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»Open Sesame: A Photophobic Experiment«

Furmaan Ahmed, Anna Banout, Tewa Barnosa, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley,
Sanni Est, Gabriel Massan

Curated by Erkan Affan with
Sanni Est and Tewa Barnosa (Artists-in-Residence)

5.11.2020 - 21.02.2021 (postponed)

Erkan Affan in conversation with Tewa Barnosa

Erkan Affan: Hi Tewa, thank you for taking the time to be interviewed for the Baerenzwinger Berlin's online program. As a result of us not being able to do the opening as originally planned in November, we've decided to do a series of interviews where we invite the commissioned artists to talk about their works. So, like our previous interviewee Sanni, you are an artist-in-residence at the Baerenzwinger Berlin. So let's talk a bit about your work, your background, what it is you've been doing here Berlin as an artist, and then we can take it from there?

Tewa Barnosa: Thanks Erkan. So yes, I am an artist and curator currently based in Berlin, I'm currently conducting this interview from Tripoli in Libya where everything started in relation to my artistic practice. I've been working as an artist since 2015, also curating under the WaraQ Art Foundation. What I'm currently doing and what I'm interested in exploring is sociopolitical elements that are related somehow to the Libyan context, but largely also the African context in general and how is it contextualised in Europe and specifically in Berlin. For example how do we analyse, think about, and discuss continental Africa in Europe? The work and mediums I use rely on calligraphy, writing, and other such visual elements of letters and typographies. The two languages that I have experimented with a lot with are Arabic and Tifinagh, both of the scripts take a large part in my work whether as installations, visual pieces, or objects – most of the time it is through the mediums of calligraphy. In relation to the themes and topics I have worked on and am currently researching is the ongoing situation of Tripoli, and also the heritage of Tifinagh identity that is also related to me personally – whether here in Tripoli, or in Berlin.

EA: Let's talk about audience, what do you feel is the difference of how audiences respond to your work in Tripoli compared to that in Berlin? And how do you navigate that?

TB: Well, both are very different on many levels, but I would say that the Libyan audience is much more familiar of course with specific contexts and topics, because it is a lived experience here. That notwithstanding, I also have not been able to show works here that are critical or political as well. So, there are advantages and disadvantages, you know? There is a lot of contextual understanding in Libya, but at the same time there is a very limited space for criticality too. I've experienced a lot of censorship that has played a huge part in how I think about and produce works, and as a result of this I haven't shown some of my major recent works in Libya due to the need for sensitivity – not just in terms of censorship and the risks involved, but in terms of asking oneself about the extent to which you can criticise without

also coming across insensitive... in the context of Libya, you don't want to be an artist that produces works saying to people, "hey guys, you're dying and here is a work about that".

EA: And I guess this is something I also want to attach unto, because being familiar with your work I see that there is a big process of documentation involved in it. Granted, your work has a very artistic context but a lot of it is also about documenting experiences and using scripts and audio-visual elements to document and draw attention to specific realities. So, this is also why I wanted to ask you that question because I wanted to see whether you believe that the Berlin audience is actually able to understand the intentions behind your work?

TB: Okay, I can give an example from one of the previous exhibitions I did in Berlin called "Common Ground" that took place at 68 projects. I showed two works there, and one of them was a research-based (and ongoing) project called "Silent Protest". It started with observations from when I was still living here in Tripoli a few years ago about the vandalism and graffiti I would see on walls around the city and in other parts of Libya. These vandalisms were like interventions in a conflict zone where you cannot protest and thus where walls can tell you more than what the people are saying – a space of in which pain was demonstrated but also in which irony and sarcasm was expressed too. I documented these displays and then created an installation of fifty bricks here in Berlin, each brick with a different statement that was written on a wall somewhere in Libya. All of these bricks had a dialogue with each other because some of them speak about the horror of death, and some of them speak about being a hopeless romantic in a conflict country or zone. There were some interesting things to note with this exhibition. For instance, the texts were in Arabic and thus we needed to provide translations for them, meaning the German/European audiences lost a lot of value regarding what was being said through the act of the translation itself – the expressions of likeness of the Arabic language did not have its meaning honoured when conveyed in German and English. This was a dilemma because as Germany is involved in Libya, making the texts more accessible to European audiences also felt like compromising a part of the struggle for the sake of accessibility.

On the other hand, there were a lot of people who did come to this exhibition who understood Arabic – whether Libyans or Arabic-speakers from Egypt and other countries that have lived through revolutions, uprisings and protests – and they were very connected to the pieces and were reacting to specific statements as they understood the context behind them. This is because some of these

statements are written in a way that holds a lot of historic pertinence, context and background – in relation to Libya and neighbouring cultures & communities.

EA: So, languages and translations are of course a big element of how art can be misrepresented – politics too. A lot of meaning can be lost in translation, and I imagine that this applies tenfold to rhetoric of social justice, especially when you try to translate to a language that has a legacy of colonialism and power like German. I want to explore this with you regarding the Tifinagh script and its relationship to Arabic, especially as an identity that is integral to you as an indigenous person in Libya – how do you navigate language in the context of an “Arabised” city/country? Similarly, how do you then get identified when you write/talk/create art about these contexts in Europe too?

TB: I haven't shown a lot of works in Tifinagh in Libya – I haven't had a lot of time or opportunities to do so, and thus the responses I have are still quite vague and basic in that sense. I would love to see how a discussion would go about this though, after reflecting on specific works. I think people are more open in artistic mediums now, and I'm sure they would love to see something that highlights this heritage, that would give them more accessibility if they are not native speakers to understand more about the language, civilisation and culture. Whist in Berlin, if we speak about the European audience, you really have to explain a lot and as you and I have discussed several times before, mistakes still happen regarding how artwork is phrased, rephrased and labelled. With Tifinagh, I think that with some of the works I've produced it has been very difficult as a process to exhibit them – as I've felt that I always have the forcible role of having to educate a curator on the context, whereas a curator should do their own research and understand the nuances of cultures and civilisations in a continent/region. I think it is not an easy process, but at the same time people are willing to know more, so to speak.

I also want to speak on censorship here too. My role as a woman plays a part in how I contextualize my work too. Even though there is a lot of space to think and be experimental in Berlin, I cannot forget that I'm a Libyan woman needing to be careful and alert - my distance from Libya doesn't change that. If I'm in a situation of danger for example, it may not be me directly who is affected but my family and close ones back home can be made vulnerable. This of course is increased a lot of my own self-censorship relating to my artistic practice too.

EA: Let's talk about the works you're bringing to the Bärenzwinger, starting with some information about your commissioned artist Anna Banout - we will have an interview with her as well, but perhaps you

could provide context to why you chose her to exhibit at the gallery?

TB: I've known Anna since 2019, we worked together before but not in the context of an art installation. Anna comes from a design background, but what really interested me in her work was the use of archiving and how she manipulates this practice in a critical way to deliver a specific narrative that she has in mind. At the same time, she also works a lot with objects and has a specific way of understanding them. This is what I'm really inspired by with her. For example, you can check out one of her recent exhibitions called “Salt of the Earth” Where she was looking into bread as an object that is used and perceived in our daily lives: specifically, how there are a lot of narratives that come out of thinking of bread like collective identity, memories, nostalgia, and other such practices that can link to daily consumption too. This is why I wanted Anna to be at the Bärenzwinger, because her work was relatable and interactive – a beautiful and different experience. Furthermore, when we discussed the “Open Sesame” concept about Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Anna came up with a really interesting perspective about the original story and the question of “who is the villain and who is the hero?”. I found this querying very interesting, because she criticizes all sides of being a hero and a villain and the possibility that one can be both at the same time.

EA: True! And what about your work?

My installation is titled “Departure Death”, and it is about Mitiga airport in Tripoli. I chose this for the Bärenzwinger because of the nature of the space, and the fact that we're exhibiting in actual cages where bears were there until recently. The first time you took me there, I felt a feeling of being locked somewhere, and this is my own personal experience travelling through the airport that the installation is about. In short, sh*t can go down very unexpectedly, and there are a lot of Tripolitans who can attest to that. The airport is very symbolic in and of itself, as it is a former German-built military base from World War II – now it is an alternative to the main Tripoli airport, which like many things in Libya, is a symbol for an alternative way of survival. What we as passengers have gone through in this airport is surreal; an airstrike happens, and then a few days later whatever needs to be fixed is completed and it returns to functioning as an airport thereafter. It reflects a lot about the numbness that people feel here – life has to continue and there may be bombing at night, but we still have to wake up in the morning, be productive and work to make a living. Survival. The installation has audio-visual elements to it, including a departure board in which the mode of a flight schedule is subverted from showing usual city destinations to rather showing the purposes of

people travelling – for example, the destination is “Dreams”, and the status of the flight is “Bombed” or “Burned”. I want to specifically emphasise on “burned” here because Libyan militias have a hobby of burning places... The sound piece is the main part of the work, a very intense three-minute audio experience that presents an actual recording of people screaming and trying to survive whilst the airport is being bombed...

I actually exhibited this work for the first time in Spain for an exhibition mainly about Tripoli, but I wanted to reconstitute it as an installation for the Bärenzwinger because the cages added an element of entrapment that I want the audience to feel. This is how we feel when we use this airport.

EA: What do you intend to accomplish by having audience members live that experience?

TB: Can I be Evil and say that part of me wants them to feel the pain of others? People need to know what is happening in step aside from their European privileges, to know that **** is happening and nobody gives a damn. At the same time, if we're phrasing it in a more diplomatic way, this piece is a way of documentation - there are no archives of what is happening with this airport, and there is a necessity to speak about this from an artistic perspective. I don't think a lot of Libyan artists do this necessarily, actually pointing out the pain and struggles that are happening and saying "hey, this is going on and we need to think about this rather than forget it". Forgetting is not a solution, we need to think about what is happening and the aftermath. We need to reflect.

EA: And what about the neon piece that you have?

TB: The neon piece is also related to the state of numbness I have spoken about before. The actual word says silence in Arabic, which is “Samt” - but the last letter has subverted the Arabic script's letter for “T” and turned it into the Infinity symbol. It refers to this continuous state of people being silent, never speaking or reflecting on what is really happening. So, with the airport installation this neon piece fits together very well because it allows for a collective emphasis on the cycle of events that are happening over and over and over to an extent where we are starting to normalize these events and think they are OK. Being silent is the norm now, and these pieces are aiming to challenge that.

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