



## INCOMPLETE NARRATIVES



Above, top - *Only the beloved keeps our secrets* (still), 2016. Courtesy: the artists; Abraaj Art Prize, Art Dubai; Carroll / Fletcher, London  
Above, bottom - *And yet my mask is powerful* (still), 2016. Courtesy: the artists and Carroll / Fletcher, London

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme are an artist duo based in New York and Ramallah. Over the last ten years, they have created sound and video works as well as complex installations—pointing out, among other things, the struggle of an adequate political language, in addition to the overload of imagery within our daily negotiation of freedom and equality. Rather than talk about specific works, the following conversation with Fabian Schöneich examines some of the most essential elements that are specific and recurring within the artistic practice of Abbas and Abou-Rahme: their archive, a sonic language, as well as poetry and text.

BASEL ABBAS, RUANNE ABOU-RAHME,  
AND FABIAN SCHÖNEICH IN CONVERSATION

**Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme** (1983) work together across a range of sound, image, text, installation and performance practices. Their practice probes a contemporary landscape marked by seemingly perpetual crisis and an endless “present,” one that is increasingly shaped by a politics of desire and disaster. They have had solo presentations at ICA (Philadelphia), Office for Contemporary Art (Oslo), Carroll/Fletcher (London), Akademie Der Kuenste Der Welt (Cologne), New Art Exchange (Nottingham), Delfina Foundation (London) and group exhibitions at Portikus (Frankfurt). They have held performances at The Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), House of World Culture (Berlin), Tanzquartier (Vienna), Serpentine Pavilion (London), 4<sup>th</sup> Guangzhou Triennial (Guangzhou).

**Fabian Schöneich** (1985, Gera, Germany) is the curator of Portikus in Frankfurt/Main, DE. He worked as assistant curator at the Kunsthalle Basel from 2012 to 2014 and curated the *Performance Project* of LISTE Art Fair in Basel in 2013 and 2014. Prior to that, he co-organized the *Melanchotopia* exhibition and program in 2011 as assistant curator at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. Since 2012 he works as advisory curator for the exhibition space SALTS in Basel/Birsfelden and since 2015 as advisor for the *Focus, Frame and Live* section of Frieze Art Fair in London and New York.

#### FABIAN SCHÖNEICH

You started working together in 2007, and have since created a complex body of work, mainly sound-based works or audiovisual installations. The last show I saw at Carroll/Fletcher in London, titled *And yet my mask is powerful*, involved video, sound, many objects, and short fragments of text distributed through the entire gallery. So before we start talking about your work and exhibition, I would like to understand how your archival practice works. As far as I know, you created a huge archive over the last years, and many of the works are based on a yearlong investigation of that archive.

#### BASEL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU-RAHME

In a way, aspects of *And yet my mask is powerful* unfold the process of researching and inhabiting the project, and so materials, images, things we have collected, and the interior, virtual world of the project become the work itself. For us, our collection of things, the sort of living archive we have for a project, is very much connected to our long engagement with a work and to our love of the process itself. We allow each project to organically develop its own tentacles, really, and find ourselves often in unexpected places. Usually there is a precise starting point that through conversation and research begins to unfold into other points, creating a dense sort of mesh that sits strangely together. In *And yet my mask is powerful* we became interested in the unscripted connections that can emerge while working digitally through a body of research or archive. Many of the compositions in the installations were first generated as screengrabs of a particular moment in our digital-virtual research, very often between applications.

FS

What is the aim of this working process?

BA AND RAR

We are also working in this way because we want to maintain a conceptual sense of the incomplete in our projects. Incomplete narratives are a large part of our practice. As we were saying, often our projects involve a very precise editing process that brings together a multiplicity of narratives in an incoherent or partial way. We like to think about the installations as operating almost like a script composed of visual, aural, textual materials, and “things” that unfold in the space and are activated in different ways by bodies in that space. The bodies interacting in the space informs how we “script” the installations but also generate different scripts. There is something open-ended and ambiguous in the way the installations function. Perhaps it is our feeling of being part of an incomplete political project of emancipation in Palestine and globally that informs this sense of multiplicity and incompleteness in the narratives we create.

FS

A lot of your work specifically deals with the state of mind in Palestine, its past and future. I believe your archive contains a lot of found footage coming from Palestine. For example the footage you used for your 2016 video work *Only the beloved keeps our secrets*. Could you elaborate on that, and tell me about your own relationship, with you Basel being born in Cyprus and growing up in Ramallah, spending a lot of time in Jerusalem—or for you, Ruanne, being born in Boston and growing up in Jerusalem?

BA AND RAR

For us Palestine is a starting point to speak *about* and *to* the complex conditions of living now. The state of mind, the state of things in Palestine, is for us an extremely raw and dense microcosm for a much wider—for a want of a better word, “global”—state of things. It has felt to us and many others, for a very long time, that Palestine is a laboratory for various technologies of power. What we are trying to do is use our position in Palestine to think about and read the contemporary moment, so in a way to read the world through this lived experience. Palestine almost becomes an avatar in this sense to think through the conditions of living in and with the world. The lived experience is critical to our work. While our whole practice is extremely research based, the lived is still vital for us.

To put this in context, in Palestine colonial power is exercised on not only the most common, shared strata but also the most intimate and almost minute scales. The state of mind, psyche, the state of one’s body, and the communal body is just as significant as the geopolitical state, the state of land, air, water. All of these things are lived at once. One of the things that we keep returning to is the





*And yet my mask is powerful 2*, 2016, *And yet my mask is powerful* installation view at Carroll / Fletcher, London, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artists and Carroll / Fletcher, London



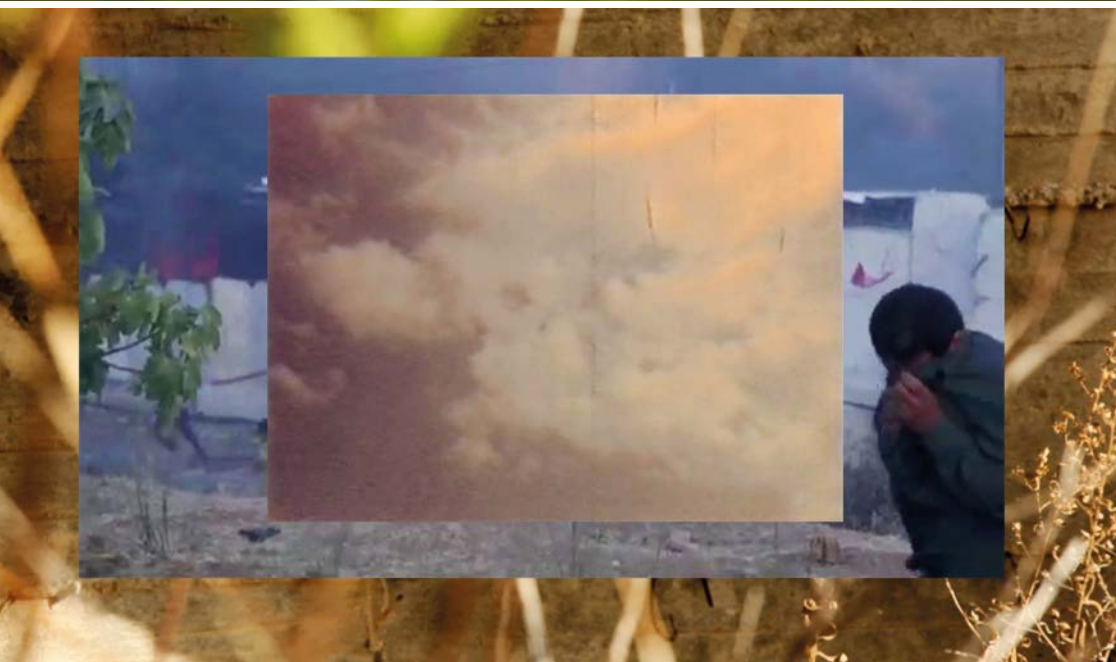
Above, top - *Only the beloved keeps our secrets*, 2016, *Only the beloved keeps our secrets* installation view at The Abraaj Art Prize, Art Dubai, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artists and Abraaj Art Prize, Art Dubai

Above, bottom - *And yet my mask is powerful 1*, 2016, *And yet my mask is powerful* installation view at Carroll / Fletcher, London, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artists and Carroll / Fletcher, London





TESTIFY  
اشهدي



QUIET  
هدى



*Only the beloved keeps our secrets* (stills), 2016.  
Courtesy: the artists; Abraaj Art Prize, Art Dubai;  
Carroll / Fletcher, London





AND YET  
ولكن



I AM SHE  
أنا هي



WE DIVE INTO THE HOLD  
نغوص في الأعماق





Top - *And yet my mask is powerful 2* (detail), 2016, *And yet my mask is powerful* installation view at Carroll / Fletcher, London, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artists and Carroll / Fletcher, London

Bottom - *And yet my mask is powerful 2*, 2016, *And yet my mask is powerful* installation view at Carroll / Fletcher, London, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artists and Carroll / Fletcher, London

relationship between desire and political action/inaction and imaginary. That vitality (or at times lack of vitality) tends to translate very viscerally and vividly in many of our works. We are not just thinking about abstract concepts at a distance, but through the connections between different layers of experiencing the contemporary. And of course in our case that is very difficult terrain.

So that's on the one hand. **On the other, both of us have always existed in an in-between space, having grown up literally between places. Reading the world through Palestine was never for us confined to being physically in Palestine. And that possibility is what freed us to take up a position that is at once incredibly "embedded" while also at a certain point of distance.** Perhaps that's why so much of our practice is concerned with drawing out the connections between seemingly disparate moments. Certainly those seam lines that we draw out across different spaces—but also, critically, times—has impacted our practice, in that we think about the so-called contemporary as a dense fabric made up of a multiplicity of times.

That sense of density in any given moment very much impacts the ways in which our works are full of layers, both formally and conceptually—layers that very often cannot be so readily peeled back. Layers often obscure other layers. In our project *The Incidental Insurgents* we were thinking about that temporal density and multiplicity in the ways in which one can take up different positions. Figures can mutate into one another across tens if not hundreds of years. Really we were tracking the many returns of an impulse toward a different political imaginary, a different way of being and imagining the world that was not captive to the existing order of things. Those strange returns but also ruptures/mutations excite us.

**FS** I would like to ask about the importance of sound, or rather the presence of a sonic language in your work. Sometimes it feels like ambient sound, but in the end it's more like a very elaborate noise composition. I would like to know more as well about your side projects, like Tashweesh, a sound and image performance group.

**BA AND RAR** Yes, sound has been critical in shaping our entire practice. When we first began working together, we felt entirely unable to produce new images, largely because there was an oversaturation of the image in Palestine. There was a strange stagnation in that saturation. We became very concerned with the sonic languages of power, specifically how colonial technologies instrumentalize sound to subjugate bodies and to construct certain spatial structures, a psycho-geography.

Although seemingly immaterial, sound is of course incredibly physical and tangible. Resonance is felt in the body in a sometimes barely conscious way. So we wanted to think about that relationship between sound, power, the body, and psychology, largely because we felt that the body was one of the critical points at which colonial power was exercised and somehow that bodily encounter could not be thought about only in the visual field. Perhaps this is where text becomes important for us in its interiority. But yes, our sound practice has imprinted our whole practice. **The body and space became central to the ways in which we developed all our installations and led us to conceptualize our works in a way that could be experienced on a physical, visceral level. At times the encounter is jarring, uncomfortable.**

One of our first sound projects looked at how sound was one of the central ways in which people were being disciplined and subjugated at one of the main Israeli military checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem. At the same time we were thinking about sonic languages and practices that circumvent or infiltrate those practices of power. For that reason certain music and oral practices are very significant for us.

These ideas have in many ways defined our sonic language, which is full of glitches, stutters, repetitions, but also rhythms. Increasingly the sound is created through live applications, so that liveness and sense of improvisation in the work has become more important to us not only in our sound practice but in the various mediums we are working with. That really comes out of our performance practice, particularly with Tashweesh, which is a sound and image performance group. Tashweesh is a total, open format, a space where our installation and music practices can cross-mutate, but also a space for us to keep developing our aural and visual language. Many times new formal developments in our work come out of live performance sessions, where things are more fluid and malleable, less fixed. That malleability is great and allows us to arrive at new formal configurations. But we would say all our installations are performative, in the sense that we never want them to be totally fixed. We want them to feel live and alive, which is always a challenge.

**FS** In your video work you use text, English and Arabic, always side by side, in a very poetic, almost enciphered way. Could you say something about that?

**BA AND RAR** Actually text is the starting point for many of our projects. Often we create a "script" of various micro samples, and the sound very often evolves out of this text. In many cases the video is the last part we work on. The sound has to have its own integrity for us, so it is its own conceptual terrain. Working between textual language and sonic language is equally intriguing and difficult. Really it would be hard to separate our sonic language from the poetic and aesthetic languages we are developing.

An entire project can begin with a very small piece of text that resonates with issues or ideas that we have been rather obsessively thinking about. The text in itself is a cipher that allows us a way to speak about things that are at times intangible, or even imperceptible at first. Literature, and particularly poetry, has been critical for us. **Poetry is incredible because it breaks language structures to create a new possible language, and that is what we are trying to do with our practice: to make things inoperative in their current form in order to activate other forms of imagining and thinking about the seemingly never-ending crisis of the contemporary moment.**

We are also approaching text as image and body in our works—not a subtext but rather as having a body that moves. That is why in the videos the text takes on certain scales and rhythms. As with the sound, it has a "liveness" to it.

But also text allows for a certain interiority. In our works we are always thinking about the concept of projection. Somehow that concept encompasses not just fiction, but wish and myth. It is full of desire. We want to work in that slippery terrain between what is and what could be. At times that can be in our engagement with a fictional text where the author is writing a novel that is a projection of themselves and their lives, or it can be in us generating a mythology to infiltrate the dominant mythologies of the present, of which there are many. We see a lot of our practice right now as a practice of infiltration, in both a material, physical and virtual sense. Because for us the question in this moment is how to keep certain spaces, actual or virtual, activated and alive. In the face of the immense violence we are witnessing, not only physical violence but all sorts of other violences, how do we not just simply survive? Perhaps in that sense the narrative field becomes critical again, especially the relationship between actuality and virtuality.

**FS** What are you working on at the moment?

**BA AND RAR** We are working on several iterations of *And yet my mask is powerful*, including a performance, and a book that will be published by Printed Matter in New York later this year.