

How to

**R A E D
Y A S S I N**

Read





By Stephanie Bailey

(Previous spread)

MY LAST SELF-PORTRAIT, 2013, documentation of the performance staged for “Journeys Through Our Heritage: Revisiting Modern Lebanese Artists” at Beirut Exhibition Center, 2013.

(Opposite page, top)

THE RAED YASSIN COOKSONGBOOK (detail), 2014, graphical music score, first performed by composer and vocalist Ute Wassermann at Café Oto, London, 2014, for Yassin’s residency at Delfina Foundation, London.

(This page)

THE IMPOSSIBLE WORKS OF RAED YASSIN, 2013–, documentation of a performance in which five curators describe fictional, “impossible works” that they came up with the artist. Seen here, curator Rasha Salti is discussing an imaginary project entitled “Blowback,” which envisions a reenactment of the 9/11 attacks at Dubai’s Burj Khalifa.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens/Thessaloniki.



invite musicians to transcend form, by playing the music of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) on the harpsichord with emotion. In this case, the harpsichord is the constraint: a keyboard instrument that precedes the piano, its plucked-string sound is described by Yassin as “mechanical,” “without dynamics” or “any sense of feeling.” The challenge he sets, therefore, is for each participant to emote despite the instrument’s mechanical structure and the pre-written score.

This idea of working with a rigid, almost machinic structure sheds light on the way Yassin composed his performance piece *The Impossible Works of Raed Yassin* (2013–), which he staged at the Beirut Art Center in 2013. The format of the performance was simple: over the course of three hours, five curators positioned throughout the bare, white-walled space described fictional, “impossible works” they had dreamed up with the artist, who ushered guests to each of the performing curators. One of these imaginary projects, “Blowback,” envisions a reenactment of 9/11 at Dubai’s Burj Khalifa—the tallest building in the world—that involves building another Burj Khalifa before flying a plane into them. As Yassin recalls, “The curators were like video projectors on a loop.” The performance turned bodies into transmitters of narratives that audience members, in turn, were invited to configure in their own minds.

You might call *The Impossible Works* a process of transmission, not unlike *CookSongBook*—one that creates a framework for exchange through fixed, yet flexible, forms. It relates to the relinquishment of control Yassin identifies in his work—when, at a certain point, a work’s reading is mediated. From Yassin’s conception to the curator’s delivery, the reception by the audience and the recollection of the happening as memory, everybody who enters into the performance becomes part of the work as planned by Yassin. Exchange is both concept and composition: an ongoing and unstoppable process of synthesis in which networks are formed and overlappings occur. This creates an expansion of the original idea: a mediation between artist and receiver that continues so long as each impossible work is redescribed in what one might call a game of telephone.

This is similar to what happened to a text Yassin wrote for Berlin’s MaerzMusik festival in 2013 titled “Based on a True Story.” Asked to give an overview of contemporary music practices from the Arab world, Yassin responded with six stories—all but one

were fictitious—that recall his first-time experiences with “famous compositions.” For example, in “You Will Always Remember Your First Time!” Yassin describes his first sonic encounter with an Israeli warplane as his earliest introduction to contemporary music. The only true story of the group recounts a moment when Yassin and his friend Mohammed al-Borasayn were running through the fields of south Lebanon, where the Israelis had planted cluster bombs and land mines, and the latter stepped on a land mine. Yassin, who couldn’t hear for some time after the explosion, titled the story *4’33”* after composer John Cage’s 1952 score, in which no instruments are played and the only “notes” to the score are the sounds of daily life. The text was soon reinterpreted by composer Grégory d’Hoop as a choral piece for two groups to sing: one indoors, one outdoors. D’Hoop titled it “Music Based on a Story Based on a True Story.”

Here, appropriation is an expression of how stories are transmitted like pieces of music, and retold in much the same way Hollywood produces remakes and historical epics. Within the context of such a readymade economy, consider how Yassin translates this process of transferral in his work *China* (2012), which was presented as part of the Abraaj Group Art Prize in 2012 at Art Dubai. This series of porcelain vases, produced in the northeastern Chinese city of Jingdezhen in the traditional Yuan dynasty style, depicts key battles from the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), including the War of the Hotels (1975–76), the Battle for Tal al-Zaatar (1976), the Israeli invasion of Beirut (1982) and the so-called War of Liberation (1989). The project was, as Yassin describes it, “a cycle of commissions.” To make these vases, Yassin interviewed fighters about their experiences of the battlefield, made compositions in response to them, had a Lebanese painter render them in the Persian miniature style and then gave them to a master in China to interpret on each pot. In Dubai, the vases were part of a prize supported by an investment fund and installed within an art fair. At that time, during the opening days of the fair, when I asked Yassin if the form and content of the vases were specific to the marketplace for which they were produced, he replied unflinchingly and without pause: “Yes.”

China was an incisive (and specific) response to its Middle-Eastern setting. Each vase in the series is predicated on a precise web of references, including the cobalt blue used in this series, a pigment once mined in Iran and traded along the Silk Road. The result, to borrow Yassin’s words on a related work, was “a material testimony

of global art production, estrangement and the appropriation and translation of cultural heritage.” Yet, as much as the vases are linked into an international network of trade and history, the objects also represent what Yassin characterizes as “an uneasy amnesia, and absence of historical narrative that reigns in Lebanon in order to keep a brittle peace,” post Civil War. Part of an ongoing series, *Yassin Dynasty* (2013) represents the artist’s intention for the record of the Lebanese Civil War to become commonplace—via a décor-like object that might exist in any home. The desired result is the normalization of a historical event through its common exchange, ironically through an object that might well also signify this history’s dismissal.

These vases could also be considered bodies of texts or even graphic scores. Each part of the composition—from the process of making it to the materials and techniques employed to the stories told—is a note that reverberates on both particular and universal levels, such as war, the trade of commodities or the validity of an object as testimony. Like silent reminders, the *Yassin Dynasty* vases have now been displayed around the world in the very spaces for which they were made: art fairs, from Hong Kong to Istanbul. In so doing, they have slotted into multiple contexts and frames of reference. Their meanings change according to who sees them, and yet, there is a relation to every space they are shown, in one way or another, be it the ubiquity of Chinese-made objects, the often illicit trade in antiquities or the experience of war. This relates to the communicative process embedded in Yassin’s work. As he explains: “I was interested in how the object of art is a living organism that changes from phase to phase. For me, this is interesting because then art becomes a social body—it moves and changes by what’s around it, and this never ends.”

There is some irreverence in his statement. In one performance, staged while producing *China* in Jingdezhen in 2011, Yassin took one of his prototypes—“an antique readymade” linked to “a dynasty of no importance”—and photographed himself dropping it. He called this a “parallel homage” to Ai Weiwei’s *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), a photographic triptych documenting the Chinese artist sending the urn—a real artifact that represents a historic era in China of comparable importance to the Roman Empire in the West—crashing to the ground. In both cases, the destruction of the artifact

gives priority to the physical form as the repository within which memory ultimately survives. Yet, like the object, the body is a form of material transmission, and forms inevitably perish, or change. Things *do* break, physically.

Here, history is a chain of human lives: a fluid movement between representation and context that feeds multiple, contested narratives developed by individuals and groups. This brings us back to *The Impossible Works of Raed Yassin*, and the reliance on bodies to make each impossible work “real” yet multiple. Stories, after all, change as they are told and retold. This aspect of Yassin’s practice—the transmission of narrative—is well articulated in *My Last Self-Portrait* (2013), which was presented at the Beirut Exhibition Center in 2013. For this performance, Yassin invited three young, aspiring Lebanese artists to reproduce the final self-portrait of eccentric Lebanese modernist Khalil Saleeby, which he created before his own death in 1928. One of the fathers of Lebanese modernism, Saleeby was murdered in Beirut, along with his American wife Carrie Aude, as a result of a village dispute over water access. In the project, bodies—both Saleeby’s and those of the students who reproduce his image—become historical records. *My Last Self-Portrait* takes history as a series of representations that are recorded, copied, altered, and oftentimes buried, simply forgotten, or mis- or re-appropriated among people.

It is through this distillation of fact and fiction that histories are transmitted to a vast, subjective audience. His work *The New Film* (2008) is what Yassin describes as his “tribute to his (postwar Lebanese) generation’s enthrallment with icons of popular culture, lo-fi technologies and Egypt’s faltering film industry.” This 12-minute video is made up of clips taken from feature films produced during former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s reign (1981–2011). History is told through “scenes set in police stations and government offices, in which (obligatory) portraits of Mubarak hang on the walls.” It is an exploration of peoples’ relationship with the visage of a historical figure—a patriarch overseeing a security state whose image has become both artifact and archetype, a part of both history and popular culture.

In this regard, memory is both representation and projection. This was explicitly articulated in a mixed-media installation of



(This page)
YASSIN DYNASTY, 2013, series of handpainted porcelain vases, dimensions variable, installed for “#18@rivolicast” at Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Torino, 2014. Photo by Renato Ghiazza.

(Opposite page)
DROPPING A YASSIN DYNASTY VASE (detail), 2012–13, inkjet print on archival paper, documentation of performance, triptych: 120 x 90 cm each.





photographs, videos and sound that Yassin produced as one-third of the Beirut-based collective Atfal Ahdath, with Lebanese artists Vartan Avakian and Hatem Imam. In *Take Me to This Place: I Want to Do the Memories* (2010–11), the artists present themselves through the aesthetics of popular, digitally manipulated photomontages produced at contemporary photography studios in Beirut, Damascus, Sharjah and Cairo. Customers of such studios are given the option of superimposing a background of their choice onto their portraits—such as a winter scene in New York City, or a view of the Eiffel Tower. The option is not so much a commemoration as it is a projection—or construction—of an unlived memory. Yassin’s project *The Best of Sammy Clark* (2009) is an installation of computer-rendered images in which Lebanese pop icon Sammy Clark appears to entertain the Yassin family during a birthday party. Accompanied by four turntables, each playing a different record album by Clark, the work is, according to Yassin, an “audiovisual world that seems both genuine and counterfeit at the same time.”

Yassin’s intention in looking back is to render the familiar indiscernible, “lost in a setting where memory is artifact.” In the “King of Disco” series (2011–12), for example, archival inkjet prints of stills taken from various movies are brought together to retell the mystery of the murder of Yassin’s father during the Lebanese Civil War. This precise, disorientating mix of fact, fiction and memory is pushed further in *Ruins in Space* (2014), a mixed-media installation based on a fictional event in November 1967 featuring real-life characters, in which the Egyptian singer and actress Umm Kulthum (1904–1975) is imagined to dedicate the song “al-Atlal” (“The Ruins”) to Korea’s star and songstress Lee Nan Young (1916–1965). (In the real world, both were purportedly in Paris during the same time in history.) In these two works—though divergent in subject matter—memory is a dual space where things have been and where they could have been. It is a place where narratives are made, re-edited and retold, and gaps are filled with fantasy.



(Opposite page, top)
Beirut-based collective Atfal Ahdath's **TAKE ME TO THIS PLACE: I WANT TO DO THE MEMORIES**, 2010–11, mixed-media installation comprising photographs, sound and video, dimensions variable, installed for "Arab Express: The Latest Art from the Arab World," at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom)
THE BEST OF SAMMY CLARK, 2009, mixed-media installation comprising computer-rendered images, album covers, four turntables and LPs, dimensions variable, installed for "The Best of Sammy Clark - Raed Yassin" at Delfina Foundation, London, 2010–11.

(This page)
Family Portrait with Peacock, from the series "**DANCING, SMOKING, KISSING**," 2013, silk thread and embroidered silk cloth, 90 x 110 cm.



In Yassin's world,
compositions of all
sorts provoke the
same key question:
"How should this
be read?"

Taking memory as artifact, whether true, invented, or both, implies an understanding of memory as a structure that can be handed down through the process of communicative and expressive transmissions, from a score to a painting—with all of the concomitant potential for variation and manipulation. The way memory is constructed, however, is as complex as the way music weaves sounds together into song, or the way an album of snapshots constitutes the portrait of a family. In the series "Dancing, Smoking, Kissing" (2013), Yassin re-creates scenes from lost family photographs based on personal recollection, his family's memories and what he describes as "the leaps and gaps of his imagination." These illustrations are embroidered on factory-produced silk fabrics using computer technology—depictions of personal moments rendered on mass-produced, decorative surfaces, a material that links to an older history of production and trade. (The manufacturing of textiles, after all, was integral to the industrial revolution.) Of the series, Yassin told the *Lebanon Daily Star*: "I'm less interested in collective memory . . . than in the collective unconscious. These are universal photos. If you're from any place in the world . . . you could feel they are photos of your own family." Here, historical complexity is located not only in personal memory but in a uniform expanse of common, mass-produced materials.

This universal mentality frames everything Yassin does, even the way he staged the public conversation we held at Delfina Foundation. As the interlocutor, I arrived to an intimate setting: a table with tablecloth, a flowerpot and an offer of tea. At first, it felt like a date, if not for the audience seated around us. Nevertheless, the site was set for a real exchange, conversation being a structure that facilitates intimacy. It was a considered staging of a dialogue that would be meaningful rather than performed. Before we even started the talk, Yassin took me aside and asked that we bypass any heavy theoretical ramblings so that we might engage in a personal conversation about the works in and of themselves.

It made sense that Yassin would set up a conversation in this way. He had just recently staged a performance based on an exchange on the mobile text-messaging application WhatsApp with German curator Beate Schüller about food. A chance meeting during which they discussed a particular dish had evolved into months of daily dialogue about their meals. The result of this was the performance project, *What Tongues?* (2014), presented during Yassin's Delfina residency. Out of sight, elsewhere in the building, the artist and Schüller connected with a roomful of visitors individually via WhatsApp, engaging each in a discussion around food while the smell of broth boiling in an adjacent room wafted in through a door left purposely ajar. A variety of conversations ensued, which ranged from simple cooking tips to others that sometimes slid into sexual innuendo.

What Tongues? was a compositional web of relations—an interpretation of the intimacy between Yassin and Schüller that was mediated through the format of WhatsApp. To translate it in another way, the performance was a bit like expressing emotion through the harpsichord while playing Bach. Here, we come full circle to music and the way Yassin considers Cornelius Cardew's use of graphic scores as a bridge between composer and musician, as well as a device that allows each score to be interpreted differently. In Yassin's world, compositions of all sorts provoke the same key question: "How should this be read?" To read is a complex act. Bodies, objects, buildings and histories are taken as narratives, texts or any other form through which an understanding of the world is mediated. There is no single answer to the question of how one reads something, from an artwork to a word on a page. Raed Yassin encourages us to think about that among ourselves. 🌐