

## *Reflections on 'Art and Conflict'*

The less works have to proclaim something they cannot fully believe themselves, the more internally consistent they become, and the less they need a surplus of what they say over what they are.' - Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment'.

The discussions during the closed Art and Conflict Workshops in Manchester which were held as part of the Cross Borders Project, exposed the vast gulf that exists between the various groups embroiled in the multiple conflicts in the Middle East, not merely in terms of varying political interests and investments, but in terms of cultural frames of reference. Even before there can be any talk of discussion between the parties involved, there are enormous difficulties involved in attempting to establish a common ground upon which communication can occur, and in creating a common contextual framework which would allow those involved to begin to understand each other. Rather than attempt to analyse the political and methodological difficulties which face programmes such as the Cross Borders Project, which have been admirably explored by Samar [surname] in her essay 'The Case for Dialogue', I wish instead to briefly sketch the way in which the project intersects with one of the most contested areas of twentieth-century Western art theory: that of the inherently conflicted relationship between aesthetics and politics.

The stated aim of the Cross Borders Project was to use 'artistic expression to reflect in a subjective way the situation of a society coming out of a major conflict, [...] to encourage social engagement, and to bring psychological relief' in the wake of the Summer 2006 War.<sup>1</sup> These aims articulate a definition of art which hinges

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<sup>1</sup> Goethe-Institut Beirut press release, 'The Cross Border Arts Project in Lebanon, Israel and Palestine Begins', 2007.

upon notions of art as a medium for self-expression and as having a consequent palliative psychological and social function: a potential space for the representation and discussion of complex and emotive issues. There are a number of unresolved complexities in this statement: firstly, when art is defined in such a way in such politically charged arenas such as the Middle East, the danger that it will be interpreted as an instrument of foreign policy or misrepresented for propaganda purposes becomes increasingly acute, as proved the case in the discussions that emerged from the project at the Art and Conflict conference. Secondly, and crucially, whilst it is certainly possible that art can function as such a forum for exposure and exploration of deeply serious issues, whether or not it can bring any form of ‘relief’ from them is another matter: one does not stand in front of Picasso’s *Guernica* or Bacon’s *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion* and feel better.

For me, the foundational problems outlined above were illuminated in dramatic fashion through the exchange of views that occurred at the conference: one of the most striking moments was during a discussion in which the various artists involved in the project were presenting their differing practices to each other. Apart from the wide variety of artistic disciplines in evidence, it rapidly became clear through the course of the conversation that the participants’ definitions of ‘art’ itself were radically different from one another: as one of the artists stated, in his country there is no ‘contemporary’ art, only ‘art’. Given the extent and depth of difference between the various participants’ academic, cultural, and political backgrounds, this is in itself perhaps unsurprising, but it does illuminate the fact that the most basic notion which underpinned the whole project, and which appeared to unite all of the participants – artistic expression – is itself not a neutral, universal or unproblematic concept. The most famous and immediately comparable undertaking to the Cross Borders Project is Daniel Barenboim’s West Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together young musicians from both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict, defines itself as ‘an ongoing dialogue, where the universal, metaphysical language of music links with the continuous dialogue that we have with young people, and that young people have with each other.’<sup>2</sup> Whether one agrees with Barenboim over the universality or not of the language of music, it is clear from the exchanges at the Art and Conflict conference any such universality in the sphere of the visual arts would be hard won.

Whilst it would be easy to draw from this the conclusion that art is therefore the wrong medium in which to attempt to find a common ground for discussion and collaboration between the parties involved, I want instead to suggest the opposite. It is in contexts such as the Cross Borders Project where the political pressures on art are most acutely felt, and the contradictions inherent to its various formulations will be therefore most keenly expressed; it is for this reason that such opportunities are valuable. The situation in the Middle East, to massively understate the case, is enormously complex. The conflicting historical and social contexts, personal and

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Barenboim, ‘Welcome’, <http://west-easterndivan.artists.warner.de/>, accessed October 2009.

political animosities, institutional frameworks and intellectual backgrounds of the participants are not easily represented or explained, let alone the differences between them resolved. Examples such as the Cross Borders Project therefore represent an opportunity for artists not to relieve these problems or to paper over the cracks, but to expose them; it is the many forms that the autonomous artwork can take, themselves inherently conflicted and irreducible to paraphrase, that allows art to hold up a fractured mirror to a shattered landscape. Whilst it might be too much to ask of art to expect it to resolve these problems, it can instead at least be the start of an understanding of difference.