

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

constructive way to engage with it that is not only critical, but also engages in an ongoing process of its transformation.

So you can see how exhibiting for us is very much like a project; it operates according to the same principles. For example, in *Refuge Heritage*, we presented the project to the refugee community of Dheisheh not as filling out a UNESCO application for heritage status of the camp, but as an art project. Similarly, after developing the *Manual of Decolonization*, we had several meetings with the UN in Jerusalem. They were very interested in our propositions, but said that this is not the time; maybe in twenty years when the geopolitical conditions are different. So we use art, and its perceived uselessness and powerlessness, as a Trojan horse for people to accept a political conversation that would not have otherwise been possible. It is actually at biennials and in museums that we found places of support and the platform to develop ideas that others rejected as not belonging to this historical moment.

☒ This takes me back to some of the expectations I had—and still have—about the art world, which was this idea of a permissive space, a space that said yes, rather than no. In this sense, the art world would not be determined by what it was, or is, but by what people wanted to do with it. That idea of repurposing the art world for your own needs, and those needs being in excess of or counter to what the art world needs—in terms of commodities that go into the market—is something that museums and biennials might make possible. This understanding is probably the main reason why I stay within the world of art, the potential for art to exceed its structural limits. I think, or at least I hope, that art and artists embrace the opportunity that art offers to work in a way that an NGO won't. They might say that a given project is not sufficiently utilitarian, not sufficiently productive, not sufficiently directed towards a solution, that it does not directly, in such awful terms, “help people.”

Of course, I'm not denying that art has its own control systems and protocols—particularly around modernist autonomy—but they are easier to challenge from within. What is positive about art, even given its conformity to luxury commodity status today, is that it has an open-ended quality of being whatever artists use it for. And maybe this is even more the case with public institutions, their bricks and mortar, and their quite solid funding structures. We can say, “let's see what happens here,” and not face an immediate shutdown. Despite the fact that it is a vague and undefined license, I would say that this is my understanding of how research operates in art. Exhibitions like yours should offer that space to let you see what happens when you make your ideas concrete. It is a way of seeing what you think, in the way that Hannah Arendt describes writing, but also seeing how people respond.

I find that an inspiring use of the institution that presenting your projects in the Van Abbemuseum makes possible. For me more generally, you are helping us distance ourselves from modernism and especially its utopian or universalizing aspects. In this regard, if you look at the evolution of your work, it seems to have gone from something

quite speculative, with ideas of repurposing settlements in a post-Zionist world, to active, practical engagement with the situation in which you are living. Where do you see your practice going now? Because with your move to Stockholm, it is obviously changing again.

☒ It has been very clear since the beginning that our role within architecture is to find cracks within the discipline and try to understand how to work within them. I never felt the same about art. Art, for us, is this moment of pleasure and experimentation, of not necessarily having a contract with society, of not necessarily feeling that we have a role in the discipline. We deal with very harsh realities in architecture, so art was, for us, a blank space where we could create freely. In that sense, our work inhabits a situation of permanent temporariness, where it temporarily resides in many disciplines—art, architecture, pedagogy—without accepting to settle in any one of them.

☒ Do you see any disadvantage in that? There is an idea that disciplines give certain frameworks, and a certain security, which obviously you abandon. But the way you talk about it sounds incredibly attractive; there doesn't seem to be much lost in this sort of nomadic, interdisciplinary existence.

☒ There are many more gains than losses, but you feel like a foreigner everywhere. This only means that you should learn how to accept being one, which is sometimes not an easy thing to do. Ilana Feldman came to the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program when I was working with UNRWA, and I recall her saying: “as an anthropologist, what I see is that you manage to do what you to do inside this super bureaucratic machine because you are never afraid of losing your job.” In that sense I never saw myself as a permanent employee of UNRWA, but this gave me freedom. It also gives a sort of resilience, because if art, or architecture for that matter, rejected us, it wouldn't be the end of the world. We would wake up the next day and still have too many things to do.

☒ Permanence seems to be one of the struggles the world is going through at the moment, in a sense of wanting a certain idea of security. I was thinking the other day, what is the opposite of terror? What would it take to be anti-terror? To be terrorized is to lose calmness, stability, and permanence, in a certain sense. So that is non-terror, but non-terror is not anti-terror, just like the opposite of love is not the absence of love, but hate; it has to be an active thing. This active idea of moving away from terror seems to embrace the idea of temporariness, that things are uncertain, and to live with that; maybe even to find it far more exciting than the state of stability. Permanent temporariness comes to stand for many other lives, not only your own life, and not only people living in refugee camps. But then I can't help but wonder, are we normalizing conditions that are really intolerable? In other words, are we in danger of romanticizing the idea of permanent temporariness, when I know that the conditions in the camp are undesirable? Could it come to justify something which is unjustifiable, the conditions of life that it produces?

AP What is important to clarify is that the condition of permanent temporariness is imposed on us. It is a regime that exists today, and is manifested of course in refugee camps as an extreme, but is diffused into many other spheres with all sorts of precarities. After recognizing that the condition of permanent temporariness is not a choice, the question then becomes how to challenge it, how to overcome its regime. The answer cannot be permanency. It is unbearable when you don't have access to rights that citizens nominally have, and the path to permanent citizen becomes the only way to obtain these rights. But we know that this is an illusion, and unachievable promise: first, because the very system of the nation state and citizenship is collapsing; and second, because the "integration" it requires suppresses individual qualities, and is never fully achieved for many categories of people—they will never be accepted as equal. So, what is left if we don't want to succumb to the regime of permanent temporariness and see neither permanence nor temporariness as salvation?

A great lesson in this sense can be learned from refugee camps, in opposing permanency while at the same time creating a space for a life in common, one that exists beyond the idea of a nation state. These are not utopian places, but places of endless struggle for justice and equality. The very existence of Palestinian camps is a reminder of the violent power of exclusion inherent within, and an existential threat to, nation states. It is a crack in the regime that shows both its limitations and its possible overcoming. This is the very important lesson that we have learnt from the struggle of Palestinian refugees: that despite all the dominant forces that want to erase them from the earth, they have not given up or disappeared.

Permanent temporariness could become the space and time from which to challenge the status quo. In *Stateless Nation*, for instance, we challenged form of an "international exhibition" organized around European national pavilions by pointing to the spaces that exists in between them as cracks and starting points to cultivate a political community beyond the idea of a nation state. *Campus in Camps*, the *Shu'fat Basic Girls' School* in Shu'fat, *Fawwar Square*, and *The Concrete Tent* are all tangible ways to work within and against this condition of a space in between nation states. The space in between is very far from being ideal, and it requires one to always question one's own role in it. It is very easy to become complicit in a situation of misery, deprivation, and self-exploitation.

CE Maybe this goes back to your architectural beginnings, but it seems to me that you are both saying that permanent temporariness forces you to create your own frameworks; you have to be critical towards them, but you have to build them in the first place. When you lose permanence, or a sense of security, you have to build walls around you in all sorts of ways—metaphorically, physically, economically, cognitively, intellectually. Those frameworks need to be constructed anew, and that is an exhausting process. *Campus in Camps* or *The Tree School*, for instance, create a pedagogical framework for conversation, but you couldn't use existing schools, you couldn't use existing curricula, you couldn't use existing literature; everything had to be built from

scratch. You started with a children's book, which makes sense, because children's books are also beginnings. We could analyze each of your projects in that way, looking at how they build their own frameworks. I'm interested in whether that is a product of permanent temporariness, or whether it is really a conscious decision to move away from these existing frameworks. Is it imposed on you or is it something you enjoy and want to do?

AP Every project requires the creation of a space and a community. A critical practice in the West is heavily invested in deconstruction because it is very built-up, institutionally speaking, while in Palestine that does not make much sense since there the real task is to rebuild, to be constructive. The country is in ruins; there isn't much to destroy. *Campus in Camps* was a university that created its own modalities for knowledge production. We had to start with deep foundations, for instance by redefining the meanings of the words that we used. This process of delving into language was very powerful for all the participants; they realized the power of giving names to their environment.

SH For us, it is really a way of life. Our lives and practice are often so intertwined that we no longer know which is which; whether our living room is the living room of our house or the public space where we are hosting collective discussions that do not exist elsewhere. I still remember how shocked I was as a Palestinian arriving in Italy seeing all these young Italians wanting to reject the idea of the nation as old-fashioned. Everybody wanted to escape from family, from the notion of a state, etc. The students I was with in Italy came there because they wanted a rootless life; but I was coming from a reality that was already rootless. In that sense, I desired what they were rejecting. So when Alessandro and I decided to escape Italy, I wanted to come back to Palestine to build the state, and Alessandro wanted to come to understand what it meant to reject this normal life. In order to be together, we had to share a condition of permanent temporariness; it was our common ground. But after ten years of living in Palestine, we were tired of constantly building new machines. The problem with them is, if you stop driving for just one day, they stop moving. We were trapped, in a sense, within the machines that we had built. This is why we moved to Sweden, in the hope that we would react in the same way, building from scratch, but in a completely different context, under radically different conditions.

CE One of the challenges of today is how the colonizer and the colonized can talk to, rather than seek to eliminate, each other. Colonized people around the world have been made voiceless for centuries, but what does the colonizer do with the fact that they can now be listened to? And what do the colonized do with the fact that they are now being heard—mostly ignored, but nevertheless heard? I think there are two moves that need to be made: the West needs to demodernize, while the Global South goes through a process of decolonization. These are twin processes in a certain sense—they are similar, but applied differently in different parts of the world. As Alessandro says, it would be absurd to try to deconstruct things in Palestine, and it is just as absurd to

try to construct things in the Netherlands; the one has too little and the other has too much. There is obviously no global solution to that imbalance, but something has to happen that makes the two come closer together, that involves a movement in both directions. It is only in this relationship that some kind of prospect for a continued existence lies. This is also where it becomes very personal for you two. These two worlds cannot be kept apart anymore, and a global society cannot fall back on the hierarchical forms of the nineteenth century. Maybe permanent temporariness is a way of trying to understand what moving towards that kind of relationship might mean. The integration of your life into your work makes it possible to understand what these new relationships might look like on so many levels, from the personal to the global.

**AP** I understand the necessity to distinguish between “decolonization” and “demodernization” as different tasks and conditions, but I’m not sure I agree that the geography where they apply is so clearly divided between the Global South and the Global North. In recent years, we have seen how the arrival of a relatively small number of people in Europe resulted in its governments legitimizing the erosion of rights within its territories. Therefore, it seems to me that the struggle of decolonization has followed the bodies of migrants and is now located at the very core of European cities. From this perspective, I think the need for decolonization applies now more than ever to the European mindset. It is time that Europe comes to terms with five hundred years of structural violence and exploitation. Similarly, one could say that demodernization is very important in the “liberated countries,” whose authoritarian elite see themselves as a continuity of the imperial project of modernization. Fanon really saw it coming, how many liberation movements would turn in on themselves and buy into the colonial apparatus.

**CE** For me this idea of demodernization is a subcategory of decolonization, so they are not on the same level. I agree that Europe needs to be decolonized. But what I would say is that Europe’s reaction to these relatively small numbers of migrants has to do with the fact that they threaten the idea of the “modern” as it is constructed in the European imaginary. This idea of Europe as a safe, clean, separate territory, in which borders are clear—borders between people, borders between nations, borders between subjects, borders between property—is being muddied. The very idea of separation, which is terribly modern and is rooted in the ideological construct of race, is being transgressed by the idea of these people “bleeding” through all the holes of what we’ve built, with the reaction being that we have to stop up all the holes. This feels like such an unavoidable gesture within the modern mindset that the only response I have to it is to say: “well, let’s just drop the modern idea of rationalizing separation and distinction at all levels.” Overcoming the idea of a rationalist universe in which these simple fictitious separations are played out in the complex lives of people needs more than just decolonization. This is where I think demodernization adds an extra set of challenges, but also of possibilities, to decolonization. I am still thinking about their relationship, because I think you are right, they certainly have applications in each

other’s territories, but there is a particularly conservative, not to say fascist, defensiveness around the idea of the modern in Europe at this moment; an urge to defend the modern at all costs.

**SH** I think those who come to Europe today think they are arriving in a stable, permanent world. I am working with many of these people in Sweden, and they are shocked to find that where they live is not what they imagined it would be. Of course, this is the modern project speaking, the imagination of Europe as paradise. There is a tension in this dream of paradise, as it devalues life elsewhere. The colonial project has worked to convince people that the only valid and valuable culture is the permanent one.

**CE** I also think that in Western Europe there was—and still is—a huge blindness when it comes to how that fictitious or former “good life,” if we can call it that, is built on the suffering of the rest of the world. Thinking about demodernization is useful as a means to escape from that form of separation, in which not only one nation state but the West as a whole—Europe and its white colonies, Australia and America—would be understood as not participating in the forms of oppression going on elsewhere. There is this double bind, or double bluff, going on, where from the point of view of somewhere like Palestine, the West looks like a utopia, it looks like the “good life,” and from the European point, there is no sense in which that “good life” is seen to be produced because of Palestinian suffering. If that connection was made it might be easier to renegotiate, but at the moment it is not seen that way. The consequence of not understanding the modern–colonial matrix is this completely false notion that migrants are taking away something of the modern from Europe, something that is Europe’s by right, when it is really the rest of the world that gave Europe its modernity—or rather, where and who Europe gained its modernity from, through a range of colonial oppressions. Rebalancing might mean that the West becomes less permanent and more temporary, and what your work shows is that this can be a positive development. I think we need to reconcile ourselves with change, and this is where recognizing permanent temporariness everywhere can help a lot.

**AP** Yes, and I believe that a common struggle could be to destabilize the binary notion that rights and a good life can only be obtained with permanency and that precarity and exploitation are brought about by temporariness. It is tragic and paradoxical to see that in the asylum-seeking process, you are asked to remain immobile; to put your life in the hands of the authorities and wait. Or, when people claim that “Jerusalem is the eternal capital of Israel.” We have to demolish this solidification of permanency and temporariness.

**CE** This makes me think of two things. First of all, there is an irony in claiming Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel and then believing in the Messiah. Because at some point, when the Messiah comes, Jerusalem will stop being the capital; it will be transformed. Secondly, within an institution like Van Abbemuseum, which collects works, permanency is absolutely encoded, and we sometimes use that to defend ourselves

## RETROSPECTION | IN CONVERSATION WITH SALWA MIKDADI | *Abu Dhabi* | 2018

**SANDI HILAL** What were your motivations and expectations in inviting us for an exhibition at the New York University (NYU) Abu Dhabi Campus Art Gallery?

**SALWA MIKDADI** I've been interested in the collective dimension of your work from the start, so I invited you to come to the campus. I remember that you were very skeptical about the possibility of having such an exhibition, not just within the American context of NYU Abu Dhabi, but also the Gulf Region. I understood your hesitation, but I also knew that the university operated as a very strong space for the liberal arts, and with an international body of students and faculty that would be very open to such an exhibition. I wasn't exactly sure how to develop this, but from our discussions it became clear that there was a space for you, and that the whole campus was open to such questioning of ideas. All of this fit perfectly within the academic environment.

Our first collaboration was in 2009 when I curated the first Palestinian collateral exhibition "Pavilion" in Venice. It was an event that offered great visibility, but like all such "art festivals," the experience was limited in time and space. There's no time to question and engage with the public. Our exhibition at NYU Abu Dhabi not only engaged the public visiting the campus, but, more importantly, the students themselves were able to discuss a set of topics over a period of four months. The faculty integrated subjects addressed in the exhibition in their classroom discussions; they held classes in *The Concrete Tent* as well as in other spaces such as the circle around *The Tree School*, Campus in Camps' *Collective Dictionary* in the reading room, and the experience inside *Ramallah Syndrome*. There was an on-going dialogue.

In 2006, when I was working in Jerusalem and thinking about the Venice exhibition, I was meeting with artists living in Palestine and much of what I saw was, justifiably, a reaction to the Israeli occupation. Very few artists had actually questioned their relationship with governmental institutions and political representation. You were the only ones who were consistently engaged in the collective dimension. This is when we started the conversation that led to the realization of *Ramallah Syndrome*, which created a common space that is neither private nor public. The concept of the commons has always been central to your practice.

**ALESSANDRO PETTI** I would like to follow up on what you were saying in relation to our desire and worries about thinking of a "retrospective" exhibition. We've always been much more interested in working on projects and engaging in research. However, after ten years of continuously generating projects, it also became important to look back and reflect on how they could become activated in different spaces and times. The question of the location of the retrospective was important to us. As you've

against the City Council, instrumentalizing the public responsibility we have for the collection to say that we cannot be abolished. There is a strange sense of eternity in everything we do. We have loans that can only be viewed at 50 lux, which effectively destroys the work as an experience, but preserves it for longer. I think that if the Messiah is going to come, it doesn't matter whether the work is shown at 50 or 200 lux, but that's not an argument that holds up in modern museology.

**SH** How, then, can we make sense of being hosted in the museum today?

**CE** To me the reason for your presence in the museum is very clear, in the sense that you are helping us to repurpose the museum away from its modernist heritage. Your presence here is not as guests who are coming to submit to our rules, but as agents who create conditions that help us repurpose this institution, through the experience we have with you and through the experiences we have with other people. This institution has its own history and you are contributing to it becoming something else—something that may not be a museum in the tradition of the British Museum or the Louvre, but something that is more relevant or pertinent to artistic research, this "trying and seeing what happens" that we started with. In order to learn what we should be as an institution, we need people like you to come and challenge it.