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Ruined Sense/s: Jumana Manna at Heidelberger Kunstverein, an Exhibition That Wasn't

by Kerstin Stakemeier

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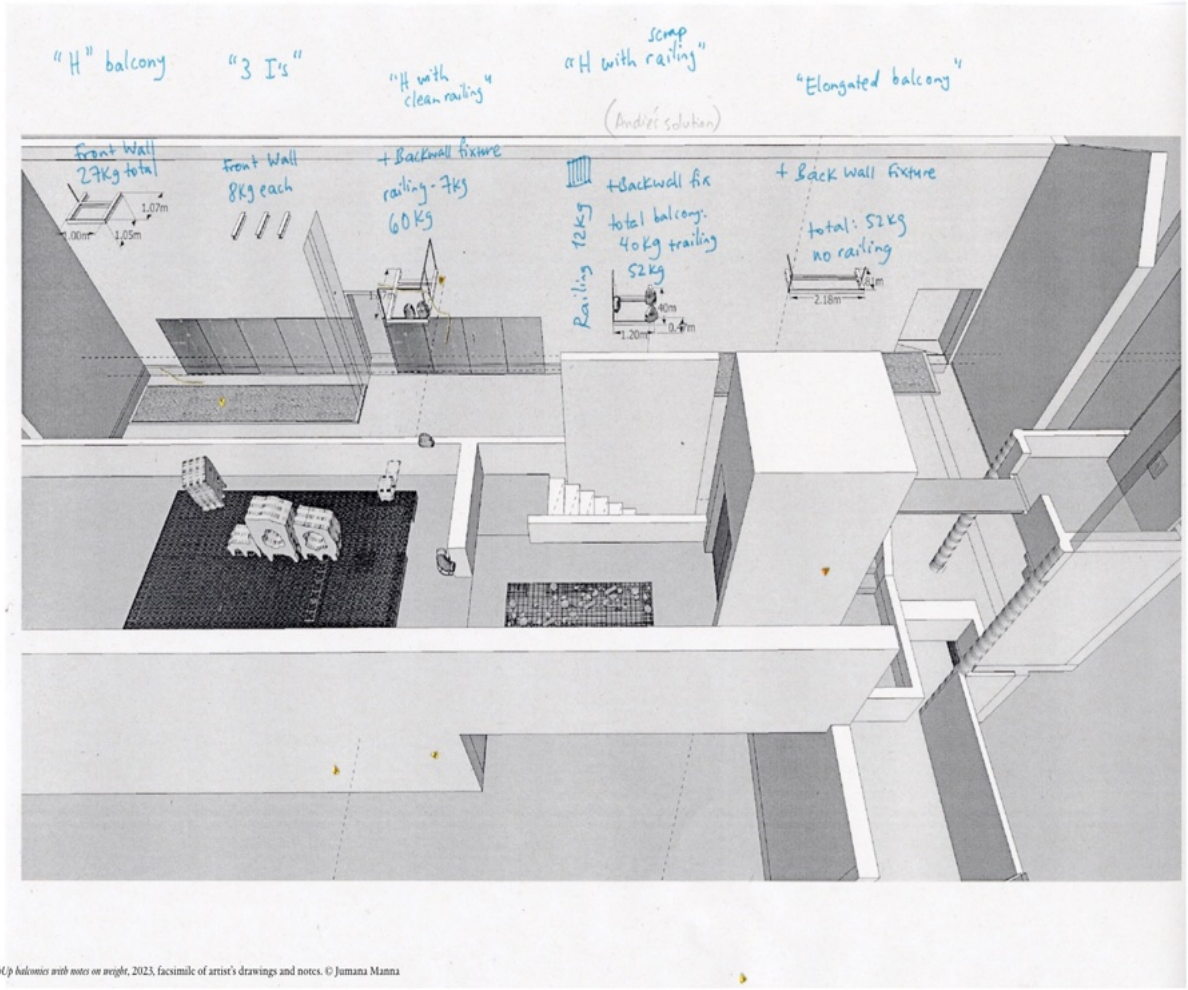

Jumana Manna, *SketchUp balconies with notes on weight*, 2023, facsimile of artist's drawings and notes. © Jumana Manna

Perceiving ruination within the landscape of everyday life feels so common within contemporary reality that it is not so much the presence of ruins, but rather the use they bear for making sense/s, that points us toward their origination. In Jumana Manna's art, the presence of ruination, of matter and lives, has always been ubiquitous. Yet her most recent body of work particularly challenges a perception that manifests its own temporal stability in imagining colonial ruins as remote sites of disaster.

Manna places us among ruins. She has us walking into a room in which ruination is what weds imperial, diasporic, and Indigenous life. Everyday signs of disintegration common to centers of both diasporic and imperial life—like the disassembled rows of pavement stones that are remainders of unfinished urban renewal executed largely by migrant labor as much as of the multiple forms of political riots present in cities like Berlin—become formally entangled with materials of unfinished houses. For instance, metal rods that never came to hold balconies, sticking out of walls, lifted from the ruinations of Indigenous as diasporic life in sites whose regeneration exists under unsanctioned duress [1] like the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. Manna grew up in the latter, and now lives in the former. Her works are formally elegant—the cobbles cared for, the metal rods congruous. Matter isn't an effect of its use here. It remains an integral provision, actively implied in a sense, in senses, of subsistence. Living (in) ruins.

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Overlooking the scenery from the metal rods and skeletal balconies, a gang of stone owls stare down. These are not produced by Manna, but by Robert Adrych, a Polish stone carver who works in Norway as a construction worker. Oslo is where Manna studied art. These animals, to me, a German beholder, figure like a practical joke on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who graces the preface to his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820) with "the owl of Minerva," who "begins its flight only with the onset of dusk." [2] It feels safe to say that the Prussian state philosopher won't fly here. Manna shares a scenery in which disaster (to Hegel, rightlessness) is not contemporaneity's frontier, but its temporal signature, within which, as Maurice Blanchot wrote, "the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact." [3] With Manna, one might ask: For whom? Her setup for the Heidelberger Kunstverein, which was to be accompanied by screenings of her films at a local cinema, follows the impossible distinction between private and public life that is latent in her staging of a ruinous street life, and doubles it.

We learn that occupational law cuts through the materialities of Indigenous practices and criminalizes their communal entanglement. In her film *Foragers* (2022), Manna embeds the Palestinian use of the wildly growing native herbs 'akkoub and za'atar in the stately illegalization of gathering local produce under Israeli nature-protection laws, which leaves the generational knowledge and practices surrounding it, and the "Indigenous population" living by it, consigned "to a distant temporal time-space through a semantic that augured their material and sensory disappearance." [4] The film's many close-ups familiarize the viewer's eyes with notions of touch: feet and hands on the land. Manna introduces the foragers as elements of a local metabolism, a social vegetation, a sense of Indigenous entanglement, that is being erased both by its criminalization and by its replacement with agricultural cultivation of 'akkoub and za'atar by Israeli companies. Ruins.

The imaginary of the ruin has been housing Western themes of introspection to a degree that makes imagining modernity, or, speaking more figuratively, Enlightenment, without ruins not just fantastically but also realistically impossible. Enlightenment can only really shine on "fossilized lives," [5] in places that got their energy cut: a historical process of accumulation aesthetically feigning ascetism. Ornamental hermits, haggard white men who were hired through newspaper ads to live a demonstratively and decoratively sparse life in the fake grottos, neo-Gothic ruins, and orientalist summer houses of English landscape gardens were common throughout the eighteenth century, figuring as the bodies of their employers' self-imaginary. [6] Artists, if you will. And while modernity could be said to have always also been ruinous, modern sense/s keep/s falling for ruins romantically, seeking temporal refuge in figures lost to its reproduction. Delivering them to their illuminant. Art, if you will.

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The 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords placed the movement of Palestinian people within and between the distinct areas of their tolerated habitation in the region under Israeli control, legalizing the ruination of their (im)possible communion spatially and temporally, as much as materially, in "the monopolization of a noncitizen populations' movement within a territory not officially incorporated into the state." [7] Manna's earlier film *Blessed, Blessed Oblivion* (2010), also intended for Heidelberg, is something of a mimetic exercise in that regard. It represents a group of men in an East Jerusalem garage, following their meticulously stylized self-representation, and/as that of their game. A vision of potency that Manna aesthetically amplifies, doubling Kenneth Anger's iconography of masculinities. She lets them appear as icons of contouring a space [8] in which "predictability is a scarce resource." [9] In Hegel's aforementioned tome, these men would figure as the criminals who he has desiring their own punishment to be repatriated into the state. [10] The question of into which state, exactly, lacks a definite answer here. The righteous judgment of their proud audacity is suspended by the fantastic horizon of their reality. Manna does not expose them. She grants them aesthetic sense/s.

Modern civilization, or enlightened civilization, if we want to stick to the figural, replaces what it ruins and props those ruins up to become its prehistory. Politically speaking, this is called nation building, and it anchors its cause within the ruins it lit up—in the ruins of what was delivered to its civilization, what became uninhabitable, what became aesthetically inhabited. On the brink of the twentieth century, unconvinced modernists were regularly writing about the communal knowledge, the folk imaginaries, and the unaligned matters of life ruined within the figuration of national culture, the cutting-off of migrating continuities, mimetic doubles, displaced refigurations, shared confusions, and deadening them into ruins, arrested developments, needlessly primitive. [11] A power cut. What these unconvinced modernists attached themselves to locally was what Fumi Okiji, writing about the illegibilities of jazz within the horizon of the modern music that reached for it, has provisionally termed the "folkic." [12] This folkic is indigenous as much as it is diasporic; it has an originary place of possibility, as much as a life of traversing national boundaries, being ruinous to their cultures. Undead ruins. Still moving, despite waves of romantic sentiment imagining them dead. Making them art, if you will. [13]

Romantic solitude is not something Manna's ruins offer, ever. Quite the contrary, the practices she calls upon, her entanglements with Palestinian plant life as much as with Berlin street views, mark a horizon of contested communalities in which "Indigeneity . . . refers to the political claims of return of refugees, which include the right to a particular way of being in and with nature." In short, Jumana Manna, like the anthropologist Ruba Salih and the political scientist Olaf Corry, who I quote here, "conceive of Indigeneity as an active anti-colonial practice." [14] A practice whose horizon of return has, after the attacks that the paramilitary arm of the Hamas led into Israel out of Gaza, with around three thousand attackers breaching the border fence in over thirty locations, attacking countless

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military bases, several Israeli settlements, and two music festivals, been indefinitely replaced by one of Israel's retaliating war on Gaza. In the attacks, eleven hundred people of mostly Israeli citizenship were killed, many more wounded and abducted. In the war since, around thirty thousand Palestinians were killed, more than sixty-seven thousand wounded, and almost two million people out of a population of two and a half million have been displaced. The land is scorched. The International Court of Justice, who presented its interim ruling on "The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) – Request for the Indication of Provisional Measures" on January 26, has published its full transcript, detailing six provisional measures. [15] Since, Nicaragua, Israel and South Africa have answered to the ruling. The South African request for additional provisional measures in the light of Israel's announcement of a ground offensive into "Rafah [which] [. . .] currently houses—primarily in makeshift tents—more than half of Gaza's population, estimated at approximately 1.4 million people, approximately half of them children" [16] has been rejected. [17]

Jumana Manna is, like Martha Rosler did starting in 1967, "bringing the war home." And so, the announced intervention of Germany as a third party at the ICJ in Israel's favor seems to additionally confirm why Manna's new work is currently not on view at the Heidelberger Kunstverein. Instead, her show, like countless more in Germany lately, [18] was canceled quietly in October 2023, one month before its projected opening, robbing Manna of her labor and her art of the generosity it exudes: to include us into a living and shared sense of ruination. Manna's ruins do not accumulate the matters of anyone's "fossilized lives" as art, but instead employ art as an infrastructural lifeline, continuously building sense/s of communal decolonizations.

In early November 2023, Manna published an essay on *Hyperallergic* titled "The Embargo on Empathy," [19] detailing her own positioning, exposure, and exemplarity within the current situation. Amid the personal attacks on her, the art, the matters Manna generates for public contention, is obliterated from view in favor of compromising her personally, breaking down the distinction of private and public so central to European politicality once again. Unmaking her as a political subject. As much as one of art.

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"but then all of a sudden
the rhythm falls
you know what happens
when the chants fall with it" [20]

In January 2024, the initiative Strike Germany [21] was launched on social media in an attempt to invert the cancelation of Palestinian artists and allies [22] in a demand to withhold "labor and presence from German cultural institutions, . . . festivals, panels, and exhibitions" until three demands are met: "1. Protect Artistic Freedom (*Kunstfreiheit*); 2. Focus the Fight against Anti-Semitism; 3. Combat Structural Racism."

Institutions like the Heidelberger Kunstverein, which canceled Manna's show, might be all too willing to accept such a strike, feeling what many who chose to behave stately instead of solidary argued all along, that the cancelations were taken out of their hands. Arguably, the opposite is true, as what Strike Germany generates via the endangered legalism of *Kunstfreiheit* is a fundamental line of questioning that needs to be addressed first and foremost on an intra- and inter-institutional level. It raises the question what sense/s our art makes: How are we content with distancing ourselves romantically within the ruins that sustain us? Or, how can we instead be committed to understanding these ruinations as an entanglement of imperial, diasporic, and Indigenous lives that inescapably implies us? These are our ruins, in /a narrow and in /a wide sense/s.

Unlike her cancelation, Jumana Manna's work is not an artistic act of moralism. Manna is openly producing in a predicament, committed to spelling it out. With us in the room. An unfinished ruination. On the Kunstverein's mezzanine floor, above the street view, Manna would have installed sculptures from two recent series, *Cache* (2018–ongoing) and *Old Bread International* (2022). The latter, made of glazed clay, are mold-covered variations on bread baked in regions where Manna lived and lives. The former are Manna's ongoing translations of *khabyas*, grain storage chambers built in the Levant over centuries. She sets them askew on storage-like sceneries of low plinths, body-size vessels whose glazed upright and reclining bodies render embodiment as a situation suspended between different times, different temporalities. Unfinished.

I am writing this text to return Manna's unfinished generosity of offering an entanglement of imperial, diasporic, and Indigenous lives, without which art, quite generally speaking today, is nothing but a nostalgic *Trauerspiel*, which "in the spirit of allegory . . . is conceived as ruin, as fragment, from the beginning. If other forms shine resplendent as on the first day, this form captures the image of the beautiful as on the very last." [23] This is no place to stay.

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Jumana Manna is a visual artist and filmmaker. Her work explores how power is articulated, focusing on the body, land and materiality in relation to colonial inheritances and histories of place. Through sculpture, filmmaking, and occasional writing, Manna deals with the paradoxes of preservation practices, particularly within the fields of archaeology, agriculture and law. Her practice considers the tension between the modernist traditions of categorization and conservation and the unruly potential of ruination as an integral part of life and its regeneration. Jumana was raised in Jerusalem and lives in Berlin.

Kerstin Stakemeier is an educator at the Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg and a writer who mostly works in collaboration with others. In 2021, the exhibition Illiberal Arts, conceived with Anselm Franke, opened at Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin; in 2023 its second iteration was on view as Illiberal Lives at Stiftung Moderne Kunst Ludwig Forum Aachen. With Bill Dietz she realized Universal Receptivity (2021); with M. Ammer, E. Birkenstock, J. Nachtigall, and S. Weber she organized and edited the exhibition series and journal Class Languages (2017–18); and with Marina Vishmidt she wrote Reproducing Autonomy (2016). In 2017 Stakemeier published Entgrenzter Formalismus: Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik.