

In This Together

curated by **Khaled Sabsabi** is presented by

Kultour: touring multicultural arts, changing Australian culture, an initiative of the Australia Council for the Arts. This tour has been developed with the support of Casula Powerhouse (a Kultour Company Member)

In This Together is touring to the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (Melbourne, Australia), Browns Mart as part of the 2009 Darwin Festival and Darwin Community Arts in Malak (Northern Territory, Australia), and as part of the 5th Biennale of Curitiba 2009: *Ventosul* Brazil. The Northern Territory tour is presented by Artback NT: Arts Development and Touring.

Curator Khaled Sabsabi

Artists Akram Zaatari, Nadyat El Gawley & Fatima Mawas, Eliane Raheb, Anna Bazzi-Backhouse & Murrmur Sayed Ahmed, Farah Ahmed Fayed, Jacko Restikian, and the Al-Jana Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts.

Texts Khaled Sabsabi, Chrisoula Lionis, Farid Farid

Catalogue editor Andrea Bell

Catalogue design Darren Sylvester

Kultour staff

CEO Magdalena Moreno

Tour Program Coordinator Miranda Jacques

Administrative Officer Andrea Bell

Kultour is a network based company of key arts organisations that aims to increase awareness of Australian multicultural arts through touring. Kultour's program is a microcosm of contemporary artistic practice in multicultural Australia exploring the boundaries between contemporary and traditional, community and mainstream, established and experimental.

Office of Multicultural Arts Victoria

PO Box 1402 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia

T 03 9417 6777

E ceo@kultour.com.au

M C-/PO Box 1402, Collingwood, Victoria, 3066

www.kultour.com.au



a proud initiative of the Australia Council for the Arts



CASULA
POWERHOUSE

acmi
Arts Centre
Melbourne
International Centre
for Moving Image



cover image: *Beirut to those who want to listen*, 2006, Eliane Raheb, DVD 5 min 31 sec

A Pessoptimistic Fate

Emile Habibi's magisterial novel, *The Secret Life of Saeed – The Pessoptimist*, chronicles the tragicomic existence of being a Palestinian in Israel. Within the ruinous landscapes of memory and loss agonisingly detailed by Habibi stands a Kafkaesque character of sorts, Saeed, who embodies the melancholic travails that have besieged Arabs over centuries. Habibi's narrative is archeologically discontinuous and genealogically fragmented in its recounting of Saeed's 44 testimonial letters from inside the confines of a mental asylum. However, they are bound by a persistent desire to bear witness to a humane suffering that is punctuated by nostalgic moments of joy. In the same tradition of Arab storytelling, Khaled Sabsabi juxtaposes postmodern and post-September 11th realities for Arabs who occupy a peripherally exilic position whether



Her + Him Van Leo
2001, Akram Zaatari, DVD, 31 min 41 sec

inside or outside the political borders of the Arab world through a selection of intensely moving films. The title of the exhibition – *In This Together* – signals an implicit collective demand for an Arabness that embraces self-affirmation, hope and love and in the same breath remembers the residues of a traumatised psyche ravaged by the corporeal excess of war, massacres and humiliation. Sabsabi challenges the bombardment of mass-media orientalist accounts and representations of Arabs as a monolithic and undifferentiated mass of sexualised and racialised figures. He visually stitches 'together' these delicately crafted short films by established and emerging artists based in places as diverse as Australia, Canada and Lebanon. Through this process, the existentialist question of Arabness as a lived reality for millions of

people haunts this collection of films. With every turn of the camera, with every wrinkled close-up, with every wide-shot of recent rubble, the question posed nearly a century ago by African American literary giant W.E.B. Du Bois "How does it feel to be a problem?" gnaws at you.¹ Du Bois' metaphysical meditation arose in a different geopolitical climate of American racial imperialism but he deftly answered his own question "I answer seldom a word". And, with *In This Together*, words are seldom needed. This installation nurtures an affective space with the viewer beyond words to engage with the ethical and political urgency of the narratives exhibited. It is interesting to note that the artistic direction of this exhibition is aesthetically dynamic in that the seven works can be either screened together as one compilation program or can be installed



to run concurrently on individual separate screens or monitors. The strategic positioning of these works leads to a filmic counterpoint where an appreciation of Sabsabi's extensive experience as a visual artist is created. Counterpoint, is a musical term where two separate notes collide fomenting in a melodic interplay that the late Edward Said so elegantly theorised in his vast oeuvre as 'contrapuntality'. In a sense, a musical rupture is enacted within the fluid emotional blocks of this exhibition. Various voices with local particularities and global reverberations are heard with a subtle authenticity. From Palestinian children talking about their severed limbs from Israeli landmines to the lamentations about the golden age of Cairene cosmopolitanism by an Armenian Egyptian photographer, an articulate thread of multilayered *hakawi* (stories) and sensuous geographies

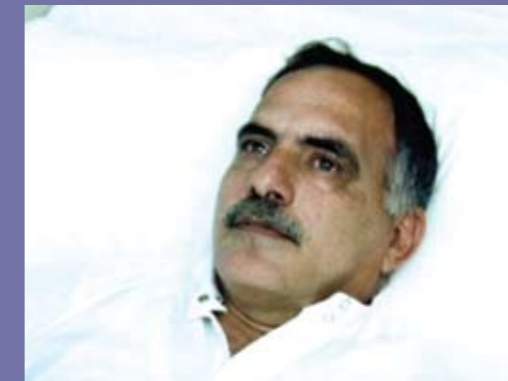
is weaved throughout. Sabsabi's contrapuntal approach debunks futile ideologies of an imposed and rhetorical Arabism as well as presenting symmetries and synecdoches of multifaceted experiences of Arabness. The distinction between Arabism and Arabness is important as it takes into account the inherited cartographies of dislocation by Arab artists (not just in the West) in their practice. When speaking of contrapuntality, Said lyrically conveys the intimate links of the rhythm of a disrupted life of an exile and how it is imbued with an innovative impulse. Exile becomes at once a metaphor and concrete reality for those oriented towards a distant place and feeling disoriented where they live. Sabsabi's location as curator is felt spectrally behind the works. The films are configured but not limited by Sabsabi's multiple and contradictory loyalties



of Arab, artist, father, Lebanese, activist etc... His conflictual situatedness as storyteller and viewer, as insider and outsider, as Arab and Australian reveal the irreconcilable and imbricating movement of identities. Sabsabi's labour of collecting these works over a three year period serves as a public compendium to document, to recall and to revive what is forgotten and what is ignored. *In This Together* unquestionably blends an aesthetic consciousness with an artistic grammar but it also develops a political language of empathetic feelings. It engenders an aural attention when confronted by powerful and personal oral histories of dispossession in one way or another. It interrogates facile representations about Arabs by letting Arabs speak for themselves and about themselves. The cultural agency by the

participants, filmmakers and the curator brings about an indigenous knowledge through poetic testimonies that are crucial in transgressing mainstream discussions about Arabness as a problem. Sabsabi manages to materialise on screen Said's wrenching aphorism that "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience".² And, in that paradoxical, liminal and negatory state of thinking about your experiences, 'In This Together', becomes a mantra, a rallying cry, a passionate outburst of solidarity, a yearning of some form of community. *In This Together*, implores us with Saeed and Said to always live in the impossibility of a resolved self.

Farid Farid



Ceci Ne Vous Appartient Pas (It Doesn't Belong To You)
2004, Farah Ahmed Fayed, DVD, 13 min 42 sec

1. DuBois, W.E.B. 1903 [2007]. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Said, Edward W. 2003. *Reflections on Exile & Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

In This Together



Foreword

The Arab world and its people are diverse in tradition, religion, place and background. The beliefs, opinions and hopes of these people cannot be encapsulated into one simple statement. *In This Together* is a compilation of video art by established and emerging practitioners that explores Arabness across broad social, regional, political and religious spectrums. The exhibition also provides opportunities for audiences to gain insights into stories emerging from zones of conflict, challenging representations through the presentation of a variety of viewpoints. These opportunities for conversation and debate cannot exist unless we approach the process of negotiation with and to an openness of opinions.

In This Together showcases a variety of stories emerging from diverse Arabic cultures speaking locally and globally to Australian audiences. Furthermore it aims to address the (mis)representations of Arab culture, exposing mainstream Australia to alternative representations of Arab culture, through commentary and self-representation.

Three years in the making, *In This Together* follows 2 other similarly themed exhibitions, *some Thing screening* (2006) and *Tone* (2007) shown at the Liverpool Regional Museum in partnership with Casula Powerhouse, Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) and 2007 Sydney Arab Film Festival (SAFF). *In This Together* consists of seven single-channel video works by Akram Zaatari (Lebanon) Nadyat El Gawley and Fatima Mawas (Australia) Eliane Raheb (Lebanon) Anna Bazzi-Backhouse and Murmur Sayed Ahmed (Australia) Farah Ahmed Fayed (Lebanon) Jacko Restikian (Canada), and the Al-Jana Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (Lebanon). The works in this exhibition cross a range of genres and techniques – dabbling in the experimental, dramatic and often controversial, suggesting there is no single method for communication or conflict resolution but rather a diversity of opinions and perspectives on the Arab world and Diaspora.

I would like to thank all the artists for their energy in preparing the work. I also take this opportunity to thank Chrisoula Lionis and Farid Farid for providing the catalogue essays. Special thanks go to Casula Powerhouse, Kultour, the Australia Council for the Arts, ACMI, Artback NT, the Darwin Festival, Darwin Community Arts and Ventosul Bienal for their support.

Khaled Sabsabi
In This Together
Exhibition Curator

Our Memory for Forgetfulness

*Why should so much amnesia be expected of them? And who can construct for them a new memory with no content...Is there enough forgetfulness for them to forget?*¹ Mahmoud Darwish

*It is not helpful to understand 'Australia' as some isolated sanctuary of a mystical and unchanging national identity, but rather is more useful to try and conceive it as an unstable product of global forces and exchange; an incomplete project.*² David McNeill

*Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.*³ Homi K. Bhabha

David McNeill conceives of Australia as an 'incomplete project', suggesting that the perception of our national identity as 'static' is to negate the voices generated by global exchange. Such an omission draws a chasm between the experience of contemporary Australia and our imagined national past. Nationhood, it can be argued, is a creation of our imagination, built on collective signs and symbols that mark and navigate the terrain of our national identity.⁴ This exercise demands a process of narrative subordination and omission. In simpler terms, the construction of national identity requires the privileging of selected narratives and the subordination of others.

For Homi K. Bhabha, 'nationalism', or indeed 'nation building', is created 'in the mind's eye.'⁵ If we are to accept this proposition, we can assume that the mind's eye is built upon nostalgia toward a place, time and way of living that a group or society feel is worthy of retrieval and continuance. This wandering eye retreats to a distant and idyllic past, omitting and subordinating narratives, events and people that do not fit into its nostalgic frame. In contemporary Australia, this subordination often targets Arabs.

In an age of cultural and political exchange, globalisation and air travel, the national wandering eye must make certain accommodations. *In This Together* highlights the impossibility of a nostalgic national narrative, preferring to reveal a necessary new Australian vision; one that accommodates a trans-cultural and trans-national gaze, looking to Australia, North America and the Middle East for a renewed concept of 'Arabness'. In so doing, the exhibition makes problematic the notion of national identity, choosing to take its cue from global citizens, without a fixed national gaze. The need to address and

understand the Arab and Arab-Australian experience has become crucial since the events of 'September 11' and Cronulla riots of 2005. The mind's eye found in *In This Together*, facilitates a cultural exchange that requires us to empathise with the Arab experience, in recognition that Australia is not separate from international conflict, trauma and experience.

The works chosen by curator Khaled Sabsabi for *In This Together* vary enormously in their context, themes and subject matter, but are drawn together through themes of memory and forgetfulness. The title of this essay takes its name from the celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's novel, *Memory for Forgetfulness*. Set during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the novel explores the impossibility of recording conflict, fusing similar the creative act with notions of homeland and resistance. Similarly to *In This Together*, *Memory for Forgetfulness* explores the limitations of narrating resulting memories of collective trauma.

Together, the works featured in this exhibition raise questions around the strengths and limitations of narratives, highlighting video as an alternative mode of storytelling. *In This Together* reminds us that spaces of art are zones of conflict; designed to simultaneously legitimise and challenge cultural identity. Many works reflect on conflicts in the Middle East, presenting a seemingly distant political conflict within the Australian cultural institution. Inserting these works into an Australian context remind us of the significance of Arab experience in Australia, and locates Arab experience and conflict in a space predicated on interaction and exchange.

Art has the potential to ignite compassion, and evoke empathy. One cannot speak of the Arab world in any homogenous sense, nor can one, as our media are prone to suggest, relegate the Arab experience as one primarily defined by conflict. There is no benefit in essentialising Arab identity or defining 'Arabness' by traumatic experience. The consequences of doing so are to nullify the complexity of contemporary identity. *In This Together* actively responds to and undermines stereotypes of 'Arabness', namely through the use of memory as a tool for understanding and empathy.

In This Together forges a complex view of Arab identity fusing narratives of sexuality and family history with those dealing with conflict in the Middle East, including the 2006 Lebanese war with Israel,

and the impact of the ongoing war against 'terror'. The video works on display reveal the personal and collective experience of Arabs around the world, providing insight into the impact of memory on Arab identity. The works exhibited expose the fault lines of recollection, tracing the unstable ground between forgetfulness and memory. This is perhaps most evident in Akraam Zaatari's work *Her + Him Van Leo* (2001). An exploration of generational memory and cultural change, this work illuminates the quest for the reconciliation of memory, giving shape and temporal order to the difficulties encountered in the relaying of archival and oral history. In *I Shaved my Beard for Good* (2006), we observe a re-orientation of archival history through the alteration of newspapers and conflicting voice-over narration.



Childhood In The Midst Of Mines
2002, AlJana Arab Resource Center for popular Arts, DVD, 18 min 25 sec

Viewed in its entirety, *In This Together* reminds us our forgetfulness for the memory of others; making palpable the enduring memory of events long after they have left our television screens. The Australian videoworks resonate this point most potently. *Details of Violence* (2007), by emerging video makers Fatima Mawas and Nadyat El Gawley, deals with the Cronulla riots of 2005. Though it has been several years since the riots, Australia is yet to reconcile its national stance or collective memory of these events. Indeed for many Australians the negative stereotyping of Arab Australians persists. *Details of Violence* reminds us of the fragmentation of Australian national identity and the slippery place the events of 2005 hold in our collective memory.

One might choose to view the Arab Australian video works as embodiments of the Australian 'politizen' – a political actor that has, since the Cronulla riots, become increasingly relevant in the Australian political landscape.⁶ In *Foreigners Among Citizens*, Grant Fareed describes the 'politizen' as a "figure whose name and acts mark the limitations of citizenship."⁷ As political actors, 'politizens' are defined by their status as citizens who are forever condemned to national 'hospitality'. Though qualified as citizens and not refugees, 'politizens' are never afforded the full rights of their citizenship, for as 'others' their rights may be revoked as moments of political or cultural crisis.

The 'politizen' is a foreigner among citizens whose political actions may be seen to exist outside and



apart from the state. Members of neither the subaltern nor the mob; they do not participate in political organizations nor seek to control the state. Rather, as Fareed suggests, 'politizens' are distinguished by their political dormancy, acting sporadically and intuitively, fully aware that their actions will not guarantee any sustained change or conclusion. The video makers included in *In This Together* reveal a struggle against political and cultural exclusion, yet do not locate their impetus merely in politics, but in the need to instigate cultural and empathic inquiry.

The New Middle East (2007) a work by Anna Bazzi Backhouse and Murmur Sayed Ahmed, highlights the limitations of political and cross-cultural traumatic narration. The conscious decision to exclude subtitles

has the effect of veiling the narrative for a non-Arabic speaking audience. As a result, the audience relies on their own knowledge and memory of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, projecting their own imagined narratives upon the work. In both *Details of Violence* and *The New Middle East*, the video makers display the hand of the 'politizen,' acting quickly and impulsively to violence, aiming for catharsis in their work and hoping in the very least to instigate an enquiry in the viewer.

There is a tangible sense of urgency in most works of the exhibition. This is particularly visible in *From Beirut to Those Who Care to Listen* (2006), a work that most noticeably parallels Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*. Alluding to the 2006 war



between Lebanon and Israel, the work dislocates narratives, exploring alienation and the difficulty of communication brought forth from war. It is the works final moments that most actively corresponds to the ethos behind *In This Together*. Looking at us whilst in the midst of war, a young lady asks "We are well. How about you?" Here, video maker Elaine Raheb asks us to realise our own position, coercing the audience into a dialogue with the trauma of others, whilst reminding us the importance of our responsibility in maintaining dialogue and compassion with our fellow human beings.

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Mahmoud Darwish asks, 'Why should so much amnesia be expected of them? And who can construct for them a

new memory with no content...Is there enough forgetfulness for them to forget?'⁸ *In This Together* posits the very same question to its audience. Opening the door to empathy and understandings of Arab experience, the exhibition forges a new way forward requesting we acknowledge our forgetfulness for the memory and experience of others.

Chrisoula Lionis

1. Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*, Muhawi, Ibrahim trans., (California: University of California Press 1995) 15.
2. David McNeill, *Australia: An Unresolved Problem? The Resilient Landscape*, (catalogue), (Sydney:



I Shaved My Beard For Good
2006, Jacko Restikian, DVD, 5 min 39 sec

3. Homi K Bhabha, *The Nation and Narration*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 1.
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London and New York:Verso, 1991)
5. Bhabha (1990)
6. Grant Fareed, 'Foreigners Among Citizens', *Cultural Critique*, 67, Spring, 2007: 154
7. ibid
8. Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*, Muhawi, Ibrahim trans., (California: University of California Press 1995) 15.

Ivan Dougherty Gallery) 6.