

# INSIDE DECOLONIZING ARCHITECTURE

The Politics of Visibility in  
*Common Assembly*

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The Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR) [1] is part of a long-term project that deals with the spatial complexities of decolonization through an interrogation of the relationships between law, spatial production and colonial practices in Palestine and Israel. A significant body of DAAR's work attempts to reveal how the operation of Israeli spatial and legal regimes within the Occupied Territories can produce extra-territorial spaces and grey zones wherein legal jurisdictions fade. For DAAR, these spaces of ambiguity are significant for their role in revealing the workings of power – they are places where such colonial and territorial power can be understood, challenged and perhaps undermined. Their work experiments with narrations of the landscape under occupation, and strives to be both intellectually and architecturally propositional.

[1] DAAR is described as a platform for collective production. It is based in Beit Sahour, a small suburb of Bethlehem in the West Bank, within the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It was founded in 2007 as Decolonizing Architecture, by Beit Sahour-based architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, and London-based architect Eyal Weizman.

In this article, we will consider the rhetoric of DAAR in relationship to their work *Common Assembly*, which was produced during a summer 2011 residency in which we participated. The work was conceived in response to the unfinished Palestinian parliament building in the West Bank, the prospective Palestinian bid for recognition at the United Nations [2] and the unfolding backdrop of the Arab Spring. Considering the recent expansions and contractions in the possibility for a viable two-state solution within this contested territory, [3] we feel it is an important time to examine the ways in which this work renders visible vital questions about the constitution and agency of the Palestinian body politic, and its viability in terms of its own claims of decolonization, both within and outside the West Bank.

Standing as a disused and incomplete structure, the Palestinian Legislative Council building (its official title, but known to DAAR as the Palestinian parliament) was designed by noted Palestinian architect Jafar Tukan. It is located in Abu Dis, an outlying Jerusalem neighbourhood that used to be a separate village, but has now been subsumed into the expanding city. Much of Abu Dis falls outside the Jerusalem line, Israel's unilaterally declared 1967 border of the city. Close to the parliament building, severing it completely from Jerusalem, passes the wall that separates the West Bank and Israel. Significantly for the project, the positioning of the building is entirely ambiguous: it sits on the Jerusalem line, partly in and partly out of the city, yet entirely physically cut off from it. The exact reason for this placement is unknown, and its potential political fallout is also in disagreement. Rumours, theories and conspiracies abound—in the tug of war between Israel and Palestine, and between the various Palestinian factions, how did the building land so fortuitously, so awkwardly? Nevertheless, it is certain that the building's positioning was the result of political manoeuvring.

The Palestinian parliament site was the starting point for the research, design, and film production work that the DAAR residents helped to produce, which also sat within a previously established framework of discourse and exhibited work. The planned outcome of the residency was the touring exhibition *Common Assembly*, to be shown in Switzerland, the UK and the US. [4] As the title of the exhibition suggests, the nucleus of the work was intended to be an exploration of the commons, informed by Hardt and Negri's definition of this concept as "the incarnation, the production, and the liberation of the multitude." [5]

Several months into the Arab Spring, there was a tangible sense of political elasticity in the region brought about by the collective uprisings, and it seemed pertinent to raise the question of the Palestinian struggle from within this wider context. The DAAR participants were keen to transpose this idea of collectivity

onto the site of the parliament building, taken to represent a form of politics under threat in the region. A principal reference was the February 2011 cleaning of Cairo's Tahrir Square by volunteer members of the public, in the wake of mass protests demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. This was seen as a manifestation of the triumph of the political power of the commons, and the claiming of common ownership of civic space.

One of DAAR's primary strategies is to work with and inside the lines that slice up the landscape. [6] In *Common Assembly*, the physical space taken up by the Jerusalem line as it cuts through the parliament was cleaned to create an ephemeral and symbolic strip of common space. This was a staged performance-for-the-camera that, because of the inaccessibility of the space to the Palestinian population, was performed symbolically for them in absentia by the DAAR residents.

The exhibited work was the installation of a 1:5-scale sculptural cross-section of the parliament as it appears inside the Jerusalem line, transporting this fragment to the site of each gallery



as a lacquered black object that bisected the space. Presented in various configurations alongside this intrusive element were projections of both the six-minute film of the cleaning performance, and grainy black and white images of crowd scenes from historical meetings of the various Palestinian parliaments-in-exile. [7] These images produced a spectral assembly of dispersed discussions, removed from their specific context, and with the key figureheads supplanted by images of the audience (although still members of a political elite) to create an image of a de-localized collective assembly. There were also four brief extracts of interviews with political figures [8] displayed on monitors with headphones. The lines

[2] In September 2011, there was a formal request by the Chairman of the PLO, Mahmoud Abbas, for Palestine to be recognized as the 194th full member state of the United Nations, by the General Assembly, based on the pre-1967 borders, as part of a campaign called *Palestine 194*. At press time, this has not yet been voted on, and at the prospect of a veto from the US, the request was scaled back to an upgrade to non-member observer state.

[3] In November 2012, Palestine was granted status as a non-member observer state in the United Nations, which then "express[ed] the urgent need for

the resumption of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians leading to a permanent two-State solution." (See "General Assembly Grants Palestine Non-member Observer State Status at UN," *UN News Centre*, 29 November 2012, online.) This unprecedented rise in support for the political legitimacy of the Palestinian diaspora, however marginal it may be in concrete terms, immediately provoked plans for a retaliatory measure of architectural occupation from Israel—the building of 3,000 new settlement homes in the E1 area, to the East of Jerusalem, previously kept clear under international pressure (see Peter

Beaumont, "Israel approves another 1,200 settlement units around Jerusalem," *The Guardian*, 25 December 2012, online). The insertion of this territorial expansion into the remaining fragments of the West Bank, if it materializes in the months ahead and remains unrevoked, will effectively sever the territory completely in half, and obliterate the chances for establishing a contiguous neighbour state for Israel.

[4] Centre d'Art Neuchâtel, Switzerland; Nottingham Contemporary, UK; The James Gallery at The City University of New York (CUNY), US.

[5] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 303.

[6] Previously, DAAR has worked with the Green Line, which was drawn following the 1949 Armistice Agreement, and the lines of the 1994 Oslo Accords. In each case, they have interpreted their ambiguous physical and legal definition as bestowing these geopolitical borders with a spatial thickness.

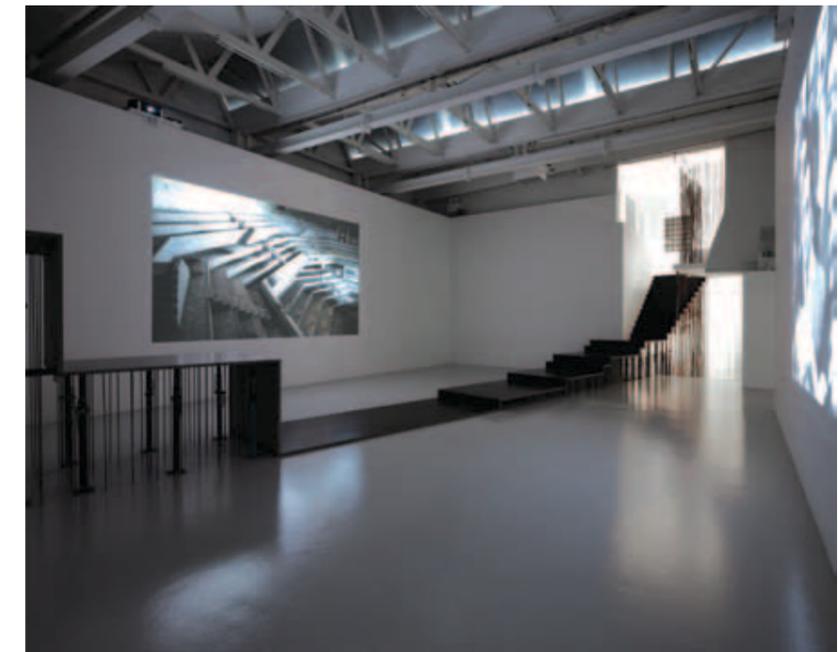
[7] These videos were from publicly accessible video archives available online, and ranged from depictions of the first parliament

appointed by the PLO in 1964 to the first popularly elected parliament established in 1996.

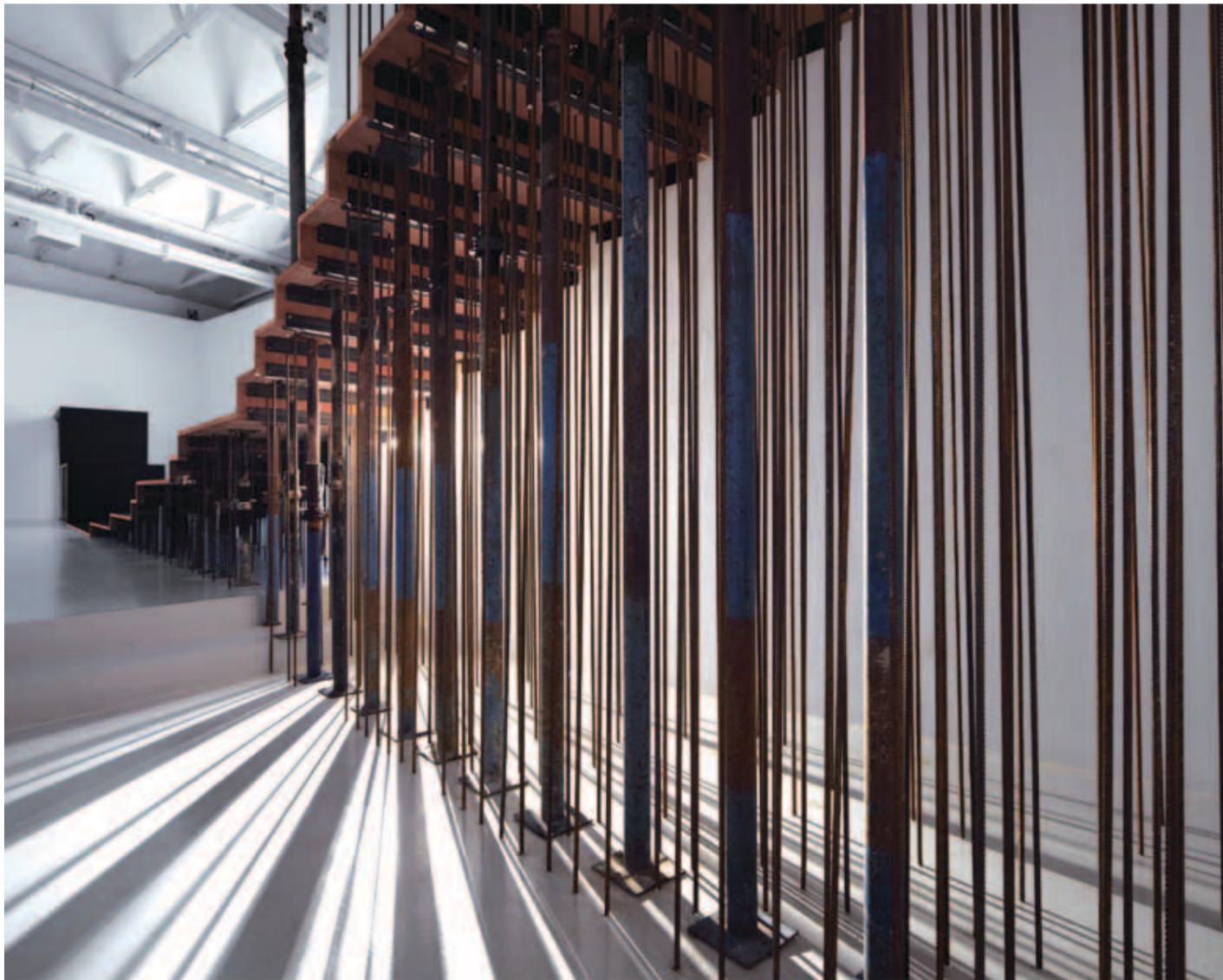
[8] Ahmed Qurei, PLO Member and Former President of the Palestinian Legislative Council; Basem al-Masri, First Director General of the Palestinian Parliament; Fajr Harb, an activist; and Khalil Tafakji, a cartographer (a highly politicized occupation in the region). The fifth video of Oxford academic and former PLO Representative Karma Nabulsi was from a lecture held in Ramallah organized by Fajr Harb.



← ↓ →  
Decolonizing Architecture  
*Common Assembly* (2011).  
Production stills.  
Image courtesy of  
Cressida Kocienski.



↑  
Decolonizing Architecture  
*Common Assembly* (2011).  
Installation shot at CAN  
(Centre d'art Neuchâtel), 17/09 to 28/10/2011.  
Image courtesy of  
Sully Balmassière and CAN.



↑  
Decolonizing Architecture  
*Common Assembly* (2011).  
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Image courtesy of  
Sully Balmassière and CAN.

of their narratives, set against the figures of the multitudes and the parliament, often cut across one another, producing a microcosmic view of the terrain in all its complexity.

The Palestinian parliament building was commissioned following the Oslo Accords [9] (1993–1995), and construction began in 1996. It was a time when many believed that the reality of a Palestinian nation-state was tangible, and the parliament was imagined as the seat of government in East Jerusalem. Basem al-Masri, who was the first Director General of the Palestinian parliament, noted in an interview that in order to be able to set up an interim parliament in Ramallah, [10] there had to be tangible plans in place to create its permanent successor in Jerusalem. He also spoke in detail about the formation of the building in parallel with the drafting of the constitution, which required the definition of the capital, the physical seat of the government, and the drafting and implementation of systems of governance. In 1996, al-Masri contributed to the decision to place the building in East Jerusalem, despite allegedly being under pressure from Israel to give up East Jerusalem in favour of Abu Dis. To remain in Ramallah would have signified both the ideological and likely territorial surrender of East Jerusalem.

The Oslo Accords and the resulting efforts to create an administrative infrastructure of governance did not, of course, result in the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the spectacular failure of this process is an on-going matter of recent history. The building itself also remains unfinished. Today it stands as a blank-faced ziggurat, minus windows and doors, but full of trailing pipes, wires, and feral animals whose traces are archived in the dust that has settled on the floors of the interior. It is a sublime and cinematic ruin that metonymically echoes the curtailed nature of the Palestinian dream of nationhood.

The building is hounded by its manifold lack of political agency, whether in relation to the refugee diaspora or the residents of Gaza, neither of whom can physically access it. Even if it were complete, the difficulties of organizing participation and travel would certainly act to narrow the field of regional representation. Its crippling proximity to the separation wall only adds to the complexity of the smoke and mirrors surrounding the truth of its establishment. In the *Common Assembly* exhibition, this is gently revealed by contradictions that emerge in some of the interviews, and reinforced by a number of labyrinthine political rumours that circulate within the general populace, related to us as anecdotes. For now, the building has been placed under the guardianship of Al-Quds University to prevent it from being damaged or interfered with by Israel, and so it is locked anonymously behind a high gate with an occasional security guard patrol. The structure does not seem to factor into conversations regarding future political situations, and so it appears to have been ignored as an icon in favour of the prolonged symbolic relationship with the Dome of the Rock, which even non-Muslim residents also appear to regard as the symbolic *idée fixe* for the unattainable Palestine nation.

The unfinished nature of the building also mirrors the unfinished nature of the political administrative apparatus of Palestinian governance, raising important questions about who

exactly *can be* represented within the democratic processes it could offer. This particular problem continues to haunt the Palestinians, and was one of the more sympathetic criticisms voiced during the 2011 push for acknowledged political sovereignty at the UN. It flagged the resultant loss of the right of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to be the sole representative of the scattered Palestinian polity, meaning that the premature crystallization of Palestine through a so-called back door would exclude the future participation of all who live outside its borders, restricting or removing their right of return (in whatever context this could be negotiated). In a sense, the failure of the frozen architecture, bifurcated by the mysterious, unilateral border, at least allows for the discussions to remain pluralistic. It also attests to the problems of transposing standard parliamentary forms into this difficult context.

These difficulties are also revealed in the workings of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) and the PLO, which, despite being large organizations, were only capable of dealing with the specifically political needs of Palestinians. There were no established systems for producing and managing civic infrastructures – neither access to drinking water or health care, nor the protections of an official military. While this is clearly a difficult challenge still to be fully resolved, it can also be imagined as an opportunity for thinking civic infrastructures as *common* infrastructures, governed and cared for by the collective. Fajr Harb, a Palestinian activist involved in the recent youth movement, made the point in one of the *Common Assembly* interviews that there is a very pressing desire for taking control, if not of the top layers of policy-making, then certainly of the bolstering of civic administration and of those aspects of governance that affect everyday life. While the resistance to and pressures of Israeli occupation certainly bring about a form of collectivity, how not only to be reactive to the occupation, but also to propose civic initiatives that can work within the very limited self-governance that Palestinians have, remains an open question.

During the DAAR residency, the commons were to be explored in the relationship *between* the building and the Jerusalem line as a potential method of “deterritorializing the Palestinian parliament,” [11] as the tagline of the exhibition title states. [12] Because the parliament building sits on top of the Jerusalem line, it was this particular detail that triggered the format of the investigation. But the Jerusalem line is itself a slippery concept – in order to maintain spatial fluidity, its positioning was never consolidated on a map, and so it exists only as a series of coordinates stored in a hidden archive, from which the line may be summoned by the District Surveyor of Jerusalem. Inaccessible to those who live on the land it might occupy, it becomes a soft weapon for land grabs, or a tool for keeping at bay the expanding Palestinian population, bisecting buildings and stranding citizens on the wrong side. This behaviour of the line means that it is a continual source of legal challenges.

DAAR worked in consultation with a lawyer, Ghiath Nasser, who highlighted one particular case that perfectly demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the line, as well as its legal consequences. The case centres around a house in Kafr 'Aqab, a neighbourhood situated on the Jerusalem periphery. A family had applied for disability pension payments for their daughter but were informed that

[9] In 1993, Israel initiated secret negotiations with PLO representatives in Oslo, their first face-to-face meeting. These produced the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles, which was signed in Washington in September, and contained mutual recognition of both parties, promises that Israel

would withdraw from certain areas of Gaza and the West Bank, and provided for the creation of a Palestinian interim self-government, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

[10] The largest Palestinian city in central West Bank, to the north of

Jerusalem, currently serving as the de facto administrative capital.

[11] In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Deleuze and Guattari defined the concept of deterritorialization as the disruption of order and decontextualization of a set of relations in a space or territory.

Within the architecture of the parliament this was enacted as the weakening of its designed spatial programs, which were then reterritorialized as a container for the commons inside the space of the line.

[12] The title of the exhibition in Neuchâtel was *Common Assembly: Deterritorializing the Palestinian Parliament*. This was shortened to *Common Assembly* in subsequent exhibitions.

since the Jerusalem line bisects their house, they could not claim social security. According to the ruling, “54.20% of the property is outside of the Jerusalem jurisdiction area. 45.80% of the property is inside the Jerusalem jurisdiction area.” [13] Yet, the accuracy of the figures revealed nothing about the nature of the problem and led only to increasingly bizarre arguments over whether the front door of the house opened inside Jerusalem or not, or whether the more intensely occupied parts of the house were in the percentage located within Jerusalem. Dividing the time spent in the house according to everyday activities was, in the end, a futile course of action. What the case reveals is that despite its official status as vector, the Jerusalem line adopts a certain thickness in the practices of the District Surveyor, or in the practices of those who challenge his decrees. Rather than revealing the official co-ordinates of the line, the surveyor describes it in relation to an existing feature, such as a road. This move introduces a measure of ambiguity, transforming the vector into a slightly indeterminate zone. In other cases, the practices of everyday life give the line a thickness, as was attempted in the zoning of the house into sleeping and living areas. The elusive and highly interpreted quality of the line gives it an ambiguity that can become a space in which to work.

DAAR’s focus on the lines that separate Palestine began with another, more concrete, line: the Green Line. Established as part of the Rhodes Armistice Agreement of 1949, it split historical Palestine in two. As the story goes, it was marked out on the hood of a military jeep by the two commanders who agreed on its positioning, Moshe Dayan and Abdallah al-Tall. The line was drawn in a green grease pencil on a large scale map of the region, so when the map is reproduced at a 1:1 scale, the line’s spatial referent can be anywhere between 15 and 50 metres wide. For DAAR, the area captured by the thickness of the line is crucial; it exists in a legal limbo and can be claimed by neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis.

A similar thinking was to be applied to the line that cut across the parliament building, which was considered an anomic space, [14] that is, a space without law, or, as Nicola Perugini states, a space in which the law can be questioned. [15] In DAAR’s work, therefore, there was an attempt to define a common space in Palestine that is necessarily anomic. This point is especially important in the context of the pernicious methods that Israel uses for annexing land; many areas are designated as belonging to the state because the land registry is either absent or antiquated, a legacy of the old British and Ottoman systems of apportioning land. Or, they are designated state land when areas have been left uncultivated for a period of time (even when landowners have been deliberately denied access). There are many ways state land can be inexplicably absorbed wholesale into projected Israeli infrastructure, even if defined as a nature reserve, which cannot be built upon. [16]

Thus, the notion of the common as anomic space stands in opposition to the concept of public land as state land. This manoeuvre allows DAAR to think the anomic space of the line’s thickness as a place from which to imagine new modes of political assembly. Yet, as everyone was also aware, these lines are not all equal: the Green Line transfers from the representational space of the map onto physical space quite perceptibly, as a regular swathe

formed by the pencil lead, whereas the Jerusalem line is a more topologically fluid entity. Despite the line officially having no consistent thickness, the width demarcated by the cleaning performance was sufficient to give it a symbolic physicality both within the moving image work and the sculpture in *Common Assembly*.

Perhaps the attempt to use this as a space from which to think new modes of political participation was problematic, but it was this impulse, together with the desire to link to the cleaning of Tahrir Square, that drove the ambition to create an ephemeral and symbolic strip of common space into which may be imagined a mode of dialogue and participation. Furthermore, and quite significantly, the Jerusalem line represents an illegal border, unilaterally declared by Israel in contravention of international treaties.

Yet, to think the common as both a space for, and a mode of, political participation requires both a deterritorializing re-appropriation (which our gesture could be construed as) and also a reinvention. This reinvention was necessarily missing, since the people best placed to do it, the Palestinian population, were absent. As Hardt and Negri have commented in relation to their articulation of the common, this reinvention should consist of new forms of governance, new institutions and new modes of acting. [17] In the moment of our cleaning *on behalf of*, rather than cleaning *with* (as was the case in Tahrir Square), the political imaginary was restricted to a discursive space.

Perhaps the inchoate, ruined nature of the space of the parliament forms too perfect an image of the false starts and frustrations that have saturated the history of the Palestinian journey towards sovereignty. The incompleteness of the building, its abandonment, and the claims and counter-claims surrounding its location, can all be read as microcosms for the wider Palestinian political situation. Reading the building thus, as an archaeology of the conflict, may narrate a complex history, but does it offer any new insights? Nuance emerges in the narrative of the exhibition from the contradictory anecdotes of its inception within the interview videos – yet the building itself can only point to its own failure.

The troubling paradox of this work is that it necessarily accepts the Jerusalem line as a presence in the landscape, however unilaterally declared, and perhaps even serves to fetishize it. But the line *is* traced by occupational infrastructures, with their employment of the technologies that enforce the presence of its cheese-wire topology, and therefore attests to its inescapable there-ness. Working with the line as a legally negotiable or unclaimed space within which to make visible forms of colonization may lead to the Pyrrhic victory of the land inside the lines being made *too* visible, and thus have its ambiguity forcibly erased.

For us, this concern was echoed within the *Common Assembly* installation, where the film of our performative cleaning of the Jerusalem line was foregrounded. It raised interesting questions, in light of ourselves both as participants and in the subsequent dissemination of the work. There is a strongly performative aspect to the act, which, since it only circulates in its complete form within the reified space of contemporary art galleries outside of Palestine, could appear to undermine its claims. There is no public access to this building, and there was no public forum or participa-

tion in the project within Palestine. [18] DAAR did organize a series of public events to accompany the exhibitions in an attempt to link the work with concurrent and transnational political movements and discourses such as Occupy and the Arab Spring. Linking a specific discussion about the Palestinian question to these broader movements was a welcome move, but one that remained curtailed through the residency’s lack of direct engagement within the Palestinian territories, or with the Palestinian diaspora. Without such participation, the work shifts from an open-ended line of inquiry to a site-specific diagrammatization built for a gallery space.

Yet, within the fragments of the project there did emerge a desire to engage a commons built upon new notions of governance. Arguably, as the most participatory parts of the project, the interviews did establish a context for this to happen. If the project had provided a forum for the interviewees to engage with a wider audience, away from the structures and failings of the fledgling state apparatus, the commons as a site for informal and collective polities may well have been prompted. Due to the participatory limits of the project, the interviews with activist Fajr Harb and other members of the Palestinian political landscape only served to highlight this need. All approached *the common* in their rhetoric, but it seemed impossible to evoke a strong sense of this outside the *things in common* that Palestinians share, like semantic erasure, frequent struggles and interrupted access to water. In engaging in this process, we were left to wonder what could have been.

The wider rhetoric of DAAR’s work is based on their definition of decolonization. They write: “Decolonization is a counter apparatus that seeks to restore to common use, to fantasy and play, what the colonial order had separated and divided. The goal of decolonization is the construction of counter apparatuses that find new uses for the abandoned structures of domination.” [19] Did our intervention restore the parliament building to common use? The parliament is a Palestinian building, and many of its failings are certainly underpinned by the occupation and Western complicity. But the building itself does not require decolonization as such; rather, it is *the line* that has been deployed solely by the occupier that must be profaned. [20]

Was a counter apparatus created? Perhaps these ambitions are too lofty. The installation is ultimately pedagogical (for contemporary art audiences outside Palestine), but it is not a prospective model for participation or decolonization as described above. It is a spatial graft of the idea of a European commons enacted by Western actors with the necessary citizenships to grant us almost unparalleled civilian access across all the shifting boundary lines, and out into a West-facing exhibition infrastructure. There is a marked difference in the ways in which this work operates and activates in the sites of production (West Bank) and reception (white cube galleries). If making colonization visible to those who otherwise have the luxury of ignoring it is part and parcel of decolonization, then, in this more modest description and scope, the project could be considered a success. The tension in DAAR’s work between making things visible while also trying to be propositional, is often observed in the work of architects employing artistic forms and modes of production. While making things visible may be

enough in certain contexts, the necessary embedding of architecture within the spaces of our everyday lives, and the propositional nature of the work means that for architects, the move of making visible is always followed by a “what next?” DAAR is careful not to describe this work as architecture, but as an operation performed upon existing architecture. The question remains as to what it has achieved in the context of the parliament building. Perhaps it is therefore a matter of viewing this work as an art project rather than an architectural one, a pedagogical project rather than an activist one, a project probably still in the making – a piece of research upon which DAAR will surely build.

To borrow a method of thinking about the parliament from Ernesto Laclau’s essay “What do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” [21] there needs to be an “empty” space into which geopolitical history-making can pour. The empty building acts as a signifier for such a space, able to draw in the conflict-ridden and chaotic alliances built in opposition to the frameworks of the external oppressor state. At the same time, through its failure, it is also able to represent those aspects that cannot be homogenized into a functioning official political system because of the Gordian knot of obstructions. The discourse around this work is thus incredibly valuable in making visible the spatial conditions of the occupation in the mostly Western cities of UN veto-ers and abstainers.

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Cressida Kocienski holds an MFA in Art Writing from Goldsmiths, London. Working between video, performance and text, her research concerns spatial production and modes of narration. She collaborates with architects Nishat Awan and Phil Langley as OPENkhana, and is co-editor of the experimental publishing platform The Institute of Immaterialism. She was filmmaker in residence with DAAR in 2011. She has worked collaboratively with Art on the Underground; James Taylor Gallery; South London Gallery; Whitechapel Gallery; ICA, and Resonance FM. Her films have been screened at the Benaki Museum, Athens (2010); FormContent, London (2010); and Pleasure Dome and TSV, Toronto (2012).

[13] The Jerusalem Regional Labour Court Ruling, Bardan vs. The National Insurance Institute, Israel.

and Avoiding the Nomic Reason,” 2011, online.

re-classify an olive tree as a bush. They wanted to claim that the land was not being actively cultivated as “olive bushes just grow there.”

[18] There was a university course for Palestinian students taught at Al-Quds University, but conversations across the two sites were not facilitated.

[16] There were several accounts of the increasingly bizarre tactics being used to designate land as being uncultivated. One anecdote relates to an Israeli-initiated legal procedure that attempted to

[17] Antonio Negri, quoted in R-Urban Commons Files/Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée, 2012.

[19] Sandi Hilal et al., “The Morning After: Profaning Colonial Architecture,” in *Sensible Politics*, eds. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 434.

[20] Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

[21] Ernesto Laclau, “What Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” in *Emancipation(s)* (London & New York: Verso, 1996).