

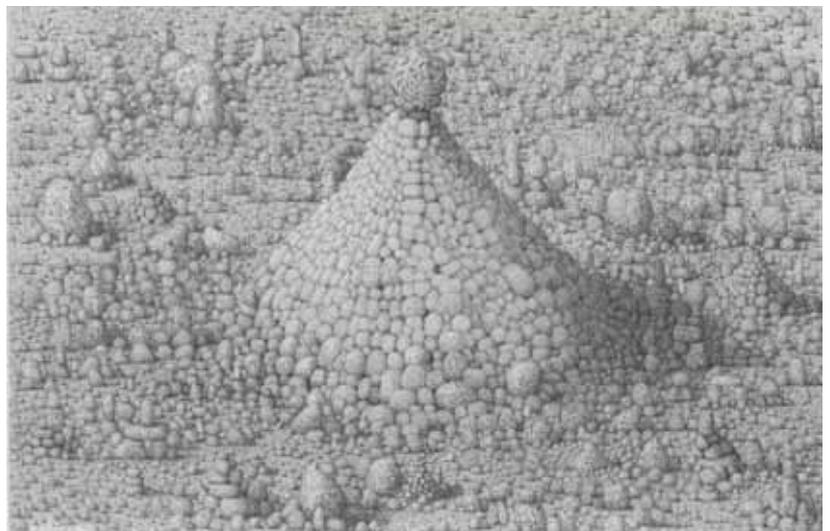
Interview

Running the Territory

A Conversation
between Guy Mannes-
Abbott and Sheyma
Buali

Jean Fisher's introduction to Guy Mannes-Abbott's recently-published book *In Ramallah, Running* points out the significances of the spaces that we are about to run through with the author. Using Henri Lefebvre's differentiations between the 'perceived space' – that which is lived in, holding of purpose and meaning – and that which is the 'conceived space', created by cartographers, planners and, most importantly in this case, colonisers, Fisher undermines both of these with Lefebvre's concept of the 'third space', the space of our imagination, 'which knows no limit'.^[1]

Paul Noble, Cathedral,
2011, Pencil on paper,
19 7/8 x 30 inches (50.5
x 76.3 cm). © Paul
Noble and Gagosian
Gallery.



[1] Fisher, Jean, introduction to *In Ramallah, Running*, London: Black Dog (2012), p9.

Many people have an image of Ramallah. Through Mannes-Abbott's descriptions of his runs around the city, we visit a place we may have imagined through stories, images and the news, testing boundaries with him as if we are being led through this place known for its limitations, history, and oppression but also beauty, homeliness and character.

We hear of Ramallah being a bubble, where one doesn't feel the occupation. Mannes-Abbott here acts within that bubble, showing us that what is at the end of the road is simply a road back – no exit, no entry, unless you have the right ID, of course.

As likely outsiders, who only know Palestine through pictures and stories, we take this trip with Mannes-Abbott as first-timers: challenging the boundaries and sniper threats, and trying to imagine the everyday normality beyond the narrative fed to us all the time. In this interview, Sheyma Buali speaks to Mannes-Abbott about the uniqueness of this city, its politics, history and terrain as well as what inspired him to create a work that has such intimate proximity to the place he experienced.

Sheyma Buali: Was this your first time in Ramallah?

Guy Mannes-Abbott: Yes, first and only time.

SB: I've been noticing growing numbers of what I would describe as 'occupation flaneur' books hitting bookstores of late, between Raja Shehadeh and Bidisha, for example. How does your book fit into this theme?

GMA: People have been asking me if there's any relationship with Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a vanishing landscape* (2008). It has got a relationship, though a distant one, and I admire and respect what it offered, but you can't walk around Ramallah with it. I didn't realise why until I was stitching together my archipelago of views of Ramallah. He was mythologising the place in a particular as well as admirable way. Reading that book, I was under the impression that there was only one Qasr, for example, that he found and was telling the story of. One day I was in the Wadi running east-west and north of Ramallah. The valley opened out and I noticed that there were many of these Qasrs: round ones, square ones, old ones, new ones. I literally laughed out loud at how naughty he had been to do that. That's where I found my admiration for the book because it is exactly what the place needs, to be mythologised, to make it an accessible story to sympathise and identify with.

I've long felt that flaneurs belong to the nineteenth century – too passive and definitely not me! And I haven't read Bidisha's book yet.

SB: Can you give me a bit of background – how did the project start?

GMA: The project began at a Thanksgiving dinner in 2008. Mourid Barghouti's *Midnight and Other Poems* had just appeared with my introduction and I was talking about it with Charles Asprey. Charles

is a founder of ArtSchool Palestine and he asked if I'd be interested in developing a work on Palestine and invited me to join him on a forthcoming visit. I set to work immediately, thinking hard through the night in fact, but slaughter in Gaza intervened that winter. Then I ran into an old friend, Paul Noble, at a memorial for Angus Fairhurst, who told me excitedly of his recent visit to Palestine where he stayed in modest quarters behind the A.M. Qattan Foundation building. It was the trigger for conversations that led to my own residency at al Qattan in the summer of 2010.

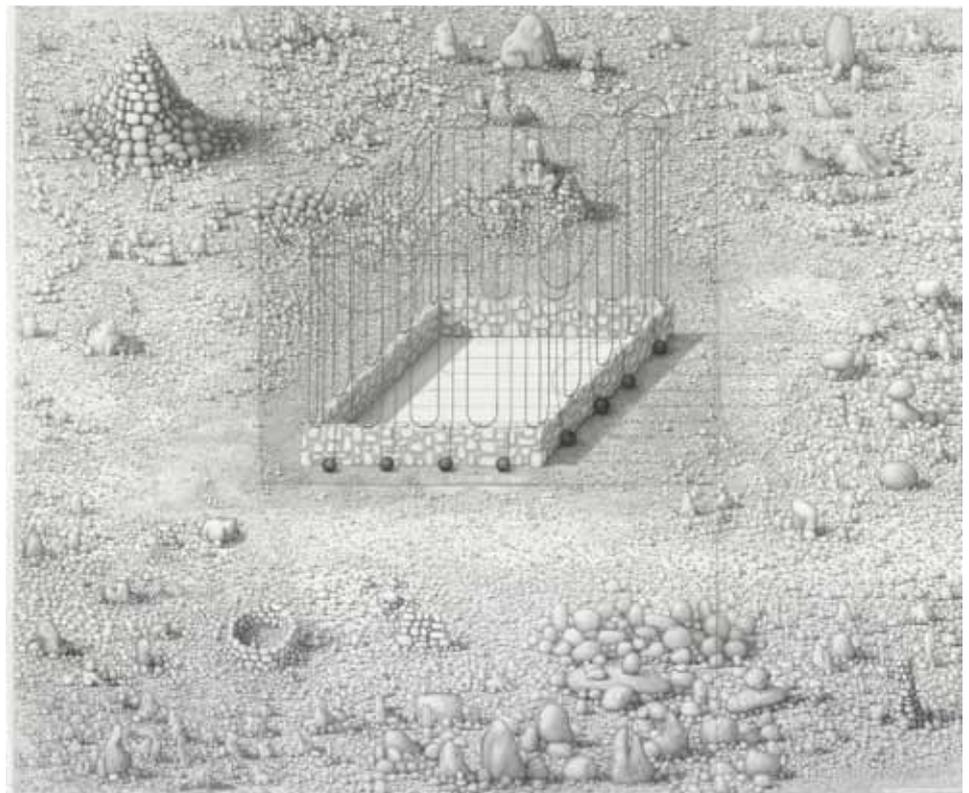
I wrote a lot while there, some 95,000 words, which might have become the basis of a conventional book. Instead, back home – rather urgently and without reference to those notes – I wrote the highly condensed texts that have become the book and sent the manuscript to Mourid (Barghouti), Shumon (Basar), Adania (Shibli) and Mahmoud Abu Hashhash at the Qattan, who all responded generously. It was almost exactly two years ago.

Meanwhile, Charles had put Samar (Martha, of ArtSchool Palestine) and I in touch and I described the finished work and notion of an exhibition in a book when we ran into each other in London. So, we met up to discuss it further and, well, here we are.

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

GMA: I thought that I might run. Essentially, I was trying to turn my basic idea of what I'd proposed to do there into action. 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

Paul Noble, Family is Infinity (or, Hard Labour), 2009–2010, Pencil on paper, 3 panels: 54 5/16 x 65 inches overall (138 x 165 cm). © Paul Noble and Gagosian Gallery.



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: Why is it strange to run in Ramallah?

GMA: The first, really obvious thing is the topography: it is extremely hilly. Where I was staying was nearly at the top of the hill; to get downtown you go down a very, very steep road, so even walking is quite painful. The idea that you would run is rather ridiculous unless you can find a relatively flat stretch. And then, it seems like a very decadent activity. When you go there, I mean, everyone shares an experience of going through a trauma of getting in and out. So to think in terms of running, or doing something very normal, is strange. Then just very banal things around not seeing anyone else running, or even on foot very much, after dawn.

SB: As we read, we get into the speed and the rhythm, as well as the space you are covering. It's interesting that you are constructing and breaking apart the spaces you talk about as you go back and forth between what was, what is and what may be. This sort of back and forth also comes through in terms of the speed that you see and describe things as you run and walk.

GMA: My running and honestly recording in words formalises my relationship with the place in its brevity. It's meant to convey and confess that I had that glancing relationship with the place, but I found that it worked better than that because over time, after 10 or 15 runs, you get little glimpses into things that start to become more resonant than I thought they would be. What you see when you do that is a certain newness of the place. For example, two roads were being built while I was running, it was happening very quickly and it was like the 'new' Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority's Ramallah, actually happening. Meanwhile, the people gathering on the terrace at dusk were a sort of old Ramallah, a pre-'Ramallah', which you see almost in the same moment.

SB: Throughout the book, you mention different maps denoting different historical events, things that are marked or unmarked, or marked by yourself. How did you choose which map to use? Did they influence your experience given the time/space relationship?

GMA: I had a Ramallah Municipality map in two versions that people gave me. Both of them slightly differed but centred on Al Bireh and twentieth-century Ramallah. I also had an out-of-date 2008 UN map of roadblocks and access to Google. You know it

says Ramallah, Israel on Google? But because those maps were only of the centre, I ran outside them, so then you just find out where it goes. I developed an experiential map in my head that was quite clear; I drew it out when I got home and it's very detailed, it's still there. The image was just one in my head: in the end I sketched it out self-critically, as a kind of test, before writing.

SB: This place has so many contradictions, where you have a so-called 'bubble' within an occupation of new Dubai-esque real-estate development, borders within the bubble, and settlers living in these newly-manufactured homes. Is this comparable to anything else to you? Would you be able to look at this through a different lens?

GMA: It is genuinely unique. However, the settlements around Ramallah, particularly the way the wall manifests itself in the south, reminded me of these kinds of inter-zonal borders between warring countries that I've crossed before. Twenty years ago between Honduras and Guatemala there was a no-man's zone where you cross on one side and then cross or walk around the other side; or between Guatemala and Belize, who were at war when I was there, or between India and Pakistan today. In Ramallah District, it is like leaving country after country after country, when you journey between Nablus and Ramallah, or it would be if you walked. That is the only true comparison I can think of, which is why it is so extreme. Especially for the two or three kilometres around the southern edge, half the western edge, there is that kind of infrastructure there. You can see occupied Jerusalem and Israel on the other side.

SB: Much of the book negotiates limits and boundaries, with each chapter title mentioning them, in this political context, speaking about politics in spatial terms. Is it fair to say that you were inspired (for lack of a better word) by this, what you can versus what you can't do, almost like a challenge to what is free in the mind but not on the ground?

GMA: I think you can read the state of the world in our time based on Ramallah's exception. It's so perverse and unique in being both so acute and so chronic. There is not very much else that you can compare that has so many things layered on top of each other but you can read the world from that exception. That is the appeal, from my perspective as a writer; I have a belief that this 'Ramallah' will dissolve. It will never be the capital of Palestine because it shouldn't be and it won't be. Something about the story of this 'Ramallah' will always tell a lot about the world right now in the future. My duty is to find a way to write about it, which is hard. J.M. Coetzee said you can't live in a state like that and write properly, expansively, because you can't free yourself to write. But I've always disagreed with that. I see his point but I think that is our responsibility: can we find a form or way to write that conveys the actuality and do so honestly for the people who are stuck in it? And I think you can. So that is inspiring, that was the challenge for me.

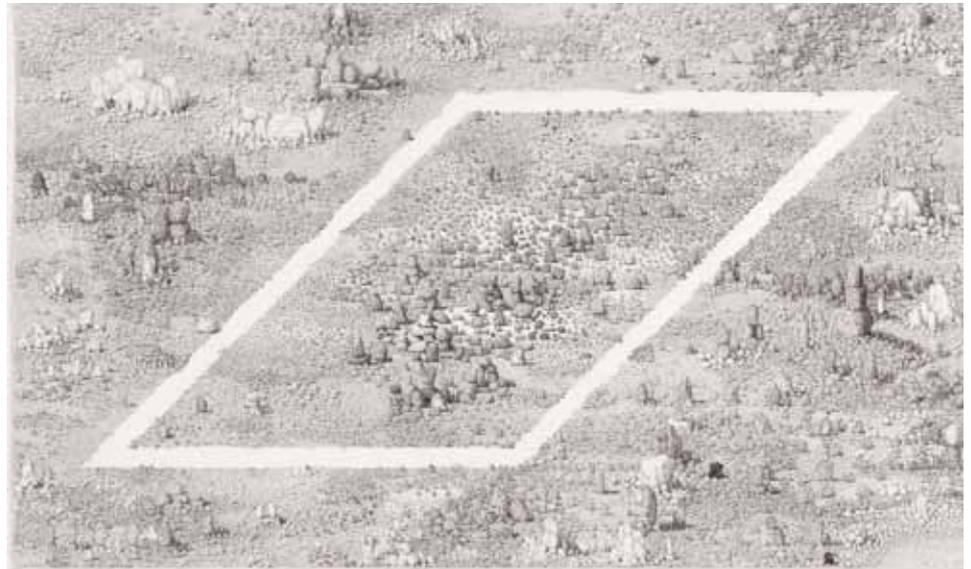
SB: At one point you walk down Al Jihad ('struggle') Street in one direction, referring to yourself as a 'bubble-burster'. This is the first

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.

SB: There is an abstraction to the way that spaces are being negotiated against a military situation with poetic words. Is there a danger of fetishising these occupied spaces by poeticising the bewildered reaction to them?

Paul Noble, This Is The Way, 2011. © Paul Noble and Gagosian Gallery.



GMA: In describing bewilderment at times, I'm trying to convey the way that occupation in the form of these limits goes on after the fact. It's so greedy with its dispossession of the space that it goes on in retrospect or retroactively. So even if you are in a place you may not know that that was where the roadblock was. A concrete example of this is in the book, when I sat for a moment drinking arak with these guys under a tree in a valley north of the city. Later I emailed a friend who is working with Riwaq precisely on mapping the villages, built form and the history of the area, telling her where I had just been walking and she wrote back saying, 'You make it sound so lovely!' Then I realised that that was where Area C hooked in. We were sitting where the roadblock had been but there is no sign of that now. So the bewilderment is in experiencing how relentless this limiting of the space, the definition of the space, the stealing of it, is. In the end, you come up with this banal conclusion, which is obvious and you can say it without having been there. The limits are all interiorised by the occupied, you're never not riddled with limits, and that's how occupation works. In a way it's academic in the sense that there is a line there, but if only it was simple, modest and instrumentalised like

that. The bewilderment is exactly that: how it works so insidiously that you think you've got it down, you're crossing this limit and that limit and you hope that no one sees you as you cross that limit, but actually there's a whole other limit already there and that changes your own experience after the fact.

SB: I thought it was interesting that you noted the new visual landscape or identity of Ramallah is that of the occupation.

GMA: Well a crude way of saying that is that it feels like an open-air prison camp. It's important to emphasise that that's the basic deal. And so you can say that this 'Ramallah' is the prisoners' internal management block. Some prisoners have been elected or given the task with some privileges of running the camp. I feel I should be careful about saying that but I think that is clearly the case.

SB: How do you think your text translates to residents of Ramallah?

GMA: It must be strange. For one thing, I know that some of those people won't have been to the places I walked. Until months before I was there, there were roadblocks that stopped them. At the end of George Habash Square there was a roadblock, at the bottom of the hill there was a watchtower and two more roadblocks and it's all Area C. Presumably, Palestinians in Ramallah weren't able to go there, either ever, or not until very recently. In that sense, though it's crazy, I may be telling them something that they don't know. I think the most positive response I could hope for is that people will say: he hasn't made too many obvious, massive mistakes in interpreting what he's looking at, or misrepresenting me.

SB: Can you tell me about the process of choosing and commissioning the artists' works?

GMA: Once I had written it and it was done, I met with Samar (Martha) who was keen to take up the challenge. We worked out who to invite and we basically named the same people. It ended up being 50/50 Palestinian to others, and I'm happy it ended up like this. We were aiming to select five artists, we got eight good proposals, and decided we would keep it all. The process was simple: we sent an invitation to those people attaching the whole 20,000 word text and a brief description of what the project would be: a book dominated by at least 80 pages of my texts and extending to about 160 pages altogether. Artists were told they could do anything, either an intervention or a contribution with no page limit, it would be in colour and it will be the size it is.

Some of them I hadn't met before. Francis Alÿs, for example, I didn't know at all but had his email, and it turned out to be a warm link. He read the text and proposed a piece. Olaf Nicolai's piece was a version of something he had done before, re-edited for the book. I knew that Jananne (Al-Ani) had taken her images years ago but she was in that nice state of not knowing what to do with them. I was, subtly but keenly, suggesting that she should do something with them. Actually, she's going to have a show based on the

same archive at Beirut Art Center next year. Mark Titchner's were commissioned, they use lines, words and phrases from my text. I think Sharif Waked's were from a longer series. They are several poses from the peace process. It's a project with many parts, which includes a film, and so on. Khalil Rabah's was an older piece and it fits really well. Emily Jacir's piece is more complicated, in that when I was in Ramallah, a project of hers appeared involving spoof billboards of some new fantasy Ramallah tower. Everyone was gossiping about it because they were put up but taken down very quickly, so people were trying to work out who put it up, how did they go down so quickly, doesn't Mahmoud Abbas's son own those sites, he can't be involved, did he have something to do with it? So I hoped to have them in the book, partly to engage things I didn't want to address myself. In fact, she offered this even better text-based piece that had been published in French before but never in English. It says something about how she is sick of people coming to Palestine and talking about what Palestine is, which is exactly what the book does, and is explicit about being resistant to a project like this. But the fact that she offered it suggests something. It could be regarded either as a critical intervention or as a safe place to have such content. You know, it's either an antagonistic relationship or a deeply collaborative one. Let's say we'll never know, and that to me is very important, that openness. Adania Shibli's text is from an early draft towards a novel. She was concerned that it was too extreme, full of hate or too angry as writing. But it seems very placid as a text. We're good friends and talked about this a lot, the subtle breaks in presumed sense in her writing. Najwan Darwish wrote his text for the book, in response to my series of texts. Again, I can't say the things he says, it's not for me to say it. Whereas, when you're in that situation you have to say the most important things first.

Guy Mannes-Abbott is a writer, essayist and critic who lives and works in London. He is the author of a singular series of texts - poems, stories, aphorisms - called e.things, which have been exhibited, published and performed alongside the work of leading British artists as well as sporting artists' videos, since 1997. In Ramallah, Running is the longest and latest in this series of texts and projects. Mannes-Abbott collaborated with Bombay-based collective CAMP on a film called The Country of the Blind, and Other Stories for the Folkestone Triennial 2011, as well as, for example, written catalogue essays on visual art. He has been a tutor in architectural theory at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, London, and is published in specialist journals. Critical journalism spanning literature and visual art has appeared in the New Statesman, The Guardian, Harpers & Queen, Bidoun and The Independent. Recent publications include; Translated By (Ed. Arsène-Henry and Basar), and an Introduction to Mourid Barghouti's Midnight and Other Poems. A novel that takes place between the Arabian and Baltic Seas is forthcoming.