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ART IS NOT RESEARCH
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khaled sabsabi, or *how to tell when you're listening to a fool*



DAVID McNEILL

Political art so often shouts too loudly. Like most political poems, it knows where it is going long before it gets there, so there is no element of real surprise or genuine imaginative engagement.
A stupid art reviewer

Statements such as this have one great advantage, they serve as a very reliable and immediate indicator of the stupidity and conservatism of the person who offers them. All clichés are traces of a certain expressive laziness, and we all resort to them more or less frequently but sometimes too, they are just plain wrong. Let's translate this one – I prefer my art to entertain in a facile and non-challenging manner, dealing only with the protocols of its own medium, or alternatively, with the subjective ephemera of some artists' picaresque quotidian anxiety.

If we contemplate many of the most sophisticated and consistently challenging international artists of the last two decades, such as William Kentridge, Mona Hatoum, Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, Paul Chan, Hito Steyerl, or Thomas Hirschhorn, it is apparent that their work cannot even be approached, let alone understood, in isolation from the political concerns that animate and drive it. These artists were and are, without exception, drawn to art for its power to communicate in a unique manner percepts that give added depth to our 'documentary' understanding of oppression and injustice. Kentridge's evocative and often comic riffing on White denial and culpability in the 'old' South Africa, Hatoum's disturbing and oblique references to the terrorist massacres that preceded the violent occupation of Palestine and McQueen's constant return to the necessary connection between imperial wealth and colonial exploitation do not constitute mere embellishments grafted onto their considerable skill in manipulating their chosen mediums. Rather they are the central substance of their practices, the indispensable core without which technique and aesthetic configuration is meaningless. Artists require a reason for doing their work and technical facility is the means through which this is effectively realised. There are noble reasons and trivial ones and the pursuits of self-expression or formal elegance for their own sakes pretty much fall into the latter category.

Non-political art has no social purpose beyond serving as an entertainment for lazy elites who wish to absorb an appreciation of art as the easiest path to a kind of bogus intellectual or cultural capital. That the entire commercial art industry exists to pander to this desire does not make this any less true. Thus we can reasonably take our first smug aphorism and simply invert it—non-political art is frequently boring. It tends to whisper incoherently and like academic poetry it knows where it is going long before it gets there. It contains no element of real originality or genuine communicative engagement.

Khaled Sabsabi is a political artist. He was born in Tripoli on the northern coast of Lebanon in the mid-1960s and his family migrated to Australia to escape the deadly civil war that erupted in 1975 and paralysed the country for fifteen years. Sabsabi remains committed to his country of birth, at the same time as being a responsible and 'integrated' Australian citizen.

It should not be necessary to emphasise the advantages of such dual allegiance were it not for the fact that we live in a country populated by some who have on occasion expressed a propensity to treat with suspicion those whose horizons are broader than their own. To spell out these advantages then, someone who has experienced life in two different cultures, or in two different national contexts is in a unique position to assess the limits of their various and contradictory totalising claims and also to recognise (through having 'lived' them) the universal nature of qualities that are postulated as culturally specific. To pick a banal example, if you had never lived anywhere other than in Australia you might be forgiven for actually believing that notions such as "mateship" and the belief in a "fair go" were invented here and are found nowhere else. Those who have experienced life across national boundaries will never be so naïve and thus they will also, things being equal, be better and more informed citizens, less constrained by local ignorance and prejudice. It is not putting it too strongly to suggest that blind nationalistic fervour is the handmaiden of fascism, since it insists that the denizens of a particular State access a humanity denied to those who do not share a particular accident of birth. In this sense then, the true humanists of our time are cosmopolitans—not the business class Louis Vuitton suitcase species—but those with genuine transnational and transcultural knowledge and affections.

Sabsabi is then a political artist and a cosmopolitan. As a cosmopolitan he can be a good citizen, but not a good nationalist and as a political artist he can be provocative, but not decorative. There are many artists in Australia who address political issues in their work but there are far fewer political artists. A political artist is an artist whose practice negotiates and exposes the mechanisms by which aesthetic content is transported and contextualised. A political practice is necessarily a self-conscious and sceptical one that always casts a peripheral and suspicious glance at the mythologies and protocols of the art world in which it operates. This art world (and not just in the Australian context) will always exert a downward pressure towards the twin enemies of good art, commodification and aestheticism. Dealers oversee the first of these impulses and curators, teachers, writers and gallery staff preside over the second.

Hip-hop and street art represent two great sites of resistance to these homogenising pressures and have done so for many years now. Hip-hop combined an attack on intellectual property through the technologies of sampling with an aggressive and visceral anger, and graffiti and stencil practices colonised liminal public spaces and either ignored or expressed a deeply felt hostility towards the sanctified spaces of the commercial art world. Both these revolutionary forms have proved global in their reach and impact and Sabsabi's generation is the one closest to the moment of their revolutionary eruption. Like so many of his contemporaries across the world in the late 1980s he found in hip-hop a form ideally suited to expressing a disaffection with clichéd mainstream assumptions about migrant communities and as a means to escape the ghetto spaces set up for the reception of 'multicultural' art production.

In a world in which Banksy is collected by Angelina and Brad, Shepard Fairey is feted as the artist behind the Obama campaign and Obama himself quotes the body language of Jay-Z's *Dirt Off Your Shoulder* video with a knowing irony, it is possible to underestimate the impassioned anti-institutional critique that forms such an integral part of these countercultural practices. Sabsabi, however, is old enough to remember such things.



His work as a musician and as a video and installation artist has been shown and performed in Germany, Argentina, Malaysia and China among other places and he has also had extensive experience as a community advocate, curator and event organiser. He knows better than most the barriers that separate multicultural and community practices from the mainstream of art production and dissemination—barriers that are geographic (Western Sydney versus ‘downtown’), and cultural (‘earnest’ versus ‘trendy’). However, since so much of the downtown scene in Sydney and in other cities, is committed to a kind of antipodean rejigging of trends and forms derived from quick overseas trips or illustrations in art magazines, the work produced at some critical distance from this scene is sometimes both more original and also paradoxically, more connected. The great gift of hip-hop and street art culture is that it offers younger artists an international network that is closed to non-aficionados (older people such as myself) and this, when placed beside Sabsabi’s knowledge of Middle Eastern culture and politics, gives his work a planetary resonance and connectedness that is formed independently of a downtown apprenticeship or imprimatur. Sabsabi has shown that it is possible to move backwards and forwards between Cabramatta and Beirut, Shanghai or Kuala Lumpur without transiting through the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and without assistance from an established commercial gallery in Paddington. None of this means (or should mean) that an artist like Sabsabi will not accept the challenges and rewards of a downtown exhibition when it is offered, but it will mean that he will take up such an invitation with full awareness of the pitfalls and compromises that acceptance may entail.

When invited to participate in the *Making it New: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art* exhibition at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (beginning 10 September 2009), Sabsabi presented a proposal for a large, hanging chandelier-like installation titled *Coexistence*. The inverted ziggurat form displays the flags and logos of the many confessional political groupings that vied for support in the recent national elections in Lebanon. There are groups representing Maronites, (liberals and Phalangists), Sunni, Shiite, Druze, Greek Orthodox, Communist and so on. The diversity of these groups is almost overwhelming given the extent of this tiny nation. Nevertheless, we all have to believe that the elections can lead to a degree of political stability commensurate with the wellbeing of the Lebanese people and that this small but culturally rich nation will be able to rebuild a national infrastructure free from outside interference.

As Sabsabi knows, and wants us to know, Lebanon offers itself as a particularly appropriate laboratory for investigating the modern travails of nationalism. It is a comparatively new nation and it has never managed to produce a consensus around the characteristics of its “imagined community”. Lebanon is a colonial creation, and it has been subjected throughout its short history to continual outside interference, both benign and aggressive. All nations are formed as a result of compromise between major indigenous sectors, but in the case of Lebanon these sectors are unusually rich, varied and proximate. Thus Lebanon has never had an opportunity to produce the usual ideological trappings of nationhood that presuppose basic functional unity and cohesion. There is no consensus about identity, no commonly subscribed founding mythology and no shared sense of what might constitute a nation-building project. Lebanese identities and identifications traverse and striate the State rather than nestle within it. As a result Lebanon is faced with the pressing problem of forging a functioning State apparatus,



civic space and sense of community that will need to be, in many important regards, post-national. It will have to do this while situated within an unimaginably hostile region; Lebanon's neighbours, and in particular the aggressive occupiers of Palestine to the south, would not be displeased to see the fledgling post-nation reduced, once again, to civil war. Sabsabi's work serves to remind us that Australians should not remain indifferent to these concerns, as they are by no means as removed from us as their geographical distance might suggest.

In his first proposal for *Coexistence*, Sabsabi included a Star of David beneath his chandelier of Lebanese parties. It was laid out on the floor in broken cement and glass. After a discussion with the curator Sabsabi agreed to remove this part of the work, as it was felt that the broken glass would pose a health and safety threat to young children. The Museum of Contemporary Art has previously taken a strong stand against censorship, most recently last year in regard to the 'Bill Henson Affair' and Sabsabi accepts that the health and safety concerns were quite genuine. He has worked in galleries himself and he knows that a successful display is always realised against resistances of all kinds.

It will be interesting to see how Sabsabi deals with this 'technical' problem when the exhibition opens, but I am willing to bet that he will find a way to circumvent it in order that the integrity of his work remains uncompromised. I am also sure that he will do this in a manner that poses no threat to young gallery visitors. After all, he is a political artist.

Pages 184-87, Khaled Sabsabi, *You* (video still details), 2007
 Page 188: Khaled Sabsabi, *To Lebanon* (video still detail), 2009
 Page 189: Khaled Sabsabi, *To Israel* (video still detail), 2009
 Photos courtesy the artist