



THERE WHERE YOU ARE NOT¹ KAMAL BOULLATA

Kamal Boullata was born in Jerusalem in 1942. He is a graduate of the Fine Arts Academy of Rome and the Corcoran Art Museum School in Washington, DC. Public collections holding his art include the British Museum, London; Alhambra Islamic Museum, Granada; National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman; Institute of the Arab World, Paris; New York Public Library, New York; Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; Bibliothèque Louis Notari, Monaco. As a Fulbright Fellow (1993 and 1994), he conducted research on Islamic art in Morocco and Spain. In 2001, he received a Ford Foundation grant to research post-Byzantine painting in Palestine. Books he edited include *If Only the Sea Could Sleep: Love Poems by Adonis* (2003); *Belonging and Globalization: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture* (2008). Books he authored include *Palestinian Art from 1850 to the Present* (2009) and *Between Exits: Paintings by Hani Zurob* (2012). – Address: Joachim-Friedrich-Straße 2, 10711 Berlin. E-mail: kamal.boullata@t-online.de

“Paradise without people is not worth stepping in.” This is the Arabic saying that came to mind as I was walking down Koenigsallee. A year’s residency had just come to an end. All the familiar faces of Fellows, their partners and the children had vanished from Grunewald. Being the last to depart, I could not believe how the Institute that was throbbing with life, conviviality and intellectual zest was turned overnight into a desolate place. The departure of most of its staff deepened the desolation. The beauty of the

1 “Dort, wo du nicht bist” the last verse from the Lied “Der Wanderer” adapted by Franz Schubert from a poem by Georg Philip Schmidt.

Institute's setting continued to glow as ever before. But nothing was the same. It was the people at the Wissenschaftskolleg that were the heart and soul of the place: both the distinguished individuals who ran the institution with utmost grace and diligence and the scholars they judiciously selected and with whom together they would constitute a community that I repeatedly heard Fellows liken to a residency in paradise.

The grounds for my personal paradise began to take shape as soon as I learnt how to manage my time between the inevitable "interruptions" of communal living and the drive to focus on the painting project that I considered realizing during my residency. Throughout the first three months, sketches drafted evolved simultaneously with the blossoming of irresistible friendships cultivated mainly over the daily lunches and Thursday dinners.

Once all sketches were completed, I embarked on my painting in the spacious and sunny office space turned into a splendid atelier on the second floor of Villa Jaffé. That is when everything began to flow effortlessly. I have never experienced going through the routines of community living where I have been so intellectually stimulated at the same time as I continued to be totally absorbed by my work. The joy of thinking was energizing as I heard experts present papers in colloquia on subjects I never thought could interest me. It was not the new knowledge that I acquired that moved me as much as it was the thinking I was invited to exercise. At times, this joy of thinking could almost reach the height of pleasure experienced in looking at beauty.

Having been the first painter to be selected as a Fellow, there were times when I could not help but feel like the odd man out. I fully understood how discussions could be a necessity that compels the sharpening of one Fellow's argument or veering the course of another's research; but I could not discuss my own painting as I was in the process of calling it into being. While ideas are communicated by the same means of words one reads on a page, the language of painting is composed of matter that is alien to speech. That is why, when asked to discuss my painting, I frequently felt at a loss for words. If I were really able to express it in words, why paint in the first place? No wonder, it was during those breathless moments of silence we lived all together in anticipation of a Fellow musician's concert to begin that I felt the closest to my Wiko community of Fellows.

From the sessions of the reading group I joined to explore how a work of art could be a subject of discussion, I could trace how the level of pictorial interpretation has been elevated to an "image science" *Bildwissenschaft*. The punch that hits you in your gut upon beholding beauty in a work of art had no place in such discussions. Marianne Koos, who led the reading group, provoked critical and brilliant discussions that awakened my

insatiable interest in the relation between word and image. Marianne also contacted former Fellows including Horst Bredekamp, Gottfried Boehm and Hans Belting, who were instrumental in contributing to the formulation of the “image science”. In retrospect, I can see that the afternoons I spent with Hans Belting were particularly memorable for having allowed me a more personal glimpse of the man whose aesthetic sensibilities and reading of art history embrace a scope and magnitude that I have seldom encountered elsewhere.

While discussions emanating in and outside the sessions of our reading group enriched my general knowledge, it was the interchanges I had with fellow musicians, and listening to their music, that propelled me right back into the throb of what I sensed every time I was facing a canvas.

It all started one day early on in the year when I was having lunch with Angela Gronenborn. We happened to be talking about how our bodies respond differently to sights and sounds when Mauricio Sotelo joined our table. Thinking of how only through poetry we can fathom the welding of the visual and the audial, I turned to Mauricio to ask how he understood Lorca’s expression *sonidos negros* or “dark sounds” when speaking about flamenco. I do not remember his exact words but I do remember that a whole world opened up before us as he spoke. Angela and I were thrilled to learn how since childhood Mauricio found affinities between colour and sound and that today with the aid of a computer he synthesizes it all out in creating his compositions. In describing his music, I noted that he was employing terms traditionally associated with visual expression. Beside “tone” and “colour”, he also spoke of “line”, “edge” and “border” in music. For him, sound could feel “horizontal” or “vertical”, just as the word “architecture” referred to a composition’s structure.

Soon after that day, former Fellow and composer Helmut Lachenmann, whose Streichquartett Nr. 3 “Grido” had been performed by Fellow members of Quatuor Diotima, returned for a few days to rehearse his “Salut für Caudwell” for two guitars. I attended both events. In the rehearsal I noted how, every time the originator of *Musique concrète instrumentale* interrupted the guitarists, he was trying to refine the quality in the infinitesimal rustle of strings. At one point, he likened the tactility of sound he sought to a cat scratching the string. Throughout his interruptions, his prime concern was what he called the “texture” of sound produced – another term associated with the visual.

One day after all Fellows were gone at the end of the lunch break and I was left alone carrying on a conversation with Lachenmann, he asked if he could see my work on the

four triptychs. I told him I have nothing to show before June save for a mountain of pencil drawings on paper and a handful of studies in acrylics on canvas. Though I never let anyone view my embryonic markings, especially no one who never saw my work before, I could not but comply with his wish. Soon after detecting how the so-called Fibonacci sequence of proportional ratios was employed as a skeletal base for structuring my geometric compositions, he launched a discussion on chord progression and temporal proportions by which I sensed how correlations between contemporary music and abstract painting are drawn. I was spellbound by his discourse. We lost all track of time. By evening, as I was walking back to Villa Walther under the gentle floating of snowflakes, I could not help but recall how Adorno once referred to the ear as being the eye's Other.²

Lachenmann's words evoked in me an unflagging zeal to pursue my intuition to learn more about the affinities between music and painting. The impetus he aroused only matched his music's virtuosity in provoking my ears to listen to unprecedented sounds emanating from classical instruments. But it was his student Mark Andre whose work revealed in what sphere the temporal and the spatial arts could merge.

Mark presented several recitals during the year. One afternoon, in his work "... als ... II" for bass clarinet, violoncello and piano, interpreted by Trio Catch, the spatial quality of the Große Kolloquienraum was highlighted when the piercing shriek of the bass clarinet was emitted from the back of the hall as the accompanying performers continued playing before the audience. Understandably, music had always possessed spatial qualities by virtue of the fact that it unfolds in space; Mark, however, has been seeking to expand the dimension of space in his music even beyond the place where it is performed. Hence, he recorded the acoustic quality of places he selected to incorporate their furtive sounds into the body of his composition.

Before coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg, Mark had travelled to Istanbul to take what he calls "acoustic photos" of sounds in mosques, churches and synagogues for his composition titled "üg", which included percussion, wind and string instruments in addition to piano and live electronics. In October 2008, echoes of the centuries-old sanctified spaces in Istanbul wafted throughout the performance in the Alte Oper in Frankfurt. By introducing the sounds of a distant place, Mark's work not only transcended his art's

2 Theodor W. Adorno. "On Some Relationships between Music and Painting." *The Music Quarterly* 79, 1 (Spring, 1995): 66–79.

traditional boundaries; the listener was also made to enter a world of raspy tones and thuds in which the sound of space acquired an unearthly dimension.

During his year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Mark was working on an opera titled “Wunderzaichen”, for which he had travelled to Jerusalem to take “acoustic photos” within the Basilica of the Resurrection, venerated by pilgrims since the 4th century as the site of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Christ. The Basilica is only a few steps from the house in which I was born. I learnt about his trip when one day he joined me for lunch together with the cellist Eeva Rysä. I happened to jokingly comment on how the manufacturer of the bells of our neighbourhood’s Grunewaldkirche must have been the same as that of the Redeemer’s Lutheran Church in Jerusalem because the tone, pitch and rhythmic ring sounded identical. Mark instantly snapped his fingers and said “genau!”. That is how I was assured that his ears have been tuned to the very sounds of the quarter in which I grew up. Then out of the blue he asked if I ever travelled back home through Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. I pointed out that I was able to travel home only on a tourist visa after obtaining an American passport. He pressed on and asked me to describe the border crossing. I explained that upon arrival at the airport and as soon as the inspector sees my birthplace, I am separated from other passengers and asked to join another line where only Palestinians stood waiting. From there, I am usually led to a side room to be intermittently interrogated by various Israeli agents as to why I was coming back, and I said that last time, the waiting between agents and my renewed interrogation took 6 hours. Eeva turning to Mark exclaimed *sotto voce*, “but this sounds like Reuchlin in your opera!”.

Only weeks after varying encounters with Mark in which he went over with me about the details of my interrogations, I learnt that all four acts of his opera take place at the Tel Aviv Airport. There he had placed the late 15th-century Greek and Hebrew scholar Johannes Reuchlin coming to fulfil his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After his investigation by the airport authorities, the German scholar is not permitted to cross the borders. There, he dies only to reappear in the last scene.

By incorporating in his music the recorded sounds of a legendary space believed to be the site of Christ’s Passion, Mark Andre sought to capture the memory of the place as the biblical narrative is re-enacted in a contemporary operatic setting. Yet, just as much as sounds of that empty sepulchre could have evoked in the composer the memory of death and resurrection, for the painter in me it was the sights of Grunewald and the ground

under my feet that resuscitated the memory imprinted in this place where simple sounds like a church bell could further convoke sights and sounds of other places.

In the beginning, it was the villa's name where I set up my temporary atelier; "Jaffé" recalled the Arabic sound of "Yafa", the coastal town of Jaffa where I saw the sea for the first time in my life. Here I took my first lesson in German with the formidable Ursula Kohler and learnt to read how to "See, our trees stand / And the houses we live in endure. Only we / We alone drift past all of it – as if air. And all things / Conspire to silence us – we who embarrass them / Yet remain, perhaps, their unsayable hope."³

Right outside the gates of Villa Jaffé, a tiny brass plaque set into the pavement commemorates the former residents Emmy and Georg Braun who sought exile in Shanghai to escape the Nazis. Their son Herbert had preceded them there following his incarceration for six months in Sachsenhausen for his criticism of National Socialism. In 1948, Herbert sailed to Jaffa to settle next door in Tel Aviv. Within four years, however, he left the newly born Jewish state to live back in Villa Jaffé where he ultimately died. Upon crossing the threshold of the house, I often wondered, did Herbert Braun return to Berlin for the same reason that Walter Benjamin, his former neighbourhood resident from Delbrückstraße resisted going there in the first place, rebuffing all enticements pressed by his friend Gershom Scholem?

At the end of a day's work, hearing my footsteps on Wallotstraße after the woman walking her dog was gone, I always felt estranged by an eerie stillness in the air, the trees and the houses. No, "It is not the houses. It is the spaces in between the houses / It is not the streets that exist / It is the streets that no longer exist" that made me often wonder how could it all have happened in this very place "when the world was at its darkest / When the black wings passed over the rooftops."⁴

One day I asked Daniel Boyarin, with whom I shared common friends from Jerusalem and Berkeley, how he feels about residing in Grunewald whose Jewish natives perished in the Holocaust. The Talmudic scholar replied, "I try not to think of it." I thought to myself, perhaps these memories that are not mine continue to haunt me because fresh news from home never ceases to reach me. That week, I had just read on *Ynet: Israel News*

3 Rainer Maria Rilke. *Duino Elegies*, bilingual edition. Translation by Stephen Cohn, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989. (2nd elegy).

4 Verses from James Fenton. *A German Requiem*. London: The Salamander Press, 1980.

that on May 29, 2013 a mass grave holding remains of over 200 Palestinians killed in 1948 was uncovered in Jaffa. None were identified.

Crossing over from Wallotstraße to Koenigsallee to return to Villa Walther often reminded me of the habitual way I used to take on foot between Georgetown University and my home on R Street in Washington, DC. The sight of the Rathenau Memorial summoned up the sight of that on Sheridan Circle. In 1922, Foreign Minister in the Weimar Republic Walther Rathenau was killed by right-wing extremists around the curve as he was driven that morning to work. From Villa Jaffé one would have easily heard the rattling discharge of the submachine gun followed by the explosion of the hand grenade tossed into the open car.

In DC, the modest memorial commemorates the 1976 assassination of the exiled Chilean leader Orlando Letelier who served as Foreign Minister in Allende's government. Letelier, a familiar face in our neighbourhood, was driving to work at the Institute of Policy Studies located in the next block to my house. His car, which had been booby-trapped by Pinochet's agents, was rounding up the circle when it exploded. I remember hearing the deafening explosion in my apartment that morning. Its shrillness instantly echoed the thunderous blast I heard one night, and that made our house shudder, when Jerusalem's Old City was under attack in 1948.

It took me until summertime before I mustered enough courage to go through the tunnel in the Grunewald S-Bahn train station and turn right up the stairs to Gleis 17 where one can trace the number of Berlin Jews daily deported to their death camps. The stark bareness of the place was awesome. Utter silence reigned, save for the occasional whiff of breeze as the sun was setting at the end of the platform. I could see it all started a year before I was born and ended when I turned three. In the meantime, thousands were sent from where I stood to their death. I went through the years and read the number of Jews boarding the train day after day. Coming to my day of birth at the other end of the world, I noted that no one was deported that date. But it was no reason to rejoice. When I checked a more detailed chronology of events, I learnt that the following day, when I was just one day old, an inner circle of Nazi officials were invited to observe the effectiveness of the new extermination unit at Sachsenhausen camp where Herbert Braun had been incarcerated two years earlier. That day 96 Jews were murdered for purposes of demonstration.

As the year was winding up, it was our next-door neighbour at Villa Walther who reawakened the memory of the Jaffa Gate neighbourhood in which I grew up. Elizabeth

Key Fowden gave me a book review she had written in which she suggested renaming one of the book's chapters after Joni Mitchell's line, "They paved Paradise and put up a parking lot." That was no joke of hers to season her review of an academic book on sacred sites. The chapter discussed today's state of an Islamic cemetery that lies right outside the walls of our neighbourhood's city gate. Its history has been noted by Arab and Persian chroniclers since the 11th century. In Islam as it is in Judaism, dying in Jerusalem had been considered dying at God's threshold. For Muslims, being buried in Mamilla Cemetery was further considered as being buried in Heaven. Thence, it had historically been the largest Islamic cemetery in Jerusalem and in 1944 it was designated an antiquities site. Its surviving gravestones and funerary shrines honour the remains of some companions of the Arab Prophet, emirs, mystics, scholars, governors, ministers, Jerusalem notables from pre-1948, along with hundreds of men who joined Saladin's army to liberate Jerusalem from the Crusaders. In the Jewish world, Saladin had been hailed as a new Cyrus for inviting Jews back to Jerusalem following their expulsion by the Crusaders. After it fell under Israeli control, however, large parts of the Mamilla Cemetery were bulldozed and converted into a park, a parking lot and public lavatories. The chapter that Elizabeth discussed in her review dealt with the controversy aroused after further Israeli plans called for wiping out the entire cemetery and building on its grounds a Museum of Tolerance.

Indeed "There is no limit to the resourcefulness of recollection."⁵ And yet, it seems neither is there any measure to estimate the human capacity to forget, especially when it concerns the memory of others.

When it comes to personal memory, seeing appears to lead all other senses in prompting memory. Living away from my country of birth for more than four decades, I often wondered in what way the inveterate awareness of the irreconcilability between seeing and memory could have contributed to my intuitive drive towards the language of geometric abstraction in art. Straight lines are nowhere seen in nature save in the sea horizon, a ray of light or a torrent of rain. Yet, despite all the unending allure of the visible world, it had only been through the interrelationships of straight lines as embodied in the mind's eye that I could forge a language of self-expression. It was thanks to the work of European pioneers of abstraction that I was led back to my cultural roots, where I rediscovered a wellspring in the tradition of Islamic art and Arab culture.

5 Ibid.

As for the work I created at Villa Jaffé during my residency, it culminated in a series of 12 geometrically abstract canvases in acrylics conceived together in the form of four large-scale triptychs. They were the subject of a solo exhibition at Wiensowski & Harbord Gallery in Berlin. Titled “Bilqis” after the Arabic name of the Queen of Sheba, the painting series draws upon the perception of transparency and visual ambiguity as narrated in a Qur’anic legend. We are told that Bilqis, upon entering the court of King Solomon, mistook its glass floor for a sheet of water and lifted up her skirt to avoid getting it wet. Over the centuries, glass floors, fountains and glistening ceramic walls were combined to become the aesthetic hallmark of all palatial buildings in the Islamic world. In my colloquium, “Journeying through Transparency”, I attempted to illustrate this fundamental tradition in Islamic art.

In each triptych, vertical and diagonal lines intersect at variable angles to create a horizontal composition. The rhythmic sequence of forms is set in accordance with a geometric formula of proportional ratios originally devised in the 10th century by an Arab mathematician from Baghdad whose formula was later known in Renaissance Europe as the Fibonacci numbering sequence. The transparent layers of free-flowing brushstrokes are sharply delineated by the precision of hard-edged painting. The issuing contrast of overlapping forms stirs a sense of movement punctuated by intermittent flashes of light. Contrary to a perspectival illusion of space, foreground and background become interchangeable. Seeming symmetries and refractions are perceived through the interweaving of polygons and triangles whose correspondence recalls ambiguities intrinsic to geometric arabesques.

Unlike pioneers of abstraction like Klee who played the violin and Kandinsky who played both the piano and cello, I never learnt to play any musical instrument. But painting was the closest medium in which I felt as if I were playing music. Between one brushstroke and another, the process of painting always felt like listening to a musical composition for the first time. In anticipation of hearing an upcoming note, the listener is usually delightfully surprised by the composer’s turn just as I am by the accidental turn of a brushstroke amidst solid angular forms. In the meantime, beneath the order of razor-sharp edges of geometric shapes, the chaos of free-flowing brushstrokes freezes the sound I have heard of the brush thumping on the stretched canvas like a muffled drum. Who was it that once said that Bach’s “Passion According to St. Matthew” was composed with ruler and compass?

Having always sensed that the presence of a painting creates an atmosphere in space the way a musical composition does, I was wondering before embarking on the Bilqis painting series to what extent an abstract painting could succeed in turning its transparencies, spatial ambiguities and allusion of movement into metaphors the way Debussy's "La Mer" does, which is not a representation of the sea but a metaphor for sea-ness? Now that the paintings are behind me, only their viewers can tell. José Burucúa, one of the first Fellows to view all four triptychs, noted how far they are from the *aliquid stat pro aliquo* formula, that is, from being objects standing for something else. As for me, I feel that, no matter the different levels of kinship we may experience with regard to spatial and temporal arts, in their essence painting shall remain a silent form of expression as much as music shall continue to be an eyeless art.

Conversely, during 2013, a work of art was created at the Wissenschaftskolleg by a Fellow's partner whose profession is neither that of a composer nor a painter. Even so, it inspired the viewer to have what Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus would call a "synaesthetic experience". That was the video by Teri Reynolds in which image and sound were elaborately intertwined in a seamless flow. Teri had managed to catch off guard the animated faces of each member of the Wiko community during various outdoor events. The image of the individual's natural movements and the instantaneity of expression flashes at the speed of a torrential musical beat. The absorbed, the amused and the smile-lit faces seen in fleeting moments mirrored the heart of each. Screened just before our last gathering and running for no more than six minutes, Teri's video granted us all ample time to enjoy the evening of our farewell party. For me, it was Teri's face and the sparkle in those faces that her artist's eye captured that personified the year's paradise.



Abb. 1: Kamal Boullata, *Bilqis 1*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, triptych, 120 × 328 cm



Abb. 2: Kamal Boullata, *Bilqis 2*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, triptych, 120 × 328 cm



Abb. 3: Kamal Boullata, *Bilqis 3*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, triptych, 120 × 328 cm



Abb. 4: Kamal Boullata, *Bilqis 4*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, triptych, 120 × 328 cm

Photos: Steve Sabella