

Ep. 12 - Wafaa Bilal

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to This Being Human. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, performance artist Wafaa Bilal.

WAFAA BILAL:

I use my body in order to solicit empathy. When the body is mutilated, when the body in pain, other body understand that language and understand what it takes for a person to put themselves in harm way to talk about others.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Wafaa Bilal has gone to extreme lengths in the name of art. He has mounted a camera to the back of his head, been shot at by tens of thousands of paintballs and was even waterboarded. It's all to create dialogue about human rights and his home country of Iraq. Wafaa was born in the sacred city of Najaf, the burial place of the prophet Muhammed's son-in-law, Imam 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib. Both Imam Ali and his son, Iman Hussein, were deeply venerated in his community.

WAFAA BILAL:

We used to see these processions of, commemorating the death of Imam Hussein by these Shiite ritual and by the reenactment of the battle of Karbala. So that seeped into my mentality without knowing, that is history commemorated by, physically, by the body itself.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Growing up, Wafaa wasn't allowed to go to art school. But he made art anyways, which raised the suspicion of Saddam Hussein's government. He eventually fled the country, after refusing to volunteer in the Iraqi army for the invasion of Kuwait. He settled in America, where he established himself as a major artist, exhibiting work around the world and even becoming the subject of network news stories. We reached Wafaa in New York, where he teaches at the NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. But ironically, when he was growing up in Iraq, he wasn't allowed to study art at all.

WAFAA BILAL:

As you might know, art being viewed back home in Iraq under Saddam's regime as a powerful tool. So, many of us for that reason were not allowed to study art. And the other layer is that the government dubbed it as central allocation of people to different profession. So that was -- if you refused to go to any of these schools, which is artist school or physical training, sport, then the government will pick a study for you and somehow they picked geography and geology for me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Not, not disciplines that you wanted to study.

WAFAA BILAL:

No, not at all, not at all, but it really never deterred me from continue the thing I love. And during that time, every college in Iraq has a studio for people to go and practice. And I did. I practiced and I seek the connection with the College of Fine Art in Baghdad. I become a frequent visitor there, but at the same time, I was not part of the discourse there. So when I finally arrived to United States, I said, that's it, I have to start from zero.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Wafaa, when you were making art in Iraq, what kind of art were you making and what kind of art raised red flags with the Saddam Hussein government at the time?

WAFAA BILAL:

So I must admit, Iraqi artists in that period were extremely creative in creating this duality between criticism and aesthetic. So criticism to the regime were layered with the aesthetic on the surface, but everybody knows and the government are suspected of artists who does this duality. But not only the artwork will get you in trouble, because if you are doing art and you're coming from, let's say, a city like my city, Najaf, the holy city of Najaf, I'm a suspect automatically. You know, so anything I put out there, it was a suspect. So when I would put a show -- and I think I mounted three show at the College of Fine Art -- the College of Art in Baghdad -- I was dragged to the office of the government on campus every single time. And sometimes the show will completely disappear.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Like it would be removed?

WAFAA BILAL:

It would -- it would not exist, just like I would go there and it's gone. One of the time when I went to the show to see it after the opening, the dean of the college would open the show, and then I went back and it was nothing. And after that, I remember I'd been asked by one of the intelligence officers on campus to follow him quietly. And sometimes when you are asked that question, you may never come back. But in my case, I really played it smart. I would go to the office, sit down, and sometimes for hours, you know, I mean, they mentally play with you. You get locked in sort of interrogation office and you sit there with a cup of tea after a cup of tea, after a cup of tea, you know. And then it depends on how you answer these questions. But

again, just like how we play with the duality of aesthetic and deep meaning to the artwork, we carry that in our conversation, you know. And we survive. But you never know what trigger an arrest. Luckily, and to this day, I said I was really lucky, I was able to do artwork critical and then at the same time I was able to evade any arrest.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

But Wafaa had a mark on him. His time was limited. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, he was approached by a government recruiter and asked to volunteer in the army.

WAFAA BILAL:

I said, I am not going to volunteer. I mean, it was spontaneous and it was from from the heart. This is also come from losing family members in Iran-Iraq war and I thought, “does life worth living if we live it this way?” And to my surprise, that small act of courage give people the power, the entire class to say no. And when the Ba'athist regime left, we looked at each other just like, what did we do?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Wafaa left Baghdad. Not long after that, in January 1991, war broke out in Iraq. He hid out with his family in the countryside for a bit.

WAFAA BILAL:

So I think when Kufa start being bombed, I got my family out and first in loading them in a car to the countryside. Then I jumped on my bike after they left and nobody left behind and then joined them in the countryside, staying in a school. I remember one day waking up my mother in, living in a school and using the school desk to warm up.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Then one day, he heard some friends were planning to leave the country.

WAFAA BILAL:

And I said, “Mom, I am leaving. Don't tell anybody.” And she said, “where are you going?” I said, “I don't know. I heard some of my friends going toward Iran.”

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

And so Wafaa and his fellow travelers set out on the long walk to Iran. But when they got to the road that would take them across the border, they found out it had been closed and taken over by Saddam Hussein's military. So they changed course.

WAFAA BILAL:

Many days later, I arrived to the Kuwait border. And we saw allies and allies were not taking any refugees at the time. We were running from Saddam regime, but we heard there is a camp across the border. So at night, we crossed the border into that camp. We got arrested. And really, that was one of the moment I thought, “OK, well, this is the last day,” because when you get attacked by angry people who you just decimate their country and they pick you up, they

threw you in the back of a pickup truck and told you “this is your last day,” you think, “well, this is last day.” But again, luck had it. I remember with us was an older man with his grandkids. And in his pocket was his son execution certificate by the regime and the Kuwaiti officers were very kind, sympathizing with us and letting us go.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Within a week, Wafaa was living in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. He kept himself busy teaching art to the children there.

WAFAA BILAL:

In the camp, art become way of making sure we still alive. As simple as that. And I remember it was really harsh reality. I mean, imagine you're in the desert, the heat and the cold and you living in a tent, that's it. No electricity, no water. This is a makeshift camp. But when I arrived, I knew we could be out from there in one day or years, and my worst fear come true, which is becoming a war prisoner. So I needed to get art supply.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Wafaa knew he'd need help in getting art supplies to the camp, so he struck up a relationship with camp authorities. He would begin working with them to pick up trash around the camp every day.

WAFAA BILAL:

I would get up in the morning, get into these trucks. And by ten o'clock in the morning, I'm done working and I have a salary where nobody does, so I establish a good relation with the drivers who mostly come from the city, they're Saudis. And I would ask them to go and get me art supplies. But then I, we, we were faced by another reality. Lots of artists and writers were in the camp. The new reality was the sandstorms. You make beautiful paintings and, and then sandstorm come to ruin everything.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Wow.

WAFAA BILAL:

And that was during the summer, and winter start approaching. And I thought, this is where geography, geology come into place. And this is where you start experimenting with material to see if you could make an adobe house. And I start with so many people helping me, getting water, excess water from the kitchens and then start mixing material, sand and some rocks, and start making one of the first adobe blocks. Before winter come, I built a studio there, the first structure, and when I was building it, people making fun of me, just like “oh, we going to leave -- what are you doing here?” But when winter come in the desert, everybody starts asking for how to do it. And within a matter of weeks, the entire camp turned into a village.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Wafaa spent two years in the refugee camp -- before moving to America. He got into an art program at the University of New Mexico -- and later got his MFA at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2007, he mounted the project that put him on the map in the American art world. It was a performance called "Domestic Tension." In it, he lived in a gallery for 30 days and allowed people around the world to watch him on a webcam -- and shoot him with paintballs.

WAFAA BILAL VOICEOVER:

Hi everybody, it's day 30th. The gun is very busy right now. I don't have any script written, but I have a lot of people online who are trying to shoot. As you can know, there is not even a single second between these shots right now...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

It came out of a feeling of desperation over the war in his home country.

WAFAA BILAL:

There are events sometimes taking place, really transform us and set us on a new path. And that tragic event in the news, it was in 2004 when I was living in Chicago. And this is another war again and the invasion of 2003. In 2004, my brother Haji died of -- or killed -- by a drone attack in our hometown, Kufa. And for three years, I didn't know what to do and how I would really cope with my loss and not to even thinking about how to use art in a way to communicate or connect people to the tragedies. And then I think it was January again, 2007, when I heard a soldier in Colorado directing these drones. And dropping bombs on Iraq and other places and the soldier was ask if she has any remorse. And I was so surprised how the soldier was emotionally, physically disconnected. And I thought, "probably at night her, other soldiers, would go and be with their family as if nothing happened, while places like Iraq is completely destroyed." And I start thinking immediately about the duality again, and I thought, "I want everybody to experience watching an Iraqi being shot... live." And what I did, I decide to rig a paintball connected to the internet. Give the user over the internet from anywhere in the world to watch, point the gun and shoot at an Iraqi. I was shot sixty five thousand times, a hundred and twenty eight countries participated. Eighty million hit on the website. But I think the most remarkable thing was the chat room. And how people start informing each other about what I was doing and why I was doing it. I did not tell people this is about Iraq war. It is very playful, I mean, a person sitting in a room and you could shoot them over the internet. A lot of people took pleasure in that.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Wafaa started this performance project with a single box of paintballs - and they ran out in just a few minutes. Soon, he was spending every penny he had in order to keep up with demand.

WAFAA BILAL:

But I think later on, when people start talking to each other and start informing each other on the chat room, it dawned on people how serious the situation is. This is 2007, when so many people do not have a platform to talk about Iraq casualty, American soldiers just losing their life there. And Baghdad is about to become a civil war battleground. And I think people come to that

platform to aid, to support and to inform each other. And for so many times I thought, “the project's going to stop. It's not going to continue for thirty days.” But I was shocked when people start delivering food, delivering water, delivering ammunition to the gun and not, sometimes with not even asking them. And I think what happened is, the project become a collective voice. It become a platform, and I was the trigger for that platform to let people come and project or share their anger against these multiple wars in Iraq and the killing of innocent civilian people.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Like you've said, Wafaa, people approached this work with so many intentions. How did this experience affect the way you saw other human beings and their humanity?

WAFAA BILAL:

At the beginning, I was judging the people who are shooting at me, but then I was alerted by a friend saying, "without the shooters, there is no project." But at the end of the project, not only I overcome my denial of losing my brother and my father, but I was also assured of how strong humanity is when we come together. People took up themselves to protect me, to, during the project, where people establish the virtual human shield and they start directing the gun to the left and keeping it left to deny other people from shooting. So the humanity and my idea of humanity were assured at the end of the project.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Wafaa, you've put yourself through so much pain and violence through your art. Was there no other choice? Is that what you had to do, you had to make yourself part of it? It's such a big part of your work.

WAFAA BILAL:

I use my body in order to solicit that empathy. When the body is mutilated, when the body in pain, other body understand that language and understand what it takes for a person to put themselves in harm way to talk about others, so in order to bring people in the comfort zone, I had to take extreme measure by using my own body to connect them emotionally to the other bodies in Iraq.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

In 2008, Wafaa took another project that invited his audience's participation. It was called “Dog or Iraqi”, and people had to vote on whether he, or a dog named Buddy, would be subjected to waterboarding. It was Wafaa's way of talking about the war, and introducing people to the little-known tactic that was being used in the war against Middle Eastern people - a tactic that essentially amounts to drowning someone in order to yield a confession.

WAFAA BILAL:

I wanted to let people that is inhuman, but I thought, I'm not going to go in a didactic way pointing out what it is. I'm going to give the people the chance to vote, who would they like to waterboard? The dog or Iraqi? Sometimes you plan it, but it doesn't turned out better than you think. Within a matter of days, we got PETA to object to the project saying this is inhumane

treatment for animal. And we were kicked out of campus. But the project continued to progress and at the end of the month, I lost to the dog, to Buddy, and I decide I'm gonna waterboard myself because I lost. But also I didn't want any media to be around. It was not for them. It was for me. And for the audience who were around to know what this is. So we ran away from the media into a basement of friend of mine. They carried the waterboarding method on me. And I have to say, after six seconds, I give up and I knew now waterboarding is not simulated drowning, but it's really drowning. Putting the body through that torture method, it really bring the issue to the surface and let people knew what is happening out there in their own names.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

We know that so many of the stereotypes and xenophobia that circulate around bodies like ours focus on violence and conflict. Did you ever feel that your work, which explores violence and conflict and the body, might add to that impression or those stereotypes of quote unquote, our people being a violent people?

WAFAA BILAL:

I'm just a person who want to highlight what we go through back home in Iraq. And my project it really engage people, give them agency too, you know. But there are so many really comic entry point in these project -- and knowing both culture and how to push the buttons. But at the end, people understand this is my right to do an artwork. So sometimes I intentionally push people buttons, sometimes get -- people get angry. But at the end when the objective arrive, I think some of them look back and have a good laugh at what they're angry about it. Because it breaks the stereotype.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's interim director and CEO. We hope you are enjoying this episode of *This Being Human*. If you like what you hear, please support us by rating *This Being Human* on your podcast app or by leaving a review. By sharing your feedback, you will help us grow our audiences and reach more people with the podcast's extraordinary human stories, wonderfully told. Thank you so much. And now back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I have to ask you about about about one last project and maybe what it means for your future, for our future. One of your projects involved creating a golden effigy of Saddam Hussein and all of us who watched Iraq, those of us who are born in the 60s and 70s, and those of us who grew up knowing of the Iran-Iraq war, you know, saw these images of Saddam Hussein, of course, and also the celebration of Saddam Hussein as, as you yourself said, in statues and in artwork. And this project of yours wanted to create a golden effigy of Saddam, similar to the one he himself wanted to create and then launch into space. Now, you've done the effigy. Are you planning to launch him into space?

WAFAA BILAL:

So, Abdul-Rehman, I am happy to tell you, yes. And here is a little bit background and tell you where we are in launching Saddam into space. During the Ba'ath regime idolization of one man, they wanted to send a golden statue to space, but geo-synchronize it above Baghdad, so any time Iraqi look up, they would see the gold star shining on them. The visible ever man looking back at them. And of course, they didn't carry that because the regime was toppled. And in 2015, I revisited that idea and I said, how poetic is to deal with the past in a very, it is kind of a humorous way. By realizing a dictator wish. Launching him into the space. And so I worked on that, and I'm really happy to say I'm currently working with San Jose State University on their space program and arts program in building a CubeSat with Saddam statue on it, but also Saddam is going to have a selfie camera. And he's going to launch into space for two years and he's going to take a selfie and send it back every hour for two years, and at the end of the two years, the satellite come and gonna disintegrate to ashes into the space. But when I thought about it more, what's in it for the Iraqi? Is it just idolization of? I added another fold to the project. And that is, the project has to be sort of an archival machine. So I'm calling on the Iraqis to send any song they love, any image they love, any food recipe they love, and I gonna archive them in a couple ways. Digital archiving but at the same time, I'm turning them into bursts of sound and could -- so when the satellite up there, I'm going to send these recipes and anything archived the Iraqi culture into the void. So then when Saddam's statue come and disintegrate to dust into the space, what's left is, what unifying us, is the culture of Iraq immortalized to eternity.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Wafaa Bilal, what does this being human mean to you?

WAFAA BILAL:

This being human, it means to take the higher spiritual road. I remember when interacting with a veteran in New Orleans. And I am trying to tell him how I'm coping with my PTSD and how he should do it. And tears come to his eyes and he said, "look what happened. I was in Iraq and I destroyed your home. And now you're telling me how to live better." Isn't that what it is about? That's what being human is about.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Wafaa Bilal, thank you for making the time to speak to me on This Being Human. It has been such a full and generative conversation and I can't wait until we are able to do this again.

WAFAA BILAL:

Thank you so much Abdul-Rehman for really beautiful conversation. I love it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our Senior Producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Nicole Edwards and Sydney Bradshaw. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

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