

# Relevance متورط Wichtigkeit متلائم Relevanz

By Nadine Aranki

## Reflection on Relevance



October 17th, 2022, and  
November 14th, 2022

This picture changed my perception about relevance. Taken in the Palestinian Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem, which is constantly threatened by ethnic cleansing by the Israeli occupation. Zooming in, we can see a Palestinian scarf and a medical cloth covered with the blood of the journalist Shireen

Abu Akleh who was murdered by the Israeli Occupation Forces on May 11th, 2022. This piece being in this place has several layers of stories to tell. For me, it is a mere practice of collecting and exhibiting that took place on the road although the neighborhood residents, or أهل 'Ahil', as we say in Arabic, do not necessarily want to label their practice in these museum terms. This mural was painted several times by the Palestinian residents because it was removed or spoiled by Israeli settlers in the area,

inside the mural we see a frame hung on the wall. The frame has a Palestinian scarf inside in black and white which we call كوفية 'kufiyyeh' in Arabic, the kufiyyeh is the traditional headscarf for men and is part of our material heritage as Palestinians. On top of the scarf is a medical cloth covered with blood. This piece was given to Muna Al\_Kurd, a young woman who was born and raised in the neighborhood and who constantly raises awareness on the human rights abuses her family and the neighborhood encounters. Muna already shared that this cloth was handed to her by one of Shireen Abu Akleh's close friends, and in a very symbolic act, they decided to frame it with the kuffiyeh and display it on the neighborhood's wall right outside Muna's house. Shireen was a well-established journalist who did daily coverage of the Israeli settler and military attacks in the Jerusalemite neighborhood.

During my short journey discovering relevance, I have thought of language and its role in achieving relevance in museum work. Debating the word in Arabic also meant thinking of the museum audience, young and old, and making sure their experience is welcoming. I have come across many words to speak about relevance/ relevant in Arabic including Ittisal (contacting, اتصال), Tawasol (communicating, تواصل), Watheeq Assila (strongly involved/ related to, وثيق الصلة), Gozo' min (part of, جزء من). I have to say that this was not a mere act of translation, but a way to realize the meaning of relevance in my mother tongue and the ability to speak to and with audiences and contribute to change. It is also a way to reflect the difficult realities in which human dignity is not always protected and the human soul is not always valued. In the end, I decided

that the word ‘Mutawaret’ متورط (implicated or involved in a wicked way) is the one. To translate the word into wicked involvement is not very accurate, however, I think it is the one word that describes the two sides of the term “what is, and what is not” relevance. It encompasses the positive and negative connotations, and reflects the uncomfortable connotations related to the word.

When I first chose the term, I thought about it as a tool for advocacy and change. I was focused on the Palestinian reality in which we live under Israeli colonization, and the work we do in terms of culture and museums. I thought about the positive connotation that such a word can bring and focused on how to invest in such a term into the museum space. I naively ignored ‘what is not relevance’ so I can allow that time to build on the existing efforts for a museum experience. I have to say that choosing one single word was hard, but soon I realized that it is how we see this word in a collective and in conversation with other terms. To this end I came to work with ‘relevance’, which I saw as an umbrella term for the important glossary for my work including co-curation, museum as a home, human dignity, liberation, and conflict.

I will now reflect more on ‘what is and is not relevance’ from the viewpoint of a museum worker. Towards ‘what is relevance’, I believe it is a museum setting(s) that is closely connected and tied to visitors’ daily reality(ies). It is spaces which speak to different ages and abilities, and which display stories by them and with them. Relevance, in my opinion, is an experience full of human dignity. In the above story from Jerusalem, we see how the realms of art and politics are connected and intertwined.

Yet this does not make ‘relevance’ a very easy process to implement in the Museum. All our work seems modest when a human life is lost – murdered by a colonial structure of violence. This brings me directly to ‘what is not relevance’, it is surely the moments when one feels helpless and unable to immediately affect the daily reality. I have sensed this with Shireen Abu Akleh, and with the Israeli military offense on our people in Gaza in August this year. During this time, 49 Palestinians were murdered by the Israeli occupation’s air force including a young lady named Duniana al-Amour, a 22-year-old fine arts student, who left great artworks. During October 2022, many villages and towns were collectively punished and put on full closure by the Israeli occupation forces. Many people were not able to reach their workplaces and schools including colleagues at the Palestinian Museum. All of these are examples of how ‘relevance’ is difficult to realize within the reality of Palestine.

I have to say that these are not the only moments of experiencing ‘what is not relevant’. After my visit to Berlin, I came to realize that institutionalization and hierarchy are also enemies for relevance. In cultural institutions in general, adopting strict structures affects the flow of work making ‘relevance’ hard to achieve, and adding another layer to the reality which is already very pressing. In this regard, we ask ourselves as museum workers many questions. How do we change priorities under such hierarchal structure? How do we push for new ideas towards a welcoming museum? What are the different forms and managerial strategies that are more suitable for cultural bodies? How do we

challenge the single way of institutionalization that involves less collective power?

The field of culture has been polluted by rigidity and hierarchy all over the world, which I have noticed in Palestine as well as in Berlin during our SAWA Museum Academy days. I have also seen inspiring examples of community organizing in Berlin such as the House of Materialization, a space that values and raises awareness around different materials such as fabric, wood, metal, and furniture. In their space, which used to be an abandoned building, all types of materials are collected from museums to galleries to individuals and companies. The aim is to value these materials, reuse them, reduce the waste, and avoid new production and thus energy consumption. This not only increases community solidarity, but it also raises awareness on protecting our planet and through practical terms. I say here to value materials because I can feel now how it is important having met an artist and a former prisoner who was incarcerated inside Israeli military jails. I remember the day he visited us at work. We sat outside on the balcony to discuss an upcoming artwork for our next exhibition, and he mentioned the importance of materials inside prison. He said that every single element becomes valuable even old worn-out clothes. The prison space becomes a workshop where everything is broken down to obtain raw material from tuna cans to old trousers. Although this story was on the margins of our conversation, it stuck in my mind as I reflected on our visit to the house of Materialization in Berlin.

To write, as someone mentioned, is to confront our realities and our emotions. Hence reflecting on a term can be a journey of ups and downs in search of meanings that seem at some point clear and static and others very unsteady and changing. Relevance is definitely one of these words, at least for me, and writing about it is a difficult and healing process at the same time.