

Ground into dust, written in the skin: *Here, Jaffa*—Photography, performance, video art¹

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The passion of the artists in the exhibition *Here, Jaffa*—Anisa Ashkar, Dafna Shalom, Didier Ben Loulou, Raafat Hattab and Anna Cohen-Yanai—for the esthetics of the seen and heard is entangled in a moral debt to the history of the city of Jaffa. *Here, Jaffa* is attentive to twentieth-century events—to Jaffa's evolution into a modern Palestinian city, to its destruction as such and to the continuous devastation it has suffered since 1948, when it was almost emptied of its inhabitants, who became refugees, and flooded with Jewish refugees. It is also attentive to current events, in which individuals and communities are being displaced as a result of the planning and development policies of the Tel Aviv–Jaffa municipality and governmental land policies (Wallerstein and Silverman, 2009).

In poetry and in colloquial spoken language, in the positions of the photographer and the object, the continuous work of these artists creates, implicitly or explicitly, their identifications with a national group, a culture and a religion. These identifications of the artists—those belonging to the dominating group and those belonging to the subordinate one—are necessary grounds for acknowledging the losses, processing the different pains of both groups and taking responsibility. But these identifications are also transformed by the artistic expressions and are stretched anew over a mixed identification axis, rendering social and spatial boundaries—saturated with domination and subordination—flexible and supple.

The refusal to be bound by collective borders—spatial or social, material or imagined—is manifested in the body images as well as in the images of the city. The body is indeed marked by signs of belonging and identification, but it is even more present when it is stripped of them—shivering from the cold, bleeding or deserted, gesturing to Jaffa, whose image is spread to include the reality of its ruins and its multifaceted boundaries. These boundaries are blurred by the intersecting demands of its residents, refugees and destroyers and are crossed in different directions—through the branding of the city's image in the skin, into the depths of its sea, amongst the debris of its ruins, within the interior of the homey and towards its daughter who has devoured her, the adjacent Tel Aviv.

Human figures, animal figures and city figures are brought into the exhibition *Here, Jaffa*, marked by signs of belonging, but their reality and corporeality are surpassed by the passage through the mythical and the transcendental, beyond the

possibility of fixating or generalizing them. Along with our transcendental experience, we the viewers are called to come frighteningly and adventurously closer to an Otherness that is lurking within the self. Thus, between self-identification and the differentiation of that which is identical to the self, in sensitivity to the Other and Othernesses and in being responsible for them, the works entangle in an insoluble manner the spatial with the corporeal and the public-political with the intimate and the singular.

I've Returned, Yaffa, video art (2006–2010)

Anisa Ashkar

Jaffa, May 27, 2006. It is twilight on the first-floor balcony of the “Yaffa” coffee shop and Arabic-Hebrew bookstore, located in a Palestinian Bauhaus building at one of the main junctions of the city. On the balcony, Anisa Ashkar is pouring jugs of milk on a nude male torso, rubbing and massaging his body. A parking area in front of the building slowly fills with a crowd—residents, passersby and invited spectators. Ashkar thus paces anew the city’s heartbeat and stalls the movement of the pedestrians and the cars in its veins by her art performance, *I've Returned, Yaffa* (2006).

Ashkar’s fingers press defined points on the male limbs, naming them after the conquered Palestinian shore-cities of Acre, Jaffa and Haifa, marking them with longing and moaning on the body as an imagined map, while in her very presence, she marks, with a cultural journey of return, the concrete cultural public space of the real city of Jaffa. The video art *I've Returned, Yaffa* (2006–2010) is a translation of this performance, which is one in a series of site-specific art performances in which the Acre-born artist deals with Jaffa and other Palestinian towns.

In her performative journeys of territorial demarcation, Ashkar is a multifaceted figure. She is both a female twin of the conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte and a daughter of the city of Acre, which Napoleon never managed to conquer, and always also a Palestinian citizen of Israel living in the very city that swallowed Jaffa—Tel Aviv. While this internal multiplicity does not hide real power relations, it nevertheless fractures any total opposition and opens up new and plural imagined locations for identification.

Until the age of 19, the artist prayed five times a day, and, following Islam’s commandments, performed a water purification ceremony before each and every prayer. When she now purifies a naked male body in public, she not only disrupts the purification ritual, but also disobeys religious imperatives. Ashkar also chooses to purify in milk—a liquid which does not cleanse the skin, but rather maintains its fats, and chooses Michel Assali as her male partner—a member of a well-known Christian family of Acre. Thus, a connotation of Christian baptizing melts into the already violated Muslim ritual.

As a coherent identity of belonging that is simultaneously implied and disrupted, the scrubbing and washing are a consummation of love, devotion and responsibility for the nude body, wet and shivering in the evening wind, stripped of confining anchors of identification. The viewer is thus exposed to a multiplicity of significations, a plurality that allows for recognition of a concrete Other and of responsibility for any Other.



Anisa Ashkar, *I have Returned, Jaffa* (2006) Performance: May 27, Jaffa.



Anisa Ashkar, *I have Returned, Jaffa* (2006-2010), Video-art 4.20 min.

Reef, photographs (2004–2009)

The Broken Kilometer—Jaffa, video art (2009)

Dafna Shalom

By withdrawing from the territorial and the land-based, Dafna Shalom turns to Jaffa from its edges, from its coastal ends. In the first photographs of the series *Reef* (2004–2009), the presence of horses among those on the beach and the bathers in the water marks the crossing of borders of strangeness that culture erects between man and animal. The horses in Shalom's work suggest a loss and a danger as they suspiciously and uncannily enter the depths of the sea, in the same direction in which the Palestinian refugees fled the city in 1948.²

In 2006, the construction of Jaffa Slope Park began, forever changing the landscapes documented in the first photographs. Shalom responds to the dynamism of the scenery by actively staging the Palestinian horse riders and the horses and by narrowing the distance between them and her camera.

The Broken Kilometer—Jaffa video art (2010) opens with an extreme long shot towards the movement of two large mechanical instruments working on the park's construction site, grabbing piles of construction debris, erected by the authorities

during the 1970s and 1980s, some of it from the 3,125 Palestinian homes demolished in Jaffa by the municipality.³ In the backdrop of this image, which holds loss, a conversation in Hebrew is led between two Jewish speakers. The soundtrack contains only one of the men's voices: "[*silence*]/ OK, [...] the place changes, they are not allowed to send the horses into the sea any more. It will take them time to learn [the rules]/ [*silence*]/ [...]." The pauses between the speaker's sentences force the viewer to complete the other half of the conversation and to revisit worn-out idioms of the territorial Jewish discourse in Israel. This halved dialogue serves as a baseline for national self-identification, creating a sense of responsibility for the subjects being filmed: a couple of Palestinian horse riders, their horses—as signifiers of Palestinian loss—and their daily habitat, from which they are being pushed out as the park takes shape.

From then on, Shalom presents sequences of loss and absence, but at the same time examines the limitations of art to testify and to present them. Shalom's lens approaches the eye of the animal, whose sight is limited by blind spots and who is unable to give verbal testimony to the losses it has witnessed. Shalom triples the meaning of the horse image, turning it also into a signifier of the limitation of seeing and a signifier of photography's limitations as an instrument of testimony.

When one of the riders in *The Broken Kilometer—Jaffa* is helped off the horse's back by his friend and left alone in the frame, the work closes with an experience of orphanage and is opened to universal-mythical chasms of loss. Thus, the viewer is given the opportunity to become an exposed and compassionate animal, aware of its own limitations and seeking silenced testimony.



Dafna Shalom, *Reef-Jaffa* (2004-2009), Image # 1. Digital print 50X70 cm



Dafna Shalom, *Reef-Jaffa* (2004-2009), Image # 2. Digital print 50X70 cm



Dafna Shalom, *Reef-Jaffa* (2004-2009), Image # 12. Digital print 60x60 cm



Didier Ben Loulou, *Jaffa: 1983-1989*, Image #76. Digital print 100x100 cm



Didier Ben Loulou, *Jaffa: 1983-1989*, Image #52. Digital print 100x100 cm



Anna Cohen-Yanay, Mountain (1), Digital print 100x100 cm



Anna Cohen-Yanay, Mountain (2), Digital print, 100x100 cm

Jaffa: 1983–1989, photographs

Didier Ben Loulou

Didier Ben Loulou dedicated himself throughout the 1980s—the decade of the Lebanon war—to a prolonged photographic project in Jaffa. To him, Jaffa was the Mediterranean twin city of Beirut, which shared the same destiny of destruction and violence.

His photo “Jaffa #36” revolves around a central visual pivot—an electrical pole with a lamp on top. The lamp shines in the early morning hours, placing at the center of the photograph the riddle of the need for illumination and visualization in conditions of obviously complete visibility. Under the pole, a peeled wall, with remnants of pipes hanging from it, testifies to a home interior that has been destroyed. In the 1970s and 1980s, in line with the municipal planning policy of urban renewal through clearance and on-site reconstruction, the authorities demolished a large portion of the city’s Palestinian houses. Walls were torn down and rooms were opened wide, turned into an invaded public space. Under the imagined spread of lamplight, a group of men and youngsters take refuge. The sidewalks and curbstones they stand on are covered with fragments of buildings and sand, thus losing their original function in the urban environment as regulators of the space’s different uses. The spread of lamplight during the daytime wishes, then, to illuminate the acts of destruction and the deliberate conversion of Ajami from a city neighborhood in 1948 to a perforated village of dusty roads in the 1980s.

“Jaffa #76” is taken in a Palestinian home. A tunnel of bright light coated with the foliage of hibiscus, banana and palm, together with a painted paved floor, drapes with tenderness the girls at the entrance to the house. But at the end of the lightened tunnel sprouts the desolation of the city’s ruins. Thus, the homeliness of the interior is structured as inseparable from the city’s destruction and neglect. Homeliness is produced under the threat of removal from shelter.

Ben Loulou leaves the riddle of Otherness open throughout the series and positions himself humbly in the face of it. His camera does not wish to invade the boundaries of the photographed subjects or to catch their gazes. On the contrary, the camera wishes to wrap with light and greenery those who were ripped of many layers of self and homeliness by the authorities’ acts.

Ben Loulou gives indirect testimony to the stubborn lives that struggle to preserve the city’s homeliness. Furthermore, he takes responsibility for visualizing the images of purposeful destruction that surround the characters. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994) suggested, there is no need to talk in the name of the subalterns, but to learn to re-present ourselves in relation to their current lives and in the face of colonialism’s aftermath. His Jaffa series is thus an act of “re-presentation” of the actions of the Israeli authorities during the 1980s.

Houria, video art (2010) **Raafat Hattab**

Following a meticulously detailed calligraphy of Arabic letters, a needle tattoos on Raafat Hattab’s chest the words, *Yaffa Arouse Falasteen*—Jaffa, the Bride of Palestine. The tattoo on Hattab’s skin is an attempt to establish a pact of responsibility and eternal love and loyalty between the city and its son. The act of tattooing nevertheless also includes the participants in this act of signing. It takes

place in the city of Tel Aviv and is done by a Jewish tattoo artist. As Hattab puts it: "Our identities are constructed through a friction with each other." This pattern of constructing the boundaries of the self and of space by unraveling them is engraved deeply in Hattab's work. By choosing the tattoo pact, he subverts the common ways of constructing self and identity in large parts of Palestinian society, as tattooing is forbidden by the laws of Islam.

In *Houria*, Hattab interviews Yousra, his father's sister, who tells him family stories that she heard from her mother, Hattab's grandmother. The family lived in the agricultural village of Jamaseen Al-Garbi. In the beginning of 1948, all roads to the village were under Jewish forces and, due to the long siege, its inhabitants left it. The family moved to their relatives' home in Jaffa, and some of the brothers and sisters left that year for Holland, the West Bank and Amman. Jaffa, having shriveled after 1948, broadens in these stories both towards its extinct agricultural periphery and towards the many diasporas created by the Naqba.

But the personal testimony of Hattab's aunt interweaves feminine agency into the national narrative: after the death of his grandfather, a religious scholar and the village storyteller, the voice of his grandmother, though an illiterate, became public. She became a storyteller herself, passing on the art to her daughter Yousra and her grandson Raafat, personified also in the feminine character *Arouse Falasteen* (the Bride of Palestine) in his art performances. This is a liminal character that constitutes itself through attentiveness to its desires and through dedication to those rejected from the nation's borders. In *Houria*, the Bride of Palestine is hybridized with the Little Mermaid from Andersen's legends and turns into the "Mermaid from Al-Manshiyeh's Shores." Thus, Hattab reaches another Jaffan space of his mother's family—the northern Palestinian neighborhood of Al-Manshiyeh that borders the sea and Tel Aviv. The Little Mermaid is a signifier of curiosity about and passion towards others, and of responsibility for the Other—responsibility that is embodied in saving the human prince from death. The Mermaid from Al-Manshiyeh's Shores stands for belonging to the Palestinian nation, as well as for an ever transcending movement beyond strict belongings.

Mountain (2007) **Anna Cohen-Yanai**

Like an oasis or a concealed dwelling floating between elevated mountain tops is the view of Jaffa's red roofs in the photographs of the Anna Cohen-Yanai's series, *Mountain* (2007). The images have a transcendental-theological dimension stemming from the enigmatic presence of the tremendous mountains in the urban scenery and from the rays of light that wash the surface of the picture, referring to revelation images in classical art.

In the Jewish cultural context, the mountains allude to the acceptance of the Torah on Mount Sinai—a transcendental event in which the moral imperative of God was unconditionally accepted by the people. The streams of light in the images, like the presence of a supreme power, were created by a failing in Cohen-Yanai's camera. This impairment caused double exposures that created an effect of multilayered scenic depth. The artist chose to leave the products of the impairment and in fact to represent the impairment as an inexplicable event, echoing the transcendental dimension of the unconditional responsiveness of the camera to an inexplicable moral imperative that comes from the object, the event or the Other, in the moment of taking a photograph.

The image of the dwelling resting on the mountaintops is confronted with an image of the real—piles of dirt, uprooted blocks of concrete and crushed plastic bottles, the residue of a 15-meter manmade hill of garbage from the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, that buries beneath it the western houses of the Ajami neighborhood and all of the neighborhood's seashore and reefs. In the heaps of garbage are buried thousands of Jaffa's demolished homes. The hill of debris had turned into a local monument commemorating the destructive nature of governmental authorities with respect to the deserted Palestinian property.

But the mountain in Cohen-Yanai's photographs is not the garbage hill itself. In 2007, the hill was subject to a recycling process. The broken pieces of Jaffa's Palestinian homes underwent an aggressive mechanical transformation in the bellies of huge shredders. Their residue was crushed into gravel, soil and sand, amassed and sorted in enormous piles. It is these piles that are the mountains photographed in the series, later turned, at the end of the shredding process, into the tender grass hills that make up Jaffa Slopes Park.⁴ The building of the park accelerated a rise in dwelling prices caused by planning and land marketing policies that encourage Jewish gentrification, where the Palestinians' legal status in absentee properties is weak.

An external command that comes from the object, from the mountain that is not a mountain, tells Cohen-Yanai: "take a picture!", imposing on her the responsibility to document its existence, to understand its essence and the processes of its coming into being and its reincarnation in the green grassy hills. It instructs her to give presence to the "destructive character" and to condemn it.⁵ It calls to plan and build with sensibility.



Raafat Hattab, *Houria* (2010), Video Art, 7 min.

NOTES

¹ The *Here, Jaffa* exhibition was held in The Architect House Gallery in Jaffa in October 2010. It was curated by the author.

² The horse image in Mahmoud Darwish's (2006) poetry is a pivotal reference in Shalom's art projects in Jaffa.

³ Data is taken from research conducted by Al-Rabita, an association for the Arabs of Jaffa. See <http://www.arabyaffa.org/he/index.aspx>.

⁴ In some places in the park, as homage to the demolished homes, some fragments of painted pavements that were rescued before shredding were combined into the park's paving.

⁵ On the destructive character that blurs even the traces of destruction, see Benjamin (1996).

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