

# HYPERALLERGIC

## A Pair of Performances Exposes the Politics of How Museums Operate

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Public Movement, “Choreographies of Power,” Sept 22–24, 2016, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (photo by Enid Alvarez, © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation)

The most conceptually compelling work of art in the Guggenheim’s *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa* is also its least visible. “Debriefing Session II” by Public Movement, a research-driven Israeli collaborative, takes the form of a secret, one-on-one meeting between a Public Movement agent and a participating audience member. In the performance, which is only available to eight viewers on Saturdays during the exhibition’s run, the agent gives an oral account of art made in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Over the course of 30 minutes, “Debriefing Session II” unravels the entire premise of the

collection enhancement project of which it's a part: the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, sponsored by a Swiss wealth management company (UBS).

Ostensibly, the MAP program seeks to expand the museum's holdings of non-Western contemporary art; simultaneously, it reveals the impossibility of disentangling any collecting project by a Western institution from a long history of instrumentalizing the museum as a tool of colonialism that bolsters the acquiring nation's ideologies. For instance, 2014's *Under the Same Sun*, another exhibition in the MAP series, collapsed distinctions between Central and South America and the Caribbean to emphasize how 39 countries — a vast expanse of territory that surpasses a region — were once colonies, timing the birth of two continents to the moment when the Americas entered Western perception. (Incidentally, the US was also once a colony, but American cultural narratives stress liberation over bondage.) While important and impressive artworks have been added to the Guggenheim's collection through this initiative, filling in blanks in the institution's constructed history of modern and contemporary art, critics including myself have questioned the actual research taking place in the region. [Holland Cotter's recent \*New York Times\* review of \*But a Storm Is Blowing\*](#) and [my review of \*Under the Same Sun\* for \*Modern Painters\*](#) noted that few, if any, artists represented in the MAP exhibitions are not already circulating at art fairs and international biennials. Thus, the narrative that the Guggenheim is constructing is one skewed by the market's taste and Western perceptions, rather than one that gives priority to actual artistic activities happening in specific locations. This very issue — how museum acquisitions and collections aid in the construction of ideological narratives that drive the nation-state — is what's at stake in “Debriefing Session II.”

The performance began when a security guard met me at the Lavazza coffee stand in the Guggenheim's foyer. The innocuous location, combined with his request that I turn off my phone, as all information from that point forward would be off the record, immediately imparted the air of a covert operation. In silence and with stealth, we moved through the crowd. The guard waved us past the ticket taker before escorting me to the private area of the institution, past security headquarters, the loading dock, to an elevator and, beyond that, a door. A knock on the door, and it opened onto a conference room, where I was greeted by a person who identified herself as an agent of Public Movement. This choreography provided a view of the museum rarely seen by visitors: its internal structure and the mechanisms by which it operates were briefly laid bare. The guard's aura of institutional authority enforced the real aspects of the parafictional experience: an actual Guggenheim employee participating in a fictional performance of coyness based on factual information. The episode felt like it could have taken place in an espionage film or a government building just as easily as a museum. Indeed, the information conveyed during the session reinforced the tenuous connection between “truth” and “reality” as well as the firm one between the nation-state and museum.



Public Movement, “Choreographies of Power,” Sept 22–24, 2016, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (photo by Enid Alvarez, © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation) (click to enlarge)

Details of the conversation that followed have dissipated from my memory, but that both is and is beside the point. “Debriefing Session II” mines the divide between the ephemerality of information and the permanence of objects. Three years in the making, the performance was conceived by Public Movement Director Dana Yahalomi and Director of Strategy and Protocol Alhena Katsof during residencies in Tel Aviv. The pair searched for artworks of Palestinian origin made before 1948 in Israeli archives, museums, private collections, and libraries and found no results. They also received no answers to their queries within these state-run institutions, prompting them to follow an underground network of information. “Debriefing Session II” is a performance of curatorial research that gets to the core of why some works are acquired and displayed, and why others are missing from collections and

exhibitions like *But a Storm Is Blowing*. After all, without physical, tangible evidence, information is only a story.

The agent informed me that through her transmission, I had become a carrier of the information; in effect, I'd been "tipped off." With that came the responsibility to pass it along to you. Here I attempt to bring some of that history, flawed by memory, to light:

*Given that the State of Israel is predicated, in part, on the idea that there was no Palestinian nation or culture in the territory before the Israeli nation-state was created in 1948, any image, picture, or object prior to this date suggesting otherwise would conflict with Israel's founding mythology. Modernism in the various styles championed in European centers — such as the Bauhaus style that fashioned Tel Aviv as the "White City" — would be imported to fill this void and positioned as an introduction to art in the region. Even Peggy Guggenheim gifted works to bolster the burgeoning collection of the Israeli nation-state. During their search, Public Movement encountered artists who spoke of paintings looted or abandoned when fleeing Israeli forces during the Nakba, the "catastrophic" shadow side of 1948 that displaced 700,000 Palestinians. Artworks dated before 1948 began resurfacing in auctions and on the black market in the 1960s, and it wasn't until then that the notion of a Palestinian artist was allowed to enter institutional frameworks, an acknowledgement that the nation of Palestine exists within the negative space of Israel. All these conversations happened off the record, of course, with few "informants" willing or able to identify themselves.*

Guided by the Public Movement agent, the session felt like walking the periphery of a void in the archive to consider the shape and size of what has been lost or kept off the record. "Debriefing Session II" posits, in the performer's words, "a diaspora of paintings," as the dispersal of objects mirrors that of people. Yet, rather than relegate this issue only to a contested territory, Public Movement's inclusion of information about the Guggenheim's collection suggests that everyone is implicated — ideological narratives are embedded in every institution's infrastructure. Employing museum collections in the service of nation-building is a cultural strategy used in Israel, the US, and throughout the world. The strength of the performance lies in Public Movement's ability to sidestep a moral position on Israel and Palestine, arguing instead that the museological is always political.



Rokni Haerizadeh, “But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise” (2014), gesso, watercolor, and ink on inkjet prints, 18 parts from a 24-part work, 30 x 40 cm each, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund 2015.89 (© Rokni Haerizadeh, photo by Ramin Haerizadeh)

When the meeting ended, the movements that led me there were reversed, and I was re-escorted from the conference room to the elevator. The security guard pushed a button, and, moments later, the doors opened onto *But a Storm Is Blowing*. It was back in the galleries that the information imparted in “Debriefing Session II” was activated, becoming a lens through which to view curator Sara Raza’s selections. That the show’s title comes from one of Rokni Haerizadeh’s paintings — and is itself a line from Walter Benjamin’s 1940 essay about Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” (1920) — only proves Public Movement’s point about the the importation of European Modernism as the foundation of Israeli institutions: “Angelus Novus” lives in the collection of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Haerizadeh, an Iranian artist based in Dubai, paints on printouts of YouTube video stills taken from news footage of the Middle East. The artist’s adaptations of these images into tales from Persian mythology demonstrate the malleability of narrative.

Generally, the exhibition suffers from a tension between two unrelated goals: creating a cohesive curatorial statement and adding work to a collection. While *Under the Same Sun* and 2013’s *No Country*, which showcased South and Southeast Asia art, were broad surveys of their regions over

multiple decades, *But a Storm Is Blowing* focuses on the importance of geometry to the region in a selection of works from the past five years. Importantly, the exhibition identifies geometry not as a primary aesthetic structure in the Muslim religion but rather as a foundational unit of Modernist aesthetics. When British forces dismantled the Ottoman Empire in 1918, various Modernist inquiries into abstraction were at their height. Thus, to speak of occupation in the Middle East and North Africa — by the British or, later, by Israel — is to speak about Modernism, and vice versa. Raza's decision to make this link usefully reveals the historical and aesthetic entanglement between the West and the Middle East, but it's also a scripting of the region's aesthetic production that supplements the Guggenheim's existing collection of European and American art — a task that may be equally, if not more important, to the museum than properly representing the region.



Installation view, 'But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa,' Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 29–October 5, 2016 (photo by David Heald)

What's more, while it creates a kind of cohesion, the curatorial premise omits important voices from consideration, such as Moroccan-French artist Bouchra Khalili, whose stunning installation concurrently on view at the Museum of Modern Art charts the movement of displaced people from

across the Middle East. Even an artwork that was actually acquired by the Guggenheim in this iteration of the UBS initiative — Ramallah-based Emily Jacir's *Where we come from*, a project begun in 2001 wherein Jacir used her American passport to enact requests from Palestinians whose movements were impeded — was not put on view. Within the context of *Debriefing Session II*, such an exclusion looks increasingly suspicious. *But a Storm Is Brewing* is less a thematic survey of art from the Middle East and North Africa than it is a reflection of the Guggenheim looking at itself through a mirage of the region.

A second performance by Public Movement, "Choreographies of Power," further drives home how objects and aesthetics have been employed as tools for the building of nation-states. On two occasions last weekend, six performers dressed in stark white occupied the exhibition and the Guggenheim's permanent collection with a spirited display of national fervor and hand-to-hand combat. They began by moving through the galleries in a synchronized procession that demonstrated order, rigor, and discipline and inspired awe for the effortlessness of their agility. The echo of their stomping feet reverberated throughout the gallery, creating a haunting soundtrack. There was more than one moment when I got caught up in their fervent activities. As the performers came toward me in a unified block, the choreography of their strides in concert with their determination to create an unbreakable wall hinted at a dangerous kind of force that was especially chilling in the context of the resurgence of nationalism and fascism in the past year.

What initially began as a patriotic processional took on aspects of combat training exercises for a radicalized youth corps. The performers used each other's bodies to run drills in a manner suggestive of contact improvisation and Krav Maga, tagging one another across the gallery and initiating a chain reaction of maneuvers. To build the choreography, Yahalomi assembled movement phrasings from tactical training methods taught to firefighters, EMS workers, riot police, and soldiers (the nation requires almost all of its citizens over 18 to serve). She also incorporated movements from public parades and protests. The performers attacked each other with swiftness and surprise. Oftentimes, they would tumble into positions within a foot of audience members, stirring the air and causing discomfort.



Public Movement, “Choreographies of Power,” Sept 22–24, 2016, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (photo by Enid Alvarez, © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation)

Halfway into the 30-minute event, the performers broke ranks and then returned to the galleries of *But a Storm Is Blowing* with a painting: a reproduction of a landscape by the Israeli artist Uri Lesser. The original hung in the Tel Aviv Museum when the State of Israel was declared there in 1948, a unification of politics and aesthetics. After parading the painting through the audience for all to see, they placed it on a wall in the exhibition. Individuals were then escorted one by one by a Public Movement member from the exhibition to the Guggenheim’s collection via the emergency exit staircase. The secondary access route instilled the same air of covertness imparted in “Debriefing Session II.” I was moved through the permanent collection with a Public Movement performer’s hand on my shoulder. When I strayed, gestures of gentle domination, such as the pressure of a finger, directed me with the least physical communication possible. En route, I was told three secrets about objects owned by the Guggenheim, including the story of drawing that was stolen by a security guard only to reappear in the collection of one Mrs. L. and a reminder of how Abstract Expressionism was used as a weapon during the Cold War. The information was whispered into my ear, increasing the level of secrecy, but also intimacy. Rather than feeling privy to a secret this time, I was instead unnerved, disturbed by the quality of the performer’s touch in combination with a knowledge of their physical capacity.



While “Debriefing Session II” reveals how information without objects turns histories into rumors, “Choreographies of Power” demonstrates how objects have acted as secret agents on behalf of their countries. These past lives are erased once their service to the state has ended. Such stories are as much about how museums and government institutions handle their own histories as they are about how art has aided politics — something I was reminded of at the performance’s end. I was ushered through a security checkpoint, where my bag was checked upon my exit from the museum. Though it may have seemed innocuous in another context, this action, I saw, was yet another choreography of power, a performance of the institution in action.

*Public Movement’s “Debriefing Session II” takes place at the Guggenheim Museum (1071 Fifth Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) on select Saturdays between June and October.*

*“Choreographies of Power” occurred on September 24 and 25. But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise continues at the Guggenheim through October 5.*