

## Imagination Behind the Wall: Cultural Life in Ramallah

*Chris Keulemans*

In the al-Kasaba theatre the wall is right there on stage. The dance performance 'Checkpoint' features thirty schoolkids recreating life on the borderline: cursing, checking their watches, sleeping, bustling to get in front, peeing, marrying and giving birth. When the children finally hold their multi-colored ID's in the air to enforce their passage, their faces serious and unyielding, they have turned the ugliest place in their daily existence into something beautiful. From my seat in the first row I turn around to watch the clapping, foot-stomping and whistling audience: four hundred proud mothers, sexy teenagers, boys with baseball caps furiously sending messages on their cellphones, beaming authorities. They rise from their red chairs and surge forward to hug their friends, classmates, brothers and sisters. In the hallways, beneath portraits of Egyptian and Palestinian stars of the silver screen, there is the euphoric aroma of perfume and sweat. The new idols embrace each other while they walk out into the street, amid the horns of taxis in the cool evening breeze.

Fatin Farhat, the young director of the Sakakini Cultural Centre, high heels and deep cleavage, accompanies me in fluent American towards café Zeryab. Ghassan Zaqtan, poet and chain smoker, follows us calmly, checking the street scenes as if the city itself is a poem, of which he alone recognizes the structure below the chaotic surface.

At the top of the stairs Zeryab's owner, an artist who has designed the wooden sculptures on the walls, guides us to the sofas surrounding low tables. We are served tall pints of local beer, olives and slices of cucumber, and discuss the wall. Fatin is reading several Israeli writers who wonder if the old ghetto-reflex is back at work, with their country fortifying itself against the outside world. To Ghassan, the wall is no more than a logical continuation of Israeli policy. 'What they were already doing to us mentally and politically, they are now doing physically. It's a pity, actually. We are such gifted victims, we deserve more sophisticated enemies.' Hard to tell, from looking at his black eyes, where irony ends and deep seriousness begins.

A week later a group of al-Aqsa warriors storms into the restaurant, shooting wildly at this symbol of the decadent cultural elite, to cool their anger about a fight with Mahmoud Abbas' police force. Nobody gets hurt, but little remains of the sculptures on the wall. Welcome to Ramallah.

The day before, I was walking through the brand-new holocaust museum in Jerusalem, an architectural miracle driven into the memorial hill of Yad Vashem. The painstakingly careful collection of personal objects, group photographs and moving images of the Jews who had disappeared into the gas chambers is deeply impressive. The museum aims to keep the six million from slipping into memory as an anonymous crowd, and succeeds admirably.

But how does the crowd on the other side of the new wall look, of which we only recognize the faces of the president, the crying mothers and the stone throwers?

The distance from Jerusalem to Ramallah is fifteen kilometres. Average travel time by car, on a good day, for the owner of the right identity card: an hour and a half. The wall is in between. A merciless row of grey concrete slabs, eight yards high, posted shoulder to shoulder over hundreds of kilometres of rocky hills.

At Qalandia, a space in the wall has been cleared. On a terrain flattened by bulldozers, fortified watchtowers look out upon a chaos of barbed wire and blocks of concrete. On the Palestinian side, next to the shaded turnstiles and the heavily armed soldiers, a row of tables offer paperbacks for the bored commuter.

Ghassan Zaqtan drives me into town. I met him in October 2001, at the University of Iowa, where he and the young Israeli writer Etgar Keret were dragged from one panel to the next in order to convince the Americans that at least this Palestinian and this Jew still got along just fine after 9-11. 'If you want to understand Palestine,' he told me back then, 'You will have to come and visit.' Now we are sitting in his ashtray on wheels, driving past the four stone lions that have been guarding Ramallah's central square for centuries. I recognize them from the TV

images in 2002, when Israeli tanks lumbered through these streets, crushing everything in their way. In the wee hours of the night, when work is done and the iron screens of the city have been rolled down, Zaqtan is in the habit of making a short drive around the lions, just to make sure that all four of them are still there.

'Come', he says, 'I want you to meet someone.' A few moments later, I am sitting in a bright office, with the sunlight dancing in through the fruit trees, eye in eye with the poet who has a near mythical status here: Mahmoud Darweesh. The man who for decades has accompanied the Palestinian diaspora with laments and lovesongs, who often brushed with Yasser Arafat and who received last year's Prince Claus Award in the royal palace in Amsterdam, has hardly slept. Dan Brown kept him awake. 'I couldn't put down the 'Da Vinci Code,' he grins 'but when I finished the book I had to conclude that it left no trace in my mind.'

I ask him if he is writing poetry about the wall, now that the West Bank is being systematically fenced in. 'The wall? I don't see it. I don't want to see it. If Sharon wants to imprison his people behind it, that's up to him, but I am not about to have my imagination dictated by his agenda. In the endless repetition of the victim's story I have no interest.'

Three years ago, Israeli troops crashed into this room. They knew exactly what they were looking for: manuscripts were stolen, computers thrashed. On the immaculate white wall in the hallway of the Sakakini Cultural Centre, where Darweesh's office is located, hangs a painting riddled with bullets that has been newly framed. 'A souvenir,' smiles Darweesh, 'of that quite impertinent visit.'

What does the wall do to the work of Palestinian artists? That's what I am here to research. Is it an important question? Wouldn't it be better to record how the wall cuts off farmers from their olive yards, slashes straight through villages, separates families from each other, undermines the faltering economy even further, reduces the already scarce freedom of movement of the Palestinians to an absolute minimum?

As far as the Israeli troops were concerned, cultural life in Ramallah was important enough to destroy. During the last occupation, between November 2001 and April 2003, they directed precise attacks on the most important cultural spots in town. The Sakakini Cultural Centre, the House of Poetry, the al-Kasaba Theatre, the Amwaj radio studios, all these were pillaged and left behind in tatters. The soldiers left behind little reminders of their stay. Faeces in the office drawers. The goldfish in an aquarium replaced by a tin of sardines. At the Ministry of Culture, used by the soldiers as a detention centre, the walls were redecorated with wildly colored, Pollock-like dashes of paint. From the office where Ghassan Zaqtan now works as the head of the department for literature and translation, snipers had an excellent view of Yasser Arafat's compound, now a mutilated complex of buildings, across the road. In the neatly swept courtyard, beneath a simple cover to shade it from the sun, lies the grave of the dead leader.

Two years and a determined clean-up operation later, Ramallah is an elegant city with 200.000 inhabitants. Outside the old town centre, resident neighborhoods of white stone and balustrades spread out across the rolling hills. On the flat roofs tv-antennas have been constructed to resemble small Eiffel towers. In the main bookshop, a small miracle in itself in a country that Israel forbids to import books, an extensive array of religious publications alternates with a keen selection of English-language literature, from Rushdie to Auster and Ondaatje. Equal numbers of veiled and uncovered women walk the streets, and at the head of cultural institutions I often encounter strong, highly educated women. 'You must understand,' says Ghassan Zaqtan without a trace of irony, 'that this is the youngest city in Palestine. Ramallah was only founded in 1500.' I suppress an incredulous smile. 'We are not burdened by history like Hebron, Jericho or Bethlehem are. Moreover, this has always been a Christian city. Even now that Christians make up no more than five percent of the population, the tradition remains that they provide the mayor. That is why this a free city, with liquor stores, uncovered women and a strong cultural elite.'

In the al-Kasaba Theatre, the morning after 'Checkpoint' quiet has returned. Director George Ibrahim slurps calmly on his waterpipe. He has just returned from Tokyo, where his company has performed a new play called 'The Wall'. On a video I see the actors dart in between

the concrete slabs on stage, the director himself beating the drums with a sardonic smile. Ibrahim, a man with decades of experience, does not select his actors according to their ID cards and thus encounters great difficulties transporting his company between his two theatres in Jerusalem and Ramallah. But he does succeed in organizing regular tours through the Arab and the western world. 'In Egypt we stir up the stagnant theatre culture, and in Europe, where theatre is largely of a cerebral nature, we bring our passion.' No shortage of pathos in the video, but self-pity doesn't dominate. 'You see this?' asks a man, pointing at the bleeding shot wound in his stomach, 'Such a deep hole! Take a look, you can almost see Australia!'

In the diaspora and in the refugee camps, every Palestinian has been raised on the stories his (grand)parents tell about the cities and villages they were forced to leave in 1948. Apart from some faded photographs, no images remain. Going back to see what is left was difficult enough as it was; the wall has made it practically impossible. 'In the places themselves, the story no longer exists,' says Najwa Najjar, a young film director educated in Washington, DC. 'Our identity has been fragmented. History is denied by the more powerful side, but we have our stories.' For months, the sharp brunette went through archives to dig up images of Jaffa in the thirties, then still a prospering city on the sea, where her grandmother taught at the university and her grandfather translated Arabic literature into French. The documentary, *Naim and Wadi'a*, became a little monument to nostalgia, just like *Quintessence of Oblivion*, a portrait of the al-Hambra movie theatre in East-Jerusalem which in the years between 1952 and 1967 offered the newest Arabic movies to an audience of well-groomed Palestinians. She spoke with the actors of the era, asked visitors which stars they had seen there and recovered old film fragments. Then her own work was interrupted by the Israeli invasion of 2001. 'Again films and photographs went up in flames. The destruction I was trying to undo in my work now became my own experience. Over the images of empty streets and the uprising of 1967 I edited the voices of Israeli soldiers now.'

'When we returned after the Oslo agreement of 1993,' says Ghassan Zaqtan, who directed the youth movement and the literary magazine of the PLO during its years in Beirut, Amman and Tunis, 'confusion reigned. We were nostalgic for the place, for the country we had left, and the people who had stayed were nostalgic for symbols, for the leaders.' Palestine had never been a state of its own, it was a people without status. Two generations had been raised with the myth of Arafat, who wandered through the Arab world with his court. 'The only symbols we knew were of the moveable kind,' says architect Nazmi Al Ju'beh, 'the key to the family house, Arafat's kafiya, the poems and songs our parents passed on to us.' Now he and Suad Amiry head the Riwaq centre for architecture, located in one of those labyrinthine, sundrenched villas that abound in Ramallah. Riwaq labors on the preservation of immobile symbols: the historical buildings, open air markets, palaces and farmers' houses that have been scattered across the Palestinian landscape for ages, now mostly in a state of deterioration. They have now registered 56.000 of such objects. In cooperation with the government, private companies and local workers Riwaq aims to renovate them, often with a destination as a cultural centre or a community building, with space for women and children.

The obstacles are no joke. Suad Amiry, an impressive woman with eyes that laugh as easily as they spit fire, takes her time to sum them up. Riwaq is struggling with two adversaries, she says. 'The Palestinian Authority, which has been obsessed with constructing new buildings since its return in 1994. On the limited areas, mostly city zones, where Palestinians are allowed to build they choose for economic profit, so there is a boom of high-rises all over the cities, with disregard to land, environment and cultural heritage.' And then of course, there is the wall. She vehemently rattles through the data. 'Many villagers depend on olive oil for their living. To build the wall, that runs straight through agricultural areas, now over a million olive trees have been cut down, ten percent of the total number. In Qalqilija, which now is practically surrounded by the wall, 45.000 people are cut off from their land. And there are the Israeli settlements, each with their own heavily protected entrance roads, prohibited for Palestinians. Harper's Magazine has published a survey that says that Israelis have the highest amount of road surface per capita in the world, ten times as much as the number two on the list, the United States.'

In this claustrophobic universe, where the government still has to get used to governing, the intifadah can flare up at any given moment, a trip to the next town can take days and the oppressed population is becoming more and more conservative, I barely meet an artist who chases his dreams freely. Everyone submits his work to the use of the community. Fatin Farhat tigers restlessly through her Sakakini Cultural Centre, another of those villas renovated by Riwaq, talking about her ambitions to present the visual arts she exhibits here outside of these walls: 'public art' is what she aims to offer, exhibitions and installations in the poor neighborhoods, in schools and at bus stations. 'After Oslo, when the artists too returned from the diaspora, they were working in a freer, more universal style. The second intifadah came as a shock. Now we see a new generation that wants to share its experiences, to break out of the elite.' In the modest Ashtar Theatre of actress and artistic director Iman Aoun, a frail woman with a feline expression, I visit the final rehearsal for 'Mona's Tale': a nimbly told but painful story of honor revenge. Iman Aoun plays a fourteen-year old girl that clamps down her teeth on the flowers presented to her by a bridegroom selected by her uncle. Enraged, her uncle and father beat her to death. Ashtar produces 'legislative theatre': lightweight performances, travelling through hospitals and community centres across the country to address these kind of sensitive issues that have not yet been settled by law. After the show, spectators are invited to step into the role of the actors in order to create alternative endings. Finally, the audience casts its votes for new legal proposals, which are then actually presented to the parliament by Ashtar.

On a café terrace overlooking the hills and the white high-rises, Ghassan, Fatin and Iman discuss the disadvantage of community art: the almost obligatory patriotism. 'Anything that might damage the Palestinian identity gets excluded,' Fatin says. 'The siege forces you into conservatism, into holding the Palestinian unity above all else. We are defending values we really don't believe in. It is a kind of cultural schizophrenia.' Iman agrees. 'After 1967, everything became focused on Palestinian identity. But globalisation is making the world a smaller place. We are part of something larger. The legislative theatre was a creation of Brazilian director Augusto Boal. His assistant is now directing our play. We have more in common with world artists like them than with the Arab patriots.' Ghassan quietly lights another cigarette. Experience has not drawn deep lines in his olive tan, but this is a story he has known for all too long. 'This is the third time we are caught in this cycle: artists trying to shake off the collective identity and going off in search of an individual one. War chases them back into collectivity every time.'

There are signs, though, that patriotism is loosening its grip on Palestinian art. When I meet Yahia Yakhlof, the minister of culture for the Palestinian Authority, he assures me that he is only out to facilitate the diversity of cultural life in his country. The minister, himself a successful author, is clearly satisfied with his own pun when he says: 'We are no Soviet Union or Iran. We don't aim for a culture of the authority, but for the authority of culture.'

Ra'ed al-Helou was one of those faceless boys throwing stones in Gaza. Eighteen years old, he learned to handle a camera and moved to Ramallah. In his latest film, *Hopefully For the Best*, he searches the rainy city streets like someone trying to discover what exactly that is, a city, that collection of buildings into which people disappear without a trace. Now he is sitting next to me, with his hypnotic green eyes, leaving long periods of silence between each sentence. 'To the soldiers, you were not allowed to speak. Before you uttered a word they started beating. Politics raged on, people died, ambulances were speeding through the streets. And I was just looking at it all, keeping everything inside. Only now am I practising to speak. I am learning myself to say what is within me. I didn't know how to live. But now I want to learn. I don't want to just watch myself die.' He comes from the generation Fatin and Iman were talking about, a loner caught up in the rage of his community. 'I cannot speak for any 'we'. I am not a leader, I have not been elected, I speak for no one. 'I' is a single noun. Even of my wife I still have to discover who she is, after four years of marriage. How can I know everyone?' His gravity is chilling. A boy who cannot take anything in life as a given. 'The only thing that counts is now. To be happy now. The past is fearsome. The future will become the past automatically. What happens after death? I don't care. What remains is today.' There is a cruel irony at work here. To

become somebody he has to wrestle free from the faceless crowd the Palestinians are to the outside world. But he can only define his own identity in contrast to the equally faceless other, the Israeli. 'I cannot trust them. I have never met an honest Israeli. I study the history of the Jews, of their catastrophe. And I can see the psychological explanation, the victim recreating his own drama, but... Now they are building this wall around us. Why are they not ashamed? I drive past their settlements and wonder: could I live like that? What do you want there? Do you want all of us to disappear?'

In the catalogue for 'DisORIENTation,' the large exhibition of contemporary Middle-Eastern art organized by the Berlin Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2003, the famous Lebanese author Elias Khoury writes: 'Pure identity, whether religious, cultural or ethnic, can only lead to internal disintegration.'

He refers to the classic story from Abdullah Ibn Al-Muqaffa's 'Kalila wa Dimna', that wonderful book of speaking animals: a lion comes upon his mirror image in a pond, takes it for a rival, jumps into the water and drowns. For too long, claims Khoury, Arab art has locked its gaze in the mirror the Other holds before them. 'That mirror can be treacherous and lead us into death.'

Is Khoury offering a metaphor for the Palestinians here, who will always lose the battle as long as they define their identity purely as the opposite of Israel? Ra'ed al-Helou is still pondering the question. The grand old poet Mahmoud Darweesh seems to rise above this polarity. George Ibrahim and his company are exporting the conflict by touring the world. The architects at Riwaq, Sakakini's public art and Ashtar's legislative theatre concentrate on opening up the narrow-mindedness on this side of the wall. In their work, Israel is at most present invisibly. And then there is the thoughtful work of the Qattan Foundation and the Virtual Gallery of the museum at the Bir Zeit university, which both try to reach across the wall through the internet, presenting an overview of Palestinian talent on their websites.

Ghassan Zaqtan simply drives me outside the city after sunset, into the rocky hills, on the way to Kobar. Sometimes there are mobile checkpoints, and we have to wait or turn back. But when we are in luck, we drive along winding roads past the zinc dealer who has no idea how much he resembles Gabriel Garcia Marquéz, past the white fortress of Bir Zeit, built against the hillside, until a small paved track leads us to the artists' colony he has been building over the past years with his friends. Large white villas, the staircases unfinished, the interiors furnished with the nonchalance of hardworking bachelors, with a grand view over the valley where they plan to build an amphitheatre next summer. Mazen Saadeh, movie director and visual artist, and sculptor Jamal Afghani are still at work in their studios. Tibetan music, the scent of incense, a bottle of tequila on the table. The three PLO-veterans, who once struggled alongside Polisario and the Sandinistas are now honored artists with a comfortable, autonomous position. The only dream they have: to grow old here, among the newly planted trees, the coming and going of women, the international guests expected to give workshops here to young Palestinians. On a beautiful day, the view reaches all the way to Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean. At night, underneath the starry sky, the gaze is routed by the Israeli settlement, a couple of hills away. Tightly secured and abundantly lit, like a spaceship in the dark. Jamal and Maazen are working on a clay sculpture of fluent human shapes, arranged around the famous poem by Kavafy, 'Waiting for the Barbarians'. Ghassan sighs. 'Kavafy, I try to keep away from him. Whenever I give in to his poetry, I tend to be lost for weeks. And now these guys bring him in again.'

I step onto the wide balcony and watch the settlement in the distance. In the living room, the three men sink into dingy sofas, home again after a long, dusty, enervating day. Kavafy must have known Ramallah well:

*Why all of a sudden this unrest  
and confusion. (How solemn the faces have become).  
Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,  
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?*

*Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.  
And some people arrived from the borders,  
and said that there are no longer any barbarians.*

*And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?  
Those people were some kind of solution.*

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### **More information about cultural life in Ramallah:**

Suad Amiry, 'Sharon and my Mother-in-Law. Ramallah Diaries,' Granta Books 2005.

Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre: [www.sakakini.org](http://www.sakakini.org)

Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation: [www.riwaq.org](http://www.riwaq.org)

Ashtar Theatre: [www.ashtar-theatre.org](http://www.ashtar-theatre.org)

Virtual Gallery at Bir Zeit University: [virtualgallery.birzeit.edu](http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu)

A.M. Qattan Foundation: [www.qattanfoundation.org](http://www.qattanfoundation.org)

al-Kasaba Theatre: [www.alkasaba.org](http://www.alkasaba.org)