

*The Occident and the Orient: Establishing Rhizomatic Relationships Through
Contemporary Art*

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Collage: Models of Aesthetic and Social Construction

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Paradoxically, the present state of war, terrorism, and persistent political upheaval in the Middle East contributes to the region's mystique and exoticism as seemingly far-removed from Western standards of cultural norms, practices, and concerns. Decolonization, globalization, and claims toward universalism have been examined and debated at length by scholars and theoreticians such as Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said. While these intellectuals have written extensively providing background and insight into theories of exile, "otherness," and the "Orient," connections between the visual arts and the desire to subvert Western hegemony are left virtually unexplored. Contemporary artworks and installations such as Mona Hatoum's kinetic sculpture, *+ and -*, (fig. 1) 2004, Emily Jacir's video installation, *Ramallah / New York*, (fig. 2) 2004 – 2005, and Shirin Neshat's *Speechless*, (fig. 3) 1996, from her "Woman of Allah" series, introduce a visual language expressive of trans-cultural identification between the Middle East and the West and represent the possibility of cultural affinities between neighboring Middle Eastern nations.

Application of the Rhizomatic Model

The formal qualities and critical interpretations of these projects reveal that subversion of a historicized Western norm is achievable through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of rhizomatics. Deleuze and Guattari employ the metaphor of the rhizome as a horizontally expanding and overlapping system of values that advances "the demolition of the sacred cows not only of Western academia, but also of the apparently obvious and commonsense logic on which we normally depend."¹ Rhizomatics challenges hierarchical systems of value and worth and in so doing, encourages parallels

and lateral relationships rather than the subordination models imposed by empires. Deleuze and Guattari strive to supplant the concrete hierarchical division of the world (the aborescent model), with an ever-expanding and inclusive system of multiplicities (the rhizomatic model). Nick Mansfield, author of *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* explains, “Deleuze and Guattari aim to see the complexity, the mixture and interpenetration of things as primary, as the fundamental basis on which we live and in which all things subsist.”² As *+ and -*, *Ramallah / New York*, and *Speechless* will demonstrate, the rhizome theory applies to Contemporary art and is especially relevant for projects conceptualized by artists of Middle Eastern descent.

Mona Hatoum’s + and -: Existence and Disappearance

+ and - (fig. 1) is comprised of a large, shallow, circular bed of sand. A metal, toothed arm is fixed across the diameter and bisects the piece. The metal arm moves circuitously at a slow, steady pace of five rotations per minute. The teeth on the leading edge of the arm create even grooves in the sand and the lagging edge immediately erases them. The repetitive movement and endless malleability of the sand are mesmerizing and the project engages the viewer not only through sight but also through sound. The movement of the sculpture is accompanied by the constant dull sound of the sand as it is molded and immediately flattened; yet, the mechanical structure itself is silent. This continuous cycle of creation and subsequent erasure alludes to the practice of artistic production with traditional mediums.³ The ongoing construction and destruction of the ridges in the sand conveys tension within the work and illustrates the tentative status of exiles who are uprooted from their homelands and forcibly dispersed.

Sand, as an endlessly shifting medium, is a direct reference to the desert-climate of Middle Eastern and Arab countries. Historically, conflicts in the Middle East have forced people from their homes and prevented them from returning. Edward Said, in his “Reflections on Exile,” acknowledges, “Look at the fate of the Jews, the Palestinians, and the Armenians,” for example.⁴ He examines the effect of exile on those he describes as “cut off from their roots, their land, their past.”⁵ The result is a constant feeling of estrangement, isolation, insecurity, and the persistent desire to re-establish an identity. + *and* – clearly illustrates the condition of life as an exile: leaving a mark on the land historically through ancestry and genealogy, only to endure erasure and displacement. As the title + *and* - suggests, people add to the land and are subsequently subtracted from it, any sign of previous inhabitation is completely dematerialized. The diasporic cycle is seemingly as endless as the sculpture’s uninterrupted movement. Exile and diaspora are compelling catalysts for artists to seek means of representing cultural and historical dislocation.

The ongoing cycle of banishment and displacement that occurs within the Middle East, the region represented here by the bed of sand, creates exiles destined to become outsiders wherever they eventually settle. Said’s definition of exile explains that it is a social and political phenomenon, created by human beings for human beings.⁶ He praises exiled artists, poets in particular, for their ability to return dignity to displaced individuals through their work. He writes, they “lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity – to deny an identity to people.”⁷ Hatoum’s project does not convey nostalgia or sentiment for the past; rather, through an abstract aesthetic, she addresses diaspora as an ongoing cycle. Moreover, the sculpture is not proprietary conceptually; rather, Hatoum

omits specifics and does not make reference to specific victims or oppressors. Since she is an exile prohibited from returning to her home in Lebanon, Hatoum also displaces herself through the work and through this act, aligns with the viewer and claims to be as much a foreigner to the region as the Westerner.

The metal outer rim of + *and* – suggests an impenetrable barrier, or border, constructed to simultaneously contain the sand and to foster a clear line of separation between the sand and the viewer, the “outsider” or “other.” Artworks by non-Western artists are often examined and considered for their “otherness” while white, Western artists maintain the standard against which all other art is measured. Steven Nelson explores the normalization of whiteness in his essay, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews,” and claims that artists from non-Western backgrounds battle a “blinding whiteness” that is prevalent in the visual arts.⁸ Nelson argues the non-Westerner and the non-white artist generally fulfill the role of the “other;” he contends, “works by non-European artists are often viewed in terms of universalizing Western aesthetics, which they almost always fail to uphold.”⁹ Hatoum challenges traditional roles in + *and* – by placing the viewer in the position of the “other.” She does not translate the ideas of diaspora and exile into easily applicable terms; rather, she challenges the viewer to relate and consider the possibility of shared experiences.

Hatoum’s work crosses cultural, religious and gender boundaries and the artist believes her classification as a Lebanese-born, Palestinian, female artist is limiting to the understanding of her work since she does not aspire to be a representative of either her country of birth or Arab women generally. In an interview with fellow artist Janine Antoni, Hatoum said, “If you come from an embattled background, there is often an

expectation that your work should somehow articulate the struggle or represent the voice of the people. That's a tall order, really. I find myself wanting to contradict those expectations."¹⁰ Hatoum simultaneously addresses exiles who have suffered parallel struggles and Westerners through + *and* – with the juxtaposition of creation and destruction, especially in recent years, since terrorism has so successfully penetrated the West, in both America and Europe. Hatoum does not strive to prove the exiles' or the Westerners' suffering is more authentic or severe; rather, she associates the hardships of both groups to encourage the recognition of similarities and the resistance to a hierarchical system based on a historicized Western norm.

Emily Jacir's *Ramallah / New York: Cross-Cultural Transmission*

While Hatoum's sculpture encourages a conjectural approach to understanding the relationship between the Occident and the so-called "Orient," Emily Jacir's *Ramallah / New York* (fig. 2) establishes a clear relationship between the two and considers cross-cultural transmission and interchange. *Ramallah / New York* is Jacir's solution to the limitations imposed by borders and boundaries. In this two-channel video installation, she juxtaposes the ostensibly disparate locations of Ramallah and New York and transmits paired images of virtually identical scenes of everyday life. As suggested by the title of the work, the video was filmed in the locations of the contrasting cities; yet, the artist never reveals which scene takes place in which location as the images transition on screen from a convenience store to hair salon, for example. Jacir pays painstaking attention to detail, such as maintaining a consistent camera angle when videoing each location. The artist is seemingly in both places at once and this effect can be interpreted

as semi-autobiographical since she is constantly moving between her homes in Ramallah and New York.

Much like the artist, the viewer is split, straddling both locations, equally invested in the simultaneous images of both scenes. The installation purposely conveys this sense of disorientation and dislocation and defies boundaries by creating geographically impossible neighbors of the two cities. Conceptually, this work illustrates Said's theory that although borders and boundaries are intended to provide protection and safety, they also create division and segregation. Said writes, "Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience."¹¹

Jacir attempts to establish connections between disparate groups of individuals in her work. The connection between the people seen in *Ramallah / New York* is visually perceptible, yet these particular cities also suggest tumultuous political undertones. Jacir challenges the viewer to venture beyond superficial appearances and to consider the possibility for shared relationships between the parallel images. The installation simultaneously addresses the specifics of locations both recognizable and indeterminate, and invokes a larger relationship between the West and the Middle East. The work ironically and intentionally provides the certainty of identifying the filmed locations and instantly revokes this certainty by not clearly differentiating between the two locations as they are presented to the viewer. Homi Bhabha states, "In trying to identify these geopolitical locations against the odds, the ruse of the title is to acknowledge the specificity of site while eliding visual recognition."¹² The duplicity of locale, the split

subject and the split viewer, promotes the realization that similar concerns exist and extend beyond defined boundaries of city or country.

As each frame flashes across the screen, the visual similarities are immediately and unavoidably striking, but there is an underlying tension in the serene appearance of each. Due to the volatility of the geopolitical situations in both Ramallah and New York, people in each location are bombarded daily with the possibility of terrorist attacks and are inundated with images of war from the news media. Scenes of explosions, remnants of suicide bombings, and constant media coverage of the heightened security level are ever-present through the transmission of media images into civilian homes. Through the video medium, Jacir usurps the same method of image and information transmission in *Ramallah / New York* and conveys the similar effects of rampant media coverage upon her subjects. There is a sense of constant uncertainty in her images. While the scenes are free from violence and terror, they inspire the feeling that at any moment a violent disruption could occur interrupting the projected scenes of the otherwise mundane.

The underlying theme of time also affects the interpretation of *Ramallah / New York*. Jacir depicts everyday scenes of ordinary life; yet it is the monotony of the routine that is often taken for granted. Jacir's other projects, such as *Where We Come From*, 2002-03, and *Crossing Surda*, 2003, highlight the inequities suffered in occupied Palestine. Bhabha argues that each passing day marks another day survived by the exile, rather than lived, and this is presented to the viewer through the passage of time in *Ramallah / New York*. The passage of time and the fragility of life are captured here in video; Bhabha writes, "there is a foreboding that at any moment on any day . . . there could be a catastrophe that would forever maim the routine of civil society and the

culture of community.”¹³ Perhaps more important than determining whether an image depicts Ramallah *or* New York, Jacir presents Ramallah *and* New York as two cities with similar values and with more in common than is visually perceptible.

The ironic dichotomy exhibited through this work also addresses Jacir’s cultural hybridity and that of all exiles forced from one land to another. The inherent duplicity in *Ramallah / New York* alludes to Jacir’s own background as an American-born Palestinian. The artist evades any attempt to concretely define her community although the majority of her projects examine the condition of Palestinians living in exile. For exiles, there is no such thing as site specificity, hence Jacir’s continuous and fluid movement from one place to another. Said notes, “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions.”¹⁴ She affords her projects this same luxury and the flexibility to freely cross borders, a freedom denied to most Palestinians. According to Jacir, the intent of *Ramallah / New York* is not to convey the controversial, widely held beliefs of most Palestinians, “that they have been turned into exiles by the proverbial people of exile, the Jews,” but that she is able to capture space and time in her video while challenging boundaries and promoting cultural and social exchanges.¹⁵

Jacir’s project illustrates diverse individuals, geographically separated by thousands of miles, joined socially and culturally through common concerns, occurring together simultaneously on screen. In general, her projects are not overtly critical or oppositional toward the geopolitics she confronts, nor do they simply convey the message that ordinary people are the same in spite of geographical differences; instead, she

challenges both the Western and Middle Eastern viewer to examine the passage of time, the possibility of cross-cultural transmission, and seen or unseen borders.

Shirin Neshat's *Speechless*: Confrontation

Shirin Neshat employs black and white photography—a medium closely associated with the print news media—to achieve the desired effect of ironic reportage in *Speechless* (fig. 3), a haunting and determinedly ethnic self-portrait. Her face is cropped and the folds of her chador add to the void black area that fills most of the left side of the larger than life image. The space is shallow and Neshat's presence prevents entry or a sense of depth to the picture; the viewer cannot see beyond her visage to examine its context or setting. Adding to the confrontational and mysterious atmosphere of the work, a gun appears out of the void between the chador and the artist's face, and the incongruous location of the barrel gives the appearance of a woman wearing an earring. Upon closer examination, the gun that mysteriously appears from beneath her chador points directly at the viewer. With the exception of her eye, Neshat's face is completely covered in Farsi calligraphy.

Speechless simultaneously confronts the Western viewer and the popular stereotypes reserved for the otherness of the Muslim world. Neshat, in her "Woman of Allah" series, of which *Speechless* is a part, conflates the stereotypes of Muslim women in chador with their portrayal by the Western media but does not attempt to overtly challenge or support this portrayal. She re-appropriates the images and emphasizes the West's inability to comprehend her Iranian heritage by covering the image in calligraphy that is indecipherable to most Westerners. In her photograph, Neshat presents the viewer

with a simulated, imagined Muslim woman who fulfills the West's expectations of mystery, exoticism, and violence. The woman pictured is threatening and stoic, and assumes a Western stereotype of people of the Muslim world. Igor Zabel, in his article "Women in Black" writes, "Neshat's aim is not to dispose of media clichés, but to recompose and reorganize them in ways that produce more flexible and complex readings."¹⁶

Many aspects of Muslim society remain incomprehensible to non-Muslim Westerners and in *Speechless* Neshat identifies the ideas that generate controversy and anxiety for the West, combines them, and forces the viewer to acknowledge their unease with the images she creates. The veil, a traditionally recognizable component of Muslim women's dress, is replaced in *Speechless* with the equally exotic handwritten calligraphy. Beautifully intricate and lace-like, the meaning of the calligraphic symbols remains foreign and inaccessible to the Western viewer, foiling a thorough reading of the image as a whole. Prevented from obtaining a more complete understanding of the artwork, the Western viewer is subsequently frustrated by this barrier, and assumes the role of the "other." This lack of access and cultural understanding perpetuates many of the stereotypes Neshat addresses in her work. Calligraphy acts as a code that cannot be easily translated by the West and, as a result, the writing is often misunderstood and misinterpreted, especially when paired with the imagery of a woman in chador and the barrel of a gun. Fereshteh Daftari acknowledges that "an audience that does not read Persian, and may not distinguish clearly between Iranians and Arabs, assumes that her texts are in Arabic and perhaps excerpted from the Koran, which Neshat has actually

never quoted.”¹⁷ Instead, the text she applies in her works is that of historical and contemporary Iranian poetry.

In *Speechless*, time is addressed through the conflation of past tradition, rooted in the calligraphy and chador, with the modern state of Iran, seen through the implied presence of violence, revolution and turmoil. Neshat’s ability to identify and illustrate stereotypes of the Middle East is due in part to her own separation from Iran for a period of sixteen years. While she addresses Western perceptions of the Middle East by acting as her own subject, or model, in the “Woman of Allah” series, she also struggles to find her place in a society that has changed since she was last a part of it; conceptually reintegrating herself by way of image. In her photographs, Neshat embodies the iconic “woman in black,” provoking stereotypes ranging from the oppressed and passive female to the fundamental extremist. Such interpretations, elicited by the artist, reveal the viewer’s own preconceived notions about Middle Eastern women that are perpetuated by an incomplete understanding of non-Western culture. Neshat’s photographs from this series encourage the viewer to examine his or her own misconceptions of the “other” in society, prompting us, as Zabel concludes, “to rethink our own position in this divided world.”¹⁸

Hatoum, Jacir and Neshat subscribe to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic theory as they challenge any notion of a Western norm through their respective art projects and confront the stereotypes associated with Middle Eastern cultures, representations, and religions. The appropriation of the rhizome as a metaphor for the establishment of relationships and connections between the culturally disparate is similar to the identification of cultural affinities between the Middle East and the West. This model

challenges the tradition of Western values as representative of the generally accepted and practiced “norm.” French writer, poet and influential Caribbean studies theorist, Édouard Glissant posits, “One cannot generalize particular values, but one can quantify all sorts of particular values, not in order to ‘extract’ universal values, but in order to make a rhizome, a field, a fabric, a web of different values, but which constantly touch and intersect.”¹⁹ It is not the goal of + *and -*, *Ramallah / New York*, or *Speechless* to merely suggest the idea that all human life is equally valuable; rather, these projects underscore the shared experiences, values and concerns of culturally diverse nations and posit that the distance between the Middle East and the West is not as vast as often assumed.²⁰

Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir, and Shirin Neshat strive to defy the measure of a white, Western norm and contend that the West can also be interpreted as the “other” through their respective artworks. + *and -* illustrates the ongoing, systematic cycle of diasporas. As the “other,” victims of exile seek connections and the establishment of relationships and this is the experience Hatoum hopes to invoke through her work. As a Lebanese exile, she forges a connection with the West through her sculpture and encourages her audience to imagine the connection between each other and with the “other.” *Ramallah / New York* affords the viewer a more straightforward visual representation of cultural similarities. Here, the viewer is impacted through the recognition and realization of relationships that surpass the visual and extend into the possibility of trans-cultural identification. *Speechless* identifies and appropriates common stereotypes to actively confront the viewer and perhaps engage a dialogue between the real and the imagined of Middle Eastern culture. Together these works, when examined in conjunction with the theories and philosophies challenging Western

claims of normativity, illustrate that one single norm cannot exist in an attempt to attain universality. As these projects attest, the examination of cultural parallels and the consideration of the complex relationships between different cultures result in heightened awareness and a continuously extending rhizome of intertwining beliefs and values.

¹ See Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University, 2000): 136.

² Ibid., p. 139.

³ Extended label text for this sculpture while on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, explains: “Replacing conventional artists’ tools (pencil and paper, paint and canvas) with a motorized, toothed metal arm and a circular bed of sand, Hatoum mechanizes the practices of mark-making and erasure”

⁴ See Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Boston: MIT Press, 1987): 360.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 358. Said writes, “Is it not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography?”

⁷ Ibid., p. 365.

⁸ See Steven Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2006): 313.

⁹ Ibid., p. 299.

¹⁰ See Charles Giuliano, “Perspectives: Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum,” *Art New England* volume 23, no. 3 (April/May 2002): 9.

¹¹ See Said, 365.

¹² See Homi Bhabha, “Another Country,” in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006): 33.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Said, 366.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Igor Zabel, "Women in Black," *Art Journal* volume 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): pp. 16-25.

¹⁷ See Fereshteh Daftari, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), pp. 10-27.

¹⁸ See Zabel, 25.

¹⁹ See Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (Montreal: Presses de L'université de Montreal, 1995): 100.

²⁰ See Ali A. Mazrui, "Pretender to Universalism: Western Culture in a Globalizing Age," in *Unpacking Europe*, eds. Iftikhar Dadi, Salah Hassan, Ken Lum (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001): 96. Mazrui writes, ". . . the historical distance between African and Islamic values on one side, and Western values, on the other, may not be as great as many have assumed."

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