



Figure 1: Emily Jacir: *stazione*, 2008–2009, Public intervention on Line 1 vaporetto stops, Venice, Italy. Commissioned for *Palestine c/o Venice*, collateral event of the 53rd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia.

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A “Non-Existing Existence” in the Contact Zone: Emily Jacir’s *stazione* (2008–2009)

Abstract With discussing the contribution of the artist Emily Jacir for the 53rd Venice Biennale 2009 *stazione* (2008–2009), this chapter will discuss the impact of the cancelled intervention and the artist’s alternative artistic outcome. Taking the brochure Jacir created in reaction to the cancellation of her intervention in the urban space of Venice, as an object representing the narrative of her project, this chapter will discuss both the brochure and Jacir’s planned artistic intervention with reference to the notion of Venice as an urban contact zone.

Keywords Cross-cultural Exchange, Cultural Transfer, Emily Jacir, Entangled Histories, Urban Contact Zone

stazione is a public intervention which was slated to take place at the 53rd Venice Biennale.

It was abruptly and unexplainedly cancelled by Venetian municipal authorities and remains unrealized." This statement written on the wall and the acrylic display box below it with brochures in Italian, English, and Arabic (see Fig. 1) are the only objects remaining from Emily Jacir's artistic intervention *stazione* (2008–2009).

The brochure is a map of the city of Venice, handed out to visitors in the "Palestinian Pavilion" during the 53rd Venice Biennale 2009. It guides interested individuals through the city center of Venice to all the places where Jacir's intervention was supposed to have taken place. Arriving at these places, they will see—nothing. All that is there is the information in the brochure to explain Jacir's artistic project. What remains is the lack of an artwork, a lack that is symbolic of Jacir's work as part of the first Palestinian participation at the Venice Biennale, the lack representing the act of cancellation and the map a highly symbolic object of resistance as a subversive artistic response to this. Both are part of the discursive potential of Venice as a contact zone. It is the "non-existing existence" of the project—a term borrowed from Jean Fisher (see Fisher 2009, 7)—which points to its non-existence as a result of the cancellation and at the same time to its existence as a result of the brochure, giving the project its lasting importance.

Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1991, 34). *stazione*, and especially the brochure, are part of this meeting, clashing, and grappling. Taking the brochure as an object representing the narrative of Jacir's project, this essay will discuss both the brochure and Jacir's planned artistic intervention with reference to the notion of Venice as an urban contact zone.

To show how *stazione* would have worked—and how the brochure still works—in the contact zone of urban Venice, it is useful to have a closer look at the artwork itself. There are four dimensions to *stazione*:

1. The visible result of the Arabic names being added to the various vaporetto, or waterbus, stops (cancelled before realization).
2. Jacir's two-year artistic research project about historical cross-cultural exchange between the Arab world, specifically Palestine, and Venice and its impact today.
3. The text for the catalogue accompanying the *Palestine c/o Venice* exhibition, in which Jacir explains the project and presents some of her research findings.
4. The brochure with the map, which was added after her project was cancelled by the vaporetto company ACTV, including photographs of each station with the translations as if they had been realized (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Emily Jacir: *stazione* 2008–2009. Public installation on Line 1 vaporetto stops (S. Marcuola). 2008–2009, digital photograph.

stazione was planned as one of six artistic statements in the exhibition *Palestine c/o Venice* curated by Salwa Mikdadi. Jacir's original intention was to add translations in Arabic to the Italian names of all vaporetto stops along Line 1. Line 1 runs through the Grand Canal and passes various monuments whose architecture is exemplary for the cross-cultural exchange between Venice and the Arab world. The Arabic names would "put them [the Arabic translations] in direct dialogue with the architecture and urban design of the surrounding buildings, thereby linking them with various elements of Venice's shared heritage with the Arab world" (Jacir 2009, 48). The artist's intention was to show and evoke the city's cross-cultural history (► **Entangled Histories**) and cultural transfer (► **Cultural Transfer**) with the Arab world, specifically Palestine, and to create a space for discussions about a future connection by emphasizing this "shared heritage."

Jacir hoped that the Arabic names at the vaporetto stops would have been the starting point for a new discussion about Palestine's and Venice's "cross-cultural fertilization" (Jacir 2009, 48). Looking at the digitally reconstructed pictures of these stops with the Arabic names included in the map, one realizes that Jacir's intervention in this public urban space would have invoked various associations for visitors (Biennale goers as well as citizens of Venice and tourists): On the one hand, the Arabic calligraphy could have appeared as a "mystical" element (Blankenship 2003, 61) pointing to the history of the two regions. On the other hand, they also could

have functioned as a provocation, as some viewers—and, perhaps, also some organizers responsible for the cancellation—would have associated the Arabic signage with anxieties about the effects of contemporary Arab migration, rather than considering the shared history Jacir was interested in. Added to specific stops along the Grand Canal, the Arabic translations would have highlighted specific architectural monuments near these places, such as the Doge's Palace, the Ca' d'Oro, and the Torre dell'Orologio, which embody the cultural transfer between Venice, the Arab world, and the Eastern Mediterranean in the fifteenth century. It is beyond the scope of this article to study these architectural exchanges in depth, but it should be noted that buildings such as the Ca' d'Oro, rather than simply adapting "Eastern" architecture, are, in fact, hybrid constructions composed of individual memories from the trade routes and traveler's accounts and resulted in the "layered architectural heritage" of Venice (Wood 2017, 135; see Howard 2000, 142–146). In addition to highlighting the architectural exchange, this artistic project also points to exchanges between Palestine and Venice in the fields of science, medicine, cartography, and philosophy. With Venice having served as the principal port for pilgrims to start their maritime journey to the "Holy Land"/Palestine since the Middle Ages (Howard 2000, 190), Jacir presents the city as an important station for the cross-cultural transfer between these regions. As yet another consequence of the cross-cultural history of Venice and Palestine, the numerous Arabic words that were absorbed into the Venetian dialect (and are still in use today) serve as evidence of the "multiple, plural, shifting, and eclectic" boundaries of the Mediterranean linguistic space (Dursteler 2016, 46–47).¹ Hence, it is the aspect of language, in particular, that Jacir's artistic research relates to the contemporary situation. With more than 246 million speakers, Arabic is the fifth most-spoken language in the world, and yet Arabic translations at touristic attractions outside the Arabic-speaking world are a very rare sight, including Venice. By adding the Arabic names to those very public spots along the Line 1 vaporetto, *stazione* would have alluded to this "non-existing existing" language (non-existing in the sense of not visually existing) in the urban display of Venice. In other words, it would have referred to the shared history yet at the same time highlighted the absence of those mutual moments in contemporary Venice. More than any other aspect of the work, this act of translation could have sparked provocation and conflict.

This brings me back to the brochure and the map. With the cancellation of the project, the idea of showing the "rich history of cross-cultural fertilization" (Jacir 2009, 48) between Palestine and Venice in this secular and reconciliatory way in public urban space remained unrealized. But

1 Due to the vivid exchange between Venice and Palestine, Venetian influence on Palestinian culture was, of course, also significant. It was a permanent process of exchange, changes, and appropriation. See for this wider view on the cross-cultural history of Venice and various Arabic countries: Wood 2017, 134–141.

I would argue that, in creating the brochure, Jacir ignored the cancellation of her project and actually opened up a new space for future discussions—discussions about cross-cultural exchange in historical, present-day, and future Venice as a contact zone.

As a guiding tool, a map is always a selective and highly subjective document—which at the same time makes it so effective in allowing the past to become part of the present of the map user (Woods 1992, 1). Jacir's map is going a step further: "And when they [the visitors] arrived [at the planned places of Jacir's project], they would discover it wasn't there, with my intention being that maybe sometime in the future people will think it was there, because I created this brochure [suggesting] that it actually happened, when it didn't" (Jacir 2015, n.p.).

In creating a map to guide the visitors to the absent artwork, Jacir's intention was to create a new fictive past for the unknown future. Even though the cross-cultural Arabic-Venetian past cannot be part of the present, the map still upholds the idea for the future. The object of the brochure still exists and will exist. Because the brochure was produced, the space for showing cross-cultural exchanges between Palestine and Venice also still exists—the map functions as an artifact for this "never-happened happening" and for the "never-shown shown" presence of Arabic-Venetian cross-cultural interaction in contemporary Venice.

The map indeed extends this space to allow for a contemporary discussion about cross-cultural exchanges. Representing the "meeting, clashing and grappling" of the different parties in the contact zone (ACTV, the artist, the Biennale organizers, etc.), the map will remind viewers in the future of the "highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1991, 34). In this way, the brochure opens up a space for new discussions and negotiations in the contact zone of the urban space of Venice today: As a place representing historical as well as contemporary cross-cultural exchange symbolized by the "non-existing existing" Arabic translations, and as a place for ongoing meetings, discussions, and conflicts negotiating the relationship between the Venetian and Palestinian cultures. The map will be a part of this.

Figures

Fig. 1: © Emily Jacir.

Fig. 2: © Emily Jacir 2009, Courtesy: Emily Jacir.

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