesque punch.

WG: What do you wish to express through this work? How would you describe the process of reorientation of a political context fiction allows for?

LS: I guess most of the elements in the piece are there deliberately to deliver a slick and powerful take on Palestinian identity, something one does not see often for more often than not, Palestinians are the target of documentaries, but put in this context, the video becomes a comment on power struggle. I think in order to establish world empathy, the launching pad has to be on the same level, once power relations have been established, confirmed and not questioned, a chance of real empathy is almost impossible to achieve.

WG: You have raised a very topical issue, that of the territories occupied by Israel. Without directly addressing the material reality, that is the image of war or exile, you have been able to “trivialize” this reality though a symbolic invitation to pacifism and nonviolence. How do you account for this subtle detour?

LS: In a way, I don't see the work as a detour at all. In the same light would we not have to call Israeli early and continuous propaganda or Hollywood for that matter a detour? The opposite is often true, subtlety, mythology or fantasy are in most cases more instrumental in building our psyche than sheer facts. The video is called *A Space Exodus*. The exodus refers to the expulsion of 700 000

Palestinians from their land in 1948. It also refers to the Israeli perspective of history and the creation of their own mythology that influenced western understanding tragically of the Palestinian reality. Hollywood films such as Exodus did a lot of damage to the Palestinian case. It of course also refers to the biblical exodus and the use of that by the state of Israel to reiterate mythologies such as “a land with no people for a people without a land”.

WG: Though this video-fiction, do you think you could create a new imaginary space for the Palestinian State?

LS: I think the whole state of Israel has been built on fiction and the results and success of the Israeli state are astounding. I feel that Palestine finds itself right now between a rock and a hard place. A way forward in my understanding would be to posit a new reality as the present formula has not worked since 1948 and does not show any promise for the future. I think the distinction here should be thought of in terms of fiction as a stepping stone for a future reality on the ground, rather than the other way around. At least that is how I approach it in my own work.

WG: During your career, you have dedicated a large part of your work to questioning the relation between the ‘fictus’ and the fictional real (we can mention some works as Falafel road, Soup Over Bethlehem-Mloukhieh). How would you define the conditions of acceptability of a « fictional » work and space in your works that would enable them to urge to think again about the range of the real?

LS: It seems that this tug and pull between reality and fiction are at constant play in my work and I feel that without the presence of both elements, I would be dishonest in my art practice.

In Falafel Road, a single Middle Eastern food item becomes the nucleus of an extensive Middle Eastern cultural, historical and political debate. Is it fictional to ascribe that much attention to a little fried piece of chickpea mash? Maybe, but if you look closer into our project, this initial reaction drifts further from the truth and closer to fiction. In Soup Over Bethlehem, fiction arises in the way the documentary has been constructed. The film is smooth, with a very flowy conversation that seems to have a cohesive beginning and end. In

relation to this film, I often get asked the question; “Is the dialogue scripted or real”? I find that particularly interesting and that is how this work which at first glance seems to have a different approach to other works of mine, relates back to the same question, reality and fiction. The dialogue in the film is not scripted, I simply asked everyone around the table to talk like they would in everyday life to show how everyday life and politics is so interlinked in the Palestinian psyche.

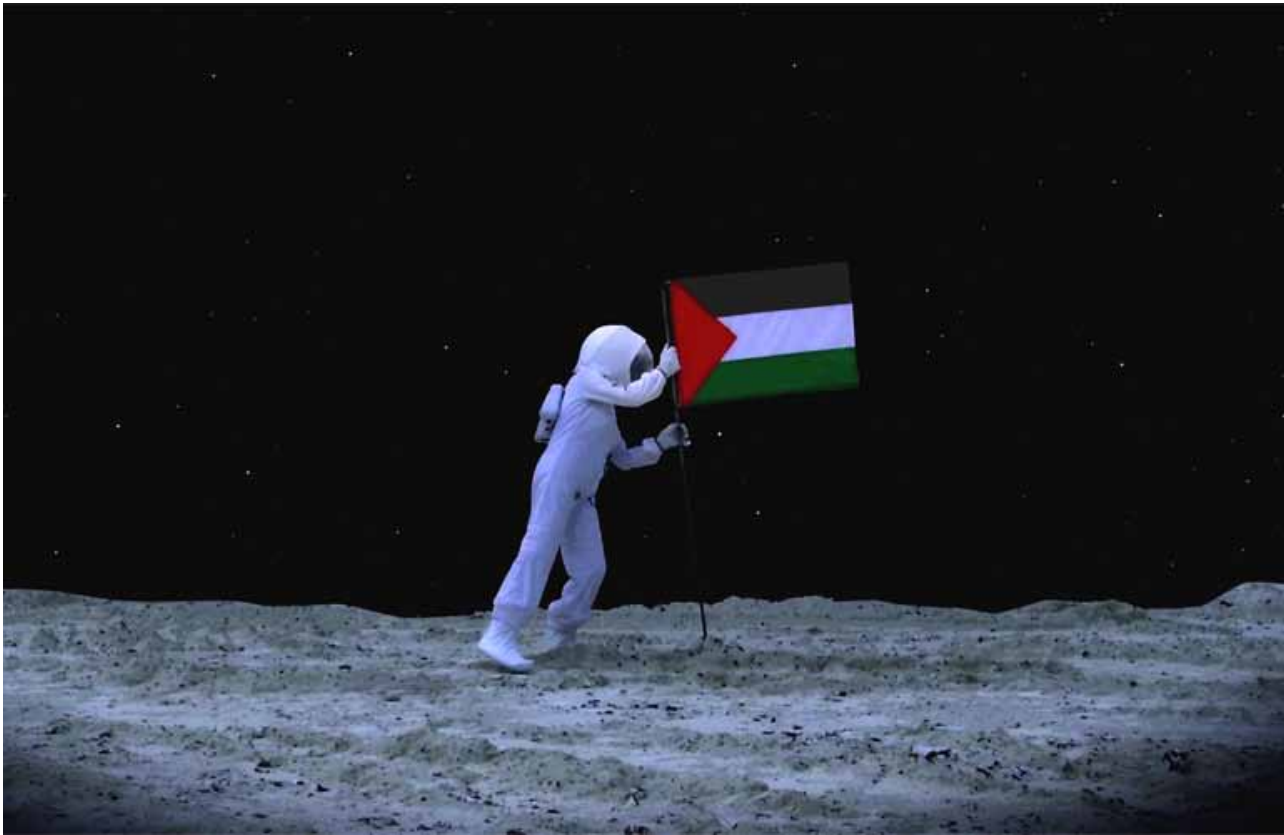
WG: In your opinion, can reality be “fictionalized”?

LS: When I start working on a project I don’t lay a premise for its fiction. Somehow in my work elements of fiction emerge spontaneously, it is as though a complete picture is never there without the inclusion of fiction and I hope the viewer can also recognize the limited version of claimed myopic copies of reality. For me the latter is more of a fiction than the former. As fiction resides in the real, one can inversely see the real in fiction.

Second part of the interview: “Recent Development Worth Mentioning” - Lacoste Censorship!

WG: Nation Estate, your new project, depicts a science fiction-style Palestinian state. How do you connect this work to “Space Exodus” – is it a process in continuity? Could you please explain more your proposed project to Le Musée de L’Elysée?

LS: Nation Estate very much follows in the footsteps of what I have begun to work on with A Space Exodus. In recent years, my work has taken a shift towards a more fictionalised and surreal approach. I feel that is the direction in which future works will follow as well. Somehow, it is in the relationship between the fictionalised space and the real political sphere that I feel my work can function most adequately or comfortably. The Nation Estate project is a sci-fi photo series conceived in the wake of the Palestinian bid for nationhood at the UN. In this vision, Palestinians have their state in the form of a single skyscraper housing the entire population: the Nation Estate. Each city has its own floor: Jerusalem, third floor; Ramallah, fourth floor. Intercity trips previously disrupted, detoured or made impossible by checkpoints are now made comfortably and quickly by elevator. The lobby of each



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floor reenacts iconic squares and landmarks of lost cities – elevator doors on the Jerusalem floor opening onto a full-scale Dome of the Rock.

Built just outside the actual city of Jerusalem, the building has views of the original golden dome from the top floors. The photo series is part of a bigger project that involves a sci-fi video of this future Nation Estate, in which we see a short narrative unfold. The main story takes place mostly in the elevator, but various floors from the building will also be revealed.

As in several others of my short films, I will be playing the main character.

WG: How do you explain the opposition of Lacoste against Nation Estate?

LS: In the case of Lacoste censoring my work, I only know what I have been told by the museum in Lausanne. And this is that my work was deemed too pro-Palestinian for the brand to support. These were the

exact words when I was first informed that my work had been banned.

In later conversations with museum staff I was informed that Lacoste wished to remain apolitical. My strong feeling is, however, that it matters hugely what brand of politics my work represented, and that had I chosen mostly any other current political topic, my exclusion would not have been as automatic and robust. Even if global opinion seems to favour a Palestinian state, Palestine is still viewed as a toxic brand by many people, let alone by big corporations making a living out of selling polo shirts. The problem here is not a major brand not openly supporting a Palestinian state. Not at all. The problem is getting involved in the arts and then not playing by the rules. My feeling is that if a sponsor feels that it has the mandate to first grant artists complete freedom to create and then revoke work that does seem to fall outside their comfort zone, then they have no business getting involved in the arts.

WG: In one of the interview towards this debate about Lactose's censorship, you have declared that "As a Palestinian artist, this is not the first time works of mine or shows I have been in have been exposed to politically-motivated pressure. I can only speculate as to Lacoste's reasons, but fearing bad press for coming out as pro-Palestinian seems a very likely interpretation." Do you want to highlight or to criticize these criteria of evaluation against your involvement to produce an "activist" art since it is not the first time you encounter this problem? What engages you to produce a political art work?

LS: I think the Lacoste Elysée Prize episode is a clear example of how instrumental a work of art can be, even when it functions according to its own premise. Lacoste apparently deemed it dangerous enough to censor, yet their decision to exclude my work in order to silence it and distance themselves from the politics of it luckily had the complete opposite result. This was a fantastic experience and a small, but significant victory for artistic freedom. In retrospect, I am happy to have been a part of that. The work has not only gained significant exposure in the art world, but also in mainstream newspapers and social media like Facebook and Twitter. It is overwhelming to see how people from different backgrounds related in such an engaged way to a work of art. That was such an incredible outcome and so much more than I could have ever hoped for. But being at the center of such a scandal has also made me very aware of my role as a political artist. I understand the potential, but also the limitations. But at the same time, I feel more motivated than ever to complete the projects I am currently working on.

WG: How do you define the situation of the artist in the balance of artistic and apolitical engagement?

LS: It is always difficult for an artist, I think, to find a balance between the two. I often find it uncomfortable to be put in the position of a political spokesperson devoid from the artistic context. The mere fact that my artistic work is immersed in politics should not mean that I have to resort to the same political discourse outside of art.

There is a potency to art that should be preserved as unique and its impact on the political dialogue cannot

be underestimated. That is why it is a difficult act for me to juggle all these positions.

WG: Can't Art be transgressive?

LS: What is important is to always keep in mind that any artwork causing an offense does not automatically entitle the offended party to demand that action be taken against the artwork in question. In the case of my own work, I have never regarded any single piece of mine as even remotely offensive or controversial, let alone transgressive. Yes, exhibitions featuring Palestinian artists are on occasion accused of all sorts of misdeeds. But this comes with the territory, so to speak. The issue of Palestine is an emotional one, and debates are often not for the faint of heart. But the fact that Palestine continues to stir the international controversies that it does still amazes me. Remember, Palestine is the occupied party in the Middle East conflict, not the occupier. Supporting Palestine's statehood ambitions should be mainstream and politically harmless by now, but is somehow still considered radical and controversial.

About the Writer Wafa Gabsi

Born in Tunisia, studied Fine Art in Tunis and then earned her Master in Cultural studies from the University of Paris I, La Sorbonne. In the following year, Gabsi began more in-depth doctoral studies with the organization of an important field study concerning contemporary artists from Middle East. Actually, she's carrying out doctoral research on contemporary southern Mediterranean artists in the international circuit of art and cultural globalization. The central question of her research is about the issue of "arab" identity.

Gabsi works on two articles publication in 2011-2012: "Building networks of cooperation for research in the world of art. Case study in Tunisia" in REDES (Spanish scientific journal) and "La singularité artistique face au danger de l'apanage identitaire" in collaboration with the National Center for Scientific Research of Paris.

Wafa Gabsi is also a researcher in the unity of "Art and globalization"-in the Museum of Modern Art, Geroges Pompidou. Recently, she participated to the symposium Exploring Mobility in the Mediterranean -in Jordan. And in October 2011, she will present a conference in the case of The German Middle East Studies for Contemporary Research and Documentation and will be then in a residence of curatorial Studies in the Node Center of Berlin.