

## Yosef-Joseph Dadoune with texts by Mikel Touval\*

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### Between Seas and Deserts<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Brought by his French mother, who was born and raised in French Algeria, Joseph Dadoune was dragged from place to place by her loves and whims, following a detour in Southern France and ending up in Ofakim, Israel. This is where Yosef-Joseph Dadoune was thrown at the age of 6. Ofakim would become the last stage of her tortured life and of her violent and chaotic spiritual quest. The only possible escape route for Dadoune is artistic creation. It is thanks to that expression that he can try to face the demons that haunt him, the anger and the frustration that animate him.

Ofakim, like Netivot and Sderot, was created from scratch to guarantee a continuity of settlement along the border with Gaza. It was created out of purely strategic and geopolitical interest; they were all sacrificed to the Zionist ideology. Stuck between two military bases and a giant waste dump, Ofakim survived until the 1980s with a textile industry that has since disappeared. Unemployment and the geographical, economic and political distance of this 'urban' ghost are such that the city is now under trusteeship, managed by a public administrator. A small industrial zone still survives, generating income not for Ofakim but to the surrounding kibbutz community, owners of the land.

**Keywords:** Ofakim, Arab Jews, capitalism, artistic creation, industry and poverty, video, film, history

### Ofakim

Ofakim which literally means "horizons", borders with the Negev Desert and Gaza. Swept by the desert winds, crushed by an omnipresent sun, this small urban entity gathers a patchwork of populations, stranded on the stone dunes, and led by succeeding politics of settlement and land use. We find here the descendants of immigrants from Maghreb and Alexandria – those Arab Jews<sup>2</sup> whom the European in-

<sup>1</sup> Editors note: this text was developed in collaboration between artist Yosef-Joseph Dadoune and Mikel Touval in a specific hybrid form of poly-genre text. Precisely because of this unorthodox approach it presents an important contribution to the possible ways of how to re-think the relation between the content and form of academic text in the context of the issue topic "Sovereignty, Migrants, and Culture".

<sup>2</sup> Arab Jews are Jews who are part of the Arabic linguistic and cultural space. They are in some cases indigenous peoples present before the Arab-Muslim conquest; their presence in Arab countries is bi-millenary, as in Yemen, Iraq and Egypt. In other cases, they descend from the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, who went into exile in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. They coexisted, and still coexist for many of them, with Muslims and Arab Christians. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the

telligentsia preferred to see far from the centers of decision-making – descendants of Persian, Indian and Caucasian Jews, and some fifty Palestinian families, who fled their towns and villages, guilty of collaborating with the enemy.

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In spite of the immensity of the sky and the desert, Ofakim today is forgotten and is in fact used as a wide zone of training and shooting that is both inaccessible and dangerous. All this makes Ofakim a synonym for blocked horizons.

It is into this artificial city that Yosef-Joseph Dadoune was thrown at the age of 6, with his French-Algerian born mother. He was dragged by her loves and her whims through France and Israel. Ofakim will be the last stage of her tortured life, of her violent and chaotic spiritual quest.

The only possible escape route for Dadoune is artistic creation. It is thanks to it that he can try to face the demons that haunt him, the anger and the frustration that animate him by telling, transmitting, and presenting to the world the universal reality of contemporary peripheral space.

Yosef-Joseph Dadoune, *Ofakim*, 2010

*Ofakim* will be his work dedicated to the city that saw him grow. It is therefore quite natural that he will choose youngsters (ten young people) to partake in a video that presents a Sisyphean quest, carrying in their arms a future that threatens them. In his video *Ofakim*, he looks at the city with an honest and caring eye. Without rancor or violence, Dadoune offers us the poignant testimony of a city engulfed in the silence of the desert and of History. It is with great delicacy he enfoldes the existential questions of a whole society, a country driven, obsessed with its defense.

The realization of this video took more than a year during which ten young people met once a week with Dadoune. The sessions were preceded by an hour of yoga practice, which allowed them to disconnect from their turbulent environment and channel their growing emotions. Every two months Evelin Hagoel,<sup>3</sup> a recognized Israeli actress, gave them a master class in acting and Yosef-Joseph Dadoune organized a visit to a museum of contemporary art.

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subsequent Arab-Israeli conflicts led to a mass exodus of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries.

<sup>3</sup> Evelin Hagoel was born on January 27, 1961 in Casablanca, Morocco. She has performed in *Sumo* (2009), *What a wonderful world* (2005) and *Shiva* (2008).

It took weeks of preparation to bring them to the scene of the trauma, in the ruins of the OF-AR3 factory, where many of their parents had worked and met. The Of-Ar<sup>4</sup> (short for Ofakim–Argentina) textile factory had been a major employer in the area.

It took weeks to allow them, during the time of the staging, to proudly reclaim this imposing factory skeleton, to stand upright, defying with determination the horizontality of the lines imprisoning them. It is on this non-place, with no regard to time, that the image is fixed, giving the viewer a moment of reflection, even introspection. Like Jonah in the womb of the monster (Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish), these adolescents bear witness to a silent fervor, and resolutely contemplate a better future. (See Image 1)



Image 1: Yosef Joseph Yaakov Dadoune, *Ofakim*, 2010

The production of the *Ofakim* video was accompanied by a reflection on the possible rehabilitation of the Of-Ar factory, in collaboration with the architect and Professor Zvi Efrat,<sup>5</sup> and Itzik Krispel, local community leader. The aim of the project was to build a cultural center, combining artist residences, exhibition halls but also to establish open exchange venues such as a concert hall and a cinema for the inhabitants of Ofakim. It is with this concrete vision that Joseph Dadoune envisages the re-appropriation of the space by its inhabitants.

<sup>4</sup> As in all developing cities, the industrial sector played an important role in the economy of the city. In the 1980s, the textile industry employed up to 80% of the working population, especially in the Of-Ar plant (Ofakim – Argentina textile factory).

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Zvi Efrat, Architect and Architectural Historian, was Head of the Department of Architecture at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem (2002–2010). He has taught at the Technion Institute of Technology, at Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University, among others. He has lectured worldwide, published extensively in various periodicals and books, and curated numerous exhibitions in Israel and in Europe. His book, *The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture 1948-1973*, was published in 2004.

## Trilogy of Museums

Between 2006 and 2007, Dadoune realized a trilogy centered on three museums: the Louvre in Paris, the Athens War Museum and the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. In each of these films, Dadoune questions the historical dialogue between the West and the East, their relation of domination/cultural submission and the very notion of 'museum' – a sort of desecrated (profane) tomb of sunken civilizations.

### Yosef Joseph Dadoune's *Sion*

The Louvre shows remains of the Middle East, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, exhibited as war trophies, exposed to the public with pride and grandiloquence in a building, formerly a royal residence. The stories here intersect, while the castle has changed function and today plays the role of a simple place of presentation, the artefacts have been desacralized, removed from their context, torn from their own history and are presented as booty testifying to the greatness and strength of the conquering civilization. The very way in which they are ordered, separated, and dismantled is an illustration of the West's desire to rewrite the history of the Middle East with its own codes. The cultural hegemony of the West resulted in the systematic plundering of the conquered lands, a desire to appropriate the ancient culture and to write modern history with a pencil on a dusty map.

It is in this museum that Dadoune put actress Ronit Elkabetz on stage, dressed by Christian Lacroix. Ms. Elkabetz,<sup>6</sup> bearing the image of the Oriental woman, Jewish, Arab and from the periphery, marks this character with her personal work, highlighting the central role of women, mothers and sisters in this Oriental patriarchal universe. *Sion* takes shape through her, with her sorrows and sufferings facing the futility of the world and eternity of the earth. Dadoune offers us a powerful and very contemporary allegory of the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes, known in Hebrew as Kohelet. It is traditionally attributed to King Solomon: "Utter futility! – said Koheleth – Utter futility! All is futile! One generation goes, another comes, But the earth remains the same forever." (See Image 2)

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<sup>6</sup> Ronit Elkabetz is an Israeli actress, screenwriter and director. She was born on November 27, 1964 in Beer-Sheva and died on April 19, 2016 in Tel Aviv. Having become a star in Israel, she chooses to leave everything for France, where she was unknown, and whose language and customs she did not know either: "The best gift I have ever had is this second birth. I could very well have continued the projects in Israel, but I needed to open a new door: to find it, the only way was to break with my landmarks and start again, from scratch. [...] I became a child of 2 years old who became familiar with sounds and words and integrated them without thinking."



Image 2: Yosef Joseph Yaakov Dadoune, *SION*, 2006

More often submissive than dominating, Sion turns back her turbulent history, punctuated by successive conquests and occupations. Bare-foot and dressed in black, a lonely widow walks through the rooms of the Louvre, discovering fragments of her own millenary history. Dadoune concludes this work with a disturbing observation, highlighting the unstable equilibrium of contemporary Sion and the incessant questioning that is for a moment concealed under the exuberant clothes, suddenly found again.

Yosef Joseph Dadoune's *Bunker buster*

(a bomb designed to penetrate deep into the ground or rock before exploding)

The Athens War Museum, a building with almost Mussolinian architecture, was built during the dictatorship of the colonels<sup>7</sup> and evokes the military history of Greece, from Antiquity to the present day. It reflects the great military campaigns, from Alexander the Great to the Korean War, through the expansionist policies of the Byzantine Empire, the War of Independence and the two World Wars. Dadoune invited the singer Alexia, a refugee in Greece who fled from her native Cyprus, occupied by the Turkish forces. The performance illustrates the madness of the dictatorship and Alexia's oedipal relationship with the mother. Again here the close relationship between Dadoune and his mother is clearly evoked.

<sup>7</sup> The dictatorship of the colonels is the name given to the political power in place in Greece from 1967 to 1974, which led to the exile of King Constantine II who was enthroned in 1964. This dictatorship was the result of the coup d'état of the military junta then dominated by Geórgios Papadópolous.

Yosef Joseph Dadoune's *The Four Seas*

Finally, the Rockefeller Museum<sup>8</sup> in Jerusalem. Built on a Nabataean cemetery, it is just another layer. Two worlds meet here; East and West clash at the very spot of this invisible green line. It is invisible, yet very present, as a social, ethnic and national border, rarely crossed, with no checkpoint to mark it. There are even Western and Eastern architectural influences, letters engraved in Hebrew and Arabic, though it was built by the English. This museum's history is a testimony of the turbulent history of this city, which remains holy for three religions. Nowadays, it is accessed by crossing barbed wire. This museum looks like a bunker, built by Westerners who imposed their vision of history. The very place where it was constructed makes it a symbol of the hegemony and colonial domination, and today it is at the center of contemporary problems.

It is within these walls that Dadoune staged the visit of a European collector, a formidable woman with imposing blonde hair, in a very proper Armani outfit, played by Brigitte Argièrne.

From room to room she discovers objects and ancient artefacts that seem to challenge and overwhelm her. Losing her confidence little by little, and allowing herself to be carried away in spite of herself in a whirlwind, an unexplained trance, she will find herself face to face with an imaginary figure, an archetype of the Oriental woman, proud and independent, free and powerful, portrayed by Israeli singer, Dikla. She stands in front of this provoking woman with black hair. In this role, Dikla finds the expression of the problems that nourish her art and which guide her musical composition, at the crossroads of Western pop and Eastern chants. The dream-fantasy continues in an erotic fight which turns into an intimate scene. A mutual fascination emerges, an attraction punctuated by violent rejections. A back and forth of love and hate gives a rhythm to these intense scenes.

The delirium of the collector intensifies until it is absorbed by another temporality and, as it is lost in a historical spiral from which she cannot escape, she is blocked in a room, with closed doors, surrounded by fragments of the ancient gates of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

It is after this violent and anxiety-filled episode that she starts a sort of inaugural journey on this earth, that she leaves the museum to start a dialogue with the very elements that compose it. It is in the water that she finds purification... it is in ritual baths, in each of the seas of Israel, that it will be able to find a relative serenity. But this purification is not complete; she preserves her spirit of conquest and collects water in each of these seas, each representing a frontier of the Promised Land, at the four cardinal points. During a pagan ceremony, dominated by a burning sun that seems to direct the ritual, an unknown hand, maybe divine, collects the four samples in a single receptacle, which will be the trophy of this woman, which she will bring back to her world. The collection of these four waters represents the whole earth, girded by its seas. Therefore, it is the spiritual and vital essence of the earth that she takes away from it.

<sup>8</sup> The Rockefeller Museum is a history museum located in front of the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, and contains many remains discovered in Israel and Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem.

## Shanti

Yosef-Joseph Dadoune's *Shanti* (video, installation, 2005–06) offers us a reflection on the notions of authority and obedience, domination and submission, and on the many facets of a master / slave relationship.

The installation is a video diptych; two back-to-back screens broadcast the same video with a slight offset. Also, the soundtracks mix, while the viewer can see only one video simultaneously. This gives the viewer a particular sensory experience, the perceptions being no longer coordinated. Here, Dadoune underlines the complexity of reporting a situation using only one media which by definition will be biased, and in this way highlights the subjectivity of a testimony.

The places chosen by Dadoune to film *Shanti* reflect the duality of space and the symbolic complexity of the territory. We find an industrial waste dump at Ofakim transformed into an experimental site, a Bedouin encampment close to Ofakim, a military base rehabilitated as an artist residence in Kodra, Greece, peaceful hills with a biblical landscape disturbed by a column of threatening smoke... Smoke that is found in the central scene of *Shanti*, a scene of humiliation, of psychological and symbolic violence until its sudden recurrence. A group of young people responding to the physical stereotypes of the Mediterranean male smoke their cigarettes. Their victim shows a passivity that could be interpreted as resignation or as a simple consent.

## In the desert

The desert is at the center of the metaphysical reflection of the work by Dadoune. As a pervasive, immutable and powerful decor, it is the natural setting and source of inspiration for many of his works.

It is in this environment that Dadoune grew up, studied, suffered and forged a tormented and creative personality. In his video *In the desert* (2009) he portrays the man and the machine, the machine in the service of man in his enterprise of domination of his environment.

Cradled by the sounds coming from the many sites scattered around Ofakim, Dadoune likes to imagine what one could see if the fences surrounding them were to disappear. Drillers, shovels and tractors are methodically involved, such as bees in a hive, in a mechanical and precise choreography, digging, drilling, penetrating, moving, butchering, seemingly ignoring the purpose of their action. The burial of two trees, in two 12-meter wells, which in another context would remain in the state of image, metaphor or intellectual construction becomes here more concrete, visible, and almost palpable. The materialization of what should have remained a symbol gives him an uncontested strength and power.

The eternity of the desert deals with human mannerisms. The capacity of the land to engulf and absorb the attempts of occupation appears in its obvious

invincibility. These attempts of occupation and quest for meaning are reflected in the double symbolism of drilling. We see constructions of foundations that will support buildings, homes, wells, and tombs where the last traces of life will disappear before merging into eternity with the soil that fed them.

One cannot ignore the timing of the realization of this video. It is indeed a year after the death of his mother that Dadoune staged this funeral of two trees, a cypress and a palm tree, both symbols of the Mediterranean vegetation. Cypress trees are found in cemeteries all around the sea. The Jews plant cypress trees when a daughter is born. Now Dadoune buries one when his mother dies. Would burying the tree of life that comes directly from paradise mean that he sees the end of his own life? Is he symbolically burying himself by her side?

The placement of concrete tombstones concludes this cycle and leaves a mark of the passage of man, giving the illusion of eternity. These blocks of concrete are derived from the environment of Yosef-Joseph Dadoune, blocking among other things the passage on the paths of the desert, checkpoints which by hindering and blocking the movement give the illusion of control of space and time.

Translated from the French by Marina Gržinić  
Translation edited by Celia Merlin

### **Credits images**

**Image 1:** Yosef Joseph Yaakov Dadoune, *Ofakim*, 2010; HD, One channel, Sound, 14.47 min; Collection FNAC Paris

**Image 2:** Yosef Joseph Yaakov Dadoune, *SION*, 2006; Ronit Elkabetz as *SION*, Museum Louvre, Paris

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