

In Ramallah, Running

Guy Mannes-Abbott

REVIEWS

[Books of 2012 in Artasiapacific's Almanac 2013:](#)

In Ramallah Running refrains from theoretical hyperbole or displays of erudition, offering instead something far more valuable to an understanding of artistic production: a sense of time and place. Guy Mannes-Abbott skillfully rescues the *dérive* from banality, refashioning it into a visceral struggle to comprehend the plethora of spiteful limits—mental and physical—that constrains the city's inhabitants as the Oslo Accords recede into absurdity. As Mannes-Abbott runs through Ramallah and its environs, he strives to notice what life and space really mean beneath the vulgar gaze of the gleaming hilltop settlements—to locate hope amid this “non-sense.” In response, artists and writers including Emily Jacir, Najwan Darwish and Adania Shibli give insiders' accounts of existing within these borders—a mixture of humiliations, scrutinies and normality.

[Kaelen Goldie-Wilson in frieze magazine:](#)

"Mannes-Abbott's writing is as strong and painful to read as the work of two other writers he pays homage to here: Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani. In fact, the challenge he sets for himself in his book is to test out the meaning of a line from Darwish – ‘on this earth there is something to live for’ – in the one place on earth where it seems most ludicrous to do so. Yet something about the absurdity of the task adds weight and clarity to the meaning Mannes-Abbott finds."

[Stephen Howe in The Independent:](#)

"Guy Mannes-Abbott, out running and seeing figures in the distance, asks himself whether these are human beings or settlers. However well one knows that the settlers also dehumanise Palestinians, the sentiment is still as shocking as it is, in that place, horribly logical... Mannes-Abbott's book, *In Ramallah, Running* is a[n] experimental hybrid. It brings together his own evocative, often moving prose-poem on running in the Ramallah hills with several shorter texts, paintings and graphic works by other, mostly Palestinian hands."

[Mya Guarnieri in The National:](#)

"Mannes-Abbott's descriptions can border on the lyrical -rendering the beauty of the land and his love for the place and its people. But they are also laden with the claustrophobia and fear that typify Palestinian life: "... in the prison of these hills, in lovely Ramallah itself, there is no freedom. Here, in this place, life spirals within abysmal limits." His 14-part series reveals the physical limitations imposed by the Israeli occupation; more importantly, [he] points to how those restrictions linger inside the psyche, long after one has entered the so-called "autonomous" areas."

[Sarah Irving in Electronic Intifada:](#)

"Mannes-Abbott's questioning, noticing style and willingness to hear — if not obey — those he encounters along the way mean that... his clean, elegant writing forms an engaging piece of reportage, description and enquiry. The almost whimsical note of how “nomadic Bedouin tend the weary terraces, their children's voices charm the silence” contrasts with the note that Psagot settlement looks “positively fascistic,” and that any Palestinian doing what Mannes-Abbott is doing, walking along a road, risks “routine arrest, violence or murder — like the boy shot last week by a settler on a road linked to this 15 kilometers north”

[Maymanah Farhat in Jadaliyya:](#)

"Although *In Ramallah, Running* was realized as a collaborative experiment, it originally began as a series of short form texts that Mannes-Abbott penned... descriptions of the landscape, the hilly, rock-strewn surface that seems to beckon under the weight of his steps, are tenderly complex, frequently in appreciation of the understated generosity of its rough, embracing terrain. At the same time there are raw, to-the-point moments within these texts, passages that jolt the reader back into a “hellish vision”... a tension to which many of the

book's contributors respond... It is to the credit of his navigable writing (what Mourid Barghouti has called its "cunning simplicity") that each included work determines its own status within the project, not one overshadows another, and each adds something more. Had he not reached out to his peers, Mannes-Abbott's poetically attentive series could have stood on its own. By doing so, however, the author initiated an interventionist art strategy that should be studied by future practitioners."

Sally O'Reilly in Art Monthly:

"Mannes-Abbott comes at literature from a very different angle, the repetition of acts of obstruction, threat and discomfort serving to communicate the lived experience of containment & oppression... each narrative relates a journey peopled with Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians, past concrete occupier settlements and ancient olive groves, haunted by poets and NGOs. Outrage at the limits placed on passage -although way more relaxed for EU citizens than for Palestinians- is a daily refrain in the region, so to set about running, literally, up against these limits is a vividly direct method of critique."

Daniella Peled in the Jewish Quarterly:

"An ostensibly collaborative book, this is really about British author Guy Mannes-Abbott who goes running through Ramallah and walking its surrounding hills... exploring the city's abstract and spatial tensions and illustrated by Turner Prize-nominated artist Paul Noble. And there's a lot of figurative running going on - people trying to carry on living a life of normality under utterly abnormal circumstances. So M-A has a lovely idea but... rather nauseating is a section in which he comes across men working in the fields outside Ramallah and muses on whether they are "settlers or human beings". And M-A isn't keen on the Ramallah boom [or bubble], noting "great white apartment blocks -just like those in the larger Occupation settlements all around."

Sara Elkamel in al Ahram:

"Running is the proof of my existence... I am running in Ramallah, and it is painful." Guy Mannes-Abbott reads poignant excerpts from his running and walking texts, which function to capture the writer's experience with the city, and by proxy reflect the labored heartbeat of a volatile city... The ginger-haired writer speaks rapidly, his fair skin often tinted red with excitement, he is not a large man, his face bears a smile at all times. Mannes-Abbott dared to walk and run across sensitive streets and hills, but he was afraid. "I was very aware of my mortality as I walked up on the hill," he says. The result of this precarious endeavor is a raw account of an alternative Palestine that unveils how insidious and transportable the limits are under occupation. "I ran within limits, beyond limits... you discover that limits are within you... that's how occupation works..." The artwork coming out of the region is what gives the city its multi-dimensionality. Artists defy occupation by defying its limits through imagination and artwork.

INTERVIEWS [excerpted]

Shumon Basar in Tank magazine:

SB: How did you end up spending time in Ramallah, and why Ramallah in the first place?

GM-A: ... I don't want to over-theorise, but one of the compulsions in attempting to write Ramallah is that its exception reveals much about the world we live in today. Plus "Ramallah", the prison-camp pseudo-capital, can't exist for much longer. We'll look back at it with fascinated horror soon...

SB: What does this form of writing bring to you and to the reader, and can you tell us what an "e.thing" is?

GM-A: An e.thing is short for "a thousand essential things"; a form I use when all others fail. They derive from lifelong obsessions with fragmentary and highly condensed forms of writing, as well as experimental

modes including cut-ups. They often work like poetry; prioritising rhythm over sense to convey something that can't but must be said, directly - without footnotes or bibliographic supports. The Ramallah texts put you in the place in singular ways and degrees by combining very large things; philosophy, histories and crimes, with very immediate things; danger, thirst and pleasures. As you suggest, a breaching of forms is required to get at this resistant quality of urgent exactitude...

Marcia Lynx Qualey in Egypt Independent:

EI: How much was this an “artistic” project versus a “political” one?

Mannes-Abbott: My writing must stand or fall by literary or artistic standards. The politics come in the act of writing the book and certainly the project as a whole is necessarily political. However, the artists' contributions were also treated and judged on artistic merits, partly because a related political infusion and maturity was assumed. Yet notice how they all respond to what Mourid Barghouti describes as the “cunning simplicity” of my texts by deepening the ambiguities...

EI: You don't write much about yourself, besides walking and running around the environs of Ramallah. Why did you choose to mostly leave yourself out of the project?

Mannes-Abbott: I was trying to let the place speak itself, if that doesn't sound faux-naive. I'm aware of obvious colonial legacies and practices and that I'm going and “recording” the place too! So motivation, method and a certain exactitude are crucial, no? That's why I tried so hard to maintain this “outsiderness” in the writing. I did and do have close friends in and from Palestine, but when I arrived I just started walking, running, stumbling on my own, and for me that was essential. What I've written is true to that experience.

Sheyma Buali for Ibraaz:

SB: Did you know before you got to Ramallah that you would be running?

GMA: ... I wanted to attempt to locate and trace out two related spaces or locations in the place. That is, an interior and exterior circle formed in locations as 'free' as possible from Occupation presence. The former could be as simple as a backyard or garden, the everyday life and tending of which I would witness over time. A limited space but one free of the direct impacts of Occupation, in a sense. Then, I was hoping to attempt a wider circle exterior to the city that would also record only Palestinian life and the place itself, 'free' of Occupation or at least from obvious interdictions and infrastructure. I wanted my text to record the place – a past and future Palestine – 'liberated' in these particular ways or senses. So running became my way of getting closest to – in fact expanding on – the first part of that, the interior of the city, the more interior intimate space and everyday relationships with the place. Walking on the outside was another expanded version of the other, a kind of circling or weaving through and in the place.

SB: At one point you walk down Al Jihad ('struggle') Street in one direction, referring to yourself as a 'bubble-burster'. This is the first instance where you use the street names to introduce concepts of what you are communicating. You test the limits of freedom and existence by going down Jihad Street, as if you are running a map theory, biography and political history all in one.

GMA: That hones in on something quite complicated: it's difficult to speak about because it was difficult to write about. There is an image that I steal from Haruki Murakami about marathon running and novel writing: that it is like breathing without taking a breath, this impossible paradox, which is exactly what it feels like in Ramallah. It is like resisting and being unable to resist at the same time, all the time, that kind of ricochet.