

ALL THAT REMAINS

by Murtaza Vali

EMILY JACIR

Based in New York and Ramallah, Emily Jacir explores the complex politics and poetics of being Palestinian. In her open-ended multimedia projects, which often present the remains of personal and/or collaborative actions, individual, national and transnational histories intertwine, raising universal questions about borders, mobility and belonging in a globalized world. In *Where We Come From* (2001–03), Jacir used the “freedom of movement” provided by her US passport to complete the simple requests of Palestinians denied access to their homeland by Israeli border restrictions. Documented through both the written requests and photos, the tasks ranged from paying respects at a mother’s grave to playing soccer with a neighborhood kid.

Jacir tackles issues of memory, archive and historical erasure in her current project on Wael Zuaiter, a Palestinian intellectual killed in the lobby of his Rome apartment building in October 1972 by operatives of Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency. Zuaiter was the first of 13 Palestinians assassinated following the terrorist group Black September’s deadly kidnapping of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. He has never been conclusively linked to the Munich attack.

ArtAsiaPacific visited with Jacir as she completed final preparations for her installation at this year’s Venice Biennale.

ARTASIAPACIFIC: Your contributions to the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, *Material for a film (performance)* (2005-06), and this year's Venice Biennale, *Material for a film* (2005-) are part of the same larger project, how did this project materialize?

EMILY JACIR: The subject of the 13 Palestinians murdered by the Mossad on European soil between 1972–73 is something I have been working on for a long time. I have been gathering information for years—books, articles, photographs, details, archival materials—and had many projects in mind regarding this subject matter. In 1998 I got Janet Venn Brown's book, *For a Palestinian: A Memorial to Wael Zuaiter*, which is a collection of contributions by people who were part of Wael Zuaiter's life. It has a chapter by Italian filmmakers Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro entitled "Material for a film," comprised of interviews with people who knew Wael. **I WANTED ACTUAL MATERIAL FOR A FILM—THE COLORS, THE STREETS, THE PLACES AND SPACES THAT WERE A PART OF HIS LIFE, SOUND RECORDINGS, FEELINGS. WHERE WAS HIS APARTMENT? WHAT DID IT LOOK LIKE? WHAT STREETS DID HE WALK ON?** None of this stuff is in that chapter. I went back to Rome several times over a period of three years to continue the work of Janet, Petri and Pirro and I started gathering my own material for a film. I also went to Nablus, Wael's birthplace and childhood home, as well as other places in Italy.

AAP: Why did you single out Wael?

EJ: I ended up focusing on Wael for several reasons. He was the first target and he was an innocent man; but also because he was in Italy—Rome—and so there was a strong personal link between us. I went to high school there and lived there for a time in college; my high school years in particular were a formative part of my life in terms of political and artistic growth. Wael also spent time in the Gulf, which is also part of my own story and, indeed, one of the parts of the Palestinian narrative—many of us grew up and lived in the Gulf states, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia. So I was drawn to him more than the other victims and felt a very strong emotional connection.

His life was full of poetry, he was sort of this tragic, failed figure: he never published anything while alive and destroyed everything he wrote weeks before he was murdered. He was a pioneer—people like him and Mahmoud Hamshari, who was murdered in Paris a few months after. These people were outside and trying to publicize our story. They were involved in European artistic and intellectual circles—making connections, presenting our case and trying to make the injustices inflicted upon us heard. This is ultimately what was most threatening for Israel and led to their murders. These people were more dangerous than terrorists.

AAP: What was Wael doing in Italy?

EJ: Wael had a talent for languages, he spoke Italian, German, English. He was hanging out with people like Alberto Moravia, Raphael Alberti, Bruno Cagli, Jean Genet, Ennio Politi, Piero Della Seta, Antonio Gambino and Pier Paolo Pasolini. He wanted to organize European writers, artists and intellectuals to make a statement about the Palestinian situation. In fact, one of Wael's projects was to make as many film people as possible aware of our story. He believed cinema was one way to make Europeans aware about the true facts about Palestine. This initiative of his inspired Petri and Pirro to make a film about Wael himself, in a sense picking up where he left off.

AAP: Was he working on any specific projects when he was killed?

EJ: He had a job as a translator at the Libyan Embassy. One of his dreams was to translate *A Thousand and One Nights* directly from Arabic into Italian. He had been working on it since he moved to Italy in 1962. To this day there is no direct translation. When the 1967 war broke out his entire life changed and the project was put on the backburner as Nablus, the entire West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights came under Israeli occupation. On one of my first visits with Janet [who was Wael's companion for eight years], she told me that when he was murdered, he was carrying a copy of the book in his pocket and one of the bullets had hit the book. That is such a profound thing. I was so struck by that, I didn't sleep for days. I stayed awake working in my sketchbook.

AAP: How did these ideas translate into the Sydney piece?

EJ: I repeated the action of shooting the book as a performance. In *A Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade is constantly telling stories to survive. **MY REACTION TO THAT WAS IN SOME WAYS A REFUSAL OF THIS COMPULSION TO NARRATE; IF ALL WE HAVE LEFT OF OURSELVES ARE STORIES, THEN IN SOME WAYS WE ARE ALREADY DEAD.** I went to a training center and learned how to shoot a .22 caliber pistol, like the ones the Mossad used, and I shot at 1,000 blank white books. I constructed a white room with shelves from floor to ceiling and lined all the books I had shot on the shelves so it looked like a mausoleum. And in an adjacent space I exhibited photographs of Wael's actual book. I documented every single page the bullet had gone through, until I could no longer see its marks or imprints. The installation presents the remains of the performance.

AAP: How did it feel to shoot a gun?

EJ: It was empowering in a bizarre way. The most surprising thing was how relaxing it was, and how addictive. I still have a callous on my hand from it. I was terrified the very first day because it was a weapon that kills. But you quickly forget that shooting is a violent act because it becomes so easy, click, click, click. I was in a shooting

range shooting books, just trying to hit a perfect shot. The adverse effects of learning how to shoot only hit me later when I returned to Palestine. Before, I was fearless at checkpoints but after Sydney I was different. I remember crossing Howara checkpoint to get into Nablus, with a friend's baby in my arms, and all these 18-year old Israeli soldiers had their M-16s trained on us like normal. But this time I was scared because now I was aware of just how easy it is to pull the trigger.

AAP: The installation sounds like an absent monument, an elegy.

EJ: It is a memorial to untold stories. To that which has not been translated. To stories that will never be written. To the refusal to perform tragic stories for people to read.

THE ONE BULLET HOLE OF WAEI'S STORY SERVES AS AN ENTRANCE INTO ALL THE OTHER STORIES.

AAP: Your installation in Venice is a different part of this same larger project?

EJ: The Sydney piece was a performance based on one element I discovered during my research, which inspired an entire piece in and of itself. The Venice installation is an entirely different piece, although both draw from the same research. Venice is an attempt to present a film as an installation, or a documentary about Wael in an installation format. Or it is an installation of the material gathered to make a film. It is my journey of finding Wael in the traces he left behind. It is also a performance in that I re-

stage certain events and projects. For example, the process and experience of my research re-enacts that of Petri and Pirro's and, ultimately, that of Wael himself. I know so much about his life having gathered thousands of pictures, documents and sounds, and like a filmmaker I am forced into this process of editing it all down to key moments. I am trying to design the space so that the viewer will move through it like a film.

AAP: By reactivating all this archival information you seem to be attempting to conjure Wael's presence.

EJ: Wael's "presence" itself conjures various trajectories, stories, things and places. In Wael, you can find the world. Wael embodied poetry, music, literature, books and all the incredible people he knew, the places he lived, the things he believed in, his efforts in fighting for justice for all Palestinians. But my piece is also about Italy, about a particular time in Italian history when, unlike today, leftist politics and support for Palestine was strong. That is one of the reasons why it is such an exciting project in the context of Venice, because this is also an Italian history.

AAP: Is this your last project using this material?

EJ: I don't know, I can't think past this piece right now. My secret fantasy is that a filmmaker will enter the installation and write a script and make a film based on this material. **END**