

The imperial, the artisanal, the unconditional

Edwin Nasr

The tale has it that, more than a decade or two ago, at the World Leaders Forum on Columbia University's campus in New York City, a tense exchange unfolded between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—then president of Iran—and an affronted American journalist who questioned him on the Islamic Republic's treatment of homosexuals. Ahmadinejad, in turn, dismissed the charge with characteristic self-assurance, declaring: “In Iran, we don’t have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran, we don’t have this phenomenon. I don’t know who told you that we have it.” Decolonial writer Houria Bouteldja, in her seminal *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Revolutionary Politics of Love* (Semiotext(e), 2016), frames this exchange in a rather curious, and contentious, manner, wherein the Manichaeism of the colonized is hacked to reflect, if not reproduce, that of the colonist. She writes: “What is Ahmadinejad saying? He isn’t saying anything. He is lying, that’s all. He is lying in all honesty. [...] By lying and by taking responsibility for his lie in front of a crowd that knows he is lying, he is invincible. To the statement ‘There is no torture in Guantanamo,’ the echo answers: ‘There are no homosexuals in Iran.’ Persian rhetoric, usually used to enable white progressives, hits home. Both lies cancel each other out; the truth erupts. And good conscience disintegrates. It begins to cringe. Nothing but ugliness remains. [...] An artisanal lie in the face of an imperial lie.” What, exactly, is an imperial lie? A weapon of mass destruction, a human shield, or a Hamas tunnel under Ocean Boulevard, always the speech act hovering over a people’s annihilation. And what, then, is an artisanal lie? A wink, a tongue thrust, or a negation, sometimes with life-altering consequences for some but not most. Would even the articulation of a half-truth come in and ruin the game?

I have spent an inordinate amount of time, ever since coming across this charged and contentious retort, trying to work through a fixed position toward it, only to fail again and again. When, in 2018, a fifteen year-old named Hammodi al-Motayri was suspected of ‘homosexual conduct’ and savagely murdered on the streets of Baghdad, an overly familiar sight in post-U.S. occupation Iraq, the deafening silence of diasporic community organizers and academics, who feared externalizing their grief would get co-opted by forces who justify and celebrate foreign intervention and military occupation in the name of women’s and queer rights, convinced me then that artisanal lies were as poisonous as their imperial counterpart. And when, amid the (ongoing) Zionist genocide in Gaza, an occupation soldier held up a pride flag with the words, “in the name of love” written overtop it, as he himself merrily stood on the rubble of family homes and the corpses of the martyred, an indescribable rage surged through me, and I cultivated a sense of possibility toward what artisanal lies can and are able to do in the face of barbarism. But I do know that, ultimately, I will remain stuck in that place of ambivalence, and that this inability to foster a definitive articulation of how I, we are meant to feel toward these rhetorical battles and strategic motions stems from being stuck between a rock and a hard place. I have, as a result, allowed this tension to block me from ever having to write about this. When Ridikkuluz first approached me to write about *minna*, I was resistant. I much prefer being asked to reflect on what I know will not throw me into the throes of uncertainty and irresolution.

There is no doubt in affirming that this exhibition, both as a gesture and as a curatorial endeavor, begins from refusal. The refusal to settle for that suffocating, airless space between the artisanal lie and the imperial lie; the refusal to find a sense of rootedness in what makes displacement legible and administratively manageable; the refusal to accept the cynical wager that Palestinian and Arab life must be translated into familiar scripts set forth by the dehumanizing

frameworks of the Euro-American liberal order so they could be mourned.

minna [in English: *of us*] gathers artists who insist on presence and on transmission, and whose gestures are protective barriers against capture and rescue. The exhibition takes its title from an Arabic phrase that signals forms of intimacy and collectivity that are neither bound by identitarian abstractions nor territorial fixities. *Minna* emerges from movement, scattering, and return; it does not resolve into a stable “we” because it is too aware of the perils of such a chore. It points instead to proximity and to a shared condition, toggling back and forth between things and situations to locate a point of landing. This is a minoritarian orientation that resists what academic Rahul Rao has described as the political, aesthetic, and affective regimes of both homonationalism on the one hand, and homoromanticism on the other, and in which queerness as such is rendered admissible through narratives of progress and cultural enlightenment. Here, queerness is engaged as an everyday practice of survival under conditions of dispossession and erasure; it can neither serve as an object of co-option, nor as an alibi for intervention because it posits itself as a diffractor of the architectures that make those imperial processes possible in the first place. Rao’s critique, formulated most clearly in *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (Oxford University Press, 2020), is inseparable from questions of movement, border regimes, and forced circulation. Homonationalism operates through form and policy. It favors clarity, affirmation, and spectacle, and casts a veil of suspicion over expressions, positions, and ways of living deemed amenable to opacity and ambivalence. Against the singular voice and the redemptive arc, the works in *minna* (*of us*) cultivate gestures and strategies for staying with life when the future, that shimmering gleam in the distance, is foreclosed by the persistence of colonial and state violence. Hold it close to the face and take it all in.

More, in fact much more than half of the world has been effectively barred from entering the U.S. at present. It would have been exquisite, a blessing even, to find oneself in New York City, engulfed in what *minna* has on offer, but for now well-organized Google Drive folders of the works will do. Now that artificial borders are coughing up blood, I have no choice but to engage this whole endeavor through renderings and digital files. The paradox here is overbearing: most of these works proceed through material insistence. Each in its own right is bound to land, body, and memory. **Xaytun Ennasr** presents a suite of paintings that situate gender transition and anti-colonial struggle with proximate earthly registers. The paintings draw from revolutionary visual languages to assert land as a condition for life rather than its metaphor. Egyptian queer socialist revolutionary Sarah Hegazy's final words are honored. "We" consider her a martyr. Ennasr is grieving but pointing towards the ongoingness of struggle.

Falyakon's sound piece, structured through field recordings, voice, and electronic composition, forges a path toward the place of memory. That path is mired with interruptions and distortions. There are ancestral echoes given the free reign to find their way, but not us. That might be because memory isn't so much a place as a series of movements. We learn to accept continuity without resolution. We allow time to unfold through rupture and still witness it hold. **Anka Kassabji** contributes a self-portrait in winter light, where a mermaid-like figure occupies a protected space that is shielded from the external gaze. There is frost that sharpens and a staging of solitude that heals. The painting is perhaps wanting to infer that survival is sometimes spoken in hushed tones. **Alex Khalifa**'s bust has been hand-carved in alabaster over several years. The artist's presence is encrypted in stone, just like in Egyptian funerary portraiture, which it draws from. Time sits still and the stillness could kill you. I find myself wanting to touch the bust, the face. For philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, "to touch is to caress a surface that belongs to something else, but to never master and consume it." **André and Evan Lenox-Samour**

work through mother-of-pearl carving, a centuries-old tradition rooted in Bethlehem and shaped by pilgrimage, extraction, and displacement. *The Salmon's Return (Awdat Al-Samak)* frames Etel Adnan's words from *Sitt Marie-Rose* (The Post-Apollo Press, 1982) within arrows that suggest movement without arrival. I am elated that the spirit of Sitt Marie-Rose is being conjured in the exhibition space because we need more traitors like Sitt Marie-Rose, individuals whose identitarian or sectarian disposition should preclude them from entering the field of a certain struggle but do so nonetheless by picking up arms. Another work by the artist duo suspends stars drawn from Christian, Palestinian, and queer ancestries within a darkened meadow. The dramas of dispossession emerge in a dignified and penetrating optic. **Elias Rischmawi** is also summoning memory. For them, it is neither a place nor a time but a working through. There are photographs, recordings, and recipes here assembled from family archives that move across generations and set hearts ablaze. The photographic apparatus changes over time, but there is a damning consistency with which Rischmawi's family members, the subjects of the camera and of the work, are staged with tenderness. That is because love, too, can operate as a form of resistance, against the evils of erasure and forgetfulness. Fares Rizk, also known as **Sultana**, presents three painted self-portraits draped in high-femme excess. Glamour, exaggeration, and humor demand serious consideration. We are all enlivened by affects that radiate toward us. Sultana inscribes herself into a history of iconography that has yet to be recorded. **Basyma Saad**'s glorious film, *Congress of Idling Persons*, gathers voices—of migrant domestic workers, and disaffected artists-cum-rioters, and wise owls—that move between analysis, fiction, and fatigue. We are in the space-time of the George Floyd uprising and the first or second pandemic of the twenty-first century and the port explosion in Beirut. It feels like forever ago, though we continue getting swayed, violently and without pause, by the reverberations of these world-historical events. The film treats gathering as a fragile, albeit essential, act. It lingers with rage,

mourning, and care. It sings. She writes: “In the face of the siege there can only be incomplete experiments.” This most certainly applies to *minna*, and to the task at hand, when having to fight off imperial lies, or push against artisanal ones, or fabulate either of both among and for ourselves. À bon entendeur, salut!