Ramallah Dada: The Reality of the Absurd

Reviewed by Penny Johnson

"Going for a Ride?" Installation, by Vera Tamari.
23 June - 23 July 2002. Friends School Playground, El Bireh.
& *"Eyewitness" Exhibit,* Popular Women's Committee, 23 June - 30 June 2002, Ramallah Municipality, Ramallah.

An Israeli soldier sits rather cheerily on top of his tank turret as he rolls past the Friends Boys School, a century-old and now coeducational school founded by the American Quakers. After all, there is not much to fear in the silenced neighborhoods of Ramallah and Bireh a few days after Operation Determined Path has swept the twin cities on 24 June 2002. At the edge of the soccer field, in the cool light of early evening, the soldier's head

turns and the tank slows with a grating screech, for tanks are noisome and discordant creatures. What is he looking at?

Before a stand of pine trees, five cars line up on a narrow curved road that begins and ends in the grassy field. The cars seem to be striving to be one-dimensional: they are flattened, crumbled, bent out of shape. Even so they are unmistakably cars, and despite their bedraggled state, look like they are going on a journey: perhaps forward to an Israeli settlement perched on a nearby hill and dominating the horizon.

Artist Vera Tamari, who created the installation "Going for a Ride?" ("*Masheen*?") from cars destroyed in the April 2002 invasion of Ramallah, watches the soldier from her balcony across the street and breathes a sigh of relief as the tank rumbles on. She and several assistants had carefully painted tank tracks across the road-to-nowhere; the prospect of a real tank following the painted path, however, was a little too genuine.

The reality of the absurd is a central feature of Ramallah life in the era of Israeli invasion and re-occupation of Palestinian cities: both Tamari's installation and a major exhibit at the Ramallah Municipality entitled "Eyewitness" and also featuring damaged objects from the April 2002 invasion opened some hours before the tanks rolled into Ramallah and Bireh once again. The crowded and enthusiastic audiences were thus summarily replaced by an eerie audience of those who were both responsible for the real damage to the objects that the exhibits rendered aesthetic, and who threatened to repeat the experience.

Eyewitness in Ramallah

The "Eyewitness" exhibit, organized by an informal women's committee in cooperation with the Ramallah Municipality and PECDAR (a Palestinian coordinating body for development aid), opened with a packed Sunday afternoon concert that gave a festive air to the cavernous basement hall housing the exhibit. "Festivity" might seem to strike the wrong note, given the exhibit's grim contents, but reflected the social goals of an admirable ad hoc group of women activists that had initiated the exhibit and done much of the hard and exacting work: goals of not only preserving memory but restoring community life.

The spirit was also combative; as one committee activist noted: "Something small happens to Israelis and they make it big. Something huge happens to us and we forget it. We want to change that."

The unplastered and dimly-lit exhibit hall was unfortunately reminiscent of a storeroom where junk has been piled by those reluctant to throw away discarded and derelict objects, unlovely and unloved. The fact that damaged objects are visually and emotively "junk" underlines one of the aesthetic problems of staging such an exhibit: how to express the disorder of damage and destruction through some form of artful ordering?

The designer of the interior exhibit, artist Husni Radwan, as well as the other artists and activists who worked on the exhibit and on an installation of smashed cars in a nearby parking lot, used several ordering principles, including grouping objects by type and setting-from domestic furnishings to office equipment to bathroooms. A giant and effective photo-collage of downtown Ramallah dominated

one wall. A corner featured a photo exhibit linking objects to settings in Ramallah and Bireh. A video - the only object in working order - played in another corner, showing images of Ramallah's damaged streets and institutions. Two rows of broken computer screens marched through the center of the room; a television that seems to have met a sledge-hammar is matched with a comfy chair at a drunken tilt, a broken remote control on the ground nearby. A plant sits in an empty file cabinent.

In the parking lot across from the exhibit, a tower of smashed cars, conceived by artists Taysir Barakat and Nabil Anani, is spraypainted white, with children's paintings of hearts, faces, butterflies, a red and blue tank and other symbols on its lower parts. The artists and the kids reportedly had aesthetic differences, resolved in a piece that remains part of the Ramallah landscape.

In the interior exhibit, writer Walid Bakr has adroitly placed text messages near or on a range of objects. An eye is painted on one broken computer, and a line of text reads: "The path is an open eye to see things," A dangling door has the encouraging slogan, "The broken door is a wide space." Another domestic setting features a dry fishbowl containing a empty sardine can. The inscription warns: "Don't forget to feed the fish." But this inscription was not written for the exhibit: an Israeli soldier, occupying a Ramallah residence in the April 2002 invasion, left this message behind along with his garbage - a military contribution to the "found object" (*object trouvee*) artistic tradition.
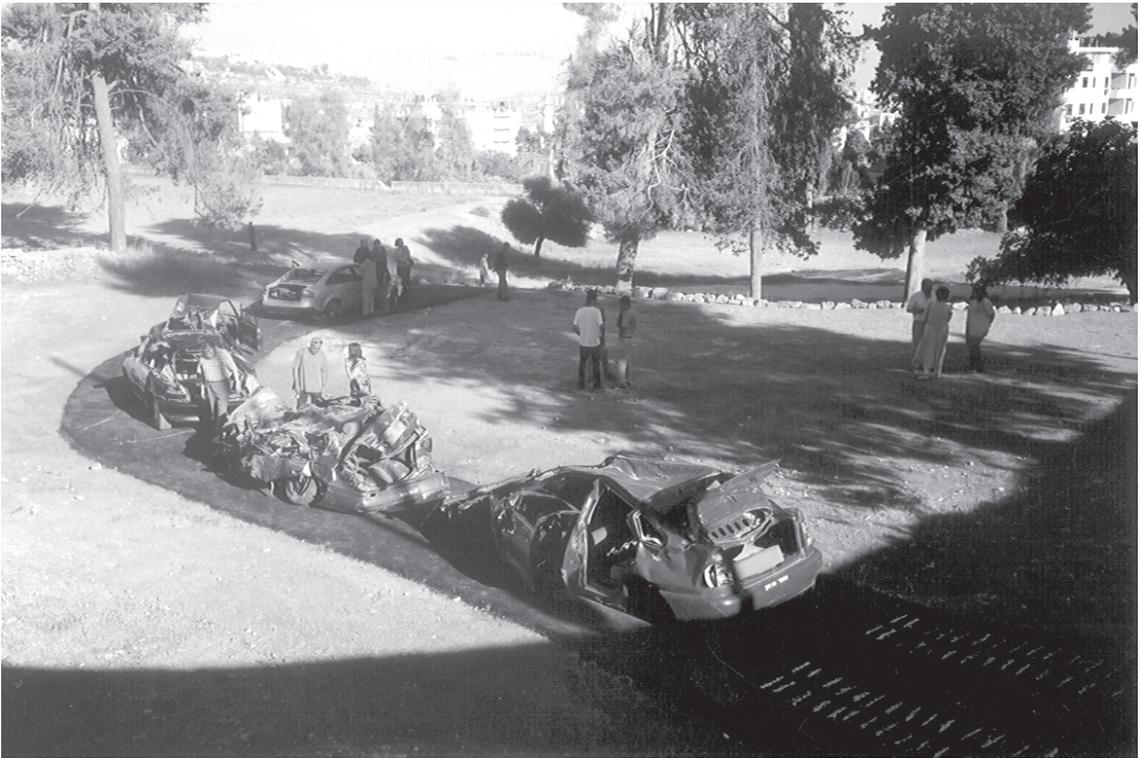
Ramallah Dada

Both "Going for a Ride" and the tower of cars and other elements of "Eyewitness"

are firmly in the contemporary and ubiquitious tradition of installation art, but the usage of text in "Eyewitness" evokes an older, and interesting, artistic resonance: Dada and Surrealism and particularly the former. A leading artist in the Dadaist movement, Marcel Duchamp, described the use of text in his presentation of "ready-made" objects in 1915:

> "In New York in 1915 I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote 'in advance of the broken arm'... One important characteristic was the short sentence which I occasionally inscribed on the 'ready-made,' That sentence, instead of describing the object like a title, was meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions, more verbal."[1]

In the Ramallah "Eyewitness" exhibit, the text messages are sometimes used to contrast the ordinary with the absurd, but more often to carry the specator to another realm - a realm of dreams and of the future. There is a message to both exhibits, proclaimed by "Eyewitness" banners hanging over Ramallah streets, one affirming that "the most beautiful days are in the future" and another evoking Ramallah and its citizens as a "phoenix arising from the ashes." Tamari places these beautiful days in the realm of dream and imagination, where the Israeli occupation "cannot destroy our will to

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[1] Marcel Duchamp quoted in *Hans Richter, Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 89.

"Let's go for a ride" installation, Ramallah, October 2002.

travel in our minds and feelings and to have joy in our dreams."

Both messages are cast as acts of the imagination, rather than of public politics. Here, the Dadaist movement also offers interesting points of reflection for artistic work that responds to the multiple levels of the Palestinian experience of war and massive destruction of civilian life, in the context where Israel articulates that destruction as a necessary act for peace- indeed where (as one Ramallah shopkeeper remarked when asked after his wellbeing by a customer during a break in the curfew) "Everything is its opposite." Dada, born at Café Voltaire in Switzerland amid the carnage of World War I and spreading to Barcelona, Berlin and New York in the war's immediate aftermath, reacted both viscerally and visually to war's destruction, absurdity and lies (when

everything becomes its opposite): Dada's Berlin Manifesto, for example, extolled the "art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday's crash." Using a multiplicity of visual and verbal forms, artists associated with the Dada movement cannot be easily categorized, but the absurdity of the real - the senseless slaughter of World War I - hangs over its work.

"Ramallah Dada" certainly does not claim to herald a new artistic movement, but the challenge to artists to visually (and viscerally) respond to the absurdity of the real was palpable in both these exhibits. But the challenge is not only to artists. The almost obsessive Ramallah/Bireh clean-up campaign that found wide-spread community response after the April 2002 invasion was a practical initiative to get

life back to normal, but also one that, in its intensity and speed, evoked a purification ritual.

Dada or documentation?

There is a tension between the practical and the visionary - between Dada and docmentation - felt in the "Eyewitness" exhibit. The twin impulses to pile up the evidence and project from that a dream of better times are both present. The documentary impulse, hower, has its limits. One response of viewers to "Eyewitness" was to compare it to what the viewer him or herself had actually witnessed: "It's nothing compared to what it was *really* like."

This makes sense: an exhibit of destruction will inevitably fall short of the scale of the real, particularly for the real eyewitnesses, but also for other viewers. Both the photos and collections of objects could not capture the shock experienced by Ramallah and Bireh residents as victims in their own homes, or making their first traverse of city streets literally littered with flattened cars, or braving their initial entrance to ransacked institutions, such as the three floors of the Ministry of Culture, or the municipality itself with records, equipment and broken glass mixed in a sea of destruction.

A more solitary viewer the day before, however expressed a different reaction when she wandered almost alone through the exhibit: "It was like my life spread before me." Perhaps the Israeli army's wanton destruction of the objects that make up peoples' lives and livelihoods is best approached artistically by creating intimacy, rather than working on a grander scale.

Tamari's exhibit was conceptually more

unified; the cars seemed transformed, rather than simply junked, and their journey onward had a jaunty air, reinforced by the radios playing with the sounds of popular music and newscasts - a bit too subdued for technical reasons - affirming that life goes on. Good luck charms dangled from the mirrors, adding a decorative and symbolic element. Viewed from the sidewalk above the field, the nicely-paved road was an ironic statement, starting and stopping in nowhere. But as the audience walked along the road, there was the pleasure (and dream) of motion.

Not every member of the audience participated in the same way. Noticing a group of boys fiddling with the cars, Birzeit University teacher Islah Jad initiatited a conversation on the meaning of the exhibit and its message of life and persistent dreams. In an email circulated to friends and posted on the internet during the latest closure,[2] she writes: "When I was talking to them, I don't know why, I was looking all the time at one of the young boys, he has very wide beautiful black eyes. His friend who was putting his hand on his shoulder, said in a so normal cool voice: his brother is a *shaheed* (martyr), and my house was demolished. His words shut me up immediately and I did not know what to say." Reality may overwhelm representation in such times.

A few days after the soldier in the tank slowed down to take in the exhibit, an army jeep escorted a trolley with two more smashed cars past "Going for a Ride?" The convoy did not slow down, but carried its load of new destruction further along the road.

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[2] See Islah Jad's 4 July 2002 posting in "Palestinian Diaries" at www.electronicintifada.net.