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Interviews, Essays and Dialogues about Art

Collapse: Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme

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(https://writinginrelation.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/collapse_videostill_2.jpg) *Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, 'Collapse', 2009, 8' 20", single-channel video and sound installation. Courtesy the artists.*

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme (<http://baselandruanne.com/>) (b.1983) work collaboratively across a range of media including sound, moving image, performance and installation. They have recently founded the video/sound performance group *Tashweesh*. Their work has been widely exhibited internationally and they have been recipients of residences/fellowships and grants including the Delfina Foundation, Artist Residency, London (2009). Solo exhibitions include 'The Zone', New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2011) and 'The Incidental Insurgents', Temporary Gallery Cologne (2014). Group exhibitions include 'Insert', curated by Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi (2014); the 13th Istanbul Biennale, Istanbul (2013) and 'Points of Departure', ICA, London (2013).

Their 2009 film *Collapse* appears on the group exhibition of Artist's Film opening at Carroll/Fletcher (<http://www.carrollfletcher.com/exhibitions/23/overview/>) 17 January 2014. The show closes 22 February.

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Tell me about *Collapse*, one of the films selected for the screening of artist's films at Carroll/Fletcher. Watching the film, I was struck by a sense of violence and power and how these, enacted in times of war and political conflict, produce a highly affective relationship to space. It made me think about how space is navigated, whether the space of a city or a landscape (or perhaps even an intimate space, such as a domestic space, or the artist's studio in your work *The Accidental Insurgents*). Watching *Collapse* I felt and experienced the disorientation of displacement, and anxiety, through the (often ghostly) overlays of spatial environments and running men and women. It is such a complex and deeply affecting work, both visually but also in the way that you use overlays of sound.

Collapse is a work we finished in 2009. We began working on it in 2008 when we returned to Palestine having not lived there for about 7 years. We both left during the Second Intifada (which began in 2000) and went abroad to study. We lived and worked abroad and were then compelled to go back to Palestine for our work. When we returned we had to deal with quite violent and radical transformation. Not only spatially. Although you are right, there is a sense of how these transformations are visualised and how they manifest spatially. There was also a feeling that there was a loss of a political community or a shared narrative of resistance. It felt as though there was a very deep geopolitical fragmentation of sorts. And a stagnation. We thought about landscape in that sense. As a kind of breakdown of community, and also of memory.

When we left Palestine at the moment of the Second Intifada there was still this discourse of resistance. Or perhaps the remnants of it – a discourse of resistance and liberation. It was the end of the transformation of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) into an authority. Before, the idea of the PLO was of something very much alive, and part of a community. When we returned the failures of the Second Intifada had solidified and this marked the end of the PLO or the end of the idea of the PLO. This was quite a radical turning point in terms of the Palestinian narrative, or the discourse which was shaping the narrative.

It seems to me (as an outsider to these issues) extremely complex and actually quite opaque. As though the moment you begin trying to make sense of it historically you are lost.

It is extremely dense and you run the risk of flattening the narrative or simplifying it. What we were experiencing in Palestine was what had happened across the world in post-colonial contexts. But we were still under Occupation. If you look at a lot of colonial contexts, post-liberation, you can see how the very movements that were part of liberation become very oppressive. This very same transformation was happening in Palestine, and you can connect them to these different moments. The only difference being that we were still under Occupation – like a paradoxical post-colonial (but colonial) moment. Palestine is very complicated but also similar to other experiences in other parts of the world.

The political context and background is so complex. Perhaps then to focus in on the work and your role as artists: What are you reaching for as artists, and in the making of *Collapse*? The title of the work is itself very interesting. You also draw from archives, including film archives. How you overlay images from different times and contexts is also fascinating, for ideas about time and history. There is such an emphasis on running figures; and this is so important to the experience of the work; and its affects. At one point there is a female figure who floats across our field of vision, she appears ghostly. At another point a woman stops running, and faces outwards toward us.

A lot of our practice is engaged in collapsing different times and spaces. The work is about the fabric of time which is, in fact, often indistinct: the past lives in the present, and also in the future. This is a very important aspect of our work. We are very influenced by Walter Benjamin's writings and in trying to redeem something from the past, or in the idea of looking towards the past to speak about the present. Our work is very concerned with using archives to the extent that they can speak about now. A lot of the archives we've drawn on in *Collapse* are fictional. We've drawn on films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925); Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966); two Egyptian films one of which is Henry Barakat's *The Open Door* (1964); and others. We've also used real documentary footage, material that we've filmed; there is Edward Said, outside of his home. We were interested in looking at films that expressed the potential and failures of resistance, and loss. The important thing (in how it is we look at film), has to do with our interest in the trace or the gesture. We will focus on a moment that may have never have been picked up on in a film. We take something that could possibly have been missed: very, very small extracts. We tend to take extracts that are not from the most memorable scenes. We're more interested in the gesture.

Collapse also has a lot of feeling in it. We were interested in this, the experiential aspect of the film: the feeling of something breaking down, of almost coming together. And also repeating itself. Repetition is important to us. In *Collapse*, it is about how the material repeats, most of the fragments repeat and accumulate at the same time. There is a certain density, of image and overlay. But it is also about how different moments relate to each other. Ambiguity is also part of the work. For example, if you look at the floating woman you might ask: 'Is she floating or is she drowning?' We were exploring all the complexity of the political situation we found ourselves in and drawing it into our work as artists.

Affect or sensations that might be described in terms of feeling or emotion is a very powerful aspect of how *Collapse* is experienced.

This is a very important part of it. We always think of the physicality of work; how it is experienced. We are interested in what speaks to us; there is a subconscious aspect to the process of making work.

Is trauma something that interests you?

Very much so, and particularly in *Collapse*. It is very much part of the work. There is obviously a trauma in this work and a kind of deadly repetition. We were trying to express this formally. There is also a kind of suspension. There is a great deal of research that goes into our work but at the same time it is very personal. It is very intimate. We also feel that the work is not just about us individually. It is coming from an exposed and intimate place. But at the same time it is not to do with us as individuals. The work is trying to express something wider.

In *Collapse* there is a sense of how trauma is repeated across generations; there is a sense of traumatic memory. There is a feeling of the perpetual return to the moment of trauma.

This is a very big part of the work. There is a sense of nostalgia and a frustrated sense of *déjà vu*. The work is about repetitions in history and the overlap between personal trajectories and historical narratives. The idea of repetition is there in all our work.

Repetition is a fascinating concept to think about historically, politically and critically. I think it really speaks to the 21st century; the sense of repetition and impotence.

In our practice, very early on, there was also a feeling of stagnation to do with our ability to produce a new image for Palestine. This also had to do with our use of fictional and archival material. In *Collapse* we actually filmed some of the landscape that appears ourselves but this is only visible (although very faintly) at the end. We overlaid it with other imagery, so that it is barely visible. This was our footage but masked by archival footage. We were trying to express something about Palestine without using a didactic, representative image.

After the Second Intifada many images of Palestine were circulating, and there was so much repetition of the same images. These images felt stagnant; as though they could not be activated in the sense that they could make you feel anything. When we returned to Palestine we felt unable to film anything without producing something derivative. We decided to narrate the present using material from different experiences, times and spaces. Our work draws from the experience of Palestine but it is not just about Palestine. We believe very strongly that different times and spaces are very intimately connected to one another; and our experiences resonate. This is a very large aspect of our work and why we continue to choose to work with materials from anywhere. We try and weave these together.

We try to create a narrative between different experiences, spaces and times. It is also a reaction to the ghettoization of Palestine and the Palestinian issue. We have had to struggle with this as artists. Many people have been disappointed that we don't make 'Palestinian images'. There is this demand to make 'Palestinian art'.

This is very interesting, this assumption that Palestine would have representative images and that you, as artists, are countering this assumption in your films.

This is why we go to the archive, and use fiction and sound. Sound is able to bring out feelings and talk about the present in ways that are not simplistic and representative.

You are not dealing with monuments or recognisable sites or didactic, political posters and other kinds of familiar images.

Although these might have a large part to play in the research but they are not repeated and foregrounded.

Affect is so important to the experience of your work, I think, and its search for a new language with which to speak about Palestine and similar conditions. The way that you use sound as a language is also very interesting. I don't think the role of the artist is to make didactic, simplistic images drawing on an arsenal of recognisable national symbols. History and politics is never about binaries. How does an artwork enter politics and what does it do to it? How does an artwork enter a landscape, a highly charged landscape or place? Or a national identity?

We don't make political art. This is not the kind of art we want to make while our work is engaged in political issues. We are not exploring politics and politicians but the most intimate aspects of people's lives. People's ability to live their lives with a certain degree of dignity and integrity interests us, people and people's experiences. We explore the pressing issues that impact on people's lives and also impact upon us. We explore things that we are experiencing and working through. Art should not be didactic and fails when it is. We are trying to speak to the issues and questions that people are dealing with and invariably that is political.

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(<https://writinginrelation.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/incidental-insurgents.jpg>) Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, 'Incidental Insurgents' Installation View. Part 1: Installation; documents, images, props, two record players, desktop computer, sound 13' loop of vinyl crackle, 35'51" video loop. Part 2: 6', one-channel video and two-channel sound. Courtesy the artists.

I am interested in the *Incidental Insurgents* and the sense of obsession it communicates – a hyped up artist's studio with prolific notes, documents etc. I think that trauma induces the impulse to try and obsessively make sense of something (an event, an experience) and to understand; although one invariably fails. I was very struck by the stuck vinyl record, and the repetitive sound of it in the *Incidental Insurgents* installation at the ICA.

This work is about our obsessive search to understand what it means to be an artist now and what it means to be living at a time of immense crisis. But we feel that, at this time, there is the potential for understanding ourselves, and how we might relate to each other in a different way. There is a need for a different imaginary and a different language.

The running people in *Collapse* is interesting in this sense. There is a feeling of panic or, at least, it produced this kind of sensation in me, as I watched it. The word obsessive keeps coming up. I'm also thinking about the time-consuming process of sifting through your archive of films and the process of isolating the particular gestures of running figures. I'm thinking too about gestures in the history of art, and particularly the history of painting. And how you are excavating gestures through an archive of film history. And then focusing in on a running figure.

The running figures do produce a sense of anxiety. Is it about running away from something or towards something? Are you about to arrive somewhere or just trying to get away. We play with this confusion. There is a kind of movement, whether the figure is running, or turning, and visually there are vertical and horizontal movements too.

Collapse is so much about layers of sound and image. You look through a human figure to a landscape, for example. I was wondering about how you compose your work in a pragmatic sense.

It's all layering of images and sounds together. We work with editing softwares, Final Cut Pro.

Do you build an archive on your hard drives of film and sound? You work with 'found film', and 'found sound'? This is your material.

Yes. We have huge collections. We have hard drives full of material. The material becomes unimportant later in the work, we choose it for the gestures, it is part of the process of working, and alludes to where we started. Assembling and editing is an important part of how we work.

I think you have very interesting things to say about the idea of history. There are so many different approaches to history, linear or non-linear. Your work disrupts any causal telling of a story and the idea that a story comes out of a particular place. You get the sense, watching *Collapse*, of the circulation of images and sounds across the world (in film, in music).

Everything is accessible at once no matter where you are located; or theoretically speaking can be at least. I come from Southern Africa and live in London but can share references with you coming from somewhere else. This is interesting to me; how familiar your work is to me.

Even though we speak from a very personal perspective and bring our own feelings to the work it is about shared feeling. In Palestine we see a microcosm of what happens elsewhere presented in a raw format. Perhaps too raw and you cannot just document it. You have to go to the heart of what is going on.

Documentation and going to the heart of something is so elusive. I am interested in how you use black and white film in *Collapse*, so associated with documentary traditions, and the relaying of a 'truth'. What is interesting for you about the black and white film?

For us time has a certain density. A lot of our work is about trying to draw attention to the idea that things are never quite finished. We don't have a sense of linear time or narrative. A moment is a dense accumulation of moments together. This is a big part of how we relate to materials and how we relate to history and to the present moment.

I like the idea of thinking about time as a material substance. You talk about time as a material; this is very compelling. Time is so abstract. Watching and listening to your work, you hear time, feel time and you see time. This is interesting. It is part of the material that you work with and mould as if it were paint.

Materiality is an important part of our work. So often time is flattened. How do you express a sense of time, make it living, and make it speak to the moment? We were trying, with sound and music, in *Collapse*, to blur the line between fiction, 'the real' and documentary. We sampled real sounds, recordings from films. These could be recordings from now or from the past. You can't really tell. We made something out of seemingly disparate bits and pieces.

A generation of artists before us were working with the archive to the extent that they were questioning the notion of an archive; questioning the document and the official archive. Because so many artists before us were engaged in this work it allowed us to relate to our material in a different way. And not have to relate to found, archival material but to fiction. In fact, where is the distinction? Even something that is fictional is a kind of testimony of sorts? Even if it is a projection. In *Incidental Insurgents* we were saying our projections are as important as what is happening, or appears to be happening. It's not only about the line between fiction and reality but also about actuality and our imaginary. How much can an imagining of ourselves or a historical period have a truth; have something that is important to our times and our experiences. When you isolate the gesture whether something did or didn't happen doesn't really matter. That is not what concerns us.

What does gesture mean to you? Do you understand it as something physical? What do you mean when you talk about gesture?

It could be about the repetition of the people running in *Collapse*. This could be a gesture that we have isolated and extracted. But then the question is: What is this gesture beyond the physical? Beyond its physicality what is it expressing? We're interested in gesture as an expression; an incomplete expression, it is not a complete action. It is a gesture towards something. It is connected to something that is incomplete. There is a very strong connection in our work between the immaterial and the psychology of the moment and inner thoughts; and then the material moment, the physical, bodily manifestation. Being within the space of an installation is quite bodily and physical. But what we are trying to get to is not just the physical but also the immaterial.

Talk a bit to how sound functions in your work. I'm used to multi-channel videos but not multi-channel sound, which is so much part of your work. Why is sound compelling for you and why is it something that you mobilise in your work?

We are really interested in the abstraction of sound and the physicality of sound. It is something that is seemingly so immaterial. It doesn't have a material form, and yet it has an incredible materiality in terms of physicality, in the way that it can enter the body. We started by looking for violence in sound and in the sounds around us. We were interested in power and how it is manifested through sound. We both have a background in sound. [Basel] was into composing music, and still composes music through sampling: digitally, electronically. Sound informs our visual practice.

Sound, and its politics, is so integral to the work *Contingency* (2010), which speaks to borders and checkpoints. I also noticed the way you work with repetition in this work – the texts you used in the LED tickers.

Repetition is an important aspect of our work, and text and language (important for *Contingency*)

Your work invokes so many languages. Language is another issue wound up in narratives about power and displacement.

This is something that has emerged in our work; that we were not that aware of in the beginning. It has become very clear that text is an important part of our work in one way or another. We are dealing with language in many different ways. One of the things we're concerned with is developing our own language as artists. We think, for example, about sound as a language. We think about sound as a language where visuality fails. This is very present in *Contingency*; which was all recorded at a checkpoint (the Ramallah-Jerusalem checkpoint, Qalandia). We have seen the checkpoint so many times, and it's a very well documented space. But images of it are so repeated and representational that they stop having any potency or meaning. People use a checkpoint so frequently that it becomes mundane and normalised as a space. We were interested in the idea of de-normalising it. How do you make it a potent space again. Not just the image of it but the experience of it. It's not just that the image of the checkpoint has lost its potency but also that the experience of it has lost potency. People treat it as part of everyday life. We began to record the sounds there and spent time just listening to them in isolation. The sounds are almost like a very bizarre science-fiction film. Violence and power is audible in the sound.

I think that a sense of close looking, and listening, is interesting about how you work. You take time to deliberately observe minute, almost indiscernible moments; and you take time to listen. It is very difficult to make sense of the world as it is, and the repetitive re-inscription of violence.

We are living in a time of crisis and there is no certainty. We are living in a time where we are expected to not believe in anything beyond this kind of injunction to just enjoy our lives. There is very little that we actually believe in. We don't believe in community, in political process. There is so much that we are disillusioned with. We are basically just asked to believe in ourselves.

But we are exploring repetition not simply as failure. There is a slightly different impulse in *Incidental Insurgents*. There are all these moments where people have struggled, and tried to create a different way of living and being in a world in crisis. But they have failed. But then as much as that impulse has been repressed (violently repressed) it has not died. It doesn't go away, it is not fully repressible. This was a turning point in our perspective.

There is a moment in *Incidental Insurgents*, the video work, where the idea of poetry surfaces, in a text: 'the impotence of action and the search for the poetic act'. I was very struck by this.

Yes, the search and the impotence at the same time. We felt that there is hope in as much as people are still searching. As much as we can look back at history, and say that it is full of this inability to get to something radically different, people are still searching. We saw from recent events in Egypt, and other parts of the world, that people are searching for a different way of being politically. People are not interested in political parties and ideologies. People are interested in thinking about the political in relation to their lives; in relation to the everyday. Not in relation to huge statements and ideological positions. *Incidental Insurgents* emerged from a moment where we felt that perhaps we are not just stagnating. In *Collapse* there is a feeling of stagnation.

I saw the aftershock of political trauma, and violence, in *Collapse*.

Yes, there is a lot of trauma. It comes out of our own trauma.

Let's turn now to your performance group *Tashweesh* (<http://vimeo.com/tashweesh>) (which also includes the musician boikutt). What is important to you about performance? I watched the footage of *Live in Ramallah* (2012).

We are trying to bring the work that we do in video, sound and installation, into performance settings. Performance allows us to show our work to different people. It allows us to move outside of a visual arts space or gallery space. We have done a lot of performances in outdoor spaces, and events such as music festivals. These performances are very connected to our installation and video works and uses a lot of the ideas and materials. If not the material that goes into an installation or video then at least the research, and different edits. *Live in Ramallah* was a live video and sound performance. The performance took place through the sound and the video. We use a live visual software which allows you to layer different visuals together. It is very similar to how the sound is performed, we layer visuals and sound. With *Tashweesh*, it is very interesting and important for us to be there physically, in a space, performing.

What is important for you as collaborators? Dialogue does seem to be important to your practice itself as a whole. There are dialogues between sound, image, text: there is a strong sense of not only you talking to each other but of formal elements, and mediums, talking to each other. This perhaps has to do with the way you work with sampling as a method.

[Basel] comes from a sound / music background and [Ruanne] from a film and video background. Neither of us studied art formally, and we were both working with the idea of the sample as a method. We've now been working together for five years. Our working process begins as a series of conversations, these lead to research, and the form comes much later. The research informs the form. We both work on research and form, and transfer technical skills to each other. Collaborative practice is significant for us as a way of working, and as a position. We also collaborate with other people, other artists. We are, in our own practice, interested in coming to something that is collaborative and that is not just about us individually, or about an 'artist's ego'. A lot of our process is about talking.

Edited version of an interview conducted by Yvette Greslé, with Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, over Skype, 8 January 2014. The responses of both artists have been edited together to create a narrative about their collaborative work and concerns.

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