

**field:**

a free journal for architecture

PRINT ISSN: 2753-3638  
ONLINE ISSN: 1755-0068  
[www.field-journal.org](http://www.field-journal.org)  
vol.9(1)

## MORPHING FORMS, UNDERMINING BORDER REGIMES

*Hanna Baumann and  
Khaled Jarrar*

### ABSTRACT

This short piece - written in exchange with Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar - charts his work over the past decade as it deals with borders. In particular, it focuses on a set of linked projects in which the material from the Israeli 'Separation Wall' in the West Bank were transformed into art objects, which then served as the basis for purchasing agricultural land in Palestine. In a new phase for the project, the outputs harvested the land now morph again in order to infiltrate international boundaries under 'false pretences'. It is argued that Jarrar's work uses the specificities of the art market as well as material-bureaucratic conditions of national boundaries to draw attention to and undermine unjust borders.

## MORPHING FORMS, UNDERMINING BORDER REGIMES: IN CONVERSATION WITH KHALED JARRAR

I first encountered Khaled Jarrar in 2011, at Checkpoint Charlie, the legendary Cold War crossing point between East and West Berlin. Jarrar, a tall man who once served in Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's personal guard, stood at the site of the checkpoint where East German border guards once inspected papers, now bustling with tourists, and offered to stamp people's passports. For his project, *Live and work in Palestine* (2011-14), he designed an official-looking passport stamp, featuring a circular image of an indigenous bird, the Palestine Sunbird, surrounded by the words 'State of Palestine' in English and Arabic (fig 1).



Figure 1 Khaled Jarrar, *State of Palestine*, stamp (2011).

Jarrar, born in the West Bank city of Jenin in 1976, says of the project: 'I sought to find an adequate art practice that dismantles the absence of the Palestinian State.'<sup>1</sup> More than a year before the UN granted Palestine non-member observer status, the phrase 'State of Palestine' was still rarely invoked. Today, it is emblazoned on all Palestinian Authority inscriptions, from letterheads to local municipal authority offices to diplomatic missions abroad. However, in light of ongoing Israeli occupation and lack of self-determination for the Palestinian people, it remains a symbolic attempt to call a new reality into being, a way of 'manifesting' a future vision – much like Jarrar's stamp at the time.

Audience members at Checkpoint Charlie became implicated in the artwork when they handed over their papers, some knowing they would face additional interrogation for this stamp when attempting to enter Palestine via its Israeli-controlled borders in the future. Jarrar was aware of this saying: 'They agreed to take a risk by putting the stamp of the "State of Palestine" in their passport.' What was important to him was to not only involve the audience in a participatory experience as 'passports [were] sealed with the stamp of the extraordinary state' but to 'use art in an open confrontation with reality.'

Over the past decade, Jarrar's practice has been marked by an ongoing engagement with borders. In this confrontational manner, he reveals tensions between their materiality, symbolism and performance, their embodied and their psychological effects on people. In doing so, Jarrar uses the spaces for manoeuvre the art world provides to expose the weaknesses of national border regimes and to actively undermine national boundaries, sometimes by deploying their own tools against them.

<sup>1</sup> All quotes taken from the author's conversations with Jarrar, held between December 2022 and February 2023.)

Jarrar became widely known as an artist working on borders for his film, *Infiltrators* (2012, 70 mins), about Palestinians who navigate and subvert Israel's bewildering matrix of control as they attempt to enter Israel and East Jerusalem without a permit from the Israeli military regime. The film shows unravelling adventures of various individuals' and groups' attempts during their search for gaps in the wall, which separates the West Bank from Israel but also cuts many Palestinians off from their own lands, in order to sneak past it. The film won accolades at a number of international film festivals and established a name for Jarrar on the international art scene.

The same year he released *Infiltrators*, Jarrar started the project *Whole in the Wall* (2012-13). As documented in the short film *Concrete* (2012, 2 mins), he manually hacked away at the Israeli Separation Wall in a laborious process – one that surprisingly was not discovered by the Israeli border police (see fig 2). Jarrar has an uncle who was involved in constructing the wall, and describes this problematic positionality as follows: 'My uncle lives in a small village near the Green Line. The main livelihood used to be agriculture, but that is no longer possible. So he has worked as a professional construction worker in Israel. Then he worked on building the Wall for several years.' Jarrar speaks about the shame such work brings, but also shows understanding for the way Palestinians are implicated, more or less directly, in Israel's settler colonial enterprise. Jarrar's uncle still holds on to his mother's Ottoman deed proving ownership of land inside the Green Line, in the fertile Marj Ibn Amir (renamed the Jezreel Valley by Israel). He hides the title deed not because he has hopes of ever getting the land back but because there are periodic rumours that, in the frame of a final peace agreement, UNRWA may compensate Palestinians for land of which they were dispossessed in 1948. In the meantime, in lieu of land or compensation, the only way to make a living is to seek employment within Israel's settler



Figure 2 Khaled Jarrar, Film still from *Concrete* (2012, 2 mins)

colonial project, and actively contribute to the physical infrastructures that imprison Palestinians. Jarrar views this implication as being drawn into a cyclical process driven by settler-colonialism: 'First they take our land, then they make us work for them like slaves, and in the end, they sell the products we made, with our own labour and on our own land, back to us.'

In contrast to this complex and messy reality, Jarrar's symbolic act of dismantling of the wall might, at first glance, be read as a clear and straightforward gesture of refusal and resistance. Jarrar used the concrete chiselled from the barrier to reconstitute everyday objects of leisure, including a ping-pong set; football boots; a set of juggling pins; a traditional ring-shaped Jerusalem bread called *ka'ek*; a football; a basketball; and a volleyball (fig 3). Quotidian and personal objects usually marked by their light, even playful nature, become heavy and violent. As the viewer

imagines attempting to handle a ball, juggle with the concrete pins, or bite into the fluffy bread, a visceral response is elicited – objects that are known as tools or means of enjoyment become obstacles, potential sources of (unexpected) pain. Through mutating the constituent material of the wall into objects of everyday life, Jarrar's work suggests that the power of the border lies not only in its form as a physical obstacle, but in the way it seeps into and reshapes people's lives. It permeates the everyday, infiltrates the most intimate realms of personal experience, affecting social ties and morphing emotive landscapes.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, Jarrar's attack on the wall shows that despite its 'concreteness', it is not as solid, permanent and impenetrable as its imposing physicality suggests. As Jarrar puts it:

The new objects thus also serve to redefine 'The Wall', originally a vertical object in space, built to separate humans. By moving the wall from its original place and presenting it within an artistic environment, I created a different, new function for it. The perception [is] changed, driv[ing] us to question the wall's present status and that shows the importance of seeing it from another perspective. Working on the functional possibilities may give us the ability to exceed the problem.

In the ten years since starting *Whole in the Wall*, Jarrar has continued this process of continually morphing the materiality of the Israeli-imposed border into new forms. He explains: 'Those objects made from the wall – the volleyball, the football, and so on – I sold them on the art market. I made money by selling those objects as art objects. They sold like hotcakes at Christmas.' Jarrar is aware that through his art – not unlike his uncle – he is also profiting from the wall, feeding an art market where 'oppression sells,' as he puts it. He continues:

I saved the money I made from these sales in socks inside my fridge for a few years. I saved up a good amount of money, which allowed me to buy a piece of land in a village near Ramallah. I was very determined to own a piece of land as a way of liberation from the colonisation of our land and bodies. In 2016, I bought the land. At the time, the trees were so sad and the soil health was really bad. I gave love to the trees as my grandmother taught me. I used goat dung to fertilize the soil and maintained the land without any machines, trying to avoid disturbing the soil. This year [2022] was the first that I was able to harvest organic olives. In October we harvested a 60 kilos of olives. The trees gave love back (fig 4).

<sup>2</sup> Hanna Baumann, 'The intimacy of infrastructure: vulnerability and abjection in Palestinian Jerusalem through the work of Khaled Jarrar' in *Planned Violence: Post/colonial Urban Infrastructures and Literature*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2018), 137-157.

Figure 3 Khaled Jarrar, *Volleyball #1* (2013) reconstituted concrete from Apartheid Wall, diameter 20cm, weight 8kg. Barjeel Foundation.

Figure 4 Khaled Jarrar on his land in the West Bank, 2023 (image by Hanna Baumann)

Hanna Baumann & Khaled Jarrar, Morphing Forms,  
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Following the principles of regenerative agriculture, Jarrar produced a small batch of Extra Virgin Olive Oil (fig 5-6). Since the land was initially bought through works made from the concrete of the Separation Wall, Jarrar views this transformation as a redemptive gesture. By acquiring land, he sought to claim back – however indirectly – the land that was taken from his grandmother. In caring for it, increasing its value by making it fertile, and making Palestinian products from it, he intervenes in and disrupts the settler-colonial cycle of expropriation and exploitation.

The next step in Jarrar's project will be to ship this oil to the United States, where he himself is emigrating. 'To avoid the bureaucracy of the US Food and Drug Administration – which would require the testing of imported oil and opening a tax file to permit its sale – I will use the first amendment to sell this product as an Art Object. I will sell it at the same price of a good olive oil in the states, with the knowledge that you can consume the content inside those canisters.'

There are thus a number of borders that this set of works crosses and indeed plays with. The olive tree is considered holy in Islam, and is central to Palestinian culture – yet the commercial labels and kitschy branding Jarrar has developed for the canisters reference the commodification of the Palestinian struggle. 'Some Palestinian olive oil producers sell oil that they bought cheaply from Palestinian farmers as "fairtrade" products. But to be honest I know the farmers in Jenin who sell to those companies and the production process is not fair at all.' The distinction between liberation and participation in ongoing oppression is also apparent in what he views as the 'selling out' of

the Palestinian cause, including by the Palestinian Authority. Jarrar's work thus muddies the waters between art, commodity for import, and food product, drawing our attention to a situation where clear-cut narratives of heroism or victimhood are insufficient.

In first phase of this decade-long process, the concrete sourced from a border wall that separates people from their land served as the material for art objects that allowed the artist to purchase land, to work the land, to harvest its fruits – in short, to engage in processes of rootedness and connection in a situation marked by Palestinians' displacement, dispossession and alienation from the land. In this new phase, we see a more natural process of transformation, one that 'indigenous farmers in Palestine followed for thousands of years', as Jarrar says: from dung to fertile soil, to olive fruit and olive oil. At the border, the shape-shifting is bureaucratic rather than physical: the oil remains the same substance, but to pass through national borders, which are always semipermeable, the process is declared to be 'art', but the product is just food for consumption. 'Concrete is for your gaze, Olive oil is for your taste,' Jarrar says. Like the Palestinian 'infiltrators' who merely wish to access their homeland, but must use subterfuge and disguise to get there, the cans of oil will enter under false pretences, and these become part of the art object's identity.

Throughout the project, the forms of the artwork morph, allowing the material derived from one border to ultimately infiltrate another. In both the concrete phase and the current olive oil phase of this long chain of transformations, Jarrar thus uses the rules of the art world to turn the border regime's tools against itself.

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Figures 5-6 Jarrar's olives in the press, and the resulting extra virgin olive oil (images by Khaled Jarrar)

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

*Hanna Baumann*

Dr Hanna Baumann is an urban scholar whose work is concerned with intra-urban borders, as well as questions of exclusion and participation in cities, especially as these relate to infrastructures and the role of non-citizens. She is a Senior Research Fellow at the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity and frequently uses participatory creative approaches and artist collaborations in her work.



## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

### *Khaled Jarrar*

Khaled Jarrar was born in Jenin (occupied Palestine) in 1976 and lives and works in Ramallah (Palestine). He completed his studies in interior design at Palestine Polytechnic University in 1996. After his graduation, he smuggled himself to work as a carpenter in the city of Jesus living as an underground ‘illegal’ worker. In 1998 he joined an intensive military training and ended up working as a personal bodyguard for Palestinian President Yasser Arafat until Arafat’s death in 2004. Trying to survive between the army and art, he entered the field of photography in 2004. He graduated from the International Academy of Art – Palestine, Ramallah in 2011, and obtained an MFA in fine art from the University of Arizona in 2019.

A multidisciplinary artist, Jarrar explores modern power struggles and their sociocultural impact on ordinary citizens through highly symbolic photographs, videos, film, and performative interventions. His *State of Palestine* project was featured in the 7th Berlin Biennale. *Where We Lost Our Shadows*, his filmic collaboration with Pulitzer Prize winning composer Du Yun, was shown at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. Jarrar’s work has been featured at Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah; the New Museum, New York City; the University of Applied Arts, Vienna; the 15th Jakarta Biennale; 52nd October Salon, Belgrade; Al-Ma’mal Foundation, Jerusalem; and the London Film Festival. *Infiltrators*, Jarrar’s first feature-length film, is a documentary about the business of Palestinians ‘illegally’ crossing and won the FIPRESCI Award for Best Documentary, Jury Special Award and the Muhr Arab Documentary Special Jury Prize at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2012. *Notes on Displacement*, his second feature-length film, about a Palestinian refugee’s flight from Syria to Germany, had its world premiere at the IDFA Envision Competition in November 2022.

Jarrar’s work has been highlighted by a number of international publications such as the *New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Harper’s Bazaar Art*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Rolling Stone Middle East*, *The New Statesman* and *Creative Time Reports*, among many others.

