

# PERMANENT TEMPORARINESS

| SANDI HILAL |  
*Alessandro Petti*

AL MASHA/COMMON

MADAFEH/HOSPITALITY

BORDERS

MUJAWAARA/NEIGHBORING

CAMP

PARTICIPATION

CONFESSION

PROFANATION

DECOLONIZATION

REPRESENTATION

EXILE

RETURNS

HERITAGE

TAWTIN/NORMALIZATION

# Introduction

## SPARKS | IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIA NADOTTI | *Beit Sahour* | 2018

*For not to speak roundly of a man's self implies some want of courage; a man of solid and lofty judgment, who judges soundly and surely, makes use of his own example upon all occasions, as well as those of others; and gives evidence as freely of himself as of a third person. We are to pass by these common rules of civility, in favor of truth and liberty. I dare not only speak of myself, but to speak only of myself: when I write of anything else, I miss my way and wander from my subject. I am not so indiscreetly enamored of myself, so wholly mixed up with, and bound to myself, that I cannot distinguish and consider myself apart, as I do a neighbor or a tree.*

—Michel de Montaigne<sup>1</sup>

*Permanent Temporariness is a book, a catalogue, and an archive that accounts for fifteen years of research, experimentation, and creation that are marked by an inner tension and a visionary drive that re-thinks itself through collective engagement. It is the result of the profound desire of its authors, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, to look back in connection with the eponymous retrospective exhibition that was inaugurated at the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery on February 24, 2018, and at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven on December 1, 2018.*

*To fully understand the nature and interconnections of the projects that Hilal and Petti—who have been partners in both work and life since the beginning of the twenty-first century—have conceived to date, we immersed ourselves in a conversation that took place over the course of two weeks, between August 2 and August 15, 2018. We met at their house in Beit Sahour, which they designed and built in 2010. It is the place they chose for their work, as well as for their experimentation with being partners and parents in ways that do not conform to the standard rules of the nuclear family.*

*This introduction crosses the spheres of private and public, professional and intimate, personal and political. Every interpretation which would separate or oppose these spheres would end up marginalizing one in order to highlight the other, thus hiding the complexity and contradictions of reality. This would in fact be a power play rather than an attempt to unveil the truth.*

*These pages have the structure of a dialogue with three voices. As the dialogue goes on, however, it progressively moves away from the format of the interview and morphs into a self-analysis aimed at revealing the profound, and deeply political motivations of a way of thinking and making that is both original and antagonistic; one that stands on the border between art and architecture, narration and history, geopolitics and the politics of emotions.*

**MARIA NADOTTI** As a retrospective exhibition and a book that summarizes fifteen years of your life—going chronologically through your projects and, with them, the material conditions in which they took shape and the collaborations that made them possible—where does the need for permanent temporariness come from?

**ALESSANDRO PETTI** I felt the need to take some critical distance from our own practice. Here in Palestine you always run the risk of turning into an NGO, becoming a doing-machine. When DAAR began getting external commissions, we started realizing that we were on shaky ground. Until we began working as artists, neither making architecture nor working with/as an NGO gave us the freedom to experiment.

**SANDI HILAL** This book is also a transition, a passage. I needed it in order not to lose the past. I know very well that what I left behind in leaving Palestine will never come back, but I don't want the pain of abandonment to take over a feeling of immense lightness.

**MN** A book and an exhibition to deal with turning the page? Writing, however, is also a conclusion...

**AP** We are used to this paradox. In 2011, when we wrote *Architecture After Revolution*, we understood that we needed to pause in order to understand. We needed closure in order to be able to take the next step, which led, in that case, to the establishment of Campus in Camps. In this current phase, we needed to retreat from the frontlines, to reflect on a ten-year cycle lived with the sensation that we were doing meaningful things that required a full engagement on the ground. I move between critical reflection and practice; between the desire to follow an intellectual trajectory, independent from daily news, and the urgency and ambition to intervene in reality, to transform it. For us, Palestine has always been a condition rather than an object. When we chose to come and live here, when Sandi chose to come back, we quickly realized that “representation” was not enough, that we weren't here to explain Palestine to the distant observer as we were doing with *Stateless Nation* and *The Road Map*. Once we moved here, we were no longer talking to Europe or to a generic outside. Everything arose from our local relations. Our reality was here.

**MN** Could we describe these phases or cycles as a movement from the outside in, and today, having recently moved to Stockholm, back again towards the outside? As some kind of zoom and counter-zoom, but also as a continuity in the re-adjustment of your personal and professional lives to a collective story? Perhaps the conceptual

paradigms, political vocabulary, and working methods that you developed within Palestinian refugee camps now need to be tested against what is happening elsewhere, and in particular in Fortress Europe.

**SH** Indeed. The sense of loss that for me is connected to the decision to take some distance from Palestine is slowly morphing into a work of reconstruction and moving towards a new life. It is not by chance that in Sweden I am looking at the personal, political, conceptual, and affective dimensions in the project that I started with a couple of Syrian refugees. *Al Madhafeh/The Living Room* seeks to create places where foreigners, exiles, refugees, or migrants can exercise the “right of hospitality.” My elaboration of grief—if I may define it that way—is coming through a slow and non-solitary awareness that what is happening inside me can become productive in a situation that I may understand better than the Swedes themselves. To be able to see with full clarity, one really needs to look in from the outside. This book is therefore an attempt to put together those phases; to open by closing. The experience of displacement can be incredibly fertile.

**AP** There is a fundamental question that emerged from our projects in refugee camps: what are the techniques to oppose normalization? Refugees in Palestine have developed extraordinary ways to refuse normalization, to avoid being captured by the regime that wants to impose an unjust reality. During these projects we were able to conceptualize and work with these lessons, even though in previous years it was already an important factor that influenced our decision to move to Palestine. Continuity and leaps; interconnected rings; shifts from practice to understanding the very reasons of that practice; from direct experience to its theorization.

**MN** Could your home in Beit Sahour and the idea to turn it into an open “residency,” into a research space for collective and temporary experimentation, perhaps also be considered as one of your projects to resist normalization?

**AP** Yes, the extended family of the residency, with people coming from all over the world, helped us avoid the trap of the bourgeoisie family. In 2006, the compelling reason to start a family and set up a home in Palestine was that we didn't want to be reduced to the norm. Sandi's extended family was also a guarantee against the suffocating paradigm of the nuclear family and gave us the opportunity to do things that would have been impossible had we lived in Europe. Here in Beit Sahour we started from scratch; there was construction instead of the deconstruction that was happening in Europe at the time. We felt like we were in charge. We went as far as conceptualizing a school for our daughters in an existing school cooperative where, along with other parents, we contributed to and established its “principles and vision.” We managed and ran it for over four years. After ten years of this, however, you become exhausted. Sometimes I wonder whether we accepted Palestinian marginality because there were no alternatives.

SH Perhaps ours wasn't even a real decision. It all happened at a practical level. When we moved here we were surprised by how in both Italy and Palestine moving with your children to a country under occupation was considered socially unacceptable. The parallel between our initial situation of the four of us living in a single room and the life of Palestinians living in refugee camps was a formidable drive for our practice. From the very start we interrogated our own fear of accepting Palestine as a stable condition. And the practical and political answer we found was: if refugees who were forced to live in refugee camps oppose normalization by rooting themselves in temporariness, can we not also set up home here, despite our precarity and temporariness, and try to have a better life? This was a crucial passage for us: rooting ourselves in Beit Sahour became possible because of the conceptual understanding that came from our work in camps.

AP For me the past ten years have been a time of "permanent impermanence." Every time I would leave Palestine to travel, I didn't know whether I would be allowed to come back. To the regime of "temporariness" (the condition of spatial and temporal transience in the camps), we never opposed a project of permanence or citizenship. We chose instead to embrace destabilization. This is a fundamental issue, especially today in a European context where the issue of refugees, migrants, and hospitality is addressed in a binary manner: you either have to live in the camp, in a precarious condition, or become a model citizen with a permanent residency permit. The idea that if you "become a citizen" everything is solved doesn't seem acceptable to us because it erases the specificity of the past and entails a messianic aspiration that does not consider life in the present.

MN Let's try to imagine that the Palestinian refugees' "right of return" moved away of its messianic dimension and was exercised. For seventy years, Palestinian refugees have lived, died, were born, studied, and worked; when they could, they chose to leave or stay; they set up structures of political and administrative self-governance; they built services, community centers, and cemeteries to bury their dead. Today the Palestinian refugee camp is a lively and self-aware community, not just a poor overcrowded town held hostage by Israel, by the Palestinian National Authority, by international organizations, or the "good will" of NGOs. Similarly, migrants who come to Europe are not a *tabula rasa* to inscribe our norms for the sake of the supposed superiority of the Western societal model.

AP After the right of return is granted, the eradication of camps would produce a second Nakba because several generations of Palestinians have been born and raised there. If we continue with the parallels with those who are migrating to Europe now, their memories and experiences cannot evaporate or simply be erased. The political vision of our practice embraces this very dimension, heading towards the possibility of alliances or identifications that are unusual and pluridirectional. Take the Arab Spring and what it produced in Europe: representative democracies from the West learned about direct democracy and political agency from the Arab world; it was the first time that

there was a real reciprocity. Political inventions today entail the ability to recognize and nurture these possible identifications. What is it, for example, that prevents young and unemployed, precarious Italians or Greeks from identifying with migrants coming from beyond the borders of Europe? Or what about the absolute precariousness of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi, who even after decades of residency in the country are not legally allowed to stay if they lose their jobs? We are not interested in solidarity, but in interconnections and joint struggles. Only through new allegiances can wars among the marginalized be avoided. Today, colonized bodies are at the heart of the metropolis and, through their very existence, they bring a claim that collapses an existing structure of privilege based on five hundred years of exploitation, racism, and slavery.

MN This book is also a great narration, an attempt at disclosing what happened by presuming that it can be replicated or reproduced in an original manner in new professional and personal contexts.

AP Through description, reasoning, images, technical overviews, multi-vocal conversations, and interviews, all the projects presented here are strictly *site specific*, but they are also readable within a wider framework. This book is an answer to our wish to connect all these projects, not with a universalizing or abstract aim—which is one of the many totalizing Western illusions—but with the intent to relieve them from the isolation that often defines Palestinian exceptionalism. The replicability that we hope for is not based on imitation, but rather on example. Our hope is that these pages will push readers to question the nature of the regime that forces European youth or migrant workers in the UAE into a condition of precariousness. We also hope they will start considering the sense of displacement not as a problem to solve, a malady to heal, but rather as the terrain in which contemporary identity is rooted; an identity based on loss, a void that no replacement (integration, citizenship, assimilation) can ever fill.

MN *Permanent Temporariness* is therefore a manifesto against the monotheistic promise of the state that poses citizenship as the final objective, as well as against the bureaucratic public machine that assists, rewards, and includes under the condition that one uncritically adapts to its regulations.

SH We believe—and this is apparent in each of our projects—that we need to build a new civic space that could construct a relational geography and allow new perspectives and new "first times." With *Campus in Camps*, for instance, it was as if we "saw" the camp for the first time, because we began to look at it from a new point of view. We were not there to teach, but to learn with them, to understand through exchange, to confront the asymmetry that the logic of aid inevitably generates as it creates disparity, subjugation, and dependency, and thus prevents any chance of transformation.

MN As we see at the beginning of each of the chapters, a fundamental part of your work is the redefinition of words; the individualization of a shared vocabulary, purified of all ambiguities.

AP We don't want the projects to be pigeonholed in airtight boxes; we want to activate them. This activation can only take place through words and concepts that we identified over the years in our collective research. The transformation of the way we think—what we call decolonizing the mind—takes place through a rigorous critique of how certain words are used, while in parallel looking at a process of re-orientation or rejection of those same terms, devoid of their original meaning. The backbone of *Campus in Camps* was the creation of a collective dictionary made of words, free of colonized terms such as “aid,” “help,” or “development.” The redefinition of our semantic grounds allowed us to make different languages and cultural traditions resonate. When words are not merely empty shells, they carry precious knowledge that has to be communicated, exchanged, and osmotically mixed so as they can thrive and regenerate themselves and others.

SH Let's take the word *madafeh* as an example. In Arabic it defines the part of the house that is meant to host guests. In Arabic cultures, it symbolizes hospitality and openness, as the *madafeh* is the middle ground between the private and the public, the intimate and the social. It is the place where you exercise both your duty and your right to host. This word is one of the cornerstones of our conceptual vocabulary because it highlights the double-faced nature of hospitality and questions its complex social relations. Its fluid nature constantly problematizes the strict interconnection between certain places and specific subjects and certain subjects and determined roles. “Guest” in Arabic entails a supplement, not an assimilation.

MN A shining example of this is *The Tree School*. You defined the project as “a device to create a physical and metaphorical common ground where ideas and actions spring from critical, free, and independent discussion among participants.” The first time you conducted it was in 2015 in Bahia, Brazil, and it then took place again in Palestine, in Mexico, on the ground, and in museums. That experience, besides offering a reflection on the conditions and modalities of pedagogical relationships, posed the need to create free spaces where that relationship can take shape in full reciprocity; where all the participants equally belong and are foreign.

SH We found the final proof of the relevance of the words we identified in the collective experience of *Campus in Camps* away from both Palestine and Europe. We found it in Bahia, by the sea, where all the participants of *The Tree School* lived with us for forty days. No one was at home, no one owned the place; we were all both guests and hosts at the same time. Every time we have managed to create this kind of setting, power dynamics give way to circularity and a multi-directional curiosity.

AP In the camps, which for us have been formidable places of learning, we have understood what it means to be outside the rules. There, belonging is not the same as ownership. The camp is a laboratory where one discovers how to live without possessing, how to reuse things without owning.

SH The creation of a collective dictionary that was connected to a very specific situation determined direct actions. It was a basic operation that allowed us to oppose concepts that came from the outside and did not derive from experience. We started listing all the words we wanted to dismantle or discard (citizenship, sustainability, activism, etc.), and through a process of *unlearning*, we freed ourselves from the subjugation generated by their opacity and rhetoric. Following Giorgio Agamben's intuition, we understood that people do not react to power, but create worlds that power in turn tries to co-opt. In the whole Middle East, the camps are the true and only political heart—so much so that in Lebanon the government decided to close them, allowing access only with special permits. Enclosed and under surveillance, only then could they become harmless. In Palestine this did not happen. There refugee camps benefit from a condition of extraterritoriality that produces their porosity, their ability to influence the city because residents can come and go. This bi-directionality requires an inside and an outside that is recognizable and can be crossed. We didn't intend to erase the boundaries of the camp, but use them in a different way; to work on their exceptionality as a potential. In refugee camps we could do things that the city would have never allowed.

MN Transit in itself is what allows one to question what is inside, what is outside, and where the threshold that separates and connects them both is. In this context, where do you place the concept of “return,” which is so politically over-used and rhetorically loaded?

AP There isn't a single return, but many possible returns. Our task is to reopen the imagination on how returns could take place. It should not be understood as a messianic event, but rather as a multiplication of acts of profanation of borders and separations. It became even more clear during our stay in Bahia: what does it mean to “return” after five hundred years of African diaspora? It is obviously not about an actual return to Africa, but it is about, for example, a series of gestures that carry in themselves the meaning of free and self-determined acts: going back to the land, to territorial sovereignty, to old cacao plantations through a reinterpretation of intensive colonial economy.

SH In Bahia they told us: “Every time I plant a baobab in Brazil, I feel like I'm going back to Africa.” Thresholds are necessary for identification. Borders mark differences and safeguard one's own identity and story, but the threshold is a mobile space to inhabit together while inventing rules and codes. For us, for example, the English language is a threshold.

AP It is a threshold as *broken English*, the lacunose, stunted, approximate language of those who did not learn it as children. It is a nascent idiom in which we all project meanings different from the original one, constantly contaminated by the many mother tongues that are reflected in it.

**MN** The theme of hospitality cuts through your research. It is an idea of making space for the other not on the grounds of ethical categories or moral imperatives, but rather through the acknowledgement of temporality and the circularity of need. It is a theme that is present in *The Concrete Tent* as well as in *Al Madhafeh/The Living Room*.

**SH** For us the tent is the space where the codes of hospitality were historically developed. To the idea of “unconditional hospitality”—the one above the laws of the state that Derrida advocated for—we prefer a less idealistic and more reciprocal and pragmatic reason. In the desert, the tent is a means of survival: if you don’t have one, you risk your life. One day you can be a host, and then another you are a guest. Derrida refers to the Bedouins, but he didn’t fully grasp the cogency of this habitus. For Derrida hospitality is an ethical path, but for us it is an urgency and a practice of survival, driven by necessity. In the Arab world, the social contract is based on mutual need; on mutual convenience rather than a way of being. To host is to be an active member of society. It generates a shared obligation.

In the West, it is ever more apparent that the right to host is in the hands of the state. We want to question this monopoly and highlight that, when the rights of others are eroded, our own rights are eroded as well. The citizens who re-appropriate the right to host, the neighborhood that re-appropriates the right to decide who is the host, stops delegating to the state. In this way they reveal the state apparatus that is hidden behind “helping those in need,” who become ever more passive because of this unidirectional hospitality.

**MN** If we push this reasoning further, and look at *The Concrete Tent* beyond metaphor, we reach a paradox. The only way to be yourself and to be a political subject is to feel “other” in the place where you live; to be ill-at-ease in the reality you inhabit, a foreigner at home. This implies a double movement or strategy: to stay without conforming, to practice the subtle art of belonging, while using the tools of imagination. How does this show in your work?

**AP** It is reflected in the rejection of fixed roles and in the search for a consistency that has nothing to do with capitalization or solidification. If you’re not constantly alert, you run the risk of slipping into the comforting inertia of stability, of linearity, or worse, of repetition. To deconstruct roles, to opt for exile and displacement, to sabotage your own work from within, to desecrate the thresholds between disciplines (the limen between art and architecture, history and politics, mine and yours)—this is what has saved us from ossification and from falling into the trap.

This retrospective and this book-catalogue is a way for us to keep transforming ourselves, each with our own potentials, limits, and fears. *The Living Room* is a project that Sandi is mostly working on; an experiment that springs directly from her own biography. Whereas for me now it seems urgent to bring the question of decolonization back to Europe and investigate the historical dimension of colonization. I

am focusing mostly on a kind of continuation of *Italian Ghosts* and *Refugee Heritage*. I want to understand how modernist architectures from Italian Fascism are appropriated and reused both in Italy and in the former Italian colonies in Africa. Along with my postgraduate students in Sweden, I am investigating the paradox of a city like Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, being declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and turned into a tourist destination thanks to its fascist colonial buildings. The history that I am interested in is full of question marks: who has the right to use these buildings? Is colonialism over? If so, how did the transition take place? How did certain things survive and how did others transform? What are the factors that allow for this transformation? Which is the moment of their conversion? What are the forces at play? Which mediations, negotiations, and compromises are unavoidable? We have just started to work on these mutilated histories, to expose contradictions, and to prevent amnesia and repression.

**MN** The title of the book and the retrospective is anchored on a temporal metaphor. It is a confutation of a linear understanding of time, non-sedimentation, intermittence, and an embrace of transience as the seed for a potential political transformation. The projects in this book don’t sum up or translate into a system; each of them takes you to the next, but also outside, here and there, and yet neither here nor there. The action itself, in its absolute specificity, is also a positioning—connected, communicating, multifaceted—within a horizontal, reticular space brightened by gleams of light that reverberate from outside.

**AP** The challenge is exactly this: how to give longevity to the world we wish for and that every so often is lit by a spark? How to prolong the intensity of these moments without getting burned? How to shape exceptionalism without bringing it back to ordinariness? How to ensure that moments of extraordinary creativity inspire other places and situations? How to make sure the light that the little spark produced is propagated as far as possible? Or, to go back to ourselves, how to learn the lesson of Palestine, renouncing the aggressive will to explain the world on the grounds of one’s own exclusive categories? How to connect and not isolate ourselves in our individual problems?

**MN** This new spatial and temporal metaphor relies on the fugacity and intermittence of light to propagate local knowledge and experiences. It is based on a principle of multiplication and reciprocal induction, on the ability to connect and take on memories of events we might not have been part of. It also implies the formidable ability to move in the dark, to keep walking even when we are surrounded by darkness and the light of the last spark is extinct. What are the sensorial means for this nocturnal practice, for this “meanwhile” that is the real dimension of history and great transformations that are inevitably conceived in the dark?

**SH** Sparks may not fade. The presence of a person I loved and whom I wanted to be with, even though we came from different worlds, is what has nurtured them for me over the years. The only chance for Alessandro and I—coming from different cultures,

languages, families, “jails”—was to keep the sparks alive. How? For me it was through the awareness that light is not a given, but needs to be nurtured, patiently and tenaciously kept alive by remembering and imagining. A sort of love instinct, a physical intuition—as if it were my body that was speaking and giving me the direction to follow.

**AP** After those moments of absolute intensity that coincide with full light, what is it that remains of lightning and sparks? The awareness of things: that’s where the real permanence is. That is the tool for moving in the dark.

1. Michel de Montaigne, “Of the Art of Conference,” in *Essays*, Book III, 1877.

## SEPARATION | IN CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES ESCHE | *Eindhoven* | 2018

**ALESSANDRO PETTI** This book is the first time we have really acknowledged the part of our practice that materializes itself as an installation or in an exhibition. Even though our projects can start or end as “art,” we have never fully documented or outwardly reflected upon this process. This book accounts for this important aspect of our work, one which has allowed some of our projects to exist.

**CHARLES ESCHE** What do you mean by the art world allowing your projects to exist?

**AP** Exhibitions play the role of a catalyst. Having to think about a project’s spatial manifestation gives us a certain autonomy from it, as it initially exists only in a specific site and for a specific community. Especially in the context of Palestine, it is very easy to be trapped in the NGO logic that quantifies success and measures impact statistically. The art world was ambiguous and remote enough for us to use it as a critical platform. Instead of being a self-referential space, for us, the exhibition was always a space for experimentation that could not take place elsewhere.

**SANDI HILAL** Hannah Arendt, in one of her interviews, said: “when I write, I clarify my ideas through the writing.” For us, more than writing, art exhibitions are occasions for being in conversations, to explore and clarify ideas that are far away from our everyday reality. The conversation is a way to share doubts and explore suspicions.

**CE** But also the artworks or the installations themselves, no? They also seem to be a way of concretizing some suspicions or ideas you have. The photographs and light-boxes of *Refugee Heritage*, for instance, give you a certain way to talk about and share your experience of being so closely attached to Dheisheh for so many years.

**AP** One aspect that might clarify our relation with the exhibition space is that it always creates a space of tension. Since most of our projects are very site-specific, the exhibition is a space of necessary alterity that allows us to clarify our understanding of the projects. This means that we never have the intention to either represent the projects themselves, or simply bring the social practice inside the museum. We are not interested in translating our work into exhibitions. For example, *Fawwar Square* took eight years of community participation to make. We don’t find it interesting to represent or mimic this process in the museum. What is at stake for us in exhibitions is the ability to continue our explorations in different ways. We are not interested in institutional critique, as it tends to merely perpetuate the cultural hegemony of the modernist white cube. If we look at the museum from an architectural perspective, however, we could ask ourselves how to reuse the white cube of the museum for aims different from those it was design for. This speculative approach opens a much more