Abandoned Property

BY EVA SCHARRER


Above and opposite – ex libris. 2010–12.
© Emily Jacir
Emily Jacir’s ongoing practice is concerned with silenced historical narratives, resistance, movement and exchange. She follows the threads she uncovers to the very end, from the collective experience to the individual person, and makes visible what is invisible—often leaving things unfinished and inviting us to continue them. In her installation in the Zwehrenturm of the Fridericianum she creates a register of fragmentary traces and intimate notes. They might seem cryptic to us, but Jacir has translated them and put them on billboards in public spaces in Kassel, significantly changing the scale of personal inscriptions left by the owners of what had been labeled as “Abandoned Property.”

**eva scharrer:** What led to your project *ex libris* (2010-2012); where did it start?

**emily jacir:** There are several different paths that led me to *ex libris*. One was the research I was doing on the situation in Mamilla Cemetery in Jerusalem. This cemetery is going to be the site of a facility called the “Museum of Tolerance” being built by the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Los Angeles in partnership with the Israeli government. Part of the cemetery is being destroyed, and hundreds of human remains desecrated. It has been a burial ground since the 7th century. Before that, it was the site of a Byzantine church. Generations of Jerusalem families are buried there. I was on the site, putting together a map of the cemetery, interviewing the families, photographing the remains. It was a laborious but fascinating project.

In conjunction with this research, there were sites visits to Kassel and especially the visit to the Marhard library, where the librarian spoke to us about the books that were destroyed when the Fridericianum, housing the library of the Landgraves of Hesse-Kassel, was bombed in 1941. He also showed us the remains of books that were severely damaged but had survived. “Sixty to eighty bombs hit the Fridericianum, but not one bomb hit the tower,” he said, and this really stuck in my mind. The manuscripts that were hidden in the tower survived.

I was also doing a lot of research on the Hess region during the period when it belonged to the American zone of occupation. In particular, I was absolutely fascinated by the work of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives officers and their efforts at the Offenbach Archival Depot, where the biggest book restitution project in history took place. On May 1, 1946 Offenbach was designated as the “sole archival depot” in the American zone of occupation for the handling of looted books and archives. (Offenbach, incidentally, was the center of European typography at one point.)

**es:** How did you first learn about the A.P. (Abandoned Property) books in the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem?

**ej:** I first learned about the A.P. books in 2008 from an article I read by Gish Amit. It was published in the Jerusalem Quarterly, under the title “Ownerless Objects? The story of the books Palestinians left behind in 1948.” After that, one of my closest friends Munir Fakhri Eldin and I spent many long hours together at the library and in deep discussions regarding the books. Our talks revolved around the idea of custodianship, preservation, restitution and the relationship between books and land, especially “Absentee Property.” Munir, who is an academic, pointed to what these books have meant to generations of Israeli scholars, and how the library not only acts as a host for these books, but utilizes them as intellectual property.

**es:** You returned to the library several times over the course of almost two years to do research with your cell phone. Can you talk about your experience there? What were the findings that struck you most?

**ej:** What was interesting was the way my relationship to the books shifted during the process of working. During the very first visits I was focused on documenting inscriptions in the books, particularly the names of the owners. But slowly, as I worked over the course of many visits, I became more interested in the small traces left behind in the books... stains, scribbles, marginalia, scraps of paper. I used to leave the library covered in dust and dirt and felt it as if that dust had coated my lungs and insides as well. I noticed 74-n or 75-n stamped in most of the books, which I asked the librarians about, but they did not know what the stamps were. I think they may be military cataloguing of some sort, perhaps.

**es:** Books, libraries and the question of translation recur in many of your projects. I am thinking especially of *Untold* (books), (2000), where books from about Palestine filled the space of a door, without a shelf, held in place only by their pressure between the two walls, and *Material for a film* (2007), where a copy of the “ Thousand and One Nights” was pierced by one of the thirteen bullets fired into Wael Zaiter, the Palestinian intellectual and translator, who never managed to fulfill his dream of translating this book from Arabic into Italian. In your year, books become surrogates for people, for untold stories. What kind of collective picture do the AP books provide?

**ej:** I think the AP books can only point to individual stories. For me, an acute detail is that these were books selected—a selection chosen by the colonizer for particular purposes. I would love to be able to know which books were deemed unimportant and not worth collecting or preserving. Which books were designated as insignificant and irrelevant? Which ones were discovered? What happened to the books that were in English, Italian, Spanish, etc? Which books bypassed the “AP” designation and became part of the library’s general collections?

**es:** Did you know some of the original owners?

**ej:** Yes, I know the families of the owners of some of books in the library. I also found books from the school where my grandfather taught—a book with an inscription written by one of my father’s elementary school teachers Asaf Wahbe Effend...

**es:** Do you see a chance that what happened in Offenbach with the Archival Depot could also happen in Palestine? Is there awareness, or a public discussion about the restitution of Palestinian books?

**ej:** I think that the question of books in the Palestinian context is an important one. It is crucial to understand that the legal framework for the restitution of Palestinian books is not as strong as it is in other parts of the world. For example, in the United States, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel is looking at a way to take up the issue in a legal framework. There is also a film by the Israeli filmmaker Benny Bruner that has just been released this month, which I think has a chance to see yet. So yes there are several discussions happening on several fronts. Palestinians cannot access these books. The books should be restituted and repatriated to their owners. I am not sure if what happened at Offenbach will have a chance to happen in the case of these books. Let’s go back to the case of Mamilla, despite international law, United Nations resolutions and legal obligations, the Israeli Supreme Court has ruled in favor of construction of the museum. The right to protection of cultural heritage and cultural property as guaranteed by international human rights instruments such as the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) etc is never implemented when it comes to the case of Palestinian objects, books, religious sites, cemeteries. On the other hand, the books are sitting in the National Library of Israel, a ready-made memorial, polluting and perhaps haunting the system.