

# Wet Floor/Piso Mojado/أرض مبللة

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**images:**Courtesy of Regina Mamou

Tell me what you think about this: Sometime in the next month, a coalition of artists will place a buoy into the Gaza port. What distinguishes this buoy from the countless others directing sailors and fishermen is that mounted atop is a yellow cone with the words, "Wet Floor," and its Spanish translation, "Piso Mojado" stamped across it. Such cones warn of wet surfaces in public spaces across the world, but this cone, affixed to its buoy, will dip and bob with the tides and the wake of passing ships, a small yellow obelisk sharply contrasting against the blue of the waters and the varied hues of the ships in the Gaza harbor.

So, what do you think?

The question is in no way rhetorical in this ongoing, touring exhibition, entitled *Piso Mojado*. In other words, your answer matters, is valid, and has meaning, because in a public, participatory exhibition, every view counts. "People think whatever they want and provide content to the piece," says Tom Bogaert, the artist behind the *Piso Mojado* exhibition, calling it an "exercise

in creativity." The piece itself is rather benign: a caution cone bobbing in the water is effectively harmless. It's the foundations of such a piece that carry radical weight, especially in a local context, because eschewing the gallery and displaying in public, then intentionally inviting a reaction from all passers-by render it democratic art.

"Once your piece [of art] is out there in the public domain, people will do



CAUTION  
CUIDADO

WET  
FLOOR

WET  
FLOOR

PISO  
MOJADO

PISO  
MOJADO





whatever they want with it," reflects Bogaert, a refugee lawyer who "officially" became a conceptual artist in 2004. New to the art world, he became intrigued by the plurality of meanings that can be given to a piece as well as his own lack of power in the meaning-making process. "Collectors or people take it to their house, hang it wherever they want, and even though it may deal with genocide, they give it a different meaning," he says. Bogaert became frustrated because given his background in refugee issues, conflict, and human rights, certain aspects of his work were "nonnegotiable," especially the intended meaning. Pondering the problematics of interpretation and public reaction, he reoriented his work in order to create pieces devoid of explicit meaning. Instead, it falls on the viewer to "provide content" and "fill in,"

and Bogaert's installation serves as a substrate to a multiplicity of views, interpretations and reactions.

In 2007, what is now an ongoing series of open-ended installations began in the East River of New York, just off the Brooklyn coast. Bogaert affixed the cone onto a mooring buoy, and then dropped it into the river's choppy waters. He solicited replies and reactions to the installation, offering no introduction to the piece - merely an invitation to interpret it. A steady succession of installations have followed, with Bogaert soliciting reactions from viewers in Miami, Belgium, France, Jordan, and next, Gaza.

Why Bogaert chose Gaza relates to both *Piso Mojado* itself and his larger artistic project in the Middle East. Since



early 2010, Bogaert has based himself out of Amman, which has served as a launch pad of sorts for different conceptual pieces addressing contemporary Near Eastern society. *Impression, Proche Orient* (IPO) is his opus, and each country serves as a different chapter within IPO. In the Jordan chapter, Bogaert has included the *Cucumber Project*, a visualization of the "Jordan option" in regional politics, particularly Hamas leader Khalid Mashal's play of words between option and cucumber, and the *K is for Kompressor*, a filmed installation which unites the Mercedes-Benz Kompressor "K" with the artist's own neologism "kompressor," a blend of compassionate and oppressor. Other chapters have been developed for and exhibited in Syria, Lebanon, and the West Bank.

The Gaza chapter, however, posed some difficulties, ranging from the practical - the inaccessibility of the strip to the artist himself - to the more fundamental - a question of the necessity of art in place utterly ravaged by conflict. But the obstacles were mitigated by Bogaert's establishing a partnership with the Gaza-based ELTIQA Artists House and its hardworking director, Raed Issa. "For ELTIQA, art is a way of showing the outside world, 'Look, we are also human beings. We are not this one dimensional, archaic, old-fashioned people from Gaza who vote for Hamas and who are against democracy and women's rights'," says Bogaert. And given the ongoing, touring aspect of the *Piso Mojado* project, it presented a ready-made and easily transportable (read: smuggle-able) piece to execute within Gaza.



The practical reasons for choosing Gaza as a site for *Piso Mojado* don't diminish the significance, however; the city and its future remain an open question, as precarious and indeterminate as the piece itself. In many ways, *Piso Mojado* is enhanced by the installation in the Gaza port and the subsequent interpretations by the people of Gaza. "The reactions become part of the piece," says Boegart, referring to both the reactions of Gazans and the broader, trans-city narrative that expands with each installation. As in Miami, New York and Belgium, the

viewers' reactions will be documented through audio, video or textual recording. Placing Gaza in this coterie of uncontested, established cities elevates it and its residents to a normalized status, begging scrutiny of its current plight and dignifying the interpretations of a people long oppressed.

While Bogaert planned on exhibiting a showcase in Gaza at ALTIQA's art space about the different reactions of people across the world to the *Piso Mojado* series, a compendium which has yet to be exhibited at once, as of



early August that plan has changed. "We decided to open the exhibition up and invite local artists to participate in a group show planned for November 2011," he explains, hoping it leavens the contemporary art scene in Gaza. Presenting the reactions to *Piso Mojado* in Gaza will still serve as the thrust of the exhibition, but participatory works by local contemporary artists will also be displayed.

While the curatorial specifics of the show take shape, they will likely be ultimately influenced by an ordinary

Gazan's honest reply. "That's my hope, that someone will look at the buoy and give a completely new content to the piece and say, 'For me this is...' I just don't know!" exclaims Bogaert, marveling at the possibilities. Perhaps they'll hone in on the language inscribed on the cone, or the shade of yellow, or the bobbing motion in the water. Says the artist, "Look at it and feel free to let your imagination work in overdrive, let it be whatever it is, that's the whole point."

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