

Picasso in Palestine: Displaced Art and the Borders of Community

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Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

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In this essay, I will discuss the “Picasso in Palestine” project, which resulted from the Middle East Summit held at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. First I will introduce the concept of democratism as developed in “Post-Propaganda” by the artist Jonas Staal, as this is the driving force that displaces the art that will be discussed. After a short introduction of how the project, which entailed the displacement of Pablo Picasso’s *Buste de Femme* (1943) from the Van Abbemuseum to the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP), came about, I will address the topics of the apparent lack of modernity in Palestine. I will subsequently investigate the communities that are stakeholders in this project and their relation to democratism. Displaced art and its implications for the imagination of a Palestine community will be put into context through two other recent displacements within the artistic field. I will conclude by the role that death plays in constituting the boundaries of a community as thought by Jean-Luc Nancy.

Jonas Staal’s essay, “Post-Propaganda,” deals with the concept of how art in Western democracies is operating as a new form of propaganda, not as the historical form of propaganda that we associate for example with Nazi Germany, but as a form that is functioning on a more subconscious level, because people in a democracy often don’t even realize that they are inhabiting an ideologically constrained political system.¹ This is the Hegelian point Slavoj Žižek refers to: ideology appears in its purest form when certain aspects of the ideology are being neutralized as non-ideology.² In the same vein, Staal renames democracy to “democratism,” thus revealing its ideological core rather than supposing it as something supposedly neutral.³ It clarifies the inherently ideological character of democracy, namely that it is another “ism” just like socialism, communism or fascism.⁴ The most important values in democracy such as freedom, participation, choice, critical thinking, diversity, majority consensus, and plurality are the same concepts that we are expecting contemporary art to communicate. Art is the manifestation of the freedom that democracy brings.⁵ Art is not a pure esthetic concept, but has a certain aim. Thus, its purpose is not without interest in the way Kant would have it.⁶ Art has a direct goal and expectations; it serves the freedom of proclaimed in and of democratism itself. This term will be key in the analysis of what transpired in the aftermath of the Middle East Summit in 2008, where the “Picasso in Palestine” project was born.

¹ Staal, “Post-Propaganda,” 76.

² Žižek, *Violence*, 26.

³ This concept was first coined during the completion of a project that Staal completed in Japan in cooperation with Vincent van Gerven Oei. In Japanese, the word for democracy, *minshushugi*, can be literally translated as “democratism”; Staal and Van Gerven Oei, *Democratism*, 2.

⁴ Staal, “Post-Propaganda,” 69.

⁵ Staal, “Post-Propaganda,” 70.

⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 221-3 (§58).

The Middle East Summit is the unofficial name for a series of meetings between several key figures from the Middle Eastern art world. The reason this summit was held in Eindhoven came from the necessity to have a mutual place where several members of the international art community from the Middle East could come together. This was a solution for the problem that several nationalities from the Arab world, such as Lebanese and Syrians, are not allowed to travel to Israel, while Israelis cannot travel to those Arab countries. In the context of this summit, Khalid Hourani proposed to bring a Picasso from the collection of the Van Abbemuseum to the IAAP which is headed by him. As he stated, this would create a sense of what he referred to as “normality”; Palestine had to be on the international art map as a place where a Picasso could and would be able to go. The integration of Palestine within the contemporary art world, by means of the displaced Picasso, would thus be a metaphor for Palestine’s possible recognition by the United Nations. The freedom of art would thus in a certain way the “democracy to come.”

Hourani’s choice for a Picasso was based on the idea that for the Palestinians he would symbolize modernity and its promise of true democracy better than any other artist from the West, under the assumption that modernity is something that has not yet reached Palestine fully. Even though I think that this assumption should be approached critically, and though I am aware of the potential underlying “orientalist” discourse as suggested by Edward Said⁷ and the regime of postcolonial studies, as well as the friction caused by the insertion of “modernity” outside the geographical and metaphysical conditions that gave rise to it,⁸ I nevertheless suggest for the moment to adhere to a factual approach to the development of the “Picasso in Palestine” project and limit myself how the concept of modernity took root in a broader Arab context.

At the end of the first World War the Ottoman Empire was defeated and the Middle East was cut up in different protectorates under British and French mandate, generally coinciding with the current national borders in the Middle East. With the European and, to a lesser extent, American influence, concepts of nationalism and modernity took root. These concepts were subsequently institutionalized by Westernized educated Arab elites.⁹ The dream from the beginning of Arabic nationalism was a unified Arab world: Pan-Arabism. One of the leading intellectuals of this school was Sati al-Husri and through his careful studies of German Romantics, especially the philosopher Fichte,¹⁰ he came to the conclusion that language was constitutive for a nation and a prerequisite of statehood. Language is the unifying element of a nation, not geography and not even Islam.¹¹ The German and Italian unifications in the nineteenth century were a source of great inspiration for the Arab world. The histories of the unification of Italy and Germany were part of the education curriculum as examples and sources of inspiration for students.¹² Concepts of modernity were readily embraced, but owing to the lack of capital or fitting infrastructure a broad reform was not immediately possible. Some of the effects of modernity were superficial, e.g. Arab citizens latching on to their appearance and imitating the well-disciplined and rational Englishman in their attire, perceived as pertinent to the greatness of the British Empire.¹³ In this dynamic we may already discern a process that has the same dynamics as the “Picasso in Palestine” project: the welcoming of visual elements of modernity heralding the possibility of political reform. Hourani argued that contemporary art would assist to create a certain type of normalization of society. However, there is a crucial difference here, namely that the Picasso is an original art object with its own history, and not just a mere imitation of a certain modernist style. I will come back to this difference below.

Hourani supported his choice for a Picasso as follows: if one would ask his mother to name a modern artist it would be Picasso.¹⁴ Except from this incidental argument, the underlying logic of this choice follows the ideological structure of democratism. The fact that the choice for the *Buste de Femme* by Picasso among other Picassos from the collection of the Van Abbemuseum was determined by the students of the IAAP instead

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁸ See also, for example, Peter Friedl’s work on modernity in Libya (Friedl, “Secret Modernity”). In this essay, Friedl demonstrates clearly how modernity was already in effect in the colonized world, that it is not something of a recent arrival.

⁹ Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, 57.

¹⁰ The Ba’ath parties in Syria and Iraq are founded on what could be considered a Fichtean political ideology. With the impending demise of the regimes of Ghadaffi in Libya and Assad in Syria, the last vestiges of Pan-Arab ideology seem to have vanished.

¹¹ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 152.

¹² Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 156.

¹³ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 163-4.

¹⁴ Hourani et al., “Ramallah,” n.p.

of picked by Hourani, reconfirms the Picasso in Palestine project bears the hallmarks of democratism such participation and decision making on the basis of a majority. Thus importing a Picasso painting — a physical object with all its history — could be another approach to create the sense of “normality” that Hourani referred to and another step closer to a community the Palestinians like to imagine it to be.¹⁵

Does the “Picasso in Palestine” project reflect the ideals of the Palestinian community or is it a mirror image of the community from where the Picasso is displaced? Or can it be more universal than this basic division? In other words, may the particularity of Picasso in Palestine be transformed into universality?¹⁶

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explains that for the concept of the state to work, first the people of this state need to see themselves as one community. This can only be achieved through an imagined community, because one cannot personally know all the people in one’s community. One has to imagine that there is a common basis, often language. However, in the Palestinian case this will not hold as they share their language with the rest of the Arab world. Whereas the Pan-Arab ideal was founded on a shared language, a Palestinian community can only be imagined on the elusive concept of “culture.” Art has always played a key position in imagining communities. Art, and more broadly, culture in general, has played a constitutive role in creating national identity ever since concepts of nationalism emerged in the late 18th century.¹⁶ I will now focus on the ideals of one of the communities that made it possible for the Picasso to come to Ramallah in order to see whether it reflects their values.

The IAAP, where the Picasso was eventually exhibited, was funded by the Norwegian government. The reason for this was best expressed during the opening of the IAAP by the Norwegian Minister of International Development Erik Solheim: “Art is of vital importance in national identity-building. It helps to build bridges, plays a part in social development and inspires people to reflect on their situation. This is why the opening of the Academy in Ramallah is such an important occasion.”¹⁷ The Norwegian minister could not have better reflected the ideals of his community, the most democratic country in the world,¹⁸ through the act of opening the International Academy of Art Palestine. Art is seen here an active process that by itself can transform a society according to a communal imagination.

The idea for the IAAP or a similar institution had existed already for some time, and had been actively advocated for by the Norwegian artist Henrik Placht. However, when in 2006, after the first the democratic elections in Palestine, Hamas came to power, Norway froze all funding to projects that were taking place in Palestine. Here we encounter the essential problem of promoting democracy in a community that is not one’s own. Norway’s and Palestine’s imaginations of how a community should be and its relation to the world did not coincide. Placht however approached the Norwegian government, which had funds but could not use them because the Palestinian democratic process had led to a situation that they could not support. In the end, it was the money from the frozen funds that made realization of the Academy possible. The arrival of the Picasso coincided with the IAAP’s graduation of their first cohort of students.

The act of the displacement of the Picasso prefigures a number of problems relating to how the “Picasso in Palestine” project may or may not have succeeded in imagining a Palestinian community to come. Several of those problems had to do with the security of the work: the insurance, climatic conditions during transport, paper work, how to deal with the road blocks, and many other aspects that would normally not be considered a problem when a work of art goes to a foreign exhibition in a fully developed nation state. One could say that the displacement of the work showed the underlying conditions of both the nation state and the modern art world, and their complicity when invaluable pieces of art become object of global transportation.

One of the first problems was that the West Bank did not have its own airport. This meant that the Picasso had to be flown into Ben Gurion airport, the airport of Tel Aviv. From there it had to be transported to Ramallah. The part up to the border with Palestine was relatively easy, but once in the West Bank the difficulties began.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 178.

¹⁷ From Solheim’s speech at launching event of the IAAP (Dec. 7, 2006). The quote can also be found at <http://www.artacademy.ps/english/pages/donors.html>.

¹⁸ Incidentally, Norway has been closely involved in the “peace process” between Israel and Palestine both by means of its institution of the Nobel Peace prize and facilitating the Oslo agreement. Wong, “World’s Top Democratic Governments,” n.p.

¹⁹ The building of the wall is part of reversal of the trend to take down walls after 1989. We see this urge to create new walls and other security measures between alongside with the rise of the populist right; see Žižek, *Violence*, 102.

There are hundreds of checkpoints scattered across the West Bank, which is under Fatah control (as opposed to Gaza, which is under the control of Hamas). Some are permanent and others are temporary, consisting of tanks blocking the road or improvised obstacles made from concrete blocks.

The eponymous Wall separating the West Bank and Israel presented another obstacle.¹⁹ The main gate between these two worlds, which had to be crossed by the Picasso, was the notorious “terminal of Qalandia. Helga Tawil-Souri has written extensively on this checkpoint in her essay “Qalandia Checkpoint: The Historical Geography of a Non-Place.” Qalandia checkpoint is often referred to as a terminal, because of its features shared with airports, such as check in, security areas, document checking facilities etc. The fascinating aspect of this checkpoint and its relation to creation of commerce and its constitutive role in community forming, can best be understood through the following example. When the flow of traffic is interrupted, commerce gets attracted to it. Anyone who has been to, for example, India and has traveled by train may recall all the commerce that swarms toward you once the train comes to a halt in some provincial town. In a more organized way this is institutionalized in Western train stations and airports with all the shops that are available after the control checks. Whereas these checkpoints are a part of the process to control the life of Palestinians, to segregate and to fragment the community,²⁰ the in fact stimulate another aspect of community forming: commercial activity. The Qalandia terminal is properly a “non-space”; just like an airport terminal everybody is transient and no one really belongs there.²¹ As Tawil-Souri writes about such checkpoints:

Given their ubiquity, their increasing centrality in Palestinian social and economic life, their symbolic significance, and their manifestations of Israeli power over Palestinian time-space, checkpoints ought to be adopted as the new Palestinian icon. For the better part of contemporary history, Palestinians have had to linger in nondescript places, neither here nor there, in spaces of exile, refugee camps and current Bantustan-like conditions in the Territories. Palestinians live in a world where nothing is fixed; where spaces constantly move and multiply; where borders and territories are furtive; where a continued sense of temporariness (and its partner, arbitrariness) is meant to displace and disorganize; where the bureaucratic stultifies and paralyzes; where identity, belonging, nationalism, resistance, and freedom are put into question.²²

And it is this history that the work of Picasso now represents by actually moving through this terminal, attracting commerce and activity and thus forming part of a communitarian process. It precisely here in the belly of the beast, where the Other defines the boundary of the community, that the death of the Picasso as we know it occurs and a new one is born for the singularity of the individual reader.²³ And from its resurrection a potential community may be established. The meaning of Picasso’s *Buste de femme* crossing this non-place, this place which exhibits the radical absence of community while being at the same time the center of a whirlwind of communal activity is what needs to be brought to light. But in order to do so, I would first like to address another artistic displacement revealing a similar type of cartography but at some key points crucially different.



²⁰ Tawil-Souri, “Qalandia Checkpoint,” 13.

²¹ Auge, *Non Places*, 98.

²² Tawil-Souri, “Qalandia Checkpoint,” 23.



In 2002, the artist Francis Alj's was commissioned by the MOMA in New York to create a work involving their temporary move from Manhattan to Queens. This resulted in the work *A Modern Procession*, a work in which several copies of key pieces from the MOMA collection, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* and Picasso's *Démoiselles d'Avignon* were carried through the streets of New York from Manhattan to Queens. In contrast to the "Picasso in Palestine" project, *A Modern Procession* featured replicas, for the precise same reasons that complicated the transportation of *Buste de Femme* to Ramallah: security, insurance, and so on. Another difference is that the procession took place in the setting of a religious, Catholic procession and traveled all the way by foot, where the pieces were held high up in the air, accompanied by live music. There are several kind of objects that could be carried in a procession as the one that Alj's's is alluding too. These could be objects such as icons or relics, in other words, cult objects. As ethnologist Francesco Pellizzi formulated: "Cult icons and works of art have long been tied to their places of origin and been the object of pilgrimages. [...] Communities are connected by moving artifacts."²⁴

In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin address the difference between a cult object and a reproduction:

In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art -- its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence — and nothing else — that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject.²⁵

This is what Benjamin called the "aura" of the work of art, an aura that still defines Picasso's *Buste de Femme*. Even though in *A Modern Procession* the art works are treated as a cult objects, by their very nature an object taking part in a religious procession, we find that in Alj's's artwork, these objects are replicas, the original works they refer to don't acquire "the mark of history." In other words, the Picasso exhibited in the MOMA is not the one that has been moved through the streets, where it was exposed to the conditions outside a controlled

²³ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 142.

²⁴ Pellizzi, "MOMA's Progress," n.p.

²⁵ Benjamin, "The Work of Art...", 220.

environment, whereas the Picasso that has now returned to the Van Abbemuseum has been exposed to the conditions of its voyages and thus acquired a new historical mark.

Another example of displacement as artistic practice is the journey of the *Bomb Wreck Jewellery* (2008) by Dutch artist Jonas Staal in cooperation with jewelry designers Hartog & Henneman. Bomb Wreck Jewellery comprises a set of five pieces of jewelry made from the scrap metal formed by the heat of the explosion from a car bomb attack on the Al-Mutanabbi Street book market in Baghdad in 2007, causing more than thirty people to lose their lives. This set however does not reveal at first glance this violent history. Instead they resemble the kind of designer jewelry one could find in any high-end shopping street. Upon closer inspection however this not the case, because only very small adjustments were made to the material to make it recognizable as jewelry, and no materials (gold, diamonds) were added that would increase the economic value of the objects. The only significant value it has was that of its history; its history made it an original that could not be copied. As Staal writes in the introduction to the project:

This is thus the main tension which *Bomb Wreck Jewellery* addresses. The selected form of the jewellery forces the bomb wreck remains into a Western, capitalistic system, while its actual value cannot be determined by the system in its entirety [...] With Bomb Wreck Jewellery, we are therefore in the first place not presenting jewellery or artwork; we are presenting you with a new design for an ongoing human conflict.²⁶

Contrary to Alj's A Modern Procession, Staal's Bomb Wreck Jewellery only focuses on the historical mark on basically worthless scrap metal. "Picasso in Palestine" thus occupies somewhat of an intermediary position between the two projects. Referring both to the displacement of Western art and the marks of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Neither content with the mere representation of cultural displacement to accommodate, in the end, a higher market value, nor the exposure of market value by mere material displacement is enough to exhaust the symbolic capital represented by Picasso's Buste de Femme crossing the border -- not only between Israel and Palestine, but also between life and death, and, perhaps, between the relativizing discourse of post-modernity and what is perceived as the nascent modernity of the Palestinian nation-state.

As said, the expectation for the "Picasso in Palestine" project was to integrate the Picasso as a symbol of modernity into the Palestine community. The "cult value" of the art work that facilitated this integration may be finally, as we are coming to a close of our analysis of Picasso's displacement, be related to the status of the relic. The value of relics was usually mediated through their narrative of violence. The aspect of violence was central in that the violence was made transparent in its relation to Christianity, that true believers had died for it. These martyrs would surely be resurrected and, as the relic specialist Patrick Geary writes, "those buried near a saint's tomb would be raised up on the day of judgment."²⁷ This longing for an immanence on the horizon is what constitutes the community in the present,²⁸ the promise of a community, or its mere imagination. The interpretation of Picasso as a relic, moving to Palestine could also allow us, albeit somewhat perversely, to interpret the Palestinian dead and their general suffering, as having sacrificed them self as martyrs for the modernity that Picasso represents. These martyrs are represented by the displacement of the Picasso heralding the immanence of a community yet to come, thereby, binding its members through the death of the other.²⁹ Nancy's analysis of the foundation of a community on death gives us a final important insight here.

The Death upon which community is calibrated does not operate the dead being's passage into some communal intimacy, nor does community, for its part, operate the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject — be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered of fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body. Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to make a work (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it) community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly — for there is neither function nor finality there — the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as community.³⁰

²⁶ Hartog et al., *Bomb Wreck Jewellery*, n.p.

²⁷ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 30.

²⁸ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 13.

²⁹ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 13.

³⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 14.

“Picasso in Palestine” does not constitute a community as a relic representing the loss of its members to attain immanence. It is the finitude of this loss, the dead, that marks the boundaries of the present community and there by moving beyond politics and hence creating the sense of normality that Hourani wished for. This community cannot arise from the domain of work nor can it be produced, but, perhaps, it is the death of an original work of art carrying the historical mark of this very death, that may communicate the extension of the singularity of the individual by the finitude of the other, and this exposure is what constitutes a community.³¹ In this context, modernity is thus reduced to its most radical aspect as crisis, as a radical break with all art production that preceded it. Picasso’s *Buste de Femme* passing Qalandia is the re-enactment of this crisis.

I have attempted to show in this article that the initial impetus of the displacement of the Picasso from the Netherlands and its presentation in Palestine can be located in modern art’s relation to democratism. However, as we followed the Picasso on its travels, we have been able to establish its role as cult object in the ritual of democratism and the practice of imagining communities. By means of its actual displacement through time and space, the original work of art was imprinted by a new history and, contrary to the superficial modernity of the past that tried to produce a community by mere imitation of modernity, it articulated the precise crisis of modernity, a displaced relic haunting the checkpoints of borders of nations and states.

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³¹ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 58.