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Negotiations

A post-ironic memo with no slogans

By Gita Hashemi

The worst failure is of the predictable kind. At the time of this writing, Sharon's government has called off "Road Map" negotiations and sent its occupation forces back into the centres of Palestinian towns for more mass arrests and house demolitions. The Palestinian Authority – as such dependant from the start on Israeli will to consider "peace" – is scrambling to counter accusations that it supports "terrorism" while its internal legitimacy hangs by a thread that has been getting thinner since long before the current Intifada proved the hopelessness of "peace" as was brokered in Oslo, also by Americans. Meanwhile, on and through confiscated Palestinian lands, the Israeli government continues to build roads that connect illegal settlements (grown fungus-like since Oslo) for exclusive use by armed settlers and soldiers; and, following its singular logic of "security," this "only democracy in the Middle East" continues the construction of the 1000-km-long, 8-meter-high, 2-meter-thick segregation wall that is longer, taller and thicker than the one whose destruction the "free world" celebrated only 14 years ago. Even to the most gullible of us, it should be clear by now that negotiations prescribed by roadmaps charting already-traveled territories – partitioned, occupied and pillaged for decades through colonialist agendas– come to nothing but a dead end.

In April 2002, Creative Response was formed through a public meeting of over 60 artists, writers, cultural workers, activists and academics who felt the urgency to respond, in solidarity with the Palestinian struggles and towards a *just* peace, to Israeli terror campaigns. The will of this loose collectivity has carried a number of arts-driven

interventions in the public discourse on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Most recently, a small all-volunteer band of eight, Negotiations Working Group, staged *Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace* (note reviews and interview in this issue of Fuse). While *Negotiations* received very little support from institutional arts funders (an issue that falls outside the scope of this brief but begs discussion elsewhere), the support – monetary and in-kind – of diverse individuals as well as artist-run, academic and grass-roots organizations enabled us to mount a programme that expanded by its internal necessity to the point of being dubbed “sprawling” by a friendly critic. To the organizing group, this could have been the measure of success, but we gauge our success somewhat differently.

We started this project a year ago from the conclusion that neither the sloganeering of trendy anti-... [fill-in the blank] movements, nor the ambivalence of intellectual ironicism [irony + cynicism] nor their attendant conceptual paradigms and creative practices were adequate responses given the urgency of the conditions here in North America as in Palestine-Israel. The rise of renewed fascism to state power in the United States – the world’s military capital – coupled with the resurgence of militarist colonialism the world over – both readily justified through discourses of “democracy,” “free trade,” “security,” and “anti-terrorism” – necessitate that we substantiate our critical deconstructive strategies with constructive social exchange towards building and strengthening *heterogeneous* [not “pluralist”] and *accountable* networks of resistance and solidarity. Such networks are crucial to the formation and fortification of the collective will to dissent from the given and move towards the envisioned, from preaching “peace” prosaically as the abstract absence of conflict to working through our geopolitical, social, economic and historical differences and power asymmetries towards building the necessary conditions for a just peace. To this effect, we made the notions of collaborating across “divides” (national, cultural, political, disciplinary) and public participation central to our curatorial concepts and integral in our programming approaches, reasoning that only in the space of shared labour could meaningful negotiations take place, and that art, as a medium of *communication* and *imagination*, could not only mediate such social dialogue but also facilitate broader participation in it.

Negotiations brought to Toronto a wide range of collaborative projects and programmes by cultural producers of different backgrounds and belongings. Most of these drew on public participation in their creative processes and/or creatively capitalized on the collaborative nature of dissemination space to actively engage the audiences in the issues they raised. In our own work, we conversed and collaborated with diverse individuals and groups in anti-racist, feminist, indigenous rights, union and social justice movements; and consciously built in our programme multiple platforms – post-screening discussions, panels, workshops and a public forum – for presenter-audience as well as presenter-presenter dialogue. The totality of this space of shared labour was where differing political claims and social visions were problematized and negotiated, openly, collectively and transparently. Inevitably, these negotiations led to new understandings, relations and networks, thus manifesting the “use value” of artistic engagement as visionary social construction. This, to us, was the topmost measure of *Negotiations*’ viability.

If it is true that when there is a will there is a way, then it must follow that when the will is collective the way cannot but be shared. Simplistic statement, I agree. But, the sincerity and intensity with which all participants [presenters, audiences and volunteers] engaged in *Negotiations* has convinced me that beyond the segregation wall there is a way to that most lauded and least realized ideal: common good. After all, there is no other way.

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Bio: Gita Hashemi is a Toronto-based artist, writer and educator, and a founding member of Creative Response. She was the Artistic Director of *Negotiations*.