Maandish balad[1]
A Formal/Informal Conversation with Rayelle Niemann by Paloma Rayón & Silvia Savoldi

In 2003, curator Rayelle Niemann, now based in Zurich, moved to Cairo. Her projects took her to Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. In 2007, she initiated the exhibition Mafish Agaza fi Gaza – No Holidays in Gaza *in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt. In May 2007, she hosted a project in Amman, Jordan, with artists from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Switzerland focusing on Art in Public Space with the working title "No Condition is Permanent". In July 2008, the project "Here I stand" was performed in Damascus, Syria, with artists from Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Her last project in 2015 was "Between History and Future. New documentaries from Egypt, Palestine and Syria" at Rote Fabrik, Zurich.*

Due to the interest and relation of her curatorial work and personal experience with migration, we proposed an interview with her on some related concepts, such as "nationality", "trans-nationality", and "trans-locality", and in relation to her own experience in Germany, Switzerland, and Egypt.

Even though the conversation started as a formal interview, it slowly evolved and become a debate on those subjects.

Silvia Savoldi: States are artificial constructions: their borders can change or disappear. Nonetheless they still define and limit the lives of individuals at all levels, especially when a border is crossed. After your work and personal experience, how do you consider "nationality"?

Rayelle Niemann: Nations…what does it take to identify a nation? You need a museum, a flag, a currency, and maybe stamps. And you'll define a constitution and a government. It is made of significant objects. For example, museums symbolize the canon. This is why a lot of things that are part of a society don't get into a museum: because they are not considered as part of the canon. People who run nations (and museums) decide what is part of the country and what is not, what is allowed to have a

visibility and what is not. Of course, nationality has also to do with a passport, which gives legal possibilities, and if you have the right passport, it gives you very interesting possibilities to cross borders. After my experience though, I think the world would be a better place if there were no nations and no nationalities.

SS: Let's talk about your experience: why did you move to Cairo?

RN: Before moving there in 2003, I was involved with other four people in a project which consisted of the analysis of agriculture in society, "SwissMiniNature/Route Agriculture"[2]. In their deepest thoughts, Swiss people still identify themselves strongly with their agriculture: the land, the farms, and the mountains. Our team had a different approach and located the topic within a global understanding. But we also collaborated with farmer unions. It took us a long time to find a common language with which to communicate with them. We worked for this project for two years; it was like deep diving into the "Heart of Darkness" of Switzerland.

It was contemporary to the boom of post-colonial studies: alongside the academic studies, if artists from post-colonial countries exhibited here, everyone wanted artists to talk about the poorness and backwardness of their country rather than talking about their artworks I was very unsatisfied. A friend of mine had a project in Egypt, and she invited me to work there. When I accepted, I felt comfortable there that I thought, "Yes, I'll move to Egypt."

Paloma Rayón: What were your expectations as a highly educated migrant? Did you feel at home, or did you encounter difficulties in integrating into Egyptian society?

RN: I arrived in Cairo with a backpack and found an apartment within a week. I didn't look for a job immediately, because I had some savings and living costs were much lower there. So I was able to start my life slowly.

Nonetheless I didn't feel at home at first. The first Arabic country I visited was Morocco and it was in the 1970s. For me, the different culture and history was "normal". It was a strange feeling, but somehow I felt "at home". I like many things there, e.g. the landscape, the vernacular culture. I had already been in Egypt in the 1980s when I studied nutrition in order to meet British doctors who used to work in the south of Egypt. At some point, as I was more and more involved in theory and discussions about diverse aspects of societies, I changed from food for the body to food for thoughts: I then studied art history and video art. So, I already had a first impression of Egypt, but it changed very much from the 1980s to the 2000s.

For me, Egypt was very interesting because a lot was going on during this time. Egyptians analysed their country with very different means than before, when the main approach was very nationalistic. The art scene was very vivid, the worker unions were very active, urban planners contrasted financial interest companies, a lot of refuges from Sudan, Somalia and Iraq came to Egypt… Also, I immediately got to know people from abroad. But I avoided Europeans and Americans. I met people from Palestine, Iraq, Sudan. I actually knew more foreigners than Egyptians, in the very first phase. I found this very interesting, because we were all foreigners in this country, so in a way we had our little group. Again, it is about this imagined community… All of a sudden you become a part of something which is also "the other", but you share something. The Egyptian side of Egypt became more and more interesting, their approach to history, their society and culture, embedded in the "Arab identity" complex. In the early years of 2000, a lot of discussions and activities happened in Egypt, which was eager to find different answers to the very strong nationalistic image and understanding of its society.

PR: How does, in your opinion, migration affect a person, the way he or she defines him or herself?

RN: I left Germany when I was seventeen, then lived in the UK and Berlin, then came to Zurich in the 1980s, and finally moved to Egypt for ten years. I experienced more host migration. When we talk about migration now, and finding jobs, we are dealing with neoliberalism. For example, some banks have jobs that require moving from one country to the other.

People have always migrated: as I grew up in Germany, we had *Gastarbeiter* from Turkey, Italy, Portugal, and the former Yugoslavia. But the term itself means "guest workers", it gives no responsibility to the hosting country; it lets itself exploit them nicely. We are exposed to a phenomenon that is not new, but happens under new circumstances.

Migration is also caused by companies: they look for cheaper labour in foreign countries and leave theirs with unemployment. It has to do with the increased flexibility in movement: flights are cheaper; people travel… We used to hitchhike: things have changed a lot.

SS: The fact that people have always moved, as you have just said, usually gets underestimated. We avoid thinking about it. I think it has to do with identity, and especially with collective identity: we see the other as alien. Taiye Selasi[3] said: "All experience is local; all identity is experience". How is an individual's identity defined in your opinion? And collective identity? Is it reinforced by the otherness, in your opinion?

RN: That is just the way it is. The word "identity" comes from the Greek term for similar, same. When you create identity, you automatically create the other. Identity is a rather narrow term despite its importance. It also varies with age. When I was young, it was important to be radical with your identity! In contrast to education, to your parents, to the neighbours… Youth culture creates identity through clothing, music, symbols. There's no youth state. But we're switching levels now.

If you talk about nations, you have to define which nation you are talking about. There are countries that love to define themselves as multicultural; for example, the Germany where I grew up was all about having people from different nations, and loving their food… This kind of thing. And then there are countries where the others have no place at all.

I want to give you an example of an artistic approach to Palestinian identity. When I was in Palestine in 2005, coinciding with the last rear ups of the Second Intifada and the aftermath of the "Oslo Agreement"[4], they had this daily newspaper called

Al Ayyam, and in this newspaper the artists created a supplement. On the front page just the word "Gabash" was written on it, which means "blur". In the inside, the artists showed portraits of people, and they put the scale of Photoshop and also the bar code for commodity. The purpose was to question the concept of identity as a commodity, ready to change according to whatever. It was a critique within Palestinian society, asking people: "Who are you? Are you what the journalists want to know from you or are you something else?"

When we talk about identity we also have to speak about narration. I realised for myself that I can speak differently about my own history depending on the circumstances, on who asks me, on my mood. I move away from accuracy; it is nothing strict.

But for some, their social, ethnic, and religious background is very crucial and for sure far more complex.

SS: How do you relate to the concept of "transnationality"? Have you worked with it in your curatorial practice? Is it present on your projects *Damascus* (2008) *and Here I Stand* (2008)?

RN: The project in Damascus was about that city and how the participants feel about their place within the city. All the people who participated in Damascus had a different background… So let's start with Ziad Al Halabi, who was born in Jordan but lived in Damascus. Then Mohamed Ali, who is Kurdish. The situation of the Kurdish people in Syria is difficult: most of them have no passport, and they are not allowed to speak their language, they are very marginalised. Then there are Bassel Al Saadi, who is half Lebanese and half Syrian, and the Boukhari sisters, whose grandfather came from Uzbekistan. Pascal Hashem is Lebanese and lives in Beirut; Iman Hasbani is from the Druze town of Suweida, and Diana Jabi is half Hungarian and half Syrian. Both Ala` Diab and Saba Innab are Palestinians born in Kuwait and living in Jordan. Finally, there is Michael Zayat who is from Damascus and Christian.

This shows you the rich diversity of the Middle East. I wanted this for the project, because I always loved Damascus and Syria, especially these diverse identities, these diverse cultures. The term "cultures" is better than identities because, again, identity is something different. An art project the way I wanted to do it in Syria was difficult, so I thought at least I can collect people from different backgrounds in order to at least highlight the rich diversity on a common ground.

We avoided using the word "identity" in the title. Everybody hated this word, and they wanted to work instead on something that concerned them than on "identity".

For *Here I Stand,* I wanted something that stays: that's why I wanted a catalogue[5].

For the printed version we were limited, since for every publication you do in Syria you have get the permission of the Ministry of Information and Culture. The maquette has to be presented to these two institutions, then they approve or don't approve. The first type of censorship was inside the heads of the artists. So we had a discussion, and I came up with an idea. We left four pages empty: these would be the uncensored pages. Anyone who gets the catalogue can write something uncensored on them. It also makes the catalogue personal. The people in the ministries probably thought that the four empty pages were a mistake: so we got the permission and we printed the catalogue. The Syrians who looked at the catalogue understood the message of the empty pages immediately. It did not need further explanation.

SS: How was dealing with that much self-censorship? Do you think that the fear about it is reasonable or is it too great?

RN: The Lebanese artist's work was the most discussed. He sent photographs of himself completely wrapped, and he would free himself from it during a performative act. It was clear what he was wrapped in was an "Abaya, a loosely fitting garment to cover the shape of women's bodies. This caused a lot of controversy in the project; other people participating were very afraid. At the time, the tension between Syria and Lebanon was elevated, and Pascal couldn't come to Damascus for the exhibition. Nonetheless he is in the catalogue.

This was the hardest project I worked on in the Middle East. I found people to be friendly and excited about the project, but there were a lot of unspoken tensions. Suddenly they wanted to speak about identities, and it was really overwhelming. Fear runs deep. There are secret services everywhere: Syria has a long history of political prisoners and torture, they randomly arrested people. People would not speak out loud about it.

PR: You have also worked on the concept of Heimat[6]. Can you tell us what you mean with that?

And you have also written that your Heimat is "not to be linked with a certain place" and "is multidimensional and metaphysic". Does "trans-locality" apply to your thought?

RN: Something about this discussion is really strange for me. Leila Aboulela, a writer from Karthoum, Sudan, wrote about it; we had the same discussions in the eighties, and in the nineties, in the 2000s… It's unbelievable. I think that maybe each generation has to go through this, because the world changes. The "Identity" in the "Nation" concept is due to changes: now we are in such chaos globally, of course it is again a topic.

The concept of "Nation" is limited. The term "World Citizen" comes from the twenties, but was used more by bohemian people, like artists, writers, and dancers travelling to different countries, and for me this word does not play such as an important role any more.

Now, "Global Citizen" is more used, but what do we actually mean when we say globalisation? When we speak about globalisation, we do actually mean that you can find a McDonald's, a Starbucks, an H&M in every country, and they all look alike, even architecture-wise. This is globalisation, but I hardly associate it with people—more with commodities, architecture, or food. I have travelled quite a lot and like to feel that I come to a place different from another, but now it's getting less and less diverse; you can find anything everywhere. It has to do with neo-liberalism: the free borders are for goods more than for people, which is in the idea of the European Union. It is a concept of economy.

SS: "Urban Citizenship" is a proposal by the cities of Zurich and Geneva on the model of New York City: everyone who is registered in the city is provided with a city card and rights. I think it relates to what you said beforehand, that you imagine a world with no nations. So, hypothetically, how do you think this could work? How can all the cities be independent without a central government which defines education standards, transportation networks, a tax system?

RN: If you take Switzerland as an example, the education and the tax system are already defined by each canton. It is already real, even if not at that extreme hypothetical extent. Living together is always a matter of negotiation and communication. The present is in flux; the situation keeps changing and creates new needs that you have to discuss. It's a process, and I think processes are very exciting. But I like this idea because it takes the issue back to the "local" and it instils responsibility.

SS: Talking about political responsibility, how do you involve people who are not interested either in this kind of topic or in art? How do you reach people who don't want to hear?

RN: I can give you an example: in my project *Societies in Transition* (2015) it was very important for me that Muslims were talking for themselves. I didn't invite "experts" on Islam who aren't Muslims to talk about "them", the "other". I tried to reach people from very different backgrounds in Zurich and around to get them interested in this series of events. I made a big effort for this project. I conducted this research to get to know how Muslims live in Switzerland, getting in touch with many Muslim communities here, some more open than others. So I tried to get people who live in areas with problems of integration to come to the events. I succeeded somehow because there were people coming to the Rote Fabric for these events who would never go to a Muslim event, and Muslims came to the Rote Fabrik, who otherwise would not mix. It had to do with personal engagement and energy. It would have been even more complicated in a rural area, but I would like to try this. The countryside would be the best place to do this project. Or the suburbs, where there is a need for a sense of community.

SS: What do you think of people who never moved from the place where they were born? For example, I have spoken to a girl who is from the same Italian village as me and around twenty-five years old, and she told me she doesn't want to move from it, not even to live in a city. This shocked me, as it is as far as possible from what I feel, from what I want. How do you think this kind of people can perceive "trans-locality"?

PR: This has also happened within my family. Two daughters moved and two brothers stayed at home. It's just the way you are, either you want to move or you don't want to.

RN: Either this, you don't want to move, or you don't have the possibilities to move. I'm thinking again about Egypt. In the South of Egypt (but not only there) there are a lot of people who can't move, because of lack of money or documents. But there used to be considerable tourism in that area, so that's how they receive trans-locality. They become very wise in a way and gather a notion on how people live

in faraway countries. In some countries you cannot freely move by law, e.g. Cuba, China, North Korea. This was why we started the website *citysharing* in 2008: it is accessible 24/7 to people anywhere in the world without needing to travel to an actual exhibition location.
http://www.citysharing.ch/

SS: But in the countries you mentioned there's a big web censorship–how exactly do you reach those people?

RN: There are always possibilities to get around restrictions, e.g. changing your IP address…

SS: *You mentioned the refugees: what is your last project, Between History and Future. New Documentaries from Egypt, Palestine and Syria (2015), about? As many of your other projects, it took place at the Rote Fabrik in Zurich: what is your relationship with this cultural centre?*

RN: The Rote Fabrik is the only place where spontaneous projects are accepted. Other institutions have long-term planning, and it did not go along with the immediacy and "urgency" of the topics. They are much more flexible. My last project is a series of documentaries and discussions about some parts of the Middle East. The flyers to advertise it are all different. I wanted to find questions which people here can also identify with (e.g. "Should I lie to my family?", "Should I trust them?"). The element of surprise lies in turning them and finding the film programme about Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. I know these countries quite well, and they are exposed to violence on different levels. The talks with the directors at the end of the screening provide with a deeper insight on the topic, and with a wider glimpse of the context: it's an important curatorial choice for me.

Captions
1 Rayelle Niemann, No Holidays in Gaza, 2007, invitation card. Courtesy of the artist. "… the title sounds more beautiful in Arabic: 'mifish agaza fi Gaza'. The circumstances for this picture are special: we were in a car and drove by the beach (in Gaza). I saw three men playing backgammon on the shore and I asked the driver to stop; it was such a beautiful scene, the men gave me the permission to take a picture. They're all dressed very differently: one is more secular, one is more like a Sheikh, and the other is maybe a Bedouin. In that time, this kind of image showing the unity of differences meant a lot." (R.N.).

2 Raoof Haj Yehia, Gabash; published as a supplement in Al Ayyam, May 2005, Palestine. Courtesy of the artist.
3 Ala' Diab, 2008. Courtesy of the artist. This "bug" of Damascus was originally printed without the words in the catalogue of the project "Here I stand" due to self censorship. Later, when the catalogue was put online, http://www.citysharing.ch/invited-projects~92.html, the original version was added.

Notes
1 Rayelle Niemann, *Heimat*, Cairo, 2004: "When I am asked where I am from a lot of times I answer: maandish balad (I have no country)".
2 Swiss National Exhibition Expo.02, Murten, Switzerland, 15.5.–20.10.2002, http://www.k3000.ch/psp/archive/doc075.htm
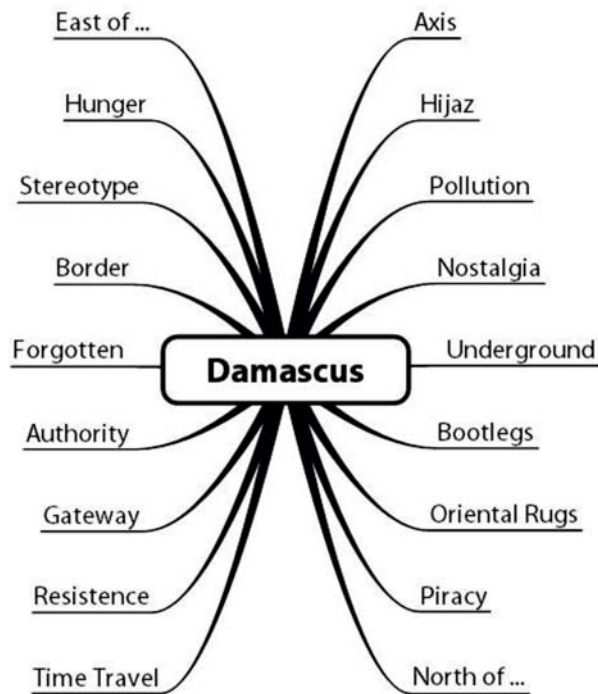**3** Taiye Selasie, *Don't ask me where I'm from, ask me where I'm local,* TED talk, 14 October 2014.
4 The Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, was the second Palestinian uprising against Israel–a period of intensified Israeli-Palestinian violence. It started in September 2000, when Ariel Sharon made a visit to the Temple Mount, seen by Palestinians as highly provocative.
5 http://www.citysharing.ch/invited-projects~92.html
6 Rayelle Niemann, Heimat, Cairo, 2004.

1

2

East of ...

Hunger

Stereotype

Border

Forgotten

Damascus

Authority

Gateway

Resistence

Time Travel

Axis

Hijaz

Pollution

Nostalgia

Underground

Bootlegs

Oriental Rugs

Piracy

North of ...

3

Rayelle Niemann *is a curator, writer, and artist. Her projects revolve around the research on social phenomena, spaces, and places, created by and provided for the human being and the arising reciprocal influences and effects. She has curated among others, the following projects:* SwissMiniNature/Analyses of Agriculture and Society, *a group project during Expo.02 CH; Performance Festival* Physical Vehicle, *London 2000; exhibitions* Salon 9, *Aarau 1999;* Art and Virulent Practices, *Zurich 1997;* From the Disappearance of the Body, *Aarau 1996.*

Silvia Savoldi *(b. 1987, Brescia/IT) studied architecture in Ferrara and Porto. During her academic years, she developed an interest in contemporary art and photography that led her to take part in the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK. Her curatorial research focuses mainly on digitality, sexuality, and semiotics. Currently based in Zurich, she is curating an exhibition about Davide Trabucco's work at the gallery da Mihi in Berne.*

Paloma Rayón *(b. 1977, Madrid/ES) studied art history in Madrid. Since 2010, she has been Coordinator of Public Programmes at Museo Picasso Málaga, where she is responsible for the coordination of the programme of activities, such as screenings, workshops, and lectures. As a writer she contributes at the blog* Con Arte y sonante, El País. *She takes part in the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK.*