

The Transmigration Of Dennis Balk: An Interview

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Gean Moreno: What interests me about the shift in your work from more scientific or sci-fi projects to the current Middle East ones concerns whether the latter have been subjected to alternative readings or narratives.

Dennis Balk: For me, these types of narrative are not at all the same as accepted polemical or market alternatives. But more generally, all my work is one long unfolding narrative that constantly departs from the main plot, tries to go out there as far as possible, lose the audience, find them again, then flee once more—maybe it's a kind of soft-core sabotage with a taste for dirt.

GM: If I get your drift, you must still have to sort through the raw material—whether for personal reasons or because of a perceived historical importance—and then “crack” it into new, subatomic particles. But to backtrack, how and when did this narrative form of atom splitting begin? And how did you become interested in the Middle East?

DB: In the early 1990s, I mainly dealt with narratives concerning the gallery setting—you know, the back-stories, background, or subtexts of how art mainly exists only in galleries, particularly in New York. Artists rely on this dénouement, and in any case it is ubiquitous—separate yet always inherent in the work. I wanted to address this finish line, and maybe make it a little more obvious in the form of supplementary stories. One of the first examples of this occurred in a 1993 show at American Fine Arts, in the form of a little book titled *Alexandria*—an elaborate fictional account of the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Nag Hammadi codices, and the mysterious Royal Library of Alexandria, all of which take place in a sand-blown, sun-baked landscape with lots of Bedouins digging around in caves. The book also contained various subplots, including one concerning [renowned Gnostic and clairvoyant] Bishop James Pike becoming lost in the Israeli desert [in 1969] and dying from exposure [—a loose inspiration for Phillip K. Dick's final 1982 novel, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*]. He was

there to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ [as well as perhaps contact his dead son who had died of a drug overdose in New York three years before]. Later on, I wrote a play called *Emerson Outside Islam* [performed at One Dream Theater, New York in 1995]. It too presented a dystrophic sci-fi narrative in the mode of [Godard's 1965 film] *Alphaville*, in which I tried to merge Islamic and Western idealism in the mind of a paranoid schizophrenic [called "Eddie" as opposed to Godard's "Lemmie" Caution]. This was several years before I ever stepped foot in Islamic countries.

Essentially, all this theater work and related gallery installations were exercises in what I call wave narratives. In quantum mechanics, subatomic energy appears to behave more as waves than discrete particles, depending on how you view or measure them. I thought this was a great idea for making work, using wave functions as a metaphor of variable, cloud-like narrative trajectories. The most dynamic property of wave functions is their "uncertainty," not unlike narratives too. Feeling in a sense, obliged to express this uncertainty, I took a scatter-shot approach to a lot of extraneous but essential material—political history, modern physics, etc. The turning point in these investigations was *Monochrome Current Density Field with Anomalies* [shown at American Fine Arts in 1995]. Since then, I have consistently tried to make models of these uncertainty principles (in narrative, history, nationality, religion, etc.), which has now taken me to the Middle East and Arabian Gulf.

GM: In your earlier work, Islamic and Alexandrian stories appeared to offer interesting historical parallels to otherwise unconventional scenarios. Metaphorically speaking, they acted as foreign gene pools that could potentially destabilize Western ones, causing "out-of-place" cognitive shakeups or changes in mindset. In the new work, however, there seems a desire to engage contemporary Middle Eastern realities directly. I'd almost call it a journalistic impulse.

DB: If the new work does suggest a journalistic impulse this would obviously be a concern. At this point in the story, however, I believe it has more to do with objectivity backfilling the iconography involved. Of course I am flirting with

a documentary approach, by placing myself in or near zones of conflict, but at the same time I allow other areas of experience and desire to flow through and color the pretense of objectivity.

I'm in the Middle East right now. But I'm not here to gather or "cover" news, though I can make independent observations. Take the current misrepresentations of Hezbollah and Hamas in the Western press, which are extremely interesting from the viewpoint of corporate media politicization. I like being immersed in it all, the feel and look of it.

Over the last several months, I've done pictures in reaction to events I either experienced firsthand or which took place in nearby Lebanon and Syria. If the impulse of journalists is to put themselves in the direct line of fire so as to better the cause and prevention of human suffering, then I can identify with that. At the same time, this new work formally addresses the malleability of my wave model, at least to me. My November 2006 show at Michael Steinberg in New York, "Hashish," was another piece of the narrative puzzle, a model response to the events of last summer in Beirut and in particular the border town of Qana. ["Hashish"— which included photographic portraits taken in Amman and in Wehdat, the Palestinian U.N. camp in Jordan—comes from Balk's phrase in the style of Hassan-i-Sabbah, "my hashish dreams of Palestine free."] That's what all the scratchy graphical work is about, scratching at the model. The wave model is broad and uses anything to assist in its quantization.

GM: Yet it's rather difficult to reconcile the "hard facts" of the Middle East with this seemingly fantastic idea of subatomic particles. Is it desirable? Can it even be done? And what if these facts don't fit your model? Do you throw it away? Indeed, there's a sort of positivist relativity in linking such disparate social and material levels, like claiming that nothing exists in a sense beyond our own "wavy" perceptions and models or reality. A working premise of your PARTICLES + WAVES WITH PLAUSIBILITY [2005 book and related projects] is that "culture is the reanimation of physical debris that exists in the subatomic regions." How do you square this statement with something else you said during our conversation,

namely concerning the “pedantic, poorly conceived humanism that gets tossed around as culture theory and produces our current versions of ‘political’ art”?

DB: These “hard facts” may actually be the media I’m now trying to sort through. But it is such an extreme way of viewing the Middle East conflict, to assume that one can weigh evidence and determine the crime and punishment. One fact seems “harder” than most, though, which is that Sunnis and Shi’as do not see the world in the same way. You witness this in every corner of the region. And the same goes for grass-roots organizations like Hezbollah, at least here in the Gulf. They are mostly a dynamic, productive presence in everyday community life, and not the troublemakers or terrorists, which I can only assume is the consensus back home. (The cruel and unusual loss of life in Lebanon, in which Hezbollah was undoubtedly complicit, cannot be attributed to the organization as a whole.) Indeed, hard-nose reporters are usually only skating across a very thin surface layer, beneath which lie a myriad of contradictions and complexities. For me, it’s hard enough connecting up these contradictions.

The recent Palestine media coverage was basically an accumulation of empty sound bytes, 30-second screen crawls, and one-minute stories. Because it is a life-and-death situation, these abbreviations and misrepresentations are agonizing, unethical, and grossly opaque to the sort of critical model I’m proposing. For me, the wave model addresses the inherent half-truths and distortions of consensus media evaluation, including the ethical spin entailed (or lack thereof). For instance, the pictures I’m making now can’t be shown in Bahrain or Jordan, as the cultural ministries there won’t allow it. They contain images of [Lebanese Hezbollah leader] Hassan Nasrallah, and I assume they don’t want to stir up trouble. I understand and respect that.

GM: However ill chosen the term “hard facts” may have been, I still think that it goes to the heart of what we’ve been discussing—namely, the grafting of two completely different trajectories or discourses of reality, those concerning the Middle East versus particle physics. Don’t you find yourself in the same dilemma as the ethnographer in the end, importing incommensurable details into an

arbitrary (usually “scientific”) cultural model? Secondly, if your new work can’t be seen by the very people who are living the circumstances depicted therein, then who is its audience, intended or otherwise? Does that make the work somewhat “activist” in tone? Are activist and ethnographer, in their alternate manifestations, the only options here? Or is it more an aberration of the two, revealing a kind of “ambiguous heterotopia” [after Samuel Delany’s 1976 sci-fi novel] in which different cultures or places are [according to Foucault’s 1967 essay “Of Other Spaces”] “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”?

DB: I’m obviously pretty far from ethnography, I’m not even in the customary position of proposing a sympathetic, “political” art, which usually takes place at a comfortable distance from danger zones and has very little influence on them. In the Middle East, however, politically motivated iconography usually involves a straightforward portrait or mythological scene, clearly representing a particular faction and always perceived as such.

If you’re implying playing off certain incommensurables against one another, then I don’t have a problem with that. I’ve always been attracted to perceptual incongruity because it helps to illuminate the creative process and its vehicle. Materially equating Islamist raw emotion or policies with quantum mechanics is not inherently contradictory. The wave-particle duality is simply a narrative device for forcing unforeseen juxtapositions into being, like connecting Hezbollah to the ancient Giza Plateau and the reincarnation of Egyptian Pharaohs as present-day jihadists [in a forthcoming sci-fi pulp paperback]. If you throw down two random points, you already have a potential narrative structure, even though, as I have said, external problems may inevitably arise. But there are already so many cultural restrictions and aporias in the Middle East that what I am attempting seems minor by comparison.

GM: But how far can the narrative stretch? At least in the past you were working with “established” material (like Lincoln and Ho Chi Minh [in *Genetics with French Revolutionaries*, 1992]), but now you are incorporating materials that are still developing. Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the Palestinian camps in Jordan, etc. Here, you are raising doubts—or simply providing plausible alternatives—not in

relation to historically established narratives, but in contrast to well-considered media and oppositional opinions. Is that kosher?

DB: After the work spins itself out, all manner of material and ideological implications rise to the surface. It is as much a product of conscious thought as what the work seeks to accomplish in its own terms. The [2006] Nasrallah canvases simply present the most charged type of reading because of current controversy, but that is precisely why they call up the political realities of this place so well and make him such a powerful presence in the work. I depict him as neither wave nor particle, but as both—which is a fundamentally different critique from what you see on CNN. And because this Shi'a cleric is deeply connected to a major slice of the region's history [his son's death at the hands of the Israelis in 1997 played a major role in the 2000 withdrawal and recent reoccupation], including being a protégé of Ali Khamenei. You see this much more clearly here than in the U.S. In the Gulf you often see past political leaders prominently displayed, inspiring all the different reconfigurations of the remote and recent past doesn't seem so strange in this context.

It would be nice to work in the vein of Bruce Nauman's *The Artist Helps The World By Revealing Mystic Truths* [1967], spiraling around present-day turmoil. In my case, however, ideological and religious truths are directly tied to the past, one that doesn't exactly have a Western equivalent. In very broad terms, our past is a mythical construction that only equates poorly to current functioning ideologies, fomenting inconclusiveness and popular malcontent. Achieving world peace. For example, is such a triumphant Western myth. But I'm personally not interested in myth. If I could reflect the deadly confusion of the human psyche, then that would be a worthy subject. However, I don't think you can reveal the very confusion into which you have been born, at least not without adding to it.

GM: Well, maybe there's a precise way to diagram that confusion. I'm thinking of those artists who attempt to trace the intricate movement of global capitalism, its speed of progress and baffling devolutions. In the Western system of value there is a general equivalency of objects and the amount of money they generate, something that can't be directly sculpted or depicted. So other,

roundabout ways of representation need to be constructed to offer allegories of the impossibility of illustrating this cultural trait. [In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System*, 1992] Fredric Jameson reads conspiracy films as a reaction to our collective inability to “cognitively map” global capitalism. The blurred or opaque core of conspiracy theories, the undisclosed conspirator, and unexplained happenings at the margins of the story—all these are stand-ins for the inscrutability of ever finding hard answers in such a miasmatic system.

I like the idea of deploying heterotopias not for harmonious but apocalyptic reasons. For instance, concerning the latter, Black British kids regularly spin diasporic, Dubstep electronics to see what sparks might fly. In such a confusion of references and narratives, and the un-synthesizable interactions they breed, we may finally be able to glimpse behind the convenient (ideological) compartmentalization of reality a vast and ungraspable “alien” landscape. In these more negative heterotopias, we see a mixing of narratives that respect neither temporal nor disciplinary borders, pitting say, bacteria against suicide bombers. A Petri dish approach might be justly used to sample Shi’ite culture but ultimately this would only reflect a kind of constant ontological movement, an irresolvable, ever adaptable reformatting of unrelated materials.

DB: Irresolvable, yes, but not fatalistic—and negative only as unspoken stories. As you know, I have worked with diagrams and schematics for quite a while. And as much as one might want them to be dynamic and inclusive, they aren’t. Not only do they immediately belong to the past, they are forever exclusive. The flow of global capital will never know the sacrifices of a Pakistani migrant worker who has left his family in search of work or the agony of Palestinians with no civil rights. How is it possible to rally against the occupying forces? Which narratives have a ring of truth about them and which ones are full of deceit? What kind of theory could ever map the inherently un-theoretical? With calls to prayer constantly wafting through the air where I live, I ask myself what unitary narrative could possibly answer the innumerable and incommensurable religious proclamations that now encircle the globe?