



Dor Guez, installation detail of 'The Sick Man of Europe', at the ICA, London. Photo credit Mark Blower.

## TEXT2SPEECH: Dor Guez

1 April 2015

*TEXT2SPEECH is a new series of reading groups organised by the ICA Student Forum to provide a space for debate around an eclectic range of texts, with each meeting topically responding to a part of the ICA's current programme. The group is free to join and open to all, encouraging anyone with an interest in contemporary art and theory to join either regularly or for one of the meetings.*

*ICA Student Forum members Kelise Franclemont with Jane Scarth summarise the latest discussion:*

For the TEXT2SPEECH session on 1 April 2015, participants were invited to review two texts that draw upon themes also seen in the recent [ICA exhibition, "Dor Guez: The Sick Man of Europe"](#). In this rich and engaging discussion, the readings served to contextualise Guez's exhibition as well as provide a platform in which to share interest in the culture and art of this alluring region.

The primary reading, ["No Occupation Without Representation - Artists in Palestine" by HG Wells from ArtAsiaPacific \(2011\)](#), centres around the work of Palestinian artists who have largely resorted to "*documentary tactics*" such as film, performance, and photography in order to "*address the urgent subjects of modern Palestinian culture: dispossession, nostalgia, exile and resistance.*" The second text by [Rona Sela for Ibraaz, "Rethinking](#)

[National archives in Colonial Countries and Zones of Conflict" \(2014\)](#) offered insight into how Zionist archives form part of "*a powerful institutional system*", and how this cache of photographs, documents, and films may be re-read to "*hear the voices of the oppressed, learn their history and restore their ownership and rights*".

After a brief recap of both texts and the exhibition, the group focussed first on the artwork of Dor Guez. Both Israeli and Palestinian, Guez makes work which relies heavily on the use of the archive, building upon stories around the complexities that result from a composite identity, born in a shared land of infinite and tumultuous history. Regarding "[The Sick Man of Europe](#)", we pondered, how does Guez focus on his singular cultural identity, in that he claims a binary set of nationalities, each with its multiple histories and ancestry? In a recent [artist talk with Simon Grant at the ICA \(4 February 2015\)](#), Guez described himself as Jewish *and* Christian, Tunisian *and* Palestinian, Arab *and* Israeli, and was quick to highlight the other if any one of his various halves was left out of the discussion. This ever-present duality of identity appears, for example, in Guez's film, "The Artist", in which two stories are blended: the folk-tale of an impossible love story between a lady-bug and a mouse, mixed in with the memoirs of an artist unwillingly conscripted into the Israeli Defense Force in the 60s. In both elements of the film, the protagonist often finds his carefully crafted identity at odds with his origins, and is challenged truly belong anywhere.

Comparing Guez's work to the contemporary Palestinian artists in the primary reading which offers analysis of the chiefly "documentary tactics" in their work, the question arose, how do these artists emphasise the nature of control under occupation? Our attention was drawn to the "Picasso in Palestine" project by Khaled Hourani, in which the artist worked from 2009 to 2011 to borrow Picasso's "Buste de Femme" from a Netherlands museum, for a month-long display in Ramallah at the International Academy of Art Palestine. From the project's inception to the twice-delayed exhibition over two years later, Hourani documented everything from the logistic to the legal, covering aspects of the Dutch, Israeli and Palestinian authorities. Whether or not the portrait actually made it to Palestine seemed beside the point of the project, which tested the boundaries of the occupation and thereby "*forced it to reveal its systemic, bureaucratic and often invisible forms*."

It was noted that many of these artists in Palestine, despite the occupation, have a certain amount of privilege outside of Palestine as members of the "global art scene". Our group wondered, how does being in this international community impact the work? We looked at Emily Jacir, for instance, who lives and works between Ramallah, London, and the USA and who also presented work at the latest Palestine Biennial (November 2014). These artists who have studied or exhibited in Europe or USA, seem to have been influenced by these Western institutions and, as one participant mentioned, "seem to make art exclusively aimed at the Western audience".

One of the reading group pointed out that there are in fact a number of Israeli artists who are

actively working towards awareness of as well as change in the nature of the occupation, if not speaking against the occupation altogether. A few of the examples suggested were: Omer Fast, "5,000 Feet is Best" (a short film offering an unvarnished perspective of modern conflict); Oreet Ashery, "Memorial Service" (a performance piece spotlighting a single village's demise in the Palestinian diaspora of 1948); and Smadar Dreyfus, "Mother's Day" (a short film highlighting the separation of family groups over the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights).

The conversation then moved to the second reading by Rona Sela for Ibraaz, "Rethinking National Archives in Colonial Countries and Zones of Conflict", in which she discussed how documentary photographs form a crucial element in *"a control mechanism that oversees the construction of meaning [and through such] ideological activities affect the representation of the conflict and its evolution in the public consciousness"*. Sela concludes that this bank of seemingly innocuous images, when considered aside from their original purpose, such as marking progress or for military reconnaissance, actually reveal a certain unbridled violence in the creation of the new state.

These archives were inaugurated pre-1948 and after, and come from civil establishments including The Central Zionist Archives, Jewish National Fund, and The National Library of Israel, among others. Military photography archives serve military and national security interests for the Ministry of Defense and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and other para-military organisations. Sela notes that, despite the extremely rich and varied content, the Israel's National Archives are commonly unavailable to non-state related analysts. Thus, Sela offers an alternative for these national archives of photos, films, and documents; by examining them with research questions that are more anthropological than military, these documents are released from their original intention, to become a critical voice of the occupation.

The main talking point around Sela's article was to keenly examine some of the images and discuss how do they depict the "violence" which she asserts is a direct result of such documentary methods. We agreed, when the viewer attempts to look beyond the subject of the image itself, the landscape or background in the picture reveals moments of Palestinian history otherwise lost, as in the scenes of destroyed villages, or soldiers with piles of goods looted from Palestinian homes. Alternately, what is not seen in the image at all is equally telling, such as the documentary photographs of Jewish immigrants posed in the remains of a Palestinian village, capturing the instant in which the Palestinian begins to be dissolved, replaced by Israeli characteristics.

Near the end of our session, a final thought emerged for consideration on the commute home: how does the artist leaving a place (homeland, birthplace) lead to changes in one's political position? Perhaps an answer would suggest itself on the next visit to the ICA for another look at ["Dor Guez: The Sick Man of Europe"](#).

*Tags: ICA Student Forum, Kelise Franclemont, Jane Scarth, TEXT2SPEECH, Dor Guez*