

CITIZEN SALLOUM

by Laura U. Marks

The question of how to be a citizen in the age of vanishing nation states demands that we ask, a citizen of *what*? Citizenship now, if it is to involve more than nationalism and more than going with the flow of global capitalism, means working across borders, building networks of responsibility and belonging. Citizenship in Canada might most optimistically be defined as *becoming-Canadian*, a flexible and continuous critique of our responsibilities as residents of this nation in relation to the world. Artists' success is often defined by an exclusive boundary marked by exhibitions and funding: the city, the region, the nation or, in what for some is the zenith of a successful career, membership in the international nowhere of the festival and biennial circuit. Jayce Salloum, a second-generation Lebanese-Canadian artist, redefines citizenship in general, and artistic citizenship in particular, across these boundaries. Salloum is an exemplar of the duties and benefits of citizenship in the age of global capitalism and international mega-exhibitions. He shows how an artist might weave a flexible web of micro-citizenships and trans-citizenships.

Canadian citizenship is being redefined, legally and culturally, as something less than the mosaic that two decades of multiculturalist policy attempted to establish. That policy had its problems, as readers of *Fuse* know well. But recent Canadian political practice seeks to establish a nationalism that is atavistic at best and slavish to global corporate interests at worst. Consider, for example, the funding criteria of Telefilm Canada. Transnationalism should be included as part of any definition of Canadianness, for one of the things this country does best is host the expression of immigrants who are Canadian *in that* they have other national loyalties as well. Yet a few years back, Telefilm redefined "Canadian cinema" according to a newly narrow prism of Canadianness: Canadian director, Canadian producer, Canadian actors, Canadian locations and Canadian content. One of the ridiculous outcomes of this policy was the questioning of whether Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, filmed in India by a Canadian director, could qualify as a Canadian film.

Meanwhile, like the country to the south, Canada has been closing its borders to immigrants. The restrictive immigration policy introduced in 2002 brusquely put an end to the relatively inclusive points system that made this country a popular destination for immigrants. The decision last year to evict thousands of Algerian refugee applicants reflected a cool calculation that Canadian corporate investment in Algeria was more valuable than the lives of a few who would return to the threat of imprisonment and torture. All this is to say that Canada's inclusive multicultural identity is becoming ever harder to defend. For many of us in the arts, the final blow came with the debacle at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). You may remember what happened; Rawi Hage's mischievous recounting of the events (including Sheila Copps' memorable greeting "Salaam. Shalom." to the Arab-Canadians assembled at the vernissage) appeared in *Fuse* a little over a year ago. Aida Kaouk, the museum's curator responsible for the Middle East and



I imagined that my house
was speaking to me..



"Many a burning tear did fall
when you went away..

All images are from the videotape *untitled part 3b: (is if) beauty never ends...*, 11:22, Jayce Salloum, 2003.
Courtesy: the artist

Southwest Asia, had spent five years researching and planning the exhibition "The Lands Within Me: Expressions by Arab-Canadian Artists." It was finally due to open on October 18, 2001. After the attack on the World Trade Center in September of that year, in a nod to anti-Arab sentiment, museum director Victor Rabinovitch decided to "postpone" the exhibition. Salloum, Hage and I were some of the actors who mobilized support for Dr. Kaouk and her landmark exhibition. We circulated a letter that traveled widely in art, activist and Arab communities, thanks especially to Salloum's prodigious mailing lists. International lovers of art, Arabs and free speech activists rallied in support of the exhibition. The Prime Minister himself called in Parliament for the show to go on. And it did but with a lingering bitter aftertaste.

The twist of the knife came a year later, in October 2002. After public attention had moved away from the fiasco at the museum, its directors fired Dr. Kaouk, declaring her position redundant. This time protests had less effect. The museum condescended to throw Dr. Kaouk a position of much smaller scope: a three-year contract to research Canadian women originating from the Horn of Africa. Though she still carries out work related to "The Lands Within Me," the Middle East and South-West Asia department has been eliminated. This implies that Arab-, Iranian- and Afghan-Canadians, among others, do not deserve representation at the national museum of the people. What must these citizens do to prove they are Canadians? And given that Dr. Kaouk is the museum's only female curator of non-European origin, what is the Museum of Civilization saying about who really counts as Canadian?

Back to 2001. We defended the exhibition in its entirety but one work was singled out for condemnation by lobbyists, Salloum's five-channel video installation *everything and nothing*. The exhibition as a whole was more suited to its location in the Museum of Civilization than it would have been across the river at the National Gallery of Canada. It was a survey of the many ways in which Arab-Canadians make art: many using such modest media as print-making, calligraphy and ceramics, as well as a few works in the international style, such as the installations by Salloum and by Jamelie Hassan. The showy form and overtly political content of Salloum's piece would be perfectly at home, say, representing Canada at the Venice Biennale—but it stood out among the other works in "The Lands Within Me." It was this work that was singled out for attention by the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) for its criticism of Israel: a series of reminiscences by 1948 Palestinians on one of its five screens and, more damningly, an interview with Lebanese activist Soha Bechara on another. Bechara had been detained for ten years in Khiam, a detention center in south Lebanon run for Israel by its proxy, the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA). She had attempted to assassinate the general of the SLA. On another screen, intellectuals from the former Yugoslavia discuss the impossibility of national belonging, in quite existential terms, after the Yugoslavian war.

In their press releases, the CJC became curious art critics, asking how an artwork that interviewed Lebanese, Palestinians and people from the former Yugoslavia could be considered Canadian. This accusation ignored a tradition of becoming-Canadian that remains our country's dearest hope for a meaningful identity in the

world. It's a gloomy situation when people feel they must ask why Canada should care about oppression and self-determination in other countries. While Canada's immigration and human rights policies seem ever more sensitive to the needs of global corporations, dissident art like Salloum's insists that Canadian-ness involves the responsibility to facilitate the global flow of humans, rather than that of capital.

Everything and nothing was attacked not only as not-Canadian, but also as not-art. This was mere reportage, the CJC suggested; it did not belong in a museum. But it would be a rare news item indeed where the interviewer allowed his poor French to be heard on the tape, offered his interviewee a bunch of red roses and listened to her reflect that roses should not be put in water, and used the subtle means of art to reveal the human love that kept Bechara alive and hopeful during six years of solitary confinement.

When everything about the Canadian Museum of Civilization debacle delineated Canadian officialdom's impulse to stifle democracy, Salloum's was one of the warmest and most insistent voices raised in defense of the democratic principles of free speech, reasoned debate and ethical struggle.

Indeed, Salloum's work challenges what counts as Canadian. Like Mehta, he takes advantage of Canadian citizenship to work freely in his country of heritage, producing art that he could never make if he were a citizen of that country. If he were a Lebanese national, he could not film in the Occupied Territories, as he does, for example, in the videotape with Elia Suleiman, *Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal (Introduction to*



the reason behind the tears,



- and then it asked me about

the end of an argument) *Speaking for oneself ...speaking for others* (1990). More fundamentally, he demonstrates that one of the great privileges of making art as a Canadian is having a locally rooted sense of global citizenship.

Salloum also forges an international pan-Arab citizenship at a time when pan-Arabism is suffering blow after blow in the Arab world itself. Benefiting from Canadian and North American funding, exhibition and distribution structures, he is able to speak more widely in the West than is possible for most Arab artists. He could have taken advantage of this exposure only to promote himself. But a kind of will to democracy urges him to share his fortune with others. It's interesting that this impulse to act on behalf of a collective (even to bring a collective into being) also characterizes the work of other Lebanese and diasporic artists and curators such as Walid Ra'ad, Akram Zaatari and Christine Tohme.

As an instigator of events, as well as an artist, Salloum forges a transnational citizenship with Lebanon and the Arab world. Believing in the ability of art to shape personal and collective becoming, Salloum is one of the people who helped bootstrap independent video production into existence in Lebanon. Shortly after the end of the civil war, he and Ra'ad returned to Beirut to facilitate a workshop on video to artists, intellectuals and activists who had plenty to say, but little infrastructure with which to say it. As a programmer, he brings Arab video to audiences that might otherwise never see it, in the traveling exhibition "In/tangible cartographies: new Arab video and film," and urges North American distributors to take up this

work. It's a separate problem that these ephemeral works are rarely seen in the Arab world itself: this is, of necessity, an audience constituted in diaspora as much if not more than at home. Like a one-person NGO he constitutes a virtual democracy in screening rooms from Brussels to Seattle where Arab voices reach the ears of their diasporic and other friends.

Salloum could easily settle into a place somewhere in the firmament of international art stardom. But his sense of civic responsibility begins locally, in the dual-class society of Vancouver. In his hometown, he organizes activist art projects, much like the intervention in Beirut ten years ago, with the goal of giving disenfranchised people a means for expression, empowerment and pleasure.

All this activity requires a certain ascetic determination. Indeed, everybody who knows Salloum remarks on his single-mindedness, and personally I'm astounded at his discipline in front of a few grams of bittersweet chocolate. But this is also a person who photographs sentimental window displays, who would rather talk about roses with Soha Bechara than press her for lurid details of her imprisonment, who cannot write a sentence without seasoning it with a pepper of ellipses. Some tenderness, some cherishing of the oblique and inexpressible animates his activism. Citizen Salloum knows that global citizenship starts at the local, and nothing is more local than the inexpressible reaches of the heart.

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