INTERVIEW

By Karen Mette Fog Pedersen, Overgaden.

Karen Mette Fog Pedersen: Your exhibition at Overgaden is a continuation of your extensive project, Between Here & Somewhere Else, which has included joint exhibitions in Denmark and the UK, became our working methods to develop jointly, whilst maintaining our individual practices. Thus the residencies in a location away from our home countries, that is, Denmark and the UK, became our meeting point, where we could focus entirely on the project in its immediate context.

In relation to the title Between Here & Somewhere Else, it almost functioned as a blank map where you position yourself in an uncertain between a ‘here’ and a ‘somewhere else’. This is something you feel quite strongly when you travel in the Palestinian territories, where you never know if you will manage to get from A to B or how long it will take to get there.

Helen de Main: The title also came to represent our own position as foreigners within this environment, as well as referring to the Palestinian situation of being caught in a position of becoming. It wasn’t until later on in the process that we came up with the idea of subtitling each of the shows in Palestine: Here (Jerusalem), Somewhere Else (Bethlehem) and Between (Ramallah). This allowed them to be differentiated as distinct exhibitions, but also, fortuitously enough, they reflected something of our experience of spending long periods in Palestine.

Going back to 2007 and how the project began, I originally spent 4 months in Tel Aviv in Israel, studying at the art academy there. I was looking at architecture and the built environment while playing a role in the conflict. I am very interested in how the physical surroundings affect us and can be used as a means of controlling behaviour. Our own architectural environment within Israel and Palestine seemed to be an extreme example of this.

This began my relationship and involvement with the area, but it wasn’t until Maj and I started spending longer periods in Palestine that I appreciated fully the stark differences and hierarchies between the two places and the effects that the Israeli occupation is having on almost every aspect of Palestinian life. I began to understand how much of a bubble Tel Aviv is and how necessary its existence for the social psyche is to convince itself that it is living in some kind of normality.

Maj Hasager: For my part, I was interested in understanding the current situation in the region, and how this tested small strip of land has played and still is playing a large role both in the media and in European history, culture and religion. This has lead to an ongoing investigation of refugee issues, inherited memory and the formation of national identity in a place where no state exists.

You could say that in the project we share an interest in investigating notions of space, objects and movement in relation to, and as a way of trying to understand, the current reality and environment of the occupied Palestinian territories, as viewed from the position of a foreigner.

For me personally as a British citizen, it was necessary to be aware of the huge role that the British has played in the Palestinian Mandate of Palestine in the first half of the 20th century. However, I was also interested to acknowledge the role that British archaeologists and explorers have historically played in the acquisition of artefacts from many foreign places, resulting in numerous objects being held within the British Museum’s collection in London without the permission of the country from which they originated.

In the work Siluan Hoard – Abasi family, I wanted to play with the idea and collect fragments of the Abas family home, which the Jerusalemites had destroyed. The building itself was of no known cultural worth, built only 3 years previously out of cheap building materials. So it seemed quite significant within this British history, for me to go onto the site and fill my rucksack with some of the final remnants of what had been the fabric of this family’s home and ship them back thousands of miles to my studio in Scotland. The subsequent transformation into bronze that they previously lacked as objects, but what was most significant for me was the action of returning them back to Jerusalem and presenting them to the family and community where they originated from as a symbol of strength and resistance.

Maj Hasager: Between Here & Somewhere Else is a continuous exhibition at Overgaden is a continuation of your extensive project, including joint exhibitions which has included joint exhibitions in Denmark and the UK, allowing our working methods to develop jointly, whilst maintaining our individual practices. Thus the residencies in a location away from our home countries, that is, Denmark and the UK, became our meeting point, where we could focus entirely on the project in its immediate context.

In the beginning my visual outcome was much more a reaction to the current situation in the area – a way of understanding and processing the harsh reality of this place. Through ongoing research over several years and by living a day-to-day life in Palestinian cities, I find myself making works, which are informed by long-term relationships, everyday life and a different way of coping with the situation.

HdM: We both investigate the realities of being artists working outside of our native cultural environment, and how this offers huge opportunities to enrich the creative practice, but simultaneously presents a number of potential obstacles when understanding the new cultural space in which you are operating.

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and interviews with young Palestinian youth in the villages their grandparents were forced from in 1948. When you look at the series of photographs and texts the refugee issues are not the first thing, which spring to mind. A key concern for me is to remove myself from the spectacle of a conflict, to a more personal relationship with the people and the stories they generously share with me, allowing the work to develop over a long period of time. For me this aspect of time is relevant, to let the material and the relationships develop, and to allow questions to be raised over and over. In my view this has entailed a different perspective within the narrative I am taking part in.

**KMF 1.10**

誊写 culture there is also something that is still very much developing at the moment. Within this context audiences weren’t necessarily used to encountering objects presented formally to them in the exhibition space. It will be interesting to see how some of these works translate into a Danish context, where people are much more familiar with this format of presentation, but the subject matter is more outside of their field of experience.

**KMF 1.11**

Why have you chosen to present the project outside Palestine and what do you think are the implications of showing the work in a different cultural context?

The beginning it has been important to both of us that the works were exhibited in Palestine before being shown in Europe, to present the works in a local and critical context, where the motif of the foreigner working in a zone of conflict is being questioned. But to show the works at Overgaden is important in terms of expanding the exhibition concept by re-contextualizing the selected works for a Danish audience. This challenges the material, our working methods in the project and our way of thinking around the produced works. For example working on the documentary film project On Site brought up a few issues for me in relation to different audiences: Was I making an informative film about Palestine for an international audience, or a film for the Palestinians I was working with, showing them places from which they are exiled?

**KMF 1.12**

The exhibition also contains background information about the situation in Israel and Palestine in the form of an archive, created specifically for the exhibition by British artist James Mclardy. Why did you bring this element into play?

I was interested in introducing an informative context for the exhibition through an archive of our collected information about Palestinian culture, history and the situation. We wanted to make this accessible to the exhibition space as a place where audiences were able to sit, read and reflect and we invited art historian James Mclardy to create a sculptural response to this context. James has approached this in the form of a functional installation, which we feel creates a dialogue between our works in the exhibition, the collected material and the audience.

**KMF 1.13**

We were specifically interested in James’ approach to working with different materials, and how his practice is involved in questioning the authenticity of these, where he might for example painstakingly paint MD to appear like marble. This seemed relevant to a Palestinian context where high-end buildings shoot up next to makeshift shelters in the landscape, and pristine Palestinian granite is found alongside faded fragments of plastic in a collage of contradictions. When James came on a research trip to Palestine earlier in the year he was interested in the architectural language of water features, such as public fountains, hamams and water parks found across the area. The objects within his work borrow from the materiality of these sites, whilst questioning the role of social and leisure space and time, in an area that is so often defined by conflict.

**KMF 1.14**

A final question: Through this project you deal with very political questions. What is in your view the potential of art in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict?

I think that art offers the opportunity to present an alternative image of a place that is seemingly so familiar to us in Europe from the media and press. Our opinions and perceptions are so much formed by these, that is was important for me to try and create my own image of this place. An image that is not attached to the agenda of an organization or institution, but is based upon what I have seen over the many months of being a Palestinian citizen and look at the use of exhibition space in Copenhagen as a means with which to share this image with a wider audience.

**KMF 1.15**

Yes, I agree with this image of the individual. But as a final point I would also like to mention a larger discussion that is taking place with regards to Palestine - a nonviolent uprising against the Israeli occupation, which has the potential to create social change through mobilizing a collective from within, can function as a form of resistance.

The interview was conducted via e-mail in October 2010.