

Can You Pull In an Actor With a Fishhook or Tie Down His Tongue With a Rope?

Rana Hamadeh, Interviewed by Vivian Zihlerl

Rana Hamadeh is a singular artist amid, and yet beside, the present flux of what might be called ‘research-art’, which is often identifiable by its archival re-crossings and self-mediating lecture-based performances.

While each of Hamadeh’s presentations is meted through rigorous configurations of form to enquiry, they seldom if ever betray a hypothesis or procedure. They arrive as the fruits of an eccentric search, dedicated to the perpetual mutation of its own terms. The results are sculptural, graphic and performative thought-contraptions, rendering an invented language for what, in Hamadeh’s words, “cannot be ignored,” and likewise for what cannot yet be said.

The present cycle of this work—clustered under the project *Alien Encounters*—emerged in 2011 upon the beginning of the uprisings in the Arab region, with a particular regard to the Syrian uprising against Basher al Assad and the Ba’ath party rule. Initially inspired by Sun Ra’s film ‘Space is the Place’ (1974)—which proposes an African American exodus towards outer space in response to racial injustice—*Alien Encounters* aims at further complicating the notion of ‘alienness’, where

the alien is on one hand viewed as an outcast with regard to the law, and on the other hand as an extraterrestrial. From here, the evolving cycle is built upon the idea of provincializing planet Earth, which is itself a response to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call for provincializing Europe. In combination these incessant departures produce an ongoing series of artistic propositions aimed at queering the spatial imaginaries that constitute our legal understandings of the ‘worldly’.

Over successive generations of *Alien Encounters* an idiosyncratic vocabulary has been established spanning A to R, ‘Alienness’ to ‘Resistance’, with mutations through Falling, Infection, Contagion, Plague, Exodus, Immunity and Hygiene, among others. In the current phase, the semiotic operations of the term ‘Resistance’ are re-imagined against the context of political and sectarian conflict in Lebanon and Syria.

The culmination is an opera—an 8-channel sound play that queries the modes by which the institutionalization of ‘resistance’ has shaped the forms of political and communal strife that have formed amid the current Syrian war. Rather than trace a geopolitical

narrative per se, Hamadeh’s probing of possible spatial, historical, legal and political conjunctions becomes a dramaturgy of subjective locations within a discursive space that she calls ‘theatre’. Her opera, which takes the Shiite ritual of Ashura as its primary substance, becomes a mimesis of the simultaneous embodiment of the oppressor and the oppressed in one voice, and a project by which the testimonial subject exits the space of the law.

Since 2013 Hamadeh and the curator and critic Vivian Zihlerl have shared a dialogue that has tracked *Alien Encounters* as well as Zihlerl’s own explorations of the subjective narrations of territory and terrain—first with the project ‘Landings’ co-founded with critic and curator Natasha Ginwala, and then within the project ‘Frontier Imaginaries’ established as Curatorial Fellow at the IMA (Brisbane). The following interview between Hamadeh and Zihlerl draws upon some of the earliest moments within the *Alien Encounters* cycle, seeking correspondences and dialogues with its most recent presentation that took place at Gallery TPW (Toronto) in June 2015.



ALIEN ENCOUNTERS PROJECT, DETAIL FROM ARCHIVAL DISPLAY AT THE 8TH LIVERPOOL BIENNIAL, ON THE OCCASION OF A NEEDLE WALKS INTO A HAYSTACK, CURATED BY MAI ABU ELDAHAB AND ANTHONY HUBERMAN, 2014, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

VIVIAN ZIHERL **Let us start by returning to the *Alien Encounters Project* in its methodology. Certainly it is propelled by a powerful impulse of enquiry, one that could be allied to a present tendency towards ‘research’ or ‘archival’ aesthetics; and yet the works you produce remain highly singular — indeed literally self-determined through a persistent process of self-definition. How do you characterize this form of practice that you are engaged in?**

RANA HAMADEH Since I’ve started working under the umbrella of the *Alien Encounters Project*, I claim that I’ve lost interest in art, while simultaneously militantly assuming a position as an artist. What I claim, in fact, is that in the place of art, I’ve become deeply invested in developing a practice that anchors itself within what I prefer to refer to, distinctly, as the space of art.

I make this distinction between art and the space of art, just as I make the distinction, tangentially, between the artwork and the work, or the workings of art. It is a total shift in the attitude, gestures and habits involved in framing what constitutes my functioning as an artist.

In the past couple of years, I’ve grown less inclined to view art as a field of knowledge, that is, as a field defined by the strata of its many histories and the sediments of its collections, or by the multitude of its worlds along with their many institutions, galleries, artists, artworks, curators, collectors, critics, anthologies, and exhibitions with their formats and protocols and so forth. I’ve grown however more and more insistent on viewing art, primarily, as a space of permissions, and art-making as the labour of generating permission: permission being a term that I am highly seduced by and that I allow myself to freely borrow from the many

discussions and conversations that have been taking place in the past couple of years within the Curatorial Knowledge PhD seminars at Goldsmiths University in London. But I allow myself here to appropriate the term and to play around with it, using it to frame my general attitude towards my work.

VZ **This is a fairly new term for you, can you explain further what you mean by ‘space of permission’?**

RH What I refer to here as a space of permissions—once again, as I borrow and appropriate the term—is a space that is essentially empty but potent, which is utterly independent from both the geological/archaeological depths and the territorial breadths of the field itself (art-as-the-field-of-knowledge). It is a space through which one permits herself to intervene in, sabotage, doubt, re-constitute, re-read, mimic, un-learn or even stick a tongue out at other fields of knowledge by inventing the methods that allow such gestures to become operative—if not within the structures of those fields themselves then operative in disrupting the processes of subjectification that such fields set themselves to produce. What I refer to as the space of art is thereby the space through which one invents the permissions to both suspend and re-constitute the objects of those fields through allowing the emergence of archives that do not belong to those fields’ depths and surfaces to be attached to them: the materiality of the sea becomes an archive of the law, a wild plant becomes an archive that reconstitutes the field of post-colonial studies, the grain of a singing voice becomes an archive attached to architecture, a conversation with undocumented immigrants reconstituting the field of astronomy or biochemistry or philosophy; and so on. The work of art (which can include but is not

reduced to the artwork, as in, the exhibited art object) becomes in this sense similar to the work of a body organ that is unjustifiably added or attached to a fully functioning body—a third hand or a third nostril—offering an excess that cannot but make us doubt the integrity of the single nostril in the first place and sabotage the assumed normalcy of the double nostril in the second place.

VZ That's quite exciting to me as it resonates very much with the frame of political mutancy that I'm currently also developing within the context of the Happy Separatist collaboration and notional journal. In this way, could we say that you undertake a kind of mutant research?

RH I very much like this description of my working method as a method of mutancy and linking this to your research. I never thought about it this way, but your observation is quite accurate. You mentioned earlier that my work seldom betrays the logic of assemblage. And this is not really as accurate a description as the operation of mutancy that you are bringing aboard here. If we look closely, it is this logic of mutancy, surfacing side by side with the histories of the mutant object/thought/term/concept—it gives the appearance of assemblage. But assemblage is not in fact the method. Here, mapping, is not the visualization of loose fragments that make a whole, but rather the process of laying bare the movement of my thoughts alongside their histories. Still, the aim is not that of historicizing my own objects, as much as to generate a 'text'—a linear text whose language slides across several discursive planes.

VZ This is interesting because you acknowledge discursive spaces such as 'theatre' or 'art', and are interested in movement across them—and yet you're quite wary of current tropes such as 'research art',

or the 'lecture performance', for example. Can you explain that further?

RH Well, since we're speaking of inaccuracies I want to contest locating the gestures and claims that I make as an artist under a certain assumed genre or format that I consider to be falsely described as 'research art' or attributed to archival aesthetics. My work is research-based and takes the field of theory as its home, but I am dubious about the over-identification of this process of research with a particular genre. In this context, I also contest tying language-based performative gestures by default to the genre of the lecture-performance. For, notwithstanding the fact that most of my performances to date have been both lecture-based and theoretically invested, it has been quite important to me—since developing the early works under *Alien Encounters*—to make clear that my performances should be viewed as theatrical plays, and that they have to be encountered through the lens of the history of theatre rather than through the genre of the lecture-performance. I do see myself as a theatre-maker after all. And this is one example of those permissions that I was referring to earlier.

VZ Speaking of forms in and out of place, what of the image that accompanies your exhibition at Gallery TPW? In the foreground a masked and robed figure is seated upon a cart, menacingly wielding a large wooden pole over two collapsed and barely distinguishable human figures. The obscuration of identity, and uncertainty of whether these actions are abuse or pantomime are belied by the cluster of smiling onlookers in the background. The image is uncaptioned however. What exactly does it depict, and why did you select this particular image?

RH This image is a very convenient entrance for me to speak about the two different chapters under *Alien Encounters* which I am showing at Gallery TPW: *The Tired Land* (2011), which happens to be one of the early works in the series, and *Can You Pull In An Actor With A Fishhook Or Tie Down His Tongue With A Rope?* (2015), which is a recent chapter.

The image is a press photo dated February 25, 1977, obtained from Keystone Press Agency, titled 'Remembering The Plague: Two moribund lay on the ground in front of Death'. It features a theatrical representation of—arguably—the Black Death (1346–53 AD), enacted playfully during the spring carnival of Postrekov, in the Chodsko Region in South-west Bohemia. I chose this photograph out of the growing archive of historical documents and artifacts which I attribute to the bigger project, because it is one of those images that can be read simultaneously through several registers, all of which correspond to disparate, seemingly far fetched, nodes within the project as a whole.

On one level, the scene in the photograph is a superimposition of an epidemiological-memorial account of the plague and a theatrical-testimonial account of it.

Plague history and the histories and theories of epidemiology, sanitation and hygiene are central to the speech that I have been developing throughout *The Tired Land*. There is no need to explain how terms activated by state, legal and military apparatuses and institutions, such as hygienification and immunization (of public squares, legal courts, universities, neighbourhoods, public hammams, architecture, the sea, the shore, refugee



REMEMBERING THE PLAGUE: TWO MORIBUND LAY ON THE GROUND IN FRONT OF DEATH. CARNIVAL OF POSTREKOV, IN THE CHODSKO REGION IN SOUTH-WEST BOHEMIA. KEYSTONE PRESS AGENCY, FEBRUARY 25, 1977. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

camp and so on), are just other terms for straight forward class-racial-ethnic-gender-ecological cleansing. Histories and the extended present of slavery, coloniality and state and corporate oppression cannot be dissociated thereby from the epidemiological syntax of the law on the one hand. Nor can the law, which I simply see as the apparatus for the management of populations, be isolated from the theatricality, the porousness, and the affective and infective attributes of the population that it sets itself to manage. In other words, the law, in the work, plays the role of the immune system that is at war with the porousness of its own skin—the first frontier and membrane whose role is to sustain the body's endurance of the risk-obligation of publicness; the risk-obligation of inhabiting the body-space of the political.

VZ In your earlier work *The Tired Land*, this emerged from a very direct experience of encounter...

RH Yes, *The Tired Land* is based on conversations I conducted in 2011 with four undocumented immigrants from North Africa that I had met in Marseille, and whom I invited for an interview on board of a small inflatable boat on the Mediterranean coast. Initially, the conversation was set to figure out a way to think of the law from water, rather than from land, away from stable ground. My main concern was to think of how one constitutes herself as a legal subject outside the territorial conditioning of the law.

The conversations guide the audience towards the history, architecture and urban/landscape of a mining town in Mauritania called Cansado, where the men interviewed



L: AERIAL VIEW OF CANSADO, A MINING TOWN IN MAURITANIA, CA. 1963. R: APPROPRIATED FRAGMENT FROM PAULUS FÜRST'S ENGRAVING OF DOCTOR SCNABEL OF ROME (1656), PART OF *THE BIG BOARD OR AND BEFORE IT FALLS IT IS ONLY REASONABLE TO ENJOY LIFE A LITTLE*, WORK RANA HAMADEH, 2013-2014.



had been previously detained as illegal aliens while on their way to cross the sea towards Spain.

As the performance unfolds, the audience find themselves part of a virtual historical and geographic tour inside Cansado. Built from scratch in the early 1960s by a famous French avanguardist architectural firm (Atelier LWD) for the European upper management of the (mainly French) mining company MIFERMA, Cansado soon became a promise for Mauritania's future modernity.

The town, originally supposed to function as a modern form of colonial/corporate 'protectorate', conceived, designed and managed in order to ensure a secure presence of the 'European assets' in the Sahara, has become one of the main objects of border police paranoia. Rather than a fortified settlement, Cansado has become a passage, a crack sandwiched between a constantly shifting mining land on one hand, and the uncertainties of the sea on the

other—as if the settlement turned itself into a passage as a form of vengeance.

As it generates a pool of associations among mining and transport histories, science fiction, modernist architecture, migration flows, legal theory and landscape, the performance's narratives construct a complex reading of the relations of land, sea and outer space.

VZ These are apparently radical transpositions—Saharan modernist history, an epidemiological history of the European Middle Ages, and now in your most recent work, the current political and civil crisis in Syria. In such a way your definitions become a vocabulary of transverse re-pairings which makes me think very much of the 'fishhook' and 'rope' within the enigmatic title of your latest piece. But please, let us know more of this latest most direct transition which in some ways 'reterritorialises' these lines of flight onto your own point of departure—Lebanon and Syria.

RH Within *The Tired Land*, I think through the materiality of the plague, the dynamics of virulence, infection and contagion and their perverse spatial logics of propagation, in order to navigate tropes of Earth, ground, land and landscape, island, sea, mountain, quarantine and outer space, narratives of migrant boats, mining histories, hygiene schools, lives lost in the depths of the sea and on the heights of European border fences. The plague becomes a tool—a tongue—that allows me to iterate the histories of colonialism and their legacies within the broader Arab and North African/West-Saharan contexts, differently.

The key here is the complexities of the term resistance, and the deep necessity to deconstruct the term not only in its wider iterations within the (Arab)/world, but as an institutionalized state-sponsored project (as in Syria-Lebanon) that has turned today into a tool of coercion in itself. Let us not forget that the Syrian regime for instance still sustains its imago as the 'last



LATE SYRIAN PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL ASSAD GREETING THE MASSES AFTER A SWEEPING 99.98% ELECTION WIN, NEWSPAPER CAPTION READS 'DAMASCUS CALLS... WE SHALL REDEEM YOU WITH OUR SOUL AND BLOOD', TESHREEN NEWSPAPER, FEBRUARY 10TH, 1985.

fortress of resistance and defiance' (against Israeli occupation, colonial legacies and neo-imperial global power structures!). As I make my detour through the Mediterranean and the Sahara, borrowing the 19th century histories of sanitation reform and structures of quarantine and their direct influence on the structuring of military institutions and colonial logics of domination, I started to think of the term resistance from within the lexicons of bio-medical language. If to infect means etymologically to perform into something, then resistance in bio-medical terms can be understood as a counter-performative technology of power that perpetuates the power of the state.

But let's get back to the image once again. It is not only the thematics of plague and theatre that make it important to the archive. The fact that this representation of the Black Death comes from Bohemia—an area that has been historically excluded from the official cartographies and descriptions of the deadly plague that later shaped the European renaissance—opens up the relations of

representation to testimony within European history itself. It opens up questions about the power of cartography in shaping the discursive attitudes towards the geographies of the periphery and how this plays out on every level of representation.

VZ How does this all manifest specifically with regard to the sound play at TPW *Can You Pull In An Actor With A Fishhook Or Tie Down His Tongue With A Rope?*

RH In the sound play the chains of thought that are developed in *The Tired Land* in the form of endless detours become focused on exploring theatre as a possible tool for decoding the complexities of state power in Syria—power that is inherited from the same colonial logics that the Syrian regime claims to resist. If the plague turns to be a tongue through which I can narrate European colonial structures and legacies in *The Tired Land*, it transforms in the sound play into an inherent structural grammar through which narration turns into testimony.

To explain the work a bit, I take in this play the Shiite religious ceremony of Ashura, as my main material. Ashura restages the battle of Karbala during which Imam Al Hussein (626–80 AD), the grandson of Prophet Mohammad and an allegorical reference to the figure of the oppressed, was slain. Through a series of rites and orations over the course of ten days each year, Ashura mourners recount the battle's events, weep and inflict wounds onto their bodies—fluctuating thereby between the actual witnessing of the historical bloodbath and acting—constituting themselves as testimonial subjects while enacting the roles of the perpetrators and the seekers of justice at once. In my argument, the militarization of Ashura in recent years in Lebanon has however perverted the ritual, turning it from a form of militant theatre into a structural dramaturgical framework that underlies the entire politics of oppression in the region, be it religious or not; the involvement of the 'resistance' party Hizbollah in the military operations in Syria, being one example.



RANA HAMADEH, *A RIVER IN A SEA IN A RIVER*,
STAGE SET WITH VARIOUS OBJECTS,
KIOSK, GHENT, PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM CALLEMIN,
COURTESY KIOSK, 2014.

As an eight-channel audio installation, the work braids a script among the theatrical-military rise of the Lebanese ‘resistance’ party, Hizbollah, the orations of Cicero, the assassination of my grandfather—the scholar Hussein Mroué—by Hizbollah and his burial in the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab, and Al Hussein’s sister and main initiator of the oratorical tradition of Ashura, among others. The work asks whether it is possible to script Justice; to rehearse, orate, narrate, prop, weep, chant, choreograph, scenograph or even spectate justice.

The sound play complicates the questions that I’ve been exploring alongside my companions on the boat in Marseille. My main question shifts in this work from ‘how can one constitute herself as a legal subject outside the logics of ground and Earth’ (getting back here to the idea of provincializing Earth); towards the question: ‘can one constitute herself as a testimonial subject in the place of the legal subject?’ The space of the testimonial—outside the plane of the law—is what is mobilizing my work right now. In my new works, extraterrestrial space

turns into the discursive space of theatre. It’s like a full circle. And we’re back at the beginning again. ■

Vivian Zihelr

Vivian Zihelr is an Associate Curator at *If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want to Be Part Of Your Revolution* (Amsterdam) and Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane). Her recent projects include the ongoing research project *Landings* curated with Natasha Ginwala and initiated in partnership with the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, and well as the performance series *Stage It! Parts 1 & 2* commissioned for the re-opening of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and curated with Hendrik Folkerts. Vivian has presented programmes with the ICA London, teaches with the Sandberg Institute Department of Critical Studies, and is editor of *The Lip Anthology* (Macmillan Art Publishing and Kunstverein Publishing). Her writing has been published in the *Curating Research* anthology (eds. Paul O’Neil and Mick Wilson) and has appeared in periodicals including the *e-Flux Journal*, *Art Agenda*, *Frieze*, *Metropolis M*, *Discipline*, and the *Journal of Art* (Art Association of Australia and New Zealand), among others.

Rana Hamadeh

Rana Hamadeh is from Beirut, Lebanon and is currently based in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Her work has been shown at *Western Front*, the 8th Liverpool Biennial, The New Museum, CCA Wattis Institute, EVA International, KIOSK and Steirischer Herbst Festival (2014); 12th Lyon Biennale, The Lisson Gallery, Beirut, Witte de With (2013); Townhouse Gallery (2012); Van Abbemuseum (2011); Beirut Art Center (2010). She has an MFA from the Dutch Art Institute/ArtEZ, and is currently auditing within the Curatorial Knowledge PhD programme at Goldsmiths University, London.

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