



THE CURRENT
SITUATION
YARA EL-SHERBINI
EXHIBITION GUIDE

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Special
**GLOBAL
EDITION**



WARNING: Requires nerves of steel.
Navigate the world's borders at your own risk!

THE CURRENT SITUATION YARA EL-SHERBINI

Foreword

New Art Exchange (NAE) endeavours to be a space that can be accessed by the broadest range of communities and audiences. It has therefore been an exciting opportunity to commission an artist such as Yara El-Sherbini who makes playful art which can be enjoyed by all. For the past 10 years, El-Sherbini's artworks have used the recognisable formats of quizzes, gameshows and jokes, as well as referencing everyday objects, such as toilet locks and books. She uses familiar things to dismantle the intimidating barriers that can be felt in the gallery environment to allow wider audiences to relate to and engage with contemporary art.

Underneath their accessible exterior, El-Sherbini's artworks provoke important socio-political questions. The laughter and play she introduces does not intend to undermine these deeper issues, but instead are a means of encouraging the audiences' reflection and active participation with the artwork. This might be in their response to a joke or question El-Sherbini offers, or in the challenge presented by one of her games. This physical interaction, and the thoughts and ideas the audience take home with them, make El-Sherbini's artworks complete.

NAE has commissioned five new works by El-Sherbini for *The Current Situation*. The show brings together both gallery-based exhibits and a number of site-specific installations. The latter will adapt and change as the exhibition embarks on its national tour, responding to the specific socio-political context of each of the localities.

Each of the artworks in *The Current Situation* are diverse in their mode and presentation, but connected by a common theme: an exploration of the here and now. For the exhibition at NAE, El-Sherbini made various works including a wordsearch placed in a local paper which looked at a collective desire people have today in Britain, and a sound piece installed in NAE's existing tannoy system that challenged how stereotypes are created. A live pub quiz engaged with local and global contemporary issues, and a display of physically deconstructed texts invited reflection on how knowledge is transferred. An interactive game in the form of a world map asked visitors to consider the forces that have shaped, and will continue to shape, the global geographic landscape as we know it.

Woven together with a sense of playfulness, humour and participation, the works in *The Current Situation* collectively attempt to unravel our world view and to encourage us to question how we know what we know, and how we've come to acquire that information in the first place. Read Nat Muller's detailed essay on pages 4 - 10 for a rich exploration of each of the exhibits in a global context, and connect with the wall texts to observe how the distinct local themes in the show evolve in response to its location.

Melanie Kidd

Director of Programmes, NAE

Power Plays: Yara El-Sherbini's The Current Situation

Nat Muller

The past decade has seen a surge in social and politically informed practices in contemporary art. Often affectionately termed the “social turn” or the “political turn” by critics and art practitioners alike, it references works borne from the petered out euphoria that ensued from the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the hangover of the burst dot.com bubble, increased globalisation, climate change, accelerated technological developments and a financial crisis to boot. It is no wonder artists feel the need to engage critically with a world that seems to spin out of control. The gravity of the subject matter – poverty, conflict, xenophobia, class divisions, authoritarianism, unbridled capitalism, greed and a squandering of the planet’s resources – do not lend themselves easily to humorous interpretations. However, artist Yara El-Sherbini’s work manages to turn *homo politicus* (political man) into *homo ludens* (playing man) by incorporating participatory playfulness and play as key components into her

practice. As such she collapses the politics of play with the performative play of politics, exposing in accessible ways the intricacies of power and how we, often unnoticed, have internalised these dynamics. Much of her oeuvre deals with pinpointing how we have succumbed, again often unknowingly, to certain ingrained ideas even if we deem ourselves on the progressive side of the political spectrum. Through play she gently pushes us to unlearn, or at least confront and acknowledge, our own prejudices. El-Sherbini does not limit her activities to the confines of the gallery space but takes her projects and interventions to, amongst others, pubs, newspapers, and markets. Her art is truly public, not only in the traditional sense that it is shown in public spaces, but also in the sense that it allows the public to connect with it and appropriate it as their own. Though as an artist El-Sherbini conceptualises her projects meticulously she can only claim partial ownership over her work. In her interactive projects her role is

more that of a mediating entity that allows the audience to engage at various levels with the work and create their own affective, aesthetic, political and social dynamic. Though the formal properties of the work are of importance, these projects are not complete without the participation of the audience. You could cheekily say that the ‘real work’ takes place beyond the artwork proper, and is to be found in the experiences people take home with them.

For her new commission for New Art Exchange, *The Current Situation*, an exhibition planned to tour nationally, El-Sherbini builds on previous projects and themes, yet realises it on a much larger scale. The main piece for this solo show is a 7800mm (W) x 3550mm (H) metal map of the world, outlining the contours of national borders, including contested borders, such as for example the annexed Golan Heights in Israel, South Ossetia, Western Sahara, Northern Cyprus and Gaza.



The End Of History (2012), Yara El-Sherbini

This expanded map is on the one hand a nod to the national and ideological aspirations of ethnic communities and other groups, but on the other hand also an acknowledgment of the fluidity of political geographies. In this sense *The Current Situation*, though a sculptural work, formed in the sturdy material of metal, should be read as a time-based work. Visitors are to navigate the borders of the world with a handheld device without touching the borders. If they do, they will experience a strong vibration resembling an electric shock, an alarm will sound and the exhibition space will be flooded with red light. In other words, visitors literally will be put on the spot whenever a border crossing is breached, so to speak. The game is an adaptation of the well-known game “buzz wire”. El-Sherbini’s shock tactic speaks to the physical and legislative strategies used by governments to reinforce and control their borders: from walls, barbed wire, electrical fences, manned and unmanned surveillance, to visa restrictions and immigration curbs. Every transgression is punished, as is the case in El-Sherbini’s game of deterrence, albeit in a playful manner.

Just as it can be in real life, navigating borders becomes a matter of tactics and skills, which are articulated in *The Current Situation* in a highly performative, and competitive, manner. The artist has skilfully combined the complex geo-politics of mobility in our contemporary world with the politics of viewing and representation, and has placed this in a friendly but dynamic social setting. Indeed, not only are players aware of their fellow-players when they start traveling their routes, but there are exhibition visitors who will choose not to participate but prefer to take in the unfolding game from the side lines. This all enhances the aspect of “being watched” and heightens the pressure on the players: In which country will they start? Why? How will they choose to move? What type of cartography will their (re)drawing of the map produce? What is the power dynamic between the players and between players and spectators?

Moreover, what happens when no one plays the map and the geography remains deactivated? Then the piece becomes a beautiful gleaming sculpture, perhaps not unlike the monumental pieces gracing UN and other supra-national organisations' lobbies and offices. Usually these works, strategically placed in the hallways of world power, celebrate a harmonious worldview; a world that is united, at least in theory. It is this dream of the world that these organisations will, again at least in theory, help to safeguard. While echoing this aesthetic at first glance, El-Sherbini's map allows for the fissures and contested spaces in these geo-political cartographies. With only the contours outlined and rendered in metal, the player's space of navigation is empty space, thin air. A space that can be read as simultaneously one that is completely controlled and restricted, as much as it offers possibilities and opportunities. There are many entry points to *The Current Situation* wherein play serves a vehicle to question and to experience territory.

The cheeky word puns of El-Sherbini's piece are one of them and cannot be lost on the viewer. The currency of the situation is as much about the exigency of the state of the world, as it is about the voltage running through the metal frame of the installation. The power struggle that forms the crux of this project refers as much to the uneven distribution of political influence as it does to the electrical current powering the artwork.

And here is an interesting rub: spectatorship only will yield a particular type of experience but will not reveal the felt extent of the power surging through the wireframe. Perhaps this an indirect commentary that non-action and looking from the sidelines can only expose power dynamics up to a certain extent. If you really want to get close to the power game you, literally, have to get your hands dirty, or shocked in this case. In the same room as *The Current Situation* El-Sherbini shows another major work, *The End of series* (2014). In these four sculptural pieces she has broken down four seminal texts by punching holes in them, reducing these texts to heaps of confetti-like paper waste. They are placed on dramatically lit pedestals with only labels identifying the texts: Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's groundbreaking political philosophical work *Empire* (2000) on the new world order within a context of globalisation and hyper-capitalism; a map of the world; the 1916 British-French Sykes-Picot agreement that carved up the Middle East in French and British protectorates; and Belgian cartoonist Hergé's *Tintin in the Land of Black Gold*, wherein the young reporter Tintin travels to the Arab world in order to uncover a plot that involves sabotaged fuel supplies. *Land of Black Gold* is the 15th volume in *The Adventures of Tintin* comics series. Its publication and editorial history, spanning from 1939 when Hergé first started working on the story and its final version in 1972, are in and by themselves examples of how changes in





world politics have altered the original narrative, the biggest change in the story being a move away from the British Mandate for Palestine to a fictional state called Khemed. All texts collected by El-Sherbini address imperial history and how it resonates in the present moment and is likely to continue to do so in the future, and how global politics' tit-for-tat policies and scramble for resources have drawn and continue to redraw the world map. It is therefore interesting that El-Sherbini has used such a varied range of texts: from academic polemical treatises, political agreements to a comic book and a visual representation of global geography. By materially deconstructing the content of these texts and their very forms, El-Sherbini not only questions the messages these texts relay but also their very genres. Again the four pieces, respectively *The End of Empire* (Hardt and Negri), *The End of The World* (world map), *The End of The Agreement* (Sykes-Picot) and *The End of the Adventures of Tintin in the Land of*

Black Gold suggest that ideologically these texts might have reached a dead end, but also more basal, the end of the physical forms of these texts.

Blending an aesthetics reminiscent of the cheap and commonly used materials of *arte povera* (the punched paper) with an impish Duchampian streak (the paper is almost a readymade), the artist has first uncoupled these texts from their original meaning and form in order to transform them into meaningless waste and then into precious works of art (the dramatic lighting and the object-like placement of the plinths sacralise the paper mounds). It is no coincidence that both Marcel Duchamp and the artists garnered under the *arte povera* movement offered strong critiques on (institutionalised) power. What is visually compelling and wonderfully self-deprecating about *The End of series* is the fact that the intellectual and historical weight of the text does not necessarily correspond to the volume of

punched paper. Then again, judging historical gravitas is a pretty subjective matter. The hefty tome of Negri and Hardt has produced the largest mound of paper, followed by Tintin and then the world map. The Sykes-Picot agreement yields the smallest amount of punched paper, though whatever the French diplomat François Georges-Picot and his British counterpart Sir Mark Sykes decided in 1916 still reverberates to this day. In addition, the aesthetic similarity between the four pieces, except for size and slight variations in colour, further enhances the idea that *The End of series*, though presented as singular art objects, could be endlessly reproduced as the wheel of world politics keeps on turning. *The End of series* placed in conjunction with *The Current Situation* cause a scrambling of historical narratives with the contemporary moment, and *The Current Situation* could very quickly too await the same terminal fate as the punched-hole texts.



Taking the idea of play to a different realm, Yara El-Sherbini is probably best known for her various quiz, game show and board game projects. For this exhibition too, she has developed a pub quiz to be held in a local pub. This one-hour durational piece is multi-layered, mixing the convivial and boozy social and recreational setting of a pub with pertinent political questions. It also takes the idea of critical artistic practice out of the gallery space and into a different public sphere with different audiences. El-Sherbini always takes on the role of the quiz mistress, makes sure that in-between breaks tacky 80s power ballads are playing and provides winners with the usual pub quiz trophies, such as a mug or a bottle of wine. However, her questions are rather unusual. Often hilariously funny and drawing from popular culture and local folklore El-Sherbini pushes the quiz teams to examine the limits of (their) political correctness and other types of ambiguous political discourse. A sample question might read:

The *Keffiyeh*; the Palestinian headscarf, is available to buy in Topshop branches throughout the UK. Is this because:

- Resistance is the new black.
- Debord's notion of Recuperation, in which radical ideas and images become safe and commodified.
- Vogue magazine voted it as a must have black and white classic.

Opposite:

What is National Is Good, Intervention, site-specific wordsearch placed in a local Portuguese newspaper 2011.

Or another might amusingly ask: "Does the film *Free Willy* explore free will?" Similar to *The Current Situation* the aspect of competitiveness adds an interesting social dynamic to an already politicised game. *A Pub Quiz* in particular puts on a par the demonstration of knowledge, or alleged knowledge, and individual political positions. What is important, however, is that this happens in a humorous and friendly context, and not in an antagonistic one. It is a winning formula to unpack current political issues.

A Pub Quiz is not the only instance in this project in which El-Sherbini takes her practice out of the white cube. In *A Wordsearch* she places a specially designed wordsearch game in a free local newspaper during the period of the exhibition. The word game is based on a series of workshops she held with diverse demographic groups where, in the case of the Nottingham edition of *A Wordsearch*, issues of what people want were discussed. Using 14 different languages spoken in the UK and transliterated phonetically, the Nottingham wordsearch expressed one unifying desire (distilled in a sentence), whatever language we speak: to be understood. Not only has El-Sherbini found a way to intervene rather innocently in a broadly consumed media product – the newspaper – often the stage where political discourses, notions and ideas of power are circulated, but she has also found a way to involve a coincidental, and therefore alternative,

audience. Her readership is unknown to her. People will just come across the wordsearch. Similar to her pub quiz where there will always be punters just having a pint, also here people oblivious to the artist's intent will start playing the game. A copy of the newspaper will be framed and hung in the exhibition space. Like this, the record of the intervention somehow becomes monumentalised.

Also created for New Art Exchange, visitors to the venue experience *Where are you originally from: Answer Britain* (2014), a site-specific sound installation that completes *The Current Situation* exhibition. The content of this piece may change in relation to the context of each of the venues on the exhibition tour, but for New Art Exchange, the work utilizes the existing public address system in the café and hallways, and the non-exhibition spaces of the gallery and plays answers to such questions as 'where are you really from', 'what is your heritage', 'where did your parents meet', that people of mixed ethnic backgrounds often face when others try to establish their origin. Usually these types of questions serve to establish a common ground for exchange, yet they often reveal exoticised and stereotyped understandings of otherness, and end up reinforcing difference between the self and the other. For example, a reply to someone's Indian heritage could be something like "I love curry".



These answers reduce complex identitarian and cultural subjectivities to pre-packaged simplistic one-liners. In El-Sherbini's case, however, the lens is provocatively turned back on Britishness, more specifically Nottingham, generating very funny results. An answer to "Where are you really from" prompt responses like "I love Robin Hood"; "You guys make the best pickled eggs", "Do you think there will ever be peace between Nottingham Forest and Derby County fans?" or "Women from the Midlands are so exotic". Here the idea of being native and going native has been turned topsy-turvy and the latent bias present in many of these responses are

made fun of in a performative fashion. Though the omnipotent voice of El-Sherbini sounding through the café and hallways demands unequivocal attention and arrests the regular flow of things, nothing of major importance is actually said. Indeed, it is the contradiction between the commandeering format of the medium (the tannoy system) and the triviality of the information that underlines cultural misconceptions. As with all the works in *The Current Situation* comic relief serves as a vehicle to address, unpack and question pressing political and social issues in a way that is accessible, playful and above all inclusive.

The Quiz Mistress
2009

Commissioned as part of Artsadmin 30
Photograph by Hugo Glendinning

In 2011 Hamas freed Israeli Soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for Israel freeing 1,027 Palestinian political prisoners. Using this exchange rate, if Hamas freed 8 Israeli prisoners, how many Palestinian prisoners would be freed?

Answer: 8216



Universality Challenge
2008

Originally commissioned
by Chelsea Theatre.
Photograph by Manuel Vason.

El-Sherbini used the format
of the popular TV game
show to playfully engage
local 'town' Versus 'gown'
teams, pitting them against
each other through everyday
and non-general knowledge.

Yara El-Sherbini: CV

Education

2003-2005 MA Fine Art Media
Slade, University College London, received
Prankard-Jones Memorial award in Fine
Art

1999-2002 BA Fine Art in Context
University of the West Of England, Bristol

Residencies

2012 *Wide Open School*, Hayward Gallery,
London

2011 *The Global Contemporary* ZKM
Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe,
Germany

2010-2011 Artist In Residence [1 year],
Whitechapel Gallery

2010 *Home and Abroad* - Triangle Arts,
Portugal

2008 Artshouse, Melbourne, Australia

Exhibitions (selected)

2010

A Pub Quiz, Bard College, New York
Universality Challenge, Arnolfini
A Pub Quiz, BALTIC
A Rather Trivial Pursuit, The Jewish
Museum

2009

Great British Art?, Norwich Castle Museum
The Girl Effect, Lombard-Freid, New York
Transmission Interrupted, Modern Art
Oxford, Oxford
At Your Service, The David Roberts
Art Foundation, London
100 years of Climate Change, Futuresonic,
Manchester
Universality Challenge, Battersea Arts
Centre

2014

Steps leading to The Current Situation,
La Caja Blanca, Spain
Rain, Snow and Hail, LWL - Industrial
Museum, Dortmund, Germany

2013

Leave to Remain, Yara El-Sherbini and
Murad Khan Mumtaz, La Caja Blanca,
Spain.
Pen Il Paper, ATHR Gallery, Saudi Arabia

2012

Wide Open School, Hayward Gallery,
London
The Global Contemporary, ZKM, Germany
HaHa Road, Mostyn Gallery, Wales
The Bravery Of Being Out Of Range II,
Sultan Gallery, Kuwait

2011

HaHa Road, QUAD Gallery, Derby
The Bravery Of Being Out Of Range,
ATHR, Saudi Arabia
A Pub Quiz, National Portrait Gallery,
London
A Pub Quiz, National Maritime Museum,
London
A Pub Quiz, LCB -City Gallery, Leicester

2008

With a small p The Delfina Foundation,
London
BAC! CCCB Barcelona, Spain
A Pub Quiz, The Melbourne Fringe
Festival, Australia
A Pub Quiz, IKON gallery, Birmingham
Universality Challenge, Chelsea Theatre,
London
Temporary Agency, Chelsea Space,
London
ARTfutures, Contemporary Art Society,
London
Live Art Unpacked, Centre d'Art
Contemporain Geneve, Switzerland
Performing Rights, National Review of
Live Art, Glasgow

2007

Absence of Present, Can Marques, Spain
Joking Aside, Bury St Edmonds Art
Gallery, Suffolk
*Festival de Video arte del Mercado de
las Flores*, Spain
System Error, Palazzo delle Papesse,
Italy
Breathing Space, The Junction,
Cambridge
Emerging Artists, Tokyo Wonder Site,
Japan
Breathing Space, Arnolfini, Bristol

2006

*Who are you? Where are you really
from?* Whitworth art gallery, Manchester
Tagged, SPACE Media Arts, London
Breathing Space, Tramway, Glasgow
Breathing Space, Greenroom,
Manchester
Interventions, Tate Britain, London
East International, Norwich
Performance Studies International #12,
London
Inbetween Time Festival, Arnolfini,
Bristol



Socially Engaged

2009

**Installation on the door
of a WC,
within a gallery space.
Plastic, metal, ink
5 cm x 7 cm**

Playing with the terms usually found on the toilet locks, Vacant/Engaged, here the artist questioned the role of art and the artist in relation to social and political concerns, and the framing of art practices and positions.



A Rather Trivial Pursuit

2008

27.3 x 27.3 x 9 cm

Image courtesy of The David Roberts Art Foundation, Yara El-Sherbini and La Caja Blanca

El-Sherbini's self-authored adaptation of this familiar game saw players question how we assume and transfer knowledge whilst they engage in what appears to be an ordinary, inconsequential pastime. Originally commissioned by Delfina Foundation, London.



Reproducing The Current Climate

2011

16 x 10 x 28 cm

A limited edition of ten handmade fully operable weather houses produced during a residency at ZKM, Germany. Here El-Sherbini subverted the traditional German Weather House from a picturesque folk chalet, an idyllic self-image, into a Doner Kebab Shop (the most popular fast food in Germany). El-Sherbini hired a stall at a Christmas market in Germany and sold the reproductions back to the locals.

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The Current Situation

Yara El-Sherbini

10 May – 7 September 2014

New Art Exchange
39 – 41 Gregory Boulevard
Hyson Green
Nottingham NG7 6BE, UK
www.nae.org.uk

Exhibition Tour

Supported by Strategic Touring funds from the Arts Council England *The Current Situation* will embark on a national tour following its closure at New Art Exchange. Confirmed tours at the time of print:

Spring 2015

Wolverhampton Art Gallery
Lichfield St
Wolverhampton
West Midlands WV1 1DU, UK
www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk

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Design: Tom Partridge

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**Nottingham
City Council**

WAVE
THE MUSEUMS, GALLERIES &
ARCHIVES OF WOLVERHAMPTON

Jean Charles de Menezes was shot and killed when mistaken for a 'suicide bomber'. On news reports, shocked passengers on the tube carriage stated the Brazilian man was 'Asian, definitely Asian'.

Does this suggest that:

- a. All brown people look the same?
- b. There are people in the world who believe Brazil is part of Asia?

