

Lua Vollaard

Bassem Saad's "Century Bingo"

This overview of the past five years of Bassem Saad's "world-historical" practice engages with different forms of mourning the victims of "the American Century." The term, coined by Henry R. Luce in 1941 and which the Marxist scholar David Harvey has argued "disguised the territoriality of empire in the conceptual fog of a 'century'," finds its antidote here: Saad's latest exhibition is grounded in events, people, and sites, merging documentary history with acid aesthetics and revolutionary zeal.¹

Commissioned for this exhibition is the film *Permanent Trespass*, made together with Sanja Grozdanić and staged as a theater performance in a previous iteration. Here, it is installed on a large screen showing a fictional narrative and a small screen intermittently showing archival footage: pop stars from the referenced eras juxtaposed with burning Kuwaiti oil fields. The main film is set in a Belgian art nouveau mansion, its furnishings haphazardly wrapped away for an impending sale. Professional eulogists lead this clearance of colonial-era assets, the dense script delivered deadpan by the artists themselves. They reflect on their job alongside the work of eulogizing—but what they're eulogizing (the human cost of the American Century?) remains unclear.

In doing so, they face off with institutional articulations of collective grief. Here, United Nations motions and amendments are fashioned as funeral rites. The Hague's "playground for diplomats" is a "tacky beachfront"; a courtroom is staged as a crime scene, diagrams on notions of historicity presented as evidence. These legal accounts are the primary mechanism in the West of giving voice to the "unspeakable" acts of violence caused by its own systems. The work folds over historical events from the Eichmann trial to the Hungarian uprising, plane hijackings, the Nakba, and Algerian independence. The speed of these transitions expresses a deep uncertainty about the future: "Will the next year emerge out of this one?" The work exclaims a longing for "the American Century" to end.

At the center of the exhibition hangs the titular work *Century Bingo (2024)*, a grid of twenty-five canvasses representing revolutions, uprisings, and counterinsurgencies, each linked to a particular year. The game aspect operates as a memory jog to liberatory moments from Allende's cybernetics to the 2021 Gilboa prison break to the Black Lives Matter uprisings. The suggestion that an alternative historical canon might be assembled as a collection of liberation movements and uprisings is compelling, but materially the work is underdeveloped, combining pencil notes with unsourced cutouts from online articles.

Saad identifies primarily as a writer, and sometimes her theories eclipse the art. A vinyl installation called *Who said fate? (2024)* spells out the words "romance & clandestinity" on the floor, and relies heavily on a curatorial



View of Bassem Saad's "Century Bingo" at NW, Open House for Contemporary Art and Film, Aalst, 2024. (Suspended from ceiling) Century Bingo (detail), 2024. Installation with series of twenty-five collages on canvas, 40 × 40 cm each, 690 × 690 cm overall. (Floor) Who said fate? (detail), 2024. Site-specific text work installed on the floor, vinyl texts, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of NW, Open House for Contemporary Art and Film, Aalst.

Photo by Lola Pertsowsky.

text explaining the reference to Palestinian militant Bassel Al-Araj's notion that romance is a guiding principle for revolutionary struggle. These poetic ideas are better supported by the spectacular lenticulars *Suppose that Rome is not a human habitation* (2022–ongoing), which combine landscape photography of sites including a prison in Berlin, a Lebanese border wall, and an ancient Greek temple with fragments of poetry and excerpts (in the form of quotations and photographs) from the lives of those who use these spaces.

The film *Kink Retrograde* (2019/22), one of two films played on loop in ancillary spaces, articulates concepts like kink, entropy, and resilience as tools to remake the state-citizen relationship. The most visually detailed work in the show, it displays the state as a diagrammatically tattooed inscription on the bodies of its subjects, fittingly situated at a newly designated landfill in Beirut. *Congress of Idling Persons* (2021) combines footage shot in the aftermath of the 2020 explosion in Beirut with images of

protests in the US, found material from the 2019 uprisings in Palestinian refugee camps, and interviews recounting experiences of migration in Lebanon. Protest is figured as formative to a sense of belonging. A haunting song by Lebanese musician Sandy Chamoun builds tension: "Defeat... Silence... Solitude, the streets, the masses, subjugation, steadfastness, victory, the blood, betrayal, longing... is of the imagination."

The end of the "American Century" has been enthusiastically declared since at least 2001, when Hunter S. Thompson announced that "the party is over." "Century Bingo" convincingly posits mourning as a necessity to help along Gramsci's infamous "new world's struggle to be born". The idea of eulogy hangs over all the works in the show, and sometimes the work buckles under the weight of its desperation, its responsibility to its subjects, and to revolutionary dreaming. The Western institutions that provide avenues to mourn collectively fall woefully short of meeting the current moment. At its core, "Century Bingo"

shows there is a responsibility in witnessing this violent end, to find ways to imagine our communities beyond the hubris of empire.

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Lua Vollaard is a curator and writer based in Amsterdam. She is curator of contemporary art at Stroom Den Haag and teaches at Design Academy Eindhoven.

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Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," *LIFE* magazine (February 17, 1941); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)