

Denise Ferreira da Silva
**Reading Art as
Confrontation**

01/06

“What I can say is that there are different layers of refusal; it begins with this violence I am responsible for in photographs; I find myself in a situation of impossibility, of doing what I have to do with these images. And then there is another layer over this; the context of the art world, the institutional context ... I find it very violent to be at this point of the program, I think about [whether] what I am presenting will offend somebody. It is very difficult to exist in this and outside of this; it is these different levels of refusal that come together and make me unproductive, as does spending a lot of time with those photographs and dematerializing them in many senses. Today was one experiment, which is a process of trying out things with these images. Even when talking and responding I feel like I am unproductive.”
– Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh

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What if one approached each and every work of art as a composition, that is, as an imaging, an assemblage of bits of representation: the already said, the already seen, the already written, the already imaged – or rather, words, images, texts, gestures, scenes? Would that be a denial of creativity? Would such a take entail a view of the artistic as hardly distinct from the economic? Would the collapsing of these two instances of value, the aesthetic and the economic, signal a corruption of art, or has the stuff of life, including economy, always been art’s sole raw material? Perhaps the work of art (the work art does) has never been anything other than life worked on, through, and by a certain intention.

I ask these questions because I am interested in the possibility of art with an anticolonial inflection. What sort of compositions could retain the postcolonial concern with representation, aiming beyond the limits of postcolonial critique and its particular rendering of modern grammar? If it aims to go beyond denouncing, if it moves to dismantle and/or counteract the effects of epistemic violence, what would anticolonial artwork accomplish through the form of presentation? For now, and within the limits of this text only, my answer to this question is: it would corrupt any mode, any form of presentation, by turning it into a confrontation – that is, a presentation that refuses representation.

With these questions in mind I read Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh’s *On Violence*, a twenty-three minute event that was part of the exhibition “It Makes Us Think of a Dance and a

Fête as Much as of War (On Violence),” curated by Doreen Mende as one of the prequel symposium series “Artistic Justice: Positions on the Place of Justice in Art” at EVA International, Ireland’s Biennial in 2013.¹ That late March afternoon in Dublin, for twenty-three minutes, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh refused to represent.

If you read online bios and descriptions of Eid-Sabbagh’s work and her academic training, it is not difficult to place her work under a rubric such as postcolonial art. That rubric also makes sense if you attend to the content of her work. Her description of this particular presentation tells us that she gathered an extensive collection of family photographs “mostly in collaboration” with residents of Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in Southern Lebanon.² Everything, at every step – from the sourcing of the photographs in collaboration with the camp’s residents through the conceptualization of the presentation – was already framed as a postcolonial piece. “Together,” the description proceeds,

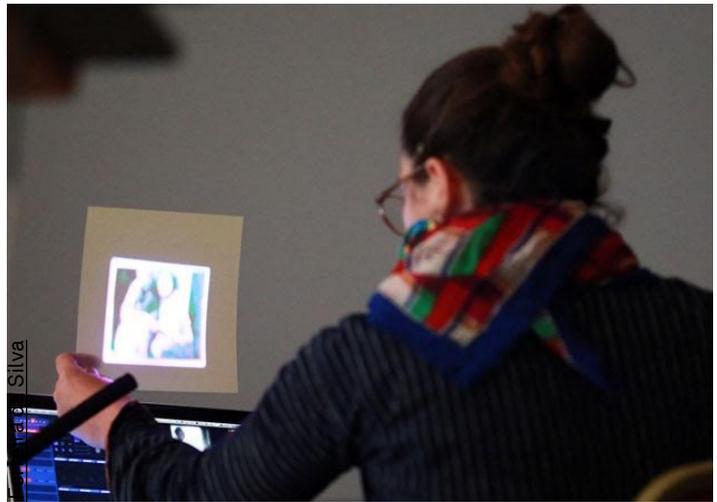
they devoted time and attention to these photographs, otherwise barely seen, even by the people who originally owned or took them. A process of rethinking visual representation unleashed, considering how to make these images “visible” without making them public, and questioning the iconography of the Palestinian refugee created through images mainly produced by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Key terms and choices in the description signal a refusal to represent – “collaboration,” “together,” making “visible without making public,” “questioning” the figure of the Palestinian refugee from the humanitarian perspective of the UN and the PLO, and so on.³

My view is that Eid-Sabbagh’s artwork is exemplary of what can be called postcolonial art, because of what a postcolonial framing does to performance as a form of artistic presentation.⁴ The time and situation in which the performance takes place – a singular performance, any singular performance, which is *the* singular performance that I have in mind – does something that is beyond and that cannot be comprehended by the conceptual tools and analytical moves associated with the “postcolonial” as a scholarly practice. This is due to the fact that something happens, and becomes part of the performance as it happens, which the artist herself could not have anticipated and directed. This occurrence is contingent upon everything that is then/there:

the audience, the artists, the technical staff backstage, the curators, the stage, the lighting, the seats, the space between the stage and the first row of seats, the in-room temperature, the outside temperature, what each one of us had for breakfast, how easy or difficult it was to get to the venue ... it involves everything; it is about everything. It is about everything because it is about how each one of us then and there reacted or responded to the key descriptor of the performance: “making visible without making public.” This is the turn of critique when it comes out of books into the world, in this case the art world, corrupting the form in the process.

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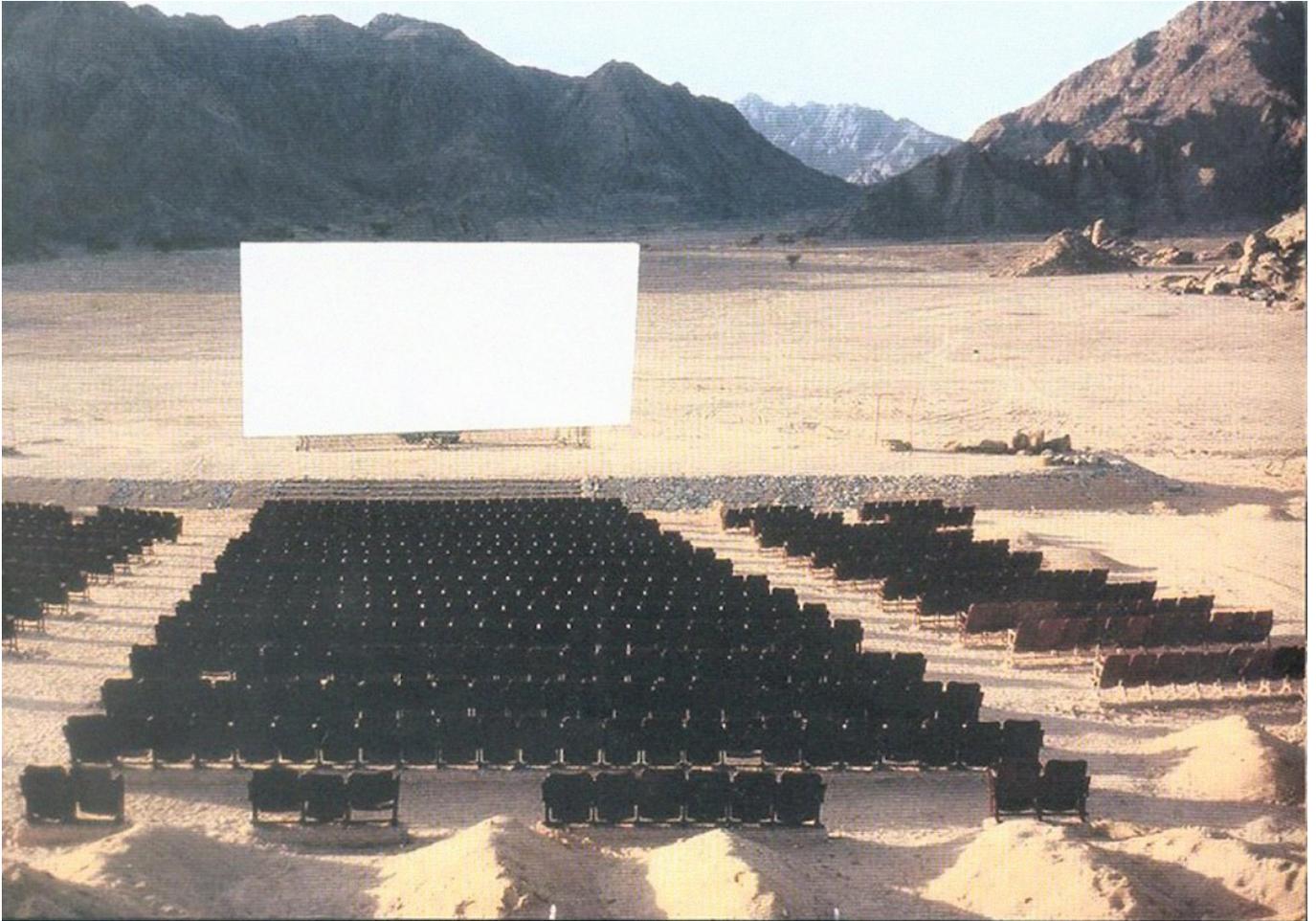
Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh presenting her performance lecture *On Violence*.

“Making visible without making public” is a key descriptor of corruption, as Eid-Sabbagh demonstrated in her performance through staging a confrontation. By not making public what she displayed, she corrupted the scene of artistic presentation, exposing how the performance itself, as a form, follows the rules of visual presentation she set up to violate. It did so by violating the presupposition of universality that gives ethical support to *representation* (juridical, symbolic, economic). My point is: without some assumption of a universal (in terms of equality and/or transcendence), it is inconceivable that free (self-determined) persons or collectives would accept being represented by somebody or something other than themselves.⁵

The very notion of a public, of a public sphere, of a common sense, and of the related notion of aesthetic judgment (in the Kantian articulation) presupposes this universal.⁶ Today, it is precisely this presupposition of a universal (as a common and even ground) that is challenged by postcolonial critique. At the core of the critique is the naming, cataloging, and exposure of colonial and racial violence – against

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This derelict movie theater in Mount Sinai, Egypt was allegedly rejected by the local population on its opening night.

claims of innocence and apologies for the failures of universal claims and projects, against the colonial, juridical, economic, and symbolic mechanisms and architectures of the past, but also against their reverberations and redeployments in the global present.

Registering epistemic violence is the staple of postcolonial critical work – the main work entrusted in the writings of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, to name three of the most well-known names. Epistemic violence can be cataloged without much concern for the risk of reproducing colonial effects. Most immediately evident is the fact that, for the most part, postcolonial critique reads the colonial texts, the ones produced by the colonizer (Said and Spivak), in the texts by the subaltern (Bhabha), and in both (Spivak).

In both the colonizer text and the subaltern text (I use this dichotomy here for the sake of simplification), there is a presumed public, which may or may not be explicitly identified as everyone, or just some, or just us. For the most part – and the exception here is to be found in public lectures, talks, political rallies, and so forth – the postcolonial academic does not have to worry about the “public” when she performs her critique. Nor does she, as noted above, worry about the “making public,” because what becomes “visible” in the text is mediated by pages and pages of conceptual and methodological declarations that make evident that what becomes visible is made so only under these conditions of emergence. None of that distancing is available to the postcolonial performance artist. All of it is (to be in) the performance itself. It is neither enough nor is it necessary that members of the audience have read Said, Spivak, or Bhabha (or Derrida, or Foucault, or Kristeva) before coming to the presentation. Making visible without making public, I learned while watching (I should say witnessing) Eid-Sabbagh’s performance, when rendered in the aesthetic form, operates at the level of feelings, both physical and emotional. This practice elicits reactions, tears, laughs, nervous coughs, deadly silences ... The art of making visible without making public corrupts the neat web of conceptual methodology that the postcolonial critic learns during academic training. It turns presentation into a confrontation. It is the move that renders one exposed in the moment of exposure because by breaking the polite/police rules of engagement, it also renders the rule-breaker unprotected by them.

I sensed this when I asked Eid-Sabbagh to talk about the complications that arise along with the refusal, along with presenting without representing. Her answer is quoted at the

opening of this text. What does she mean by “unproductive”? I thought quite a bit – I didn’t ask what she meant then and there – about the choice of this term. However, I can read it in juxtaposition with two other statements. First, the last sentence of the description of the performance: “It was the convergence of the responsibility associated with these photographs, and the antagonism inherent in them, invisible but striving to release their agency (and the effect it potentially triggers), that was at the core of her intervention.”⁷ Without a doubt, Eid-Sabbagh had already thought about the aesthetic effect of her postcolonial method. She later spoke on “the question of responsibility and how it comes together in the network of the art industry. Who do we speak for? Who are we to speak about the political? [Is] part of the violence [in] the institutional context? How could art exist outside of this context?” She asks whether “there would be a possibility for addressing something like violence in a different way.”

In Eid-Sabbagh’s performance that day, confrontation was imaged as a refusal to give the audience access to anything – images, her own facial expressions, sounds, body language – that could become pieces of evidence, that could introduce the position of a spectator. Unable to manifest the violence of spectatorship, that is, to occupy the position of the “objective observer” before the artwork, we learned of but did not access the intimacy the artist enjoyed, because it was described rather than exhibited. Her performance corrupted the trust between the performer and the audience. Instead of meeting Kantian expectations – the beautiful and the sublime, but also the horrifying and repugnant – the performance exposed them, refusing the possibility of enjoyment at all. Beyond postcolonial critique as an intellectual exercise, the art of confrontation is an anticolonial intervention precisely because it turns the space between the performer and the audience into the trenches. By staging a confrontation, it forges an aesthetic experience that recalls and exposes art’s own performance of the violence that is modern thought, precisely because of the in/difference between the stage and the museum as exhibition sites. Both offer precisely that which Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh’s performance refused (its corruptive move), which is the “ethical closure” effected by a reassurance of difference, namely, of a given distance between “I” (spectator/colonizer/Human Rights enforcer) and the “Other” (exhibit/colonized/victim). For that is precisely what has justified (as explanation, cause, or meaning) the violence done in the first place.

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See https://www.academia.edu/6570188/IT_MAKES_US_THINK_OF_A_DANCE_AND_A_F%C3%84TE_AS_MUCH_AS_OF_WAR_ON_VIOLENCE...A_conference_event_for_Limerick_Biennale_eva_international_22nd_of_MARCH_2014_DUBLIN

2

See <http://www.eva.ie/alf-dublin-yasmine-eid-sabaggh>

3

Eid-Sabbagh's bio for that event: "Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh studied history, photography, and visual anthropology in Paris. From 2006 to 2011 she lived in Burj al-Shamali, a refugee camp next to Sour, Lebanon, where she carried out photographic research that included a dialogical project with a group of young Palestinians, as well as archival work on family and studio photographs. Since 2008, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh has been a member of the Arab Image Foundation. Since 2011 she has been a doctoral candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna."

See https://www.academia.edu/6570188/IT_MAKES_US_THINK_OF_A_DANCE_AND_A_F%C3%84TE_AS_MUCH_AS_OF_WAR_ON_VIOLENCE...A_conference_event_for_Limerick_Biennale_eva_international_22nd_of_MARCH_2014_DUBLIN

4

I elaborate this reading of art as confrontation in a forthcoming piece entitled "Seven Notes on Violence," which consists of my final comments on all pieces presented at the EVA symposium. It will be appear in Doreen Mende's edited volume on the symposium, published by the Dutch Art Institute and entitled *It Makes Me Think of a Dance and a Fête as Much as of War (On Violence)*.

5

For a critique of universality and representation, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

6

For a discussion of Kant's formulation of the aesthetic and the public, see David Lloyd, "Race Under Representation," *Oxford Literary Review*, 1991: 62–94.

7

See <http://www.eva.ie/alf-dublin-yasmine-eid-sabaggh>

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