

The way in which communities are built and maintained by the collective narratives we circulate is a central feature of Jamelie Hassan's diverse artistic output. I have known Hassan for a number of years and am familiar with her multi-media installations and interventions, but beyond her video installations *Meeting Nasser* (1985) and *Boutros al Armenian / Mediterranean Modern* (1998) I was unaware that she had experimented so extensively with moving images in her artwork. Hence, it was a bit of a surprise when she mentioned over coffee one morning in her kitchen that she had over a number of years created a series of film and video works. My partner and long time collaborator Julian Haladyn gave me a look of astonishment that mirrored my own sentiments. (In retrospect we ought not to have been surprised as it was through Jamelie and her partner Ron Benner that we both learned the most about Jack Chambers' use of film). Our curiosity was piqued and we pressed Jamelie for more details. She was rather nonchalant as she confirmed that she had used videos in a number of installations.

A few days later Jamelie dropped by with a large white box filled with variously formatted videos. Julian and I were excited to peer through them. We plugged in the necessary equipment required to view the assortment of VHS and DV tapes – media we had experimented with ourselves and abandoned in favor of DVD and digitized projectors and screens. In the dark we watched the flickering images that are characteristic of the ways in which analog and digital tape age. We sorted through the box of tapes peering at labels: a typewriter has been used to type some of the cassette labels, other labels are written in smudged pencil or pen. In this white box there is a mix of media, both outmoded and contemporary, which speaks to the permeable boundaries of media and aesthetic forms, of the modes through which ideas circulate through our culture and the formats that they take as they are spoken and exchanged. The circulation of ideas occurs as a dialogue between the spectator – who is an intersubjective agent, one who translates art through their own subjective positions – and the artwork, which thanks to the Duchampian readymade can take any



box of videos

form, from a mass produced urinal to a mere conceptual idea. The artist is mediumistic according to Duchamp, and so too I argue is the spectator. Duchamp gives equal importance to both positions, the work of art “is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an esthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter” of the artwork.<sup>1</sup> It is the bodies of both artist and spectator that function as the medium through which art is translated and made sensible. This is why Duchamp says that artworks depend on posterity because the spectator is an endless multitude of possibilities stretched across time.

The multiple layers of Hassan’s artistic practice provide an opportunity to study the processes in which art functions as a responsive dialogue not just to art but also to the everyday material culture in which we live. The boundaries between art and life are blurry. Visible in Hassan’s artistic practice is the manner in which we are constantly in the process of forming our identities in conjunction with our discursive exchanges and our social environments. In *Olives for Peace* (2003) she presents spectators with video footage of a young child, Hassan’s great-niece Marwa, outside with olives that she is eating. Images of ceramic tiles from Hassan’s series *Palestine’s Children* (1990) are montaged into the video footage of the girl playing in a laneway in Canada. The tiles are painted by Hassan and are based on paintings by Salwa al Sawalhy, whose work records her daily life in the Rafah Refugee Camp in Gaza and show scenes of strife and unimaginable violence rendered in the abstract simplicity that is characteristic of children’s art. Hassan’s rendition of al Sawalhy’s paintings is an example of how two artists engage in an artistic dialogue that is itself a response to a particular context, in this case life as seen by a Palestinian child. Hassan juxtaposes the images of a child discovering the world in her front yard with images of violence that are the reality of another child.

*Olives for Peace* is projected on a wall as part of the 2004 installation *Smurfistan*, an installation in which Hassan re-constructs a child’s bedroom filled with smurfs and other toys battling for dominance in the space of what



stills from *Olives for Peace*

she calls a social laboratory. The identity of a child is one that is learned and imitated from the reality that surrounds *them*, from bed sheets to wallpaper, from reading primers to images and toys. It should be noted that I am intentionally using the terms *they*, *them* and *their* as sexless plurals, which was considered grammatically correct until it was replaced in the 18th century by the term *he*, which until recently has been used to apply to both sexes. Attempts at gender equity have resulted in the awkwardness of *he* and *she* alternations, or worse still, *he/she* or *s/he*. According to Patricia T. O’Conner and Stewart Kellerman, in 1775 Anne Fisher replaced the usage of *they* with *he* in her popular book *A New Grammar*, which is “believed to be the first to say that the pronoun *he* should apply to both sexes” regardless of the fact that “for centuries the universal pronoun was *they*. Writers as far back as Chaucer used it for singular and plural, masculine and feminine. Nobody seemed to mind that *they*, *them*, and *their* were officially plural.”<sup>2</sup> This debate over a bi-sexual pronoun – the *we* to which my argument is focused – is demonstrative of the power language has to shape subjectivities and the way speech rules are themselves subject to dialogic processes. As the combined voices of Vladimir Volosinov and Mikhail Bakhtin argue: “With respect to living language, systematic, grammatical thought must inevitably adopt a conservative position, i.e. it must interpret living language as if it were already perfected and readymade, and thus must look upon any sort of innovation in language with hostility. Formal, systematic thought about language is incompatible with living historical understanding of language.”<sup>3</sup> Reality is the multitude of discursive forms that surround us and form part of our daily experiences, yet we often overlook a discussion of the politics of form, of the ways in which we as spectators dialogically respond to art and in doing so co-creatively reproduce it in our bodies, our sensations and our voices. In *Olives for Peace* Hassan points our attention to the cultural construction of childhood, the ways in which some children are raised in peace, but others are raised in unnecessary war over land construed by some



Installation of Smurfistan

as the promised-land and still others as a stolen homeland. These conflicting ideas are part of an ideological struggle, one in which the very vocabulary of reality is contested right down to the very drawings of a child.

Hassan's dialogic montage of ordinary scenes of childhood with images of war parallels Jack Chambers' film *Hybrid* (1967).<sup>4</sup> In this film he montages still photographs of the Vietnam War and its victims with moving images of the process of cultivating roses; the images often offend because they interrogate our sense of answerability. Bakhtin argues that answerability means that we have to answer with and through our own lives for what we have experienced and understood; for him this process of "answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame."<sup>5</sup> The flickering images of roses and war make us feel responsible and guilty. Chambers focuses our eyes on the ways in which life is cultivated through cultural apparatuses that are structured by relations of power. His anti-war film constructs a sublime aesthetic, one that instills a growing sensation of responsibility and complicity through the framing of a horrific beauty. Chambers' comparison of the hybridization of roses with graphic photographs of Vietnamese citizens disfigured by the American military industrial machine at first seems a discordant pairing, but the import becomes increasingly clear – after a few jump-cuts the spectator comprehends that what they have in common is human agency.<sup>6</sup> The step-by-step process of achieving a specific end is apparent in the development of both roses and war. Chambers asks us as (active) spectators for a visceral response to these provocative images that demonstrate the degree to which aesthetics influences the collective order of culture, right down to our very bodies and minds. In one sequence a photograph of a Vietnamese man blindfolded and bound with rope is montaged with film of a man staking and binding a rose bush with twine: through the aesthetically conflicting images, Chambers communicates the idea that the ordering of life often results from severe methods. Like Hassan, Chambers points out how seemingly mundane acts and objects are political in the ways that they shape our thoughts and actions.

Likewise in *Olives for Peace*, what Hassan makes visibly obvious is the fact that the boundaries of reality, like the conventions that frame it, are permeable and plastic, repeated at will on our bodies. She does so by presenting the scene of a young toddler (Marwa with beautiful brown eyes) contemplating olives and stones, while her mother sits next to her holding a nude black doll with curly hair in one arm and on the other rests the grip of a metal crutch. Framing this peaceful scene between mother and child are painted tiles copied from the paintings of a young girl living in Gaza: brightly coloured scenes of war and bloodshed as seen by a child dialogue with images of another child playing a world away in Canada. The ways that children are responsively shaped by social concord and conflict is the subtext of this video. Both Hassan and Chambers emphasize the politics inherent in everyday life and our willingness to disregard the corresponding power dynamics that are part of all cultural relationships and in doing so they ask us to account for our deepest beliefs.

As Jacques Rancière states: “There is no art without a specific form of visibility and discursivity which identifies it as such. There is no art without a specific distribution of the sensible tying it to a certain form of politics. Aesthetics is such a distribution.”<sup>7</sup> The aesthetics of art is the sensation produced through artwork itself, whatever forms it may take. For Bakhtin the aesthetic activity of the arts functions as a bridge between the self and others. An artwork is the means to communicating the internal thoughts of an individual to the collectivity that is the external world. The dialogic nature of thought means that ideas are actualized only when they are communicated in some fashion. The idea is intersubjective since as Bakhtin states, “the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between consciousnesses.”<sup>8</sup> Human thought exists in an intersubjective web of communications that are in constant exchange between individuals and collectives. Discourse is living and exists in the multiple moments of communication as it takes place through the body. It is through the back and forth ebb and flow of ideas that discourse functions



stills from *Olives for Peace*

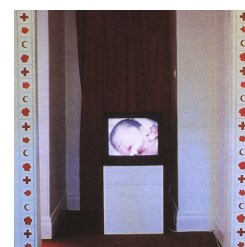
to create the living social forces that structure our communities and our everyday lives. Discourse is plastic and takes many forms from books, film, painting, video, and includes the actual bodies that experience and reproduce it. All discourse functions to give identity to the individuals who make up particular communities, which at their heart are relations between self and other(s). Through the aesthetic processes of art the individual spectator engages in an intersubjective exchange between the self and a socially constructed other that is communicated through the artwork. The discourse of art takes place in a multitude of contexts and is dependent on an apparatus – or form of visibility and discursivity – that enables the exchange of such speech acts.

Hence, in *Olives for Peace* the juxtaposed images of the small hands of a toddler holding olives and scenes of war drawn by a child communicate the trauma of war and exposes the idea that childhood should be innocent and free of strife but too often is not. Hassan makes visible the illusions that order childhood and are reproduced in our very toys. In doing so, she makes it evident how playing with a black doll or a white doll, playing cowboys and Indians at war with plastic toys has everything to do with our ideological outlook as adults and the actual wars that are part of our lives.

While each individual has a varying degree of freedom to respond to discursive exchanges there are some limits. After all as Bakhtin argues, “Our speech... our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness,’ varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate.”<sup>9</sup> While discourse takes place in exchange with the other, influencing our thoughts and actions, the restrictions of speech are always being contested in culture. The degree to which we allow ourselves to be blind and often passive to social constraints is the focus of much of Hassan’s artwork. To accomplish this task she often

blurs the boundaries of genre and speech to make her point. Hence, the jumble of toys mixed in with a child's impressions of war in *Smurfistan*.

Bakhtin traces the emergence of the dialogic novel from multiple genres that have evolved from ancient literary forms into modern forms. After a lifetime of study he comes to the conclusion that "Dialogic relationships are possible ... among images belonging to different art forms. But such relationships already exceed the limits of metalinguistics."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the process through which art is socially and ideologically constituted is through dialogic relationships that exceed the boundaries of genre and form. Such social and cultural overlaps are made visible in Hassan's video installation *The Well* (2001) located at the Museum of Health Care in Kingston, Ontario. This installation consists of a video monitor set up in front of a red velvet curtain, set back in an archway, which Hassan has inlaid with red and white tiles painted with images of roses, red crosses and crescents. The curtain functions as a sensuous backdrop to the home videos of the birth by caesarean of Alice Benner's two children: Max, born February 26, 1999, and Luc, born March 15, 2001. There is a push and pull between two forms of sensuality: the erotic sensation of the red velvet curtains theatrically framing the video monitor and its moving images, which depict the grotesque sensuality of birth. The images and sounds of the birth are very visceral. In fact, at screenings of *The Well* I consistently noticed a number of spectators – both women and men – clenching their bodies and wincing in response to the grotesque images, but there is both fear and smiling wonder at this universal process. In grotesque realism "the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people."<sup>11</sup> Reminiscent of Chambers' *Hybrid*, Hassan uses close-up images of cultivated red roses to frame the scenes of Alice's c-section, a cultivated form of birth – a gesture made more significant when we discover that all four members of the Benner/Williams family have been born through caesarean.



Installation of *The Well*



Life is shown in the process of becoming, a metamorphosis that is unending and rooted in the body itself. It is through surgical procedures like the c-section –which comes with an array of machines, devices, discourses and medical personnel – that the body is regimented and cultivated. Michel Foucault’s conception of bio-power is evident in the images of birth we witness and its bloody viscera; it is through such regulatory mechanisms that the family is transformed, molded and framed as useful. Hassan uses ordinary home videos to spotlight the dialogue between discourse and the body. For example, as the surgical team extracts a child from Alice’s cut open and splayed stomach one of the doctors states that at another hospital ninety percent of women giving birth receive epidurals. The first nurse responds by saying “We need to coach...coach those ladies,” while the second nurse exclaims “How sad!” In this exchange the normative politics of medicine are momentarily made visible, but much is left implied in these seemingly benign statements. It is such silences or gaps that are of interest in Hassan’s video, as Foucault states “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”<sup>12</sup>

The images of birth and cultivated red roses are framed through Hassan’s inclusion of historically contextualizing end-titles, which state: “Caesarian operation, one for delivering a child by cutting the mother, so called from Julius Caesar, who was born through such an operation.” This operation is the very definition of Bakhtin’s grotesque body: the body that is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.”<sup>13</sup> These end-titles link contemporary caesareans, specifically the caesarean births of Max and Luc, to a long history in which the deployment of medical mechanisms are discursively enacted on the body. Close-up shots depict the grotesque births of both brothers, while their mother calmly looks at the camera, in each case separated from her sons by surgical draperies that prevent her from seeing her sons pried out of her abdomen covered in blood and viscera. Surgical scissors cut Max’s wet umbilical cord while



still from The Well

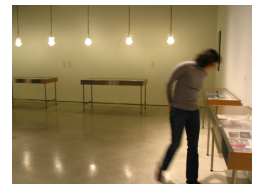


his red genitals reveal his sex. Later a slow pan reveals his small body in an incubator as he sucks on the feeding tube taped to his mouth, a jump-cut reveals a heart monitor measuring his vitals, another cut continues the pan down his body revealing the small clear plastic bag collecting his urine. This medical apparatus is supported by human agency: it is Alice, John, Max and Luc, along with the nurses and doctors who are the human components that give support and form to biopower by lending their bodies and actions. Without the human body, as it is cultivated through social controls, there is no body politic. The sterile environment of the hospital and the surgical intervention that makes Max's birth possible does not exist without the participation of each person. Biopower is the cultivation of social ideas upon our bodies.



stills from *The Well*

The dialogic aesthetic of cultural artifacts and the material ways in which ideas and subjects interact is the focus of *Orientalism & Ephemera* (2006-2009), an exhibition curated by Hassan.<sup>14</sup> Through the arrangement of artifacts, texts, artworks and hanging mosque lamps Hassan's archive demonstrates the myriad ways in which Orientalism is expressed across a global context. Each object in Hassan's archival display – including matchbooks, balloons, films, signs, souvenirs, photographs and books – functions to make visible the material forms that ideas take and the way these forms conceptually and ideologically shape and structure the world as we experience it. The subject posited in this exhibition is not unilateral but dialogic, presenting the possibility of a free engagement with the artifacts displayed – a freedom, however, that comes with a responsibility on the part of the engaging subject. The processes of subjectivity as articulated in *Orientalism & Ephemera* (and I would argue most of Hassan's works) takes place at the point of contact between the subject's body and discourse. The aesthetic forms of the idea are reflected in the responsive actions of our bodies. This is not to say that discourse predetermines the subject, but that the subject is in dialogue with discourse. Bakhtin makes clear that a dialogic encounter between the subject and the other “does not result in



Art Gallery of Windsor installation of *Orientalism and Ephemera*

merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, dialogic processes are embodied in our actions as subjects, which actively respond to the ideas that we are given with a distinctive back and forth influence, rather than being subjected to a slavish relationship to an “original” idea. Each subject has the possibility to find their own way, to change and adjust the idea that is given and to make it compatible with their own cultural and historical context.



still from *Les langues du monde*

The way discourse shapes our identities is the theme of *Les langues du monde* (2000). Filmed in the now dismantled rare book library at the University of Western Ontario, Professor Clive Thomson sits in front of a young boy, Hassan’s nephew Qays, reading out loud “Écrire les langues du monde” by Radhia Dziri – which focuses on the development of Arabic writing through multiple languages both written and spoken across the Middle East, Asia and parts of Europe – while a girl, Hassan’s niece Baalqis – who is named after the famed and learned Queen of the ancient Yemen – walks around the library caressing the leather spines of old books. The physicality of books, the spaces of reading, the act of touching and turning the pages of a book are part of the construction of languages of the world. The same two children investigate their relationship to Arabic language and culture in Hassan’s *Topsy Turvy Land* (1999), a work conceptually and contextually connected with *Les langues du monde* – both being conceived and often screened together. Hassan’s main focus in these works is to negotiate the chronotopes of language in relation to developments of subjective identities. In *Les langues du monde*, we listen to Thomson’s voice as he makes audible a text that traces out how language is “être empruntée par un multitude (borrowed by a multitude).”<sup>16</sup> Thomson reads in French, while English subtitles scroll across the bottom of the screen. Hassan’s work continually exposes the manner in which the subjective repetition of ideas – be it in the form of medical procedures, collected ephemera or personal encounters with language – is itself answerable to the dialogues of reception and (personal) translation.



still from *Topsy Turvy Land*

Like books touched and opened by a multitude of readers in a library and the verbal exchanges of a teacher and a student, the spectator listens and reads Hassan's videos: these are the material forms through which we intersubjectively communicate with the ideas of the artist. In this manner, Bakhtin tells us, "the ideas of others become more and more plastic; people and ideas which in historical reality never entered into real dialogic contact (but could have done so) begin to come together in dialogues."<sup>17</sup> Ideas come into contact with a multitude of people, each person is an independent subject, one who responds in some sensible form through their own thoughts and bodily actions to the ideas that surround them.

This is precisely what Hassan makes visible in *Meeting Nasser* (1985). Captured on video we see and hear the artist's niece Elizabeth Hassan as she re-enacts the part of a young girl meeting and giving a bouquet of flowers to the Egyptian president Gamal Nasser, an enlarged black and white photograph of the 1950s encounter is mounted on the wall behind Elizabeth. Significantly, Hassan found this photograph in her family archives during the period in which she was making *The Oblivion Seekers* (1985). Although the identity of the girl in the picture is not known, and Hassan has no memory of this meeting, it could easily be the artist as a young girl given the similarity in hair; this possibility is highlighted through Hassan's arrangement of five enlarged photographs above the video monitor, the two on the right representing a close up of the unknown girl's hair and a photo of an eleven year old Hassan with her baby sister. In these historical and personal juxtapositions Hassan literally stages a space of cultural interaction. Coached by her father and aunt, Elizabeth resembles the girl in the photograph, carrying her own bunch of flowers, which she puts down to read from the 1974 novel *Al-Karnak* by Naguib Mahfouz, an Egyptian writer censored by Nasser.<sup>18</sup> Through this process of learning Elizabeth responds with her body to the theatre that is set for her education – and ours as spectators to this installation.

In all cultural engagements the embodied presence of the subject



still from Meeting Nasser

activates what Homi Bhabha terms the third space, the space where cultures meet and mingle in the process of cross cultural dialogue and translation. In “Identity and Cultural Displacement,” Bhabha in conversation with Hassan asks the question “When is culture?”<sup>19</sup> The multiple moments that constitute culture occur in time and space. Thus, the when of culture is marked by both the presence and absence of subjective bodies. Culture exists in the multitude of moments of dialogic enunciation. The past, present and the endless future are part of the when of culture and take place in the chronotopic bodies of the artist and the spectator who is always posited in the future – that is a spectator who is not pre-determined in advance. Bakhtin gives the name chronotope to the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed”; just as there are elements of time and space in art, there are also by necessity chronotopic bodies.<sup>20</sup>



National Gallery of Canada  
installation of Boutros al Armenian  
/ Mediterranean Modern

In Hassan’s video installation *Boutros al Armenian/ Mediterranean Modern* (1996-98) she physically constructs multiple sets – one located in a private home in Windsor and another in the National Gallery of Canada – that recreate the ceiling paintings in the living room of her grandparents’ house in Kar’oun, Lebanon. The walls of these sets function as a backdrop for the accompanying video, which tells the story of how Boutros the Armenian came to paint in the house of Hussein Shouser, Hassan’s maternal grandfather. In the original installations footage is screened on television monitors located outside of the recreated living room (Hassan has subsequently screened this video as a separate projection). The demolition of the ceiling paintings in her grandfather’s house flickers on the screen showing us the process of destruction that comes along with renovation and modernization, the past vanishes before our eyes even as we hear the voice of Boutros telling of his life amongst this family. Analog fuzz marks the decaying videotape and it sticks as it spools through the VCR resulting in much static and skipping around the edges of the television frame. Like her structural and experimental film forebears – Jack Chambers,

Joyce Wieland, and Michael Snow – Hassan calls attention to the material qualities of her chosen media and makes the grainy static of video part of the story. Through her layering of multiple chronotopic spaces in this video and accompanying installation the narrative that Hassan stages is made aesthetically sensible to spectators. The vanished ceiling paintings of the house in Kar'oun are in dialogue with the two reproductions that Hassan paints and with multiple spectators of different backgrounds and sensibilities. The spectator negotiates the threads of the narrative and interprets the spaces and stories through the sensations the body produces in responsive dialogue.

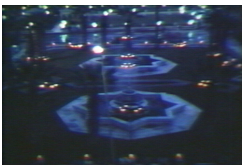
These bodies are intersubjective and socially constructed. It is a compound body that reads, thinks, sees, hears, feels, imagines and responds. As subjects we each shape ourselves according to our own responsive and answerable subjectivities. Yet, as Hassan makes obvious in *Les langues du monde*, these subjectivities are also shaped by what our language or discourse permits us to say and do, as well as the ways in which we subjectively translate and respond to what we experience within our own specific locations in space and time. The sensibilities of the body are influenced by relations of self/other as communicated through the plastic forms of discourse. As Thomson reads aloud to the children in the rare book library:

Treasures of imagination were needed to adopt Arabic writing to different languages, since despite their numbers, the consonants in Arabic are insufficient, and each language, in looking for its own way, pushes the diacritic system of signs to the extreme.<sup>21</sup>

The imagination – creative thought – is housed and made sensible by the body in which it lives. Languages may push and pull at people, but we are self-shaping beings and at all points of contact there is a negotiation that must be acknowledged: this is what Bakhtin means by responsibility. As Bhabha states to Hassan, “You see it in the work of Bakhtin: As forms of

language reflect relations of power and authority, there is always a kind of boundary where contestation happens, because there is no co-option but rather negotiation of demands, of wills, of meanings and so on.”<sup>22</sup> The subject position in all dialogic exchanges takes place in specific and unique space/time(s). Discourse, I argue, represents a meeting of chronotopic bodies through language – in the case of Hassan, a primarily visual language.

Art is made possible through multiple bodies and voices interacting and dialoguing within a variety of spatial and temporal locations, the tracing of which is the discipline of art history. From this multitude emerges an experiential and discursive plurality: the we of culture. As Jean-Luc Nancy states in *The Ground of the Image*: “Alterity – the distinct identity – is not given. Whereas I produces or creates its own identity, we project it or assume it. Nous autres lets it be heard that in the end, after further investigation, this we could one day become a completely different – and entirely other – subject.”<sup>23</sup> The we is a self/other relationship in which the self is in dialogue with a plurality, which we have named the other. In *Mom, Youre Gonna Blow It* (1990), Hassan films the construction of this *we* through the daily social relations that surround her while visiting Cairo with her son Tariq. Images of a public square, the Midan El Hussein, filmed at night from a balcony at the El Hussein Hotel, the minaret of the neighboring El Hussein Mosque and the street below are lit up with colourful lights; Hassan adds stress to the normality of this locale by repeating the clip twice, in doing so she highlights the structural qualities of both the film and the public square. More footage filmed during the day shows crowds of men praying outside the mosque, a car slowly squeezing through a narrow street teeming with people, a neon sign advertises milk in English and Arabic, and a funeral procession that winds out of the mosque and down the street. These are relatively ordinary scenes of life in Cairo, which is the backdrop that frames footage of a man hammering away at a brass plate as he engraves it for the artist. The title of this video



stills from *Mom, Youre Gonna Blow It*

is taken from a conversation Hassan had with her son about the plate that she commissioned from Egyptian artisan Aly Aly Hassan. Back in the hotel room overlooking the mosque, (Jamelie) Hassan writes: “Contemplating the inscribed brass plate, I turn to my son Tariq reading in the other bed and ask, Do you think Aly Aly knows who Salman Rushdie is? Tariq looks at me in exasperation and says, ‘Mom, you’re gonna blow it’.” The artist later tells Aly Aly that he made the plate for Rushdie, who was condemned by a fatwa as an enemy of Islam in 1989 for his book *The Satanic Verses*. At first the artisan is angry at her deception, but then gradually admits to Hassan that he would not obey the fatwa against Rushdie.<sup>24</sup> In this action Hassan singles out Aly Aly, isolating him from the plurality of the we and making him answer for himself: she holds him to account for his actions and his opinions.



still from Mom, You're Gonna Blow It

Hassan’s videos call attention to the way we learn and interact with the world aesthetically – a way of seeing that necessarily includes questions of politics and ideology. She calls spectators to account for their interactions with the world, for the way in which their opinions are formed and have formative results. Calling individuals to account for their actions is a basic tenet of citizenship and politics, to willfully wield power is to be answerable. Hannah Arendt traces the origins of accountability to Platonic thought:

Logon didonai, “to give an account” – not to prove, but to be able to say how one came to an opinion and for what reasons one formed it – is actually what separated Plato from all of his predecessors. The term itself is political in origin: to render accounts is what Athenian citizens asked of their politicians, not only in money matters, but in matters of politics. They could be held responsible. And this – holding oneself and everyone else responsible and answerable for what he thought and taught – was what transformed into philosophy that search for knowledge and for truth that had sprung up in Ionia.<sup>25</sup>

Hassan asks Aly Aly to account for his beliefs and his actions not in theory



but in practice, inviting him to be answerable for his own intersubjective responses to the world around him. In a similar manner, Hassan's artwork positions us to responsively give form to the we of culture: it is our bodies that provide the plastic forms of discourse.

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#### Notes

1. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 139.
2. Patricia T. O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman, "On Language: The Search for an Anybody Who's Everybody," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 2009, 14.
3. V.N. Volosinov and M.M. Bakhtin, "Language, Speech, and Utterance," *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 78.
4. Over the years Hassan has been deeply influenced by the art of Jack Chambers. As she writes, Chambers' paintings and films have had a "strange generational synthesis that happens to be occurring in this household is one that Chambers would clearly have enjoyed. Perhaps among this generation the mysterious vision that Chambers' works possess will continue to unfold." Jamelie Hassan, "Notes from viewing The Jack Chambers Retrospective, London, Ontario 1998," *The Silence of Jack Chambers*, ed. Ron Benner (London: Center for Baalqisian Studies, 1998), np.
5. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Art and Answerability," *Art and Answerability*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 1.
6. In "Biologisms, Metaphor & Answerability," Ron Benner discusses Jack Chambers' film *Hybrid* in relation to the various conceptions of hybridization and hybrids. Benner points out the invisible hand of human agency that is hidden beneath metaphorical biologisms to describe and shape human society. In *Hybrid* "what underlies the production of the rose is human agency. This agency crosses over into an attempt to destroy a society in Vietnam and reproduce a model of what the U.S. thought of as a 'civil' or 'productive' society." Ron Benner, "Biologisms, Metaphor & Answerability," *The Silence of Jack Chambers*, np.
7. Jacques Rancière, "Politics of Aesthetics," *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 44.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 88.
9. Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist

- (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 89.
10. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 185.
  11. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 19.
  12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 27.
  13. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.
  14. *Orientalism & Ephemera* was initially exhibited at Art Metropole, Toronto 2006, and travelled across Canada from the Ottawa Art Gallery, to the Art Gallery of Windsor and Centre A, Vancouver. Hassan also organized a one day symposium on *Orientalism & Ephemera* at the Art Gallery of Windsor in 2007.
  15. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from Novy Mir," *Speech Genres*, 7.
  16. Radhia Dziri, "Écrire les langues du monde," *Qantara* 19 (1996): 14-15. The English translation of Dziri's text, "Writing the Languages of the World" as translated by Jason R. D'Aoust, was used for the subtitles that appear in the video. This translation is reproduced in the deluxe edition of *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, 167-168.
  17. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 112 (emphasis added).
  18. It should be pointed out that Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) is now one of the most well known authors in the Arab world. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988.
  19. Homi K. Bhabha and Jamelie Hassan with Monika Kin Gagnon, "Identity and Cultural Displacement," *Aldin's Gift* (Toronto and Windsor: Art Gallery of York University and Art Gallery of Windsor, 1996), 10-30.
  20. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 84.
  21. Radhia Dziri, "Writing the Languages of the World," trans. Jason R. D'Aoust, in M. Jordan and J. Haladyn, *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan* [deluxe edition], 167.
  22. Bhabha and Hassan, "Identity and Cultural Displacement," 25.
  23. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Nous Autres," *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 103.
  24. Jamelie Hassan, "Wednesday Evening" and "Thursday Morning," *Inscription: Jamelie Hassan* (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1990), 13-14.
  25. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 41.