

A Moment of Art Beyond the Boundaries of Geography

A digital conference on questions
about arts and artistic production
in light of a decade of transformations

Conference Publications

Curated and Edited by
Jumana Al-Yasiri and Ismail Elbahar



A Moment of Art
عن لحظة الفن

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Boundaries
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الخروج من الجغرافيا

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INTRODUCTION

One decade after the eruption of the Arab revolutions, and as we are still recovering from the repercussions of the pandemic, questions of borders, geography, and language take a different turn and become ever more pressing and complex. They urge us to rethink reality in an attempt to decipher its transformations. This places art at a critical turning point in terms of what can be produced and what can be further developed in the Arab region in general and at the level of Syrian artistic output more specifically. This is due to the ongoing violence and the dispersal of artists across numerous geographies, especially since some have found it difficult to build roots and reestablish themselves in those places or connect with them.

Most artists in the region have experienced the refusal to acknowledge the loss of reality and to discover new realms ushered in by the advancement of digital technologies. They found solace in history when geography became riddled with impossibilities and was no longer a viable and realistic option at the dawn of the new decade.

At the end of 2021, upon the invitation of Ettijahat - Independent Culture, several artists and artistic producers from the Arab region and elsewhere tried to reflect on the ability of art to reshape reality.

They explored the role of art in our memory and our present reality, amid the disintegration of our material and political geography and its shifting reference points. They also contemplated the current artistic moment and its meanings as we moved into a new decade filled with uncertainty about the future and the past alike with an impaired memory.

All those discussions took place during the conference entitled “A Moment of Art: Beyond the Boundaries of Geography” held as part of MINA: Artistic Port and Passages in 2021 and 2022.

The conference included four digital sessions that explored what is possible and within reach beyond the limits of geography and borders, as well as the impact that this has on art and its different modes of production and reception. This eBook documents the valuable contributions and insights shared during the conference, delves into the questions posed by participants, and presents some additional contributions.

While the conference was held long before the publication of this eBook, the questions it addressed remain relevant. This long interval also enables us to shed more light on some key questions and themes that were not sufficiently discussed due to the rapid pace of the crises and priorities in our region.

The experiences of participants were very diverse and spanned cinema, music, visual and performing arts, media, and academic research. As such, the contributions and interventions were also very diverse.

Some took the form of research papers written specifically for the conference, while others consisted of lively discussions that took place during the different sessions or revolved around presenting and discussing the visual materials or films produced by the participants. This book includes edited versions of some of these interventions, as well as other interventions that have been reproduced in the form

of testimonies along with visual supports. Finally, some participants decided to completely redesign their interventions to be featured in this book. It should also be noted that all of this work was done in collaboration with the contributors, some of whom submitted their work in Arabic and others in English.

The sequencing of contributions in this book does not follow the order of sessions and interventions during the conference; rather, it is based on the intersections between the themes.

We would like to express our sincere thanks and gratitude to Jumana Al-Yasiri and Ismail Fayed for their invaluable efforts to prepare for this conference, develop its themes, and contribute to the issuance of this publication. We would also like to thank the participants in this conference for their valuable contributions and insightful interventions. We hope that this dynamic discussion would continue and that the different questions and themes are tackled and explored further in other artistic, events, discussions, and platforms.

Going back to Geography

Jumana Al-Yasiri

Going back to Geography

Jumana Al-Yasiri

In early April 2021, Ettijahat - Independent Culture invited me to participate in curating and facilitating the sessions of the digital conference, "A Moment of Art: Beyond the Boundaries of Geography", held in November 2021, as part of MINA: Artistic Port and Passages.

This invitation to reflect on the relation between art and geography in the Arab region and the diaspora during the last decade came exactly one year after the worldwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Truth be told, as I write these lines for the conference publication, that moment seems to be so far away, not because a year has elapsed since the conference, give or take, but rather due to the fast-moving events in the Arab region and the world, which distort time and place.

Over the past two years, most artists and cultural practitioners spent long hours in front of their screens talking, meeting, discussing, and working with colleagues from around the world, or even in their own cities, as their mobility was restricted by the lockdown. Life began to return to normal in the fall of 2021 even though some processes changed in the wake of the pandemic, and new questions were raised about sustainability in the arts and culture, mobility, the relation between producing art and preserving the environment, as well as questions about care, health, and other topics related to justice, equality, pluralism, and inclusion in arts and culture. However, we must ask ourselves to what extent these questions are really new to artists

and cultural workers in the Arab region, which has borne witness since 2011 to multiple historical, political, social, and demographic transformations that caused all kinds of lockdowns, isolation, and confinement.

Surely, 2011 was not the only turning point in modern history for artistic and cultural production in this region, which has undergone multiple attempts to redefine its identity since the dawn of the 20th century, i.e. the end of World War I (1914-1918) and the final dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath (1922). The region has lived through all forms of colonialism, wars, and oppression, which have always affected its peoples all the way from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf. The events of 2011 only drew the world's attention to these peoples, which have often gone unnoticed, even though, today, this same world seems to have forgotten or casted away that rare moment of collective euphoria towards change.

It is that euphoria and the genuine hope that ensued which make the sense of defeat so suffocating and heavy today, like a confinement sucking the life out of the region's populations and the diaspora alike. This conference, aptly named "A Moment of Art: Beyond the Boundaries of Geography", sought to reflect on the transformations in artistic and cultural production as practiced by Arab artists and intellectuals in their countries or in their various exiles since 2011. It also aimed at linking these questions to those that arose in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the outset, we knew that we wanted to focus on four key themes: memory, language, the digital realm, and the role of these practices in the world today and the questions of tomorrow.

The questions we tackled stemmed from the reality of Syrian artists, for whom exile has become a key condition facet of their professional and social existence, perhaps even the main precondition for this existence.

We are not only referring to those who left, but also those who chose to stay, thereby sentencing themselves to a potentially much harsher domestic exile. However, our intention was not to design a conference about Syrian art in exile, but rather to build on the Syrian context to establish analogies with other artistic and cultural experiences in Arab and non-Arab countries that are also struggling with major historical, political, social, and economic issues.

In the early stages of preparation for the conference, less than a year had passed since the Beirut Port explosion (August 4th, 2020) and the subsequent destruction of infrastructure in a country already in turmoil due to one of the most severe economic crises in modern history. We stood before a new exodus in Lebanon, reminiscent of the exodus of Palestinians, which is the ultimate exile in the Arab collective memory.

It also reminded us of the waves of migration to the American continent in the late 19th early 20th centuries, of how Arabs are always fleeing some disaster, as if instability is a staple in this region, a condition for producing art in the Arab Mashreq and Maghreb. In this expansive region where migration is both a solution and a necessity, language is key - both the language of oneself and the language of others - especially in a context marked by linguistic pluralism within geographic and cultural boundaries.

We tackled the issue of writing in exile, the language of donors and the art market, but also the status of Arabic and other peripheral languages in the world today, in addition to the transformations related to speech and content in countries that have witnessed uprisings and subsequent oppression and violence. As for the digital realm, or what we called the "broad expanse," we reviewed the role of the Internet and social media platforms in the Arab Spring uprisings and the ensuing artistic and intellectual forms of expression. We also reflected on the

limits of technology and its role in the power imbalance in the world today. Looking at the future, one main question arose: "What next?" which is entirely dependent on the "what now?" question. We were aware of the concerns stemming from these questions, not only in the Arab region but across a world experiencing, for the first time, common challenges that are not limited to one country, but threaten the survival of humanity and the planet as a whole. If the war in Ukraine had started a year ago, we would have undoubtedly delved more into the topic of war, which has become the beat to which we arrange our lives all across the world, and we would have discussed its direct effect on artistic and cultural production in Arab and non-Arab countries in today's world.

But what about geography?

Perhaps we have not talked enough about actual geography, although we tried to represent the Arab region fully by inviting artists and intellectuals from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. It was paramount to broaden this conversation to include neighbors of the Arab region who share its intertwined and complicated geopolitical reality, hence the choice of Iran. Most participants reside in Europe today, and some live and work in the United States. Some are exiled and cannot return to their country for security reasons, while others still move between their home cities and European and American cities for professional reasons related to the economic and political reality of their country.

"A Moment of Art: Beyond the Boundaries of Geography" was held on Zoom at a time when the cultural and art sector worldwide was pondering the possibility of digitizing artistic and cultural work in general - including performing arts such as theater, dance, and music, which rely by nature on direct interaction with the audience in the room. This question echoed around the world following the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns enforced everywhere.

It was also amplified due to environmental reasons related to the effects of travelling, especially by plane, on the climate, as well as economic and logistical reasons since the digital realm enables meetings that are not always possible in real life. Indeed, had the conference been held in Beirut or Berlin, we might not have been able to invite artists residing in New York for example. However, by holding the conference on Zoom, we may have lost the opportunity to interact with one another before and after the discussions, as noted by one of the participants who said that it was unfortunate that we could not all go to dinner after the session. During that dinner, which did not happen, perhaps the discussion would have been deeper and more intimate.

New projects might have been born and meetings might have continued well after the conference. What is certain is that going beyond the boundaries of geography refers to the exile of many artists and cultural workers from Syria and other Arab countries in the last decade, to the quarantine enforced around the world due to COVID-19, to the massive and accelerated technological advances and the impact of these advances on artistic production and content, and maybe even it refers to something else... to the need to challenge geographical borders in an era of ruptures and mass migration, an era where people want to leave Earth to build civilizations on other planets. Going beyond material geography has limitless potential, but what about going back to it?

Going back to geography” combines the idea of ‘return’ and all the emotions it elicits in us as individuals and as a collective, as well as the idea of geography as the land we walk, the places we inhabit, the

natural and unnatural borders imposed upon us. While preparing for the conference, I revisited the last book by the late Samir Kassir, “Being Arab: Reflections on the Arab Malaise” (2004), which is not strange, since I often turn to this book when I consider the tragic reality of the Arab region and its populations today. The sixth and penultimate chapter of Kassir’s book is titled: “The Arabs’ Malaise is More a Function of their Geography than their History.” In this chapter, Kassir explains the connection he made between the Arab Malaise and the region’s geography: “To understand the history of the Arab World, one must inevitably take account of its geography, particularly because the region is atypical from a geographical point of view.

Straddling two continents, not all its terrestrial borders are natural; moreover, its identity lies primarily in its shared history and a deep seam of shared culture (however diversified its expressions have been, and continue to be). [...] The first and unquestionably foremost of these [features] is its position at the heart of the Old World, facing Europe. It is almost a truism to say that the region’s proximity to Europe has had the most implications for the Arabs.”¹

This excerpt carries so much contemporary truth with millions of Syrians and non-Syrians seeking refuge in Europe in the last decade, as one of the most flagrant consequences of the oppression committed against their calls for freedom, justice, and democracy. The choice of Europe as a place to live and take refuge stems from its very proximity, despite - or maybe because of - the complications, wars, and colonialism it has engendered throughout history. I think what I am trying to say

1- Kassir, Samir. Being Arab (2004). Translated by Will Hobson (2006), with an Introduction by Robert Fisk, Verso, 2006, 2013. p. 68.

is how the lost geographic memory gets muddled with the geography of the new place. For instance, I personally started to write this introduction in a small village in Normandie, in the northwest of France, and today I am finalizing the text in an eastern suburb of Paris. When I started writing, I was surrounded by an environment that bears no semblance to the environment of the place from which I came. However, the residents had been concerned about the lack of rainfall during summer, which led to plants turning yellow or dying and soil turning dry, similarly to the soil of the place where I was raised. Their constant talk of drought and the soil made me think about my relationship with the soil of this place where I have lived for over 12 years now. This is why I am asking myself and sharing with you the question: How to go back to geography, even if it is not the geography of our countries of origin?

The peoples of the Arab region, including artists and intellectuals, began moving parts of their lives to the digital realm well before the COVID-19 pandemic. We all know the role that social media platforms played as spaces for protest, but also as unofficial venues and publishing houses, as places to connect with friends and family that got scattered and became distant. This distance is terrible and painful, and it is further complicated by the inability to build an organic relationship with the new places of residence, their land, soil, mountains, seas, beaches... i.e. geography in the scientific sense, as a physical, biological, and human reality. Hence, we do not have to go back to a lost place, but to the places where we live now and build a true relationship with the land and the people. Going back also means leaving our screens or at least stepping away from them momentarily to reflect on what is happening

around us. This might be poetic in some way, but do we have another choice when the actual return grows harder and more impossible every day?

I wrote this text, as chance would have it, while I was reading a book entitled "Nostalgia: When Are We Ever At Home?"¹ by the French philosopher Barbara Cassin, specialized in linguistics and translation. Cassin drew from her personal relationship with the island of Corsica and how she feels at home when she is there, although she has no roots or family ties in this place to which she feels nostalgic when she leaves. Building on her own experience, Cassin talks about Ulysses' journey in the Odyssey to go home to Ithaca after the Trojan war. Ulysses takes ten years to return, and when he finally arrives home, no one recognizes him because the ten years away had changed him and the place as well. When his family finally recognizes him, particularly his wife Penelope, after having lost all hope for his return, he leaves again the next day, embarking on a new journey towards other seas, as if leaving has become the new normal for Ulysses.

Cassin uses Ulysses' return and re-departure as the basis to discuss exile, language, and identity all the way to modern times and the German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) in her multiple exiles, in the third and final chapter of the book, "Arendt: To Have One's Language for a Homeland."² Hannah Arendt fled from the Nazis to France first in 1933, then she moved to, or rather sought refuge in, the United States in 1941, where she was granted citizenship after 10 years of residency. Cassin cites many publications by Hannah Arendt, stating that what

1- CASSIN, B., *La Nostalgie, Quand donc est-on chez soi ?*, Paris, Éditions Autrement, coll. Les Grands Mots, 2013.

2- "Arendt : avoir sa langue pour patrie." in CASSIN, B., op. cit., pp. 89-136.

Arendt missed and longed for the most was not pre-Nazi Germany as a homeland, but rather the German language, her mother tongue, as a space for living, social connection, feeling, writing, and thinking. Ulysses felt like a stranger/alien when he finally arrived home so he decided to leave again. Arendt did not choose to return to live in Germany after WWII (1939-1945), although she visited multiple times. However, she kept thinking in German, a language that prevailed at her home and in her social life, even though she started writing in English shortly after arriving to the U.S. She never tried to shake her heavy German accent. Even her syntax always had something reminiscent of German. Cassin concluded her reflections as follows: "I choose to hear from the Odyssey that we never stay "at home," home is never "there." Instead of roots, I will nurture the other place, an open world filled with different similar people, but who are not like us. When are we ever at home? When we, our people, our language(s) are welcome."¹

You can imagine my thoughts as I was reading these lines and rethinking the geography of memory, language, writing from a new place, the relationship with the digital realm, as well as many other questions that have affected artistic and cultural production in the Arab region and the diaspora over the last decade, as many live in what seems today as a never ending limbo. That is why I call for going back to geography, for being rooted in the present wherever we may actually be today. It is a world where our personal stories and the plights of our homelands intertwine with worldwide concerns about historical, humanitarian, and natural hazards. The experience of artists and cultural creators from the Arab region during the past decade and even before certainly

has much to add to this inevitably joint quest to break with isolation and overcome the overwhelming sense of defeat. Individual salvation may seem as a solution and necessity in the moment of disaster. However, I believe individual solutions are no longer possible today. We have a collective responsibility to the land that we roam, the land that holds the remnants of our presence, memories, and art. A decade has passed, and a new one is upon us. These questions will definitely recur, and others will arise, and I personally am looking forward to reflecting upon them with you.

Lastly, I would like to thank Ettijahat - Independent Culture once again for inviting me to reflect on some of the events of the last decade and ask questions about the future from a new perspective. I would like to specifically thank my friend, Ayham Abou Shaqra, in charge of the MINA program and of managing the conference and this publication. I would also like to thank Ismail Fayed, my parter in designing and facilitating the conference and for his work on this publication. It has been an exciting journey; I could not have imagined a better way to usher in the new decade. This is a conversation to be continued... here and there, with you all.

Montreuil, 31/8/2022

¹- CASSIN, B., OP. CIT., P. 136.

The Stories We Tell Against Storytelling

A Decade after our Springs

Rasha Salti

The Stories We Tell Against Storytelling¹ A Decade after our Springs²

Rasha Salti

For the past decade, I have given presentations and lectures about the “Arab spring”, about what happened in the Arab region, making the arguments that firstly, the Arab Spring has a history, it is neither a moment of exception, nor errancy. Secondly, I have been arguing that the politically engaged creative fields have been a surrogate territory for forging radical political imaginaries. Today, as the “political gains” seem all lost, and the region seems sunk in a nightmare far worse than a decade ago, the argument I want to defend is in fact the reverse, namely that the arts have not been a surrogate field, but the refraction, the product, and the expression of emancipated political subjectivities.

Subjectivities that have been irrevocably transformed by taking part in a radical political collective experience of change. Furthermore, and on the passing of a decade, drawing inspiration from Tunisian jurist and scholar, Yadh Ben Achour³, I am no longer hesitant from referring to the series of jacqueries that constituted our springs as a revolutionary.

Although mostly known for his scholarship on Islam and democracy, Yadh Ben Achour dismisses the representation of these revolutions as having “failed”, on account of the counter-revolutionary, populist forces having seized in power a decade after the insurgencies. To many, Ben Achour’s position might seem counterintuitive, or wildly unreasonable, but I endorse it whole-heartedly. He argues that the yardstick that

scholars and observers have been using to evaluate the revolutions of the Arab Spring are likely not appropriate, namely comparisons with the French, Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. Revolting against royals, tsars or emperors enshrined with religious writ and ruling over feudal regimes is not the same as unseating dictators backed by junta and enshrined by an economic mafia. In fact, there is a lot to gain from expanding the fields of reference, exploring the 19th century in the wider regional scope for instance, namely insurgencies in the non-western world, like Ousmane Dan Fodio’s revolution that founded the Sokoto Caliphate (1803-1903) in Fulani and Hausa territories (present day Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Niger). Or the revolutions against the russification campaigns in the Caucasus, also in the 19th century, in Chechnya, Dagestan, and the tragic Circassian genocide. More importantly, Ben Achour proposes to shift the perspective and examine the Arab Spring from ‘within’ the events, in other words, the subjectivities that the revolutions produced, acknowledging that each one develops its own specific language, logic and momentum or temporality. The revolutions are not yet done, he says, and their future remains wide open and democratic hope glides above its territory⁴.

In 1965, the late Pakistani militant and scholar, Eqbal Ahmad, published a provocative essay titled “How to Tell When the Rebels Have Won”⁵, in which he argued that the American military and its South Vietnamese allies had in fact lost the war because they had failed to inspire the support of the Vietnamese people, and because their moral isolation, locally and internationally, was nearly total. Ahmad reminded readers how a few years earlier, in 1961, the French military had overpowered the Algerian Resistance in the battlefield but had lost the war politically: “France faced a sullen Algerian population that it had conquered but

1- This publication includes parts two and three of this article. The full article is published on the website of Ettijahat - Independent Culture. To view it, please [click here](#).

2- This essay combines different versions of several essays previously published in different media. It is also a revised version of the presentation delivered during the conference “A Moment of Art”.

3- Yadh Ben Achour is a Tunisian lawyer with an expertise in public and in Islamic law. After the toppling of the Ben Ali regime, he presided over the Higher Political Reform Commission that was entrusted with drafting a new constitution. He is a prolific author and esteemed jurist who has received several honors and awards. Among his publications: *The Islamic Question Before the United Nations Human Rights Committee* (ed. Jovene / Università degli Studi di Ferrara, Naples-Ferrara, 2021) ; *La révolution, une espérance* (ed. Fayard/Collège de France, Paris, 2022).

4-See: Lecture delivered at the Collège de France on January 11, 2022, titled « Considérations théoriques sur les révolutions arabes et dans le monde africain et musulman actuel », available. [click here](#)

5- [HTTPS://WWW.THENATION.COM/ARTICLE/ARCHIVE/1965-1975-HOW-TELL-REBELS-HAVE-WON](https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/1965-1975-how-tell-rebels-have-won).

could not rule [...] the F.L.N. was defeated in the field, but it continued to out-administer and 'de-legitimize' the French." Ahmad's essay has become seminal because it crystallized a popular sentiment that the political establishment dismissed, revealed an intellectual horizon, and ushered in a new standard of critical thinking. Forty-one years after its first appearance, the essay was republished in October 2006 in the "Positively Nasty" issue 5 of LTTR (Listen, Translate, Translate Record), a journal dedicated to sustainable change, queer pleasure and critical productivity. For Emily Roysdon, who authored the preface of the re-edition, Ahmad's analysis was valuable for rethinking the production of representation and for the: "rigorous ethical research and experience-based procedure that gives precedence to the subjects of history with no capitulation to power, and no place in the analysis that reveals an eventual consolidation of power or image. It is a practice that constantly re-examines the forces acting on people, movements, history, and memory. It advocates porous boundaries and a radical process of becoming." These are the subjectivities I have and continue to see manifest in film, literature, dance, music and the visual arts. I am not trained as a political scientist or theorist, but as a curator of art and film, this foray into the social sciences has helped me understand the captivating emancipation from self-censorship in the arts, the sudden salience of motifs and the emergence of new formal languages in film, literature, and the visual arts.

At the barest level, the Arab Spring consisted of protests that mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, in capitals and provincial cities, who stood and squatted public spaces demanding political freedom and economic justice, or a life of dignity. In other words, the political event was physical. They marched, stood steadfast and sometimes even danced in public spaces in defiance of prohibitions from despotic regimes that have demonstrated, time and time again, unrestrained license in resorting to violence. They gathered voluntarily and of their

own will, free of coercion, fully cognizant of the risks they were taking. Across genders and generations, the groups belonged to different social classes, ethnic, cultural and community groups. Their only protection was in their numbers. Together, day after day, in lending their bodies to an act of political defiance, they were creating a new body politic, and reclaiming civic spaces. This essentially physical-political experience stripped regimes of their hayba –legitimacy and authority– but was first and foremost an act of emancipation from fear and complacency. The body was the first site of reclaiming agency and subjectivity.

Since 2011, representations, narratives and dramaturgies of the body were also emancipated in cinema: for the first time since the early 1970s, stories of sexual experiences have become the subjects of fiction and non-fiction films, actors have appeared in the nude, sexual acts are enacted explicitly (within the norms of mainstream cinema), and queer identity is represented in all its complexity, liberated from judgement or moralizing. Right as the pacifist civilian uprising was being pushed to devolve into a violent sectarian crisis, Lina al-Abed's medium-length documentary film, *Damascus my First Kiss* began its international festival tour. Ten years later, the film is unduly forgotten, although it constituted an important foretelling of the profound changes in the way filmmakers would narrate and represent bodies in film. A Palestinian-Jordanian, Lina al-Abed's *Damascus, my First Kiss* is her third film, she was motivated to probe the subject of Syrian women's rapport with their sexuality in the conservative environment of Damascus. She cast Lina Shashazi and Asma Khashtaro, two seemingly very different women, but whose experiences overlap in unexpected ways. Blonde, luscious and skimpily clad, Shashazi hails from one of the most well-known Christian families in the city, while Kashtaro, a Quran teacher, is the granddaughter of the former Mufti of Syria. Their testimonies confirm that patriarchal mores and traditions overrule religious difference, as both women could not control their destinies when they

were young, and both accepted to be filmed because they wanted to avoid their daughters endure the same fate. They speak unguardedly to al-Abed's camera, Lina Shashazi describes her wedding night as rape, while Asma Kashtaro dreams of riding a bicycle with her daughter, in defiance of the prejudice that prohibits observant Muslim women from doing it. In the past three decades and more, there have been several important documentaries centred on the condition of women in Arab societies, to cite a few references, Hala Lotfy's *On Feeling Cold* ('An el-Shu'ur bel Buruda, 2007), Hala Galal's *Women's Chitchat* (Dardashah Nisa'iyyah, 2004), and Omar Amiralay's *The Sarcophagus of Love* (Al-Hubb al-Maow'ud, 1984), their focus veered towards the social, political and affective aspects of women's lives, the relationship to sexuality was systematically averted. Released in 2012, the film was in fact shot shortly before the revolution and became an emblem of its spirit for a short while.

Nabil Ayouch's provocative *Much Loved* (Zin Li Fik, 2015) a crudely realist dive into the underworld of escort girls and the commerce of sex in Marrakesh, was the outcome of years of documentary research the director had undertaken listening to sex workers and recording their experiences. The film was banned in Morocco to appease conservative and religious mores outraged by the film's transgressions of morality and denigrating representation of Moroccan women¹. Hailing from a wealthy and protected family in Morocco, Ayouch is the Moroccan filmmaker with the widest international visibility, it was surprising that he would knowingly expose himself to the ire of authorities and put his actors at risk. To him, there was an urgency to denounce the hypocrisy that shrouds the commerce of sex in his country and give voice to defenceless young women. One of the most provocative elements in the film -and likely the undisclosed reason for incensing the Moroccan officialdom- is the character of an wealthy Saudi jetsetter who repeatedly fails to be aroused by his Moroccan temptress, and

after she catches him watching gay porn in the bathroom to inspire an erection, proceeds to beat her senseless. Two years earlier, in 2013, critically acclaimed novelist and writer Abdellah Taia, also Moroccan, had adapted his own autobiographical (and eponymous) coming of age novel, *Salvation Army* (L'armée du salut) to the big screen. The film was funded entirely from international sources, without any Moroccan funds involved. Translating text into eloquent cinematic language, the film told the story of a fifteen-year-old youth who hails from a working-class family in Casablanca, and who is overwhelmed by his troubling fancy for his older brother. He understands that he is gay and has several erotic adventures with older men until he can leave Morocco to study in Switzerland and come into his own. In a country where homosexuality is penalized as a crime, Taia's success in obtaining the permission to shoot the film was unexpected, but the film was banned from theatrical release in Morocco. After a successful tour at international film festivals, it was allowed two screenings at the Moroccan National Film Festival in Tangiers in 2014. The screening raised furore in Moroccan media, but eventually turned out to be only a tempest in a teacup. Perhaps what is most relevant to note here is that both filmmakers were able to enlist a cast and crew respectively, to produce their films, in other words, professionals from the industry who were willing to take the risk because they endorsed the films' missions. They were not inhibited by the fear of reprisals and shared the filmmaker's sense of necessity to bring the film to life.

The most radical in this vein is Sélim Mourad, an openly gay Lebanese actor and filmmaker, whose trilogy *Linceul* (*Linceul*, 2017; *Linceul II: Cortex*, 2018 and *Linceul III: Moss Agathe*, 2020) and personal non-fiction *This Little Father Obsession* (*Imbarator al-Namsa*, 2016) transgress by far boundaries, codes and conventions around nudity, queer representation and narrative structure. *This Little Father Obsession* is a hybrid film that travels between the filmmaker trying to

1- See: "'Much Loved' ou le cinéma haram" by Driss Bamzil, published on June 2, 2015, on his blog *Le Jeune Maghrébin* at: <https://lejeunemaghrebin.mondoblog.org/2015/06/02/much-loved-ou-le-cinema-haram>.

reconcile the family's history and prospects for the future. Baroquely styled, it staged fictional scenes in which he dialogues with the ghost of his deceased sister and confronts old lovers. Being his parents only surviving child, as a gay man with decreasing fertility, he faces up to the responsibility that the family's lineage will end with him. Mourad decided to push taboos further in the trilogy *Linceul*. He invited five actors (across gender) to lock themselves with him in a house and explore the limits of "nakedness", physically and allegorically. At the same time, not far from the apartment where the film experiment is unravelling, ISIS combatants were rampaging through northern Iraq, throwing gay men from the top of buildings, raping Yazidi women and women from non-compliant religious and ethnic minorities. The contrast between the interior of the apartment and the outside world could neither have been starker nor more pain stricken. In the sequel, *Linceul II: Cortex*, the experiment continues but with fewer actors. The film begins with a text that reads: "Beirut, summer 2017. Some individuals were meeting in a house to pursue an experiment they had started before. Tensions arise. It is 29 degrees in the shade. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is dead. Thus, opens the time of the initiates." Elliptical and more abstract, *Linceul III: Moss Agate*, begins with Mourad addressing an alarming nodule that appeared on his testicle, and evolves to reflect on death, resurrection, and art. The moss agate is a rare semi-precious stone, in which moss has been trapped inside an agate stone, petrified forever. Selim Mourad's work incarnates a wild, novel and far cry of an emancipated imaginary, because it deliberately and poetically transgresses taboos, the unsaid, the unsayable and the forbidden from representation, soaring to a space of freedom precisely at a moment when despair might have shut down the ability to regenerate a dismembered political body. *This Little Father Obsession* was censored from public screenings in Lebanon, while the trilogy (also produced on a shoe-string budget with

very small funds), was made "below the radar" so to speak. All four films travelled to international film festivals, and *This Little Father Obsession* screened at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage and at the Cairo International Film Festival with a "+18" warning for viewers.

Two of Ala Eddine Slim's feature films, *The Last of Us* (Akher Wahad Fina, 2016) and *Sortilège* (Tlames, 2019), paint stories of social and political outcasts whose bodies transform visibly to incarnate a willed and final excision from society and its contracts. *The Last of Us* follows the journey of a migrant from south of the Sahara to Europe, crossing desert, sea, and other obstacles, until he is lost, absorbed into the forest. Gradually, as each milestone in his crossing is achieved, he rids himself of possessions and even the attributes of humanity, fusing more intricately with the natural environment around him. Slim's next feature, *Sortilège*, draws, in fantastical motifs, the transformation of a man, this time in an absconding army soldier who finds refuge in an abandoned concrete structure in the middle of a forest. Hirsute, covered in rags, when the pregnant woman he has kidnapped delivers her baby, his own breasts grow plump with milk and he is able to feed the newborn. *The Last of Us* and *Sortilège* become increasingly silent as their central protagonists (who are nameless to begin with) have fewer and fewer reasons to speak, instead communicating through other means, making sounds and signs and using their bodies. In *Sortilège*, Slim resorts to the genial device of ocular titles that magically fade in and out of the screen.

Hicham Lasri's "dog trilogy" neither offers narrative sequels nor concerns itself with dogs, but Lasri casts dogged, offbeat, provocative, and dysfunctional characters whose disposition, or behaviour, contravene the codes of realism. Morocco's most maverick, punk, and

prolific filmmaker, Lasri has also authored novels and graphic novels where these motifs are even more striking. What he refers to as the “dog trilogy” includes *They Are the Dogs* (Hom al-Kilab, 2013), *Starve Your Dog* (Jawwe’h Kalbak, 2015) and *Jahiliyyah* (originally titled *Jahiliyyah Dog*, 2018). The title *They Are the Dogs* is an unambiguous expression of contempt, although it is deliberately not explicit as to who is accusing whom. *Starve Your Dog* is the first part of a popular Arab proverb that says, “Starve your dog and he will follow you,” and here too, another reference to contempt. And lastly, *Jahiliyyah*, which refers to the period preceding the advent of Islam, is also used in Moroccan dialect as a synonym for “hogra,” or contempt.

The trilogy is about rule, power, abuse, impunity, submission, and material and spiritual despair. *They Are the Dogs* follows a crew of indolent journalists whose coverage of a protest goes awry. Afterward, they stumble on a haggard old man, Majhoul (Hassan Ben Badida), who has just been released from a secret jail where he served a thirty-year sentence for having participated in the bread riots of 1981. Disoriented by the changes in the city and the protests past and present, Majhoul (the name is the Arabic word for “unknown”), who has forgotten his own name, is hounded by the guileless journalist who is eager for a “story.” *They Are the Dogs* and *Starve Your Dog* represent a stark portrait of Casablanca as a sun-drenched but sinister city, inhabited by folk the state has abandoned and who have become doggedly self-interested, offset by a cynical, self-censoring, and complacent media. In both films, ghosts surge from the past to derail the present. Majhoul is the emaciated, almost toothless, pathetic ghost who incarnates a past no one wants to recall or excavate. In *Starve Your Dog*, the ghost is the character of Driss Basri¹, resurrected from oblivion, who in real

life was minister of the interior in the 1980s, during the country’s “Years of Lead”—its years of state-imposed terror, unbridled repression, and torture against political dissenters. In the film, a television newscaster who’s nearing her fifties, and whose career has become lacklustre, receives a call from Driss Basri, who explains that he did not die but only lapsed from view, and that he will grant her an exclusive tell-all, no-holds-barred interview a few hours after the call. This proposal wreaks havoc among her crew, who are afraid of reprisals from disclosures about a past everyone wants to forget. Meanwhile, his lascivious, nymphomaniac daughter roams the streets offering sexual favours to passers-by.

Set in 1996, *Jahiliyyah* harks back to the near past, to an event that shocked the country: the ruling monarch (Hassan II at the time) decided to cancel Eid al-Adha (the feast of sacrifice) that year. An Abrahamic religious holiday that involves the slaughter of sheep, it is a day that offers poor Moroccans a rare occasion for celebrations and satiation from eating meat. *Jahiliyyah* is a choral film that laces the lives of six characters embattled with humiliation and despair despite wide social and economic backgrounds. A small boy is stubbornly looking to eat meat despite the king’s ban, while a young woman pregnant out of wedlock is desperate for a resolution as her blind father, concerned only with racial purity, rejects her suitor, who, in turn, attempts suicide. Two of Lasri’s other films, *The Sea Is Behind* (*Al-Bahr Min Ouaraikoum*, 2014) and *Headbang Lullaby* (*Dharbah fi al-Ra’ss*, 2017), are traversed by these same motifs, but it is in his graphic novels *Vaudou* (2015), *Fawda* (2017), and *Marroc* (2019)² that he goes much further, with transgressive and psychedelic storytelling and characters, and with unhindered depictions of sex.

1- A former police officer who eventually was promoted to oversee the Moroccan secret police, Driss Basri served as interior minister from 1979 to 1999. He eventually became the reigning monarch at the time, Hassan II’s right hand, and therefore his “iron fist”. His legacy is morbid and his name is associated with state-enforced terror. He was discharged of his position in 1999 by the new monarch Mohammed VI. He moved to France where he died from cancer in 2007. Mohammed VI revoked his Moroccan passport in 2004, but the French authorities chose to overlook that fact and granted him freedom of movement.

2- *Vaudou*, Editions Le Fennec, Casablanca, 2015; *Fawda*, Editions Kulte, Casablanca / Les presses du réel, Paris, 2017; *Marroc*, Editions Le Fennec, Casablanca, 2015.

In the aftermath of the Arab spring, the body as a site of political regeneration and erotic emancipation is neither glorified, idealized, nor aestheticized. The marks of years of tyranny, poverty, repression and frustration are exposed, and sometimes even amplified. A dark parable on the toxic lure of power, Néjib Belkadhi's *Bastardo* (2013), tells the story of Mohsen (Abdel Moneem Chouayat) who was raised by Am Salah (Issa Harrath) after he found him as a baby discarded in a trash bin. The film takes place in a poor and merciless neighbourhood, where gangsters roam free and from which there is no way out. Rejected all his life because he was a "bastard", Mohsen's fortune changes when the cell phone company installs a relay tower on his rooftop, but he transforms into a vindictive and power-hungry monster. The only lucid, kind-hearted and altruistic character in the film is Bent Essengra (Lobna Noomene), a dejected woman on whose skin suddenly appears hundreds of swarming insects. She lives in serenity with the insects while they inspire horror in anyone who sees them, except for Mohsen, especially before his fortune changes.

This fantastical element is one of several metaphorical motifs with which Belkadhi infused the film throughout, as all its characters have ambiguous, almost repulsive, exaggerated features, in their physique or disposition. And these aesthetic and narrative motifs find echo in several novels published around the same time by a new generation of Arab novelists that redefined the noir and the fantastical genres at once, such as Nael Eltoukhy's *Women of*

Karantina (Nisa' al-Karantina, 2013)¹, Mohammed Rabie's *Otared* (2016)² and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (*Frankenstein fi Baghdad*, 2014)³ as well as Hassan Blasim's short story collections *The Madman from Freedom Square* (2009), *The Iraqi Christ* (2013), *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories* (2014), and *God 99* (*Allah 99 - Emailat Mutarjem Emil Cioran*, 2019)⁴. While each has its distinctive singularity, it is possible to sense the resonance of poetics and motifs as they depict worlds that come undone, ruled by despots and tyrants, where temporality is elastic, agile, moving back and forth between present, past, and future, where characters bear the markers of physical and psychological abuse overtly and explicitly, and in turn reciprocate it. The texts also contain uninhibited depictions of eroticism and sexuality that are, more often than not, steeped in violence and cruelty, shown with attention to detail. The essay lists a handful of films and novels to illustrate the argument, but the list is by no means comprehensive, there are far more works.

In addition to the radical uninhibition regarding sexuality and the emergence of queerness, the body politic was itself radically gendered. Masculinities were entirely undone and "feminities" reconfigured in the space-time of protests. That too became manifest in the various expressive creative media (films, novels, stage plays, performances, etc.). The representation of women and their bodies has changed drastically, not only are they on the frontlines of confronting the anti-riot gear clad army, but they kick back, they raise their fists in rage

1- *Nisa' al-Karantina* (*Women of Karantina*, A Novel) by Nael Eltoukhy, was first published in Arabic by Dar Merit in 2013. The English edition translated by Robin Moger was published by The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2014. It was shortlisted in its English edition for the inaugural FT/Oppenheimer Funds Emerging Voices Awards.

2- *Otared* by Mohammad Rabie was published by Dar al-Tanweer in Cairo, in 2014. The English edition translated by Robin Moger was published by The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2016.

3- *Frankenstein fi Baghdad* (*Frankenstein in Baghdad*) by Ahmed Saadawi was first published by Manshurat al-Jamal (Al-Jamal Publications) in Beirut, in 2013. It received the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014. The English edition was translated by Jonathan Wright and published by Penguin Books in 2018.

4- *The Madman of Freedom Square*, was translated by Jonathan Wright and first published in English by Comma Press in 2009. The book won the English PEN Writers in Translation Award. A heavily edited version of the book in the original Arabic language was finally published by the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing in Beirut, in 2012, and immediately banned in Jordan. *The Iraqi Christ* was first published in English by London-based Comma Press in 2013, also translated by Jonathan Wright. The book won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014. *The Corpse Exhibition: And Other Stories of Iraq* was published by Penguin in 2014. *Allah 99-Emailat Mutarjem Emil Cioran* (*God 99*) was published by Almutawassit Books in Milan in 2018. The English edition was translated by Jonathan Wright and published by Comma Press in London in 2020.

and they form human shields to protect men. In terms of language, spoken (colloquial) and written, a new gendered and queer vocabulary has emerged and imposed itself, howled in protest slogans and chants and virally-disseminated through memes on social media. Locution and dialogue have been also commuted, in the past decade, a remarkable number of films from the Arab region have such spare dialogue that they are practically silent. Helmed by internationally awarded Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman, whose entire filmography has audaciously seceded from Arab cinema's strong proclivity for garrulousness, several post-Arab spring films dare to relinquish long-windedness. To cite an additional example besides Ala Eddine Slim's two features mentioned earlier, Egyptian filmmaker Mohamad Abdallah's *Rags and Tatters* (Farsh wa Ghata, 2013) was a deliberately dialogue-less sobering counterpoint to the self-congratulating clamour of the crowds that had succeeded in toppling Hosni Mubarak's regime. Following a nameless fugitive from jail (played by Asser Yassin) who wonders through Cairo looking for shelter, while protestors surge and take the city's iconic Tahrir Square. Abdallah's protagonist does not dare participate in the political mobilization, neither do the inhabitants of the economically and politically disenfranchised neighbourhoods where he finds refuge.

Although political systems were not overturned, but political imaginaries were emancipated. Starting with the body as the site where the repression and self-censorship of expressions of sexuality and eroticism were coerced, enforced and policed. Filmmakers, artists and writers have in fact ventured much further in their release, their criticality addresses the banality of evil (despotic regimes and police states) and its legacies, the toll of living with fear, the wages of complacency and forced submission, enduring economic and social precarity without ever finding safety in the state. They depict a lacerated, dismembered social body politic, a monstrous system that reproduces small monsters, a guileless authority that has no legitimacy

but endures through the nonliable ministration of violence. In the past decade, filmmakers, artists, poets and novelists have invented allegories, metaphors, elaborated visual codes and transformed formal languages, to represent the Real, and to transpose their lived experience with provocative lucidity, playing dexterously with the structural collapse of temporality between past, present, and future. While it seems predictable that counter-revolutionary forces should seize power shortly after dictatorships have been unseated, it is a far stretch to proclaim that the insurrections were pointless, or that they did not impart change. The films, novels and visual expressions mentioned in this essay are expressions of subjectivities and imaginaries that have been transformed by the experience of radical political action. Before concluding, I wish to narrate two anecdotes of mobilizations that illustrate the vitality, creativity and audacity of imagining political action, but which traverse the reverse path I travelled throughout the essay.

I choose only two out of hundreds of anecdotes, because on the one hand, I fear they risk slipping into forgetting, and on the other hand because what they point to is significant. The first is set in Siliana (a province located in the centre of the Tunisian countryside), in 2012, a year after Ben Ali was forced to flee the country. The Tunisian Islamist Ennahdha party governed the country then, and the party's General Secretary, Hamdi Djebali, was prime minister. The government had appointed Ahmed Ezzine Mahjoub, an Ennahdha cadre, as governor of Siliana, and the province had remained mired in severe economic marginalisation after months of his appointment. He had demonstrated gross incompetence and blatant partisan nepotism, the social and political problems had kept worsening. When unions and various civil society organizations asked him for a meeting to engage with these pressing issues, he refused to grant them an audience, denying the legitimacy of their demands with contempt. The general population of

Siliana responded with a call for a general strike and for a mobilization in front of the governor's office where protestors chanted "Dégage"¹ ("Get out") on November 27, 2012. The governor gave license to the police and security forces to use violence with excess, and after four days of protests the toll had reached 300 wounded, including 20 protestors blinded by snipers. The governor and prime minister justified the use of violence by accusing the protestors of being mercenary to external and internal actors who conspired to spread chaos and undermine the government's legitimacy. They also claimed that they had initiated the acts of violence. On the following day, the inhabitants of the town of Siliana marched out of the town, on the freeway leading to Tunis chanting: "Tu peux bien gouverner, mais tu gouvernera seul"² ("If you want to govern, you govern alone"). The protestors walked five kilometres, calling for an end to the violence and the dismissal Ahmed Zine Mahjoubi. This form of political action took the government by surprise, and it extricated people from the terms of engagement that the regime brought to the table. The ministry was forced to dismiss the governor and appoint someone more apt for the position to avoid further embarrassment. The image of the crowds marching away from the town, leaving the governor and police behind, was a stark reminder of Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's well-known painting "Il Quarto Stato" (literally meaning the "fourth estate") that he completed in 1901³, and that Bernardo Bertolucci filmed for the credit sequence of his seminal epic *Novecento* (1900, 1976)⁴.

The second anecdote is set in Palestine. On January 11, 2013, a group of 250 Palestinian activists (hailing from different regions of historic

Palestine) and foreign supporters set-up 25 tents on privately-owned Palestinian land in the area that the Israeli state identifies as E1, located in the environs of Jerusalem to prevent the government from building a 3000-unit settlement complex⁵. The activists named the camp "Bab el-Shams", in reference to the eponymous award-winning novel, *Bab al-Shams* (The Gate of the Sun) by Lebanese writer Elias Khoury⁶. The novel that told the story of a Palestinian man who became a refugee in Lebanon in 1948 while his wife and parents stayed in Palestine. For decades he crossed the border secretly to see his wife. They met in a secret cave in the mountain that they called Bab al-Shams. The site was forcibly evacuated on January 12, and 100 people were arrested. On January 16, the Palestinian Authority created a formal village council for Bab al-Shams⁷.

The Israeli government intended to remove the tent outpost, claiming that it was illegal, but the activists received an injunction from the Supreme Court of Israel prohibiting the government from doing so for 6 days. The following day, the occupants were evacuated by the Israeli army, the tents were left in their place. It is remarkable is that the novel was the reference for a political action.

I conclude by referencing another film that caused a great deal of tumult, namely, Nadia Kamel's documentary *Salata Baladi* (Egyptian Salad) released in 2008. The daughter of communist pro-Palestinian militants, Kamel filmed the journeys of her parents to Italy and to Israel, as they visit her mother's family members who had migrated to both countries in the 1950s. Her mother had been raised as an Italian Catholic although her father was a Jewish immigrant from the Ukraine,

1- The slogan « Dégage » was the rallying cry for protestors during Tunisia's jasmine revolution.

2- « Tunisie : La marche de Siliana pour la dignité. Protestation et tension contre le gouvernement d'Ennahdha » an editorial feature of Nawaat, published on December 6, 2012, available at : <https://nawaat.org/2012/12/06/tunisie-la-marche-de-siliana-pour-la-dignite-protestation-et-tension-contre-le-gouvernement-dennahdha/>.

3- The « fourth estate » is a reference to the notion of "third estate". Completed in 1901, the painting is considered to be Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's most accomplished artwork, after a compelling series dedicated to social and labour struggles, that he began in 1892, namely *Ambasciatori della fame* (The Ambassadors of Hunger), *Sciopero* (The Strike), *Il cammino dei lavoratori* (The Workers' Path). *Il Quarto Stato* hangs in the Galleria d'arte moderna di Milano.

4- Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, *Novecento* (or 1900) boasted a star-studded cast that included Robert de Niro, Gérard Depardieu, Dominique Sanda, Donald Sutherland and Burt Lancaster. Bertolucci wanted to make an epic historical film to revisit Italy's modern history at the dawn of the twentieth century. The film's pictorial reference and title is Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's painting "The Fourth Estate".

5- See: "Israel, E1 and the meaning of Bab Al-Shams", by Patrick O. Strickland, published in the Middle East Monitor webnews site on January 25, 2014. Address: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140125-israel-e1-and-the-meaning-of-bab-al-shams/>.

6- *Bab al-Shams*, by Elias Khoury, was originally published by Dar al-Adab in Beirut, in 1998; the English edition was translated by Humphrey Davies and published by Archipelago Press in New York in 2005.

7- <https://www.jpost.com/diplomacy-and-politics/pa-makes-bab-al-shams-council-as-e1-tents-demolished>.

who had fled the pogroms at the turn of the last century. Her mother the previous century. After the Tripartite aggression against Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1956, the European communities of Egypt (mostly Italians and Greeks) were compelled to return to their “homelands”.

Meanwhile, the Israeli government realizing that they were demographically outnumbered by Palestinians, launched underground campaigns to lure or compel the Jewish communities of neighbouring Arab countries to settle in Israel. Seeing her parents' health deteriorate, Kamel thought that both visits were timely, the filming prompted the surfacing of the complex and forgotten history of a plural and diverse Egyptian society. Kamel shot the film without the requisite permissions, knowing they would be summarily denied. As soon as the news of its premiere at an international festival was released, the Egyptian government issued its banning.

Nadia Kamel's membership in the syndicate of filmmakers was revoked, she was accused of being an Israeli collaborator, and received numerous threats. Prompted by government officials, the media waged a ruthless campaign against the film and against all those who endorsed it.

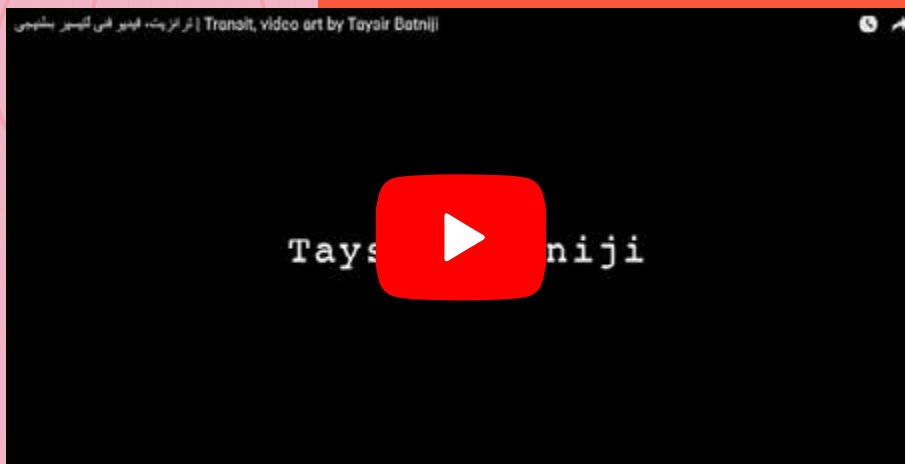
And yet, in spite all of this, in the year 2009, Kamel received more than twenty-five invitations from associations and non-profit organizations to screen the film and engage in discussions afterwards. The length of the film is slightly more than two-hours, an unusually extended duration for Egyptian audiences, especially for documentaries. On average, the discussions afterwards extended further than an hour. These anecdotes can remain as such, but I believe they should be considered in how we study and draw a chronology and history for the Arab Spring: Siliana, Bab el-Shams, Salata Baladi, are but a handful milestones out of hundreds. And the fight continues.

Between Here and There

Taysir Batniji



Gaza Diary No 3
Taysir Batniji



"Looking from afar at the place from which I came [Gaza] has evoked in me a new sense of awareness, a need to share my story as an artist and a Palestinian. You feel as if you are in a constant faceoff with the Other, and you have to explain, justify and introduce people to where you come from as some kind of duty."



Engraved Soaps
Taysir Batniji



Imperfect Lovers
Taysir Batniji

"Ultimately, stories, history and destiny, whether collective or personal, all overlap in art."



Untitled 1997
Taysir Batniji

"In this hourglass, the sand is not moving from one space to another. I have always felt that it is impossible for man to connect time and space, geographically and temporally"



Suspended Time
Taysir Batniji

"The place where we lived follows us and lives in us, no matter how far away we travel. I took both of these photos from my window in Gaza in 2001 and 2004. Now that it is impossible for me to go back, I see a different meaning in these pictures; they now act as a muse or inspiration for my art."



At Home and Elsewhere
Taysir Batniji



At Home And Elsewhere 2
Taysir Batniji

Geography and Memory

Christelle Khodor

Geography and Memory

Christelle Khodor

While preparing for this intervention, I tried to find a synonym, antonym, or equivalent for its title, which is the “Geography of Memory.” The word ‘geography’ is almost always associated with the word ‘history,’ while memory is always followed by the term ‘forgetting’. The inverse of our meeting’s title, “the Geography of Memory,” might be the “History of Forgetting.” Ever since I started working in theater, I have tried to delve into the history of forgetting and think of how I could map a geography of memory instead. This is the dilemma I generally face in my theatrical work. Personally, I believe that theater is the art of remembering par excellence, despite its immediacy and the fact that it disappears after the performance. By theater, I certainly do not mean the script, the director’s notes and instructions, or the photos taken for archival purposes. I am rather talking about the bodies of actors and actresses and the voices resonating on stage, in front of an audience witnessing an act that is being created now, here, at this specific moment.

For me, this act, which we were deprived of for one year and a half during quarantine, raises questions to which I do not have the answers. And when I do find answers while working, they generate new questions, which in turn lead me to uncover new answers... and so on and so forth. Ultimately, I end up not with answers, but rather with innumerable questions in my mind, the team’s mind, and the audience’s mind as well.

These questions that I accumulate from one project to another are the only pleasure that no one can ever deny me of, especially after having everything else taken away from us.

In 1991, the Lebanese government adopted a general amnesty law, whereby war criminals pardoned themselves for all the crimes they had committed during the previous 15 years and stole from our people the right to accountability, the right to mourn 200,000 casualties, the right to material and moral compensation for all those who had sustained permanent physical injury, and the right to know the fate of 17,000 missing persons.

This same general amnesty law also allowed the leaders of militias and sects to have control over all the country’s residents, whether Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese, or foreign workers from Asia and Africa.

I am trying to produce theatrical works while navigating this geography and this turbulent history, without having one moment to think about the future. This is because all the crises that, the country, the region, and I myself have witnessed are drowning people in the present moment and preventing them from planning for the future.

At the personal and professional level, when I am absorbed in the present moment, I cannot but go back to the past, for I consider the past to be the only time that allows me to understand the present and map a possible future.

The present moves very quickly. It does not give me room to think, neither at the personal nor at the professional levels.

When we think of our countries' crises, their histories, and how they were created and mapped geographically, as well as how our countries and their borders disappeared and Zionist, U.S., Russian, Turkish, and British colonies were established in them, we come to realize how small we actually are and how insignificant our personal stories are, despite our distinctive historical memory.

For this reason, I only plan to focus on theater in the upcoming period, which has sadly become almost impossible to practice in Lebanon amid the current economic and social crisis.

I will conclude my intervention with a scene I love from Jean Luc Godard's movie *Notre Musique*, where the director presents two images: one of Jewish settlers crossing the sea, our sea, towards the Promised Land, and one of Palestinians drowning in the sea.

In this scene, the director wanted to show how "the Jews became the stuff of fiction; the Palestinians, of documentary." I cannot compare our reality today with the tragedies of people who have been displaced and who lived through the Nakba; and I certainly cannot compare the suffering and tragedies that each of us endures in our countries and abroad. However, I feel that my situation today as a playwright and director in Lebanon resembles Godard's metaphor on Palestinians' displacement.

I worked on documentaries as an act of resistance against an unrealistic economic and political system that manages every day to drown geography and erase memory at the expense of the daily life of people who are waiting for history to bring them justice.

Independent Journalism, Art, and Culture in the Networked Exile: Two Separate Stories?

Enrico De Angelis

Independent Journalism, Art, and Culture in the Networked Exile: Two Separate Stories?

Enrico De Angelis

French film director Jean-Luc Godard once said: “The Jews became the stuff of fiction, the Palestinians, of documentary.”¹ The documentary, similar to news and often political opinions, aims at photographing reality as we see it. Fiction, however, gives us the possibility to re-imagine that reality, to transform the way we look at it, and to question the relationships of power, class, and gender.

Here, fiction should be seen as an approach that can be extended to any creative form of cultural production that aims at reshuffling and reinventing pieces of our reality in order to create alternative narratives.

The revolutionary processes which started in 2011 paved the way for new and extraordinary waves of cultural production in Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). These waves did not only challenge the political order and social norms, but also experimented with innovative forms of expression and contested the political economy which previously regulated the field.

We cannot emphasize enough the relevance of this phenomenon: Today, with the counter-revolutions gaining the upper hand everywhere, promoting and protecting this phenomenon is even more urgent.

1- GODARD, Jean-Luc, *Notre Musique*, 2004.

2- CREHAN, Kate, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology. An Introductory Text*, Pluto Press, London, 2002, p. 75.

The Paradoxes of Producing Culture in a (Networked) Exile

It is mainly through fiction and forms of culture (including popular entertainment), which are apparently not directly related to politics, that narratives and new political imaginaries are created.

As Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci wrote: “Every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men [sic] who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition” (*Il Grido del Popolo*, January 2016)²

Gramsci was particularly interested in popular culture, as he was aware that the emancipation of the masses would necessarily pass through the transformation of that culture. Such emancipation cannot be achieved only through direct political messages. It needs a wider array of cultural productions such as cinema, literature, television programmes, theatre, visual arts and so on.

These forms of expression can have the power to overcome class and ideological boundaries in ways that political messages cannot. They can speak more effectively to a broader audience, and they can radically change how people perceive reality and their position within it.

It is through fiction and popular culture that hegemonic narratives are created and penetrate society most deeply. Thus, if we want to create alternative and successful hegemonic narratives, then popular culture is the way.

In this sense, the age of networked communication presents great opportunities: New forms of cultural expression can be experimented with at affordable costs; wider audiences are easier to reach; and traditional forms of censorship can be circumvented.

These opportunities become even more relevant if we consider that a new generation of cultural producers and artists from the Middle East were forced to leave their countries of origin due to repression, lack of freedom of expression, and persecution. Digital networks offer them the chance to create content in a context in which they can enjoy more freedom, while having the possibility to maintain a connection with local audiences.

And yet, that same situation poses certain dangers and obstacles as well.

Blockbuster social media platforms such as Facebook have always been characterized by a paradox. They are spaces of emancipation and counter-hegemonic production, but they are also spaces of cultural commodification, self-marketing, individualism and surveillance. American political scientist Jodi Dean describes them as the main infrastructure through which contemporary “communicative capitalism” flows.¹ They tend to create bubbles, within which like-minded people talk only to each other, while having the illusion that the world is listening to them. Contrary to common belief, they also tend to concentrate visibility (also wealth and social capital) in a very limited number of people and companies.

The political economy of current modalities of cultural production presents further dangers. While protests and civil society mobilisations were still well alive on the ground, there were still ample possibilities for marginalised voices to emerge, crossing classes and geopolitical barriers. However, as argued by Palestinian scholar Hanan Toukan in her recent book, the relationship between dissent art and the political economy behind it is very complex, and it becomes more problematic when popular mobilisations fade out.

Indeed, critical and dissent art on the one hand, and western NGOs and foundations on the other, were and are awkward bedfellows. Significantly, the book begins with a quote by Lebanese writer and activist Bassem Chit, who says: “The Revolution, when it comes, is not going to be funded by the Ford Foundation.”

²

Of course, while authoritarianism persists, there are few other alternatives. And yet, with so many cultural producers in exile, and with as long as home countries are dominated by counter-revolutionary actors, it is extremely difficult to avoid a hierarchy of voices which creates new inequalities. Those with more connections, more cultural capital, and a stronger ability of convincing western funders tend to emerge, while other voices risk being marginalised again.

Cultural producers in exile therefore risk easily entering into a problematic relationship with western funders and support organisations. On the one hand, intellectual production can thrive, while, on the other hand, dissent can be trivialised, defused, and

1- DEAN, Jodi, *Blog Theory. Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010.

2- TOUKAN, Hanan, *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. IX.

sometimes even censored—albeit, in different and subtler ways than under authoritarian regimes.

As Hanan Toukan puts it, for many funding organisations it appears to be more important to bring artworks from the region in order to narrate to liberal audiences¹ what the revolutions are about, while “what matters more for many cultural producers from the region today is whether and how art can ever truly play a role in finally bringing down the rotten regimes in that part of the world.”²

The (potential) Role of Independent Media

In this context, independent media organisations founded by individuals from Southwest Asia and North Africa can play a particularly relevant role as antidotes to some of the issues mentioned above.

These are collective, rather than individual projects, and they can promote dynamics that counter the existing online individualism and isolation typical of the networked communication era. Truth is, art and cultural initiatives need “translation.” as French philosopher Jacques Rancière posits.³ Theatre, music, and cinema need to be discussed, interpreted, and debated, so that the audience can engage with them. Unfortunately, these discussions are often limited to restricted circles of like-minded people who are already familiar with these domains. Here, journalistic platforms could play a crucial role, as they can mediate between a larger spectrum of spectators and artists and help spectators become more active and closer to the act of cultural production. Indeed, these platforms can become an arena where different points of view and narratives confront each other. They can

As Gramsci would put it: culture needs organisation in order to become a tool of emancipation and dissent.⁴ Independent media can provide that organisation of content and the necessary space for experimentation.

Unfortunately, this synergy is not yet fully realised today, as artists and independent media often tend to act separately or even to ignore each other.

Media outlets should avoid using an excessively elitist language and a top-bottom approach to culture which in the end would only serve those who are already familiar with art and culture and speak that language. As Orwa Nyrabia describes Syrian cinema, cultural production is often discussed through political lenses rather than artistic ones.

The lack of sustainability of media outlets and their dependence on western funding is another problem, since they are not always fully capable of dedicating the necessary attention to cultural issues or giving providing continuous coverage of such issues. As I have written elsewhere, western NGOs often push Middle Eastern journalists to write only about human rights and political issues, as if people from the region have nothing to contribute to the discussions on climate change, global issues, or culture.

But journalism does not need to be limited to a documentary approach to reality: it can also integrate fiction and undertake a broader approach to cultural production and storytelling.

Art needs to find independent journalism from the region, and vice versa. Otherwise, they risk remaining two separate stories.

1- By ‘liberal audiences’, Toukan refers to audiences who belong to liberal cultural and political values, without necessarily identifying as leftists.

2- MENDE, Tugrul, “Can art change the world? An interview with Hanan Toukan”, in Open Democracy, 7 October 2021: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/can-art-change-the-world-an-interview-with-hanan-toukan/>.

3- RANCIÈRE, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Le Spectateur émancipé, 2008), tr. Gregory Elliott, Verso Books, London, New York, 2011.

4- CREHAN, Kate, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology. An Introductory Text*, Pluto Press, London, 2002, p. 73.

From Animation to Virtual Galleries: Digital Art and Re-Inventing Space

Sulafa Hijazi

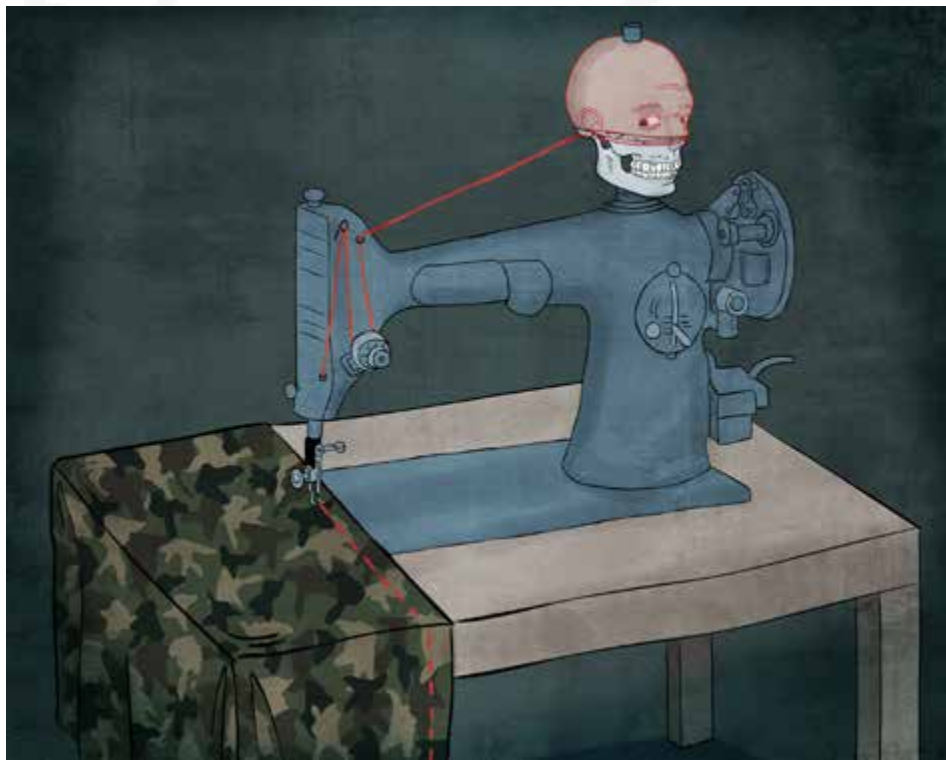
From Animation to Virtual Galleries: Digital Art and Re-Inventing Space

Sulafa Hijazi

The questions we have faced in the last ten years are undoubtedly the encapsulation of many centuries of political and technological changes. All these questions are of essence and relate to space, geography, communication as well as our psychological state.

I will talk about my personal experience in this regard, slightly going back in time to convey my relationship with technology and the virtual world as a gallery or as a theme in my artworks.

In Syria, animation was our gateway to the world of technology. It was the beginning of the third millennium, at a time when we discovered satellite television before the Internet.



Untitled 2012

It was thus possible to convey information through satellite television to a large number of people who understand the same language, such as Arabic, spoken by most people in the Arab world. Back then, when we started producing animation in Syria, we discovered the impact of television on a large audience, especially since animation targets children who constitute 40% of the population in the Arab region. We were thrilled by this discovery; we couldn't believe that we were now able to create new educational content, much different from the educational propaganda in schools. We were fascinated by the fact that we could create Arabic animated content that children could relate to.

At that time, our relationship with technology started developing. We were a group of young men and women working in Syria, and we were able to lay the groundwork for an alternative animation industry, be it 2D or 3D. We also worked in the field of visual effects and had to train ourselves, as this specialty was not offered by any university. In all honesty, the absence of intellectual property rights in Syria played to our advantage, as we were able to buy any software on a CD for what amounted to one dollar back then, from an area in Damascus called Al-Bahsa. We bought so many, including the ones we were banned from using as a result of the economic sanctions on Syria, and taught ourselves how to use them with minimal financial means.

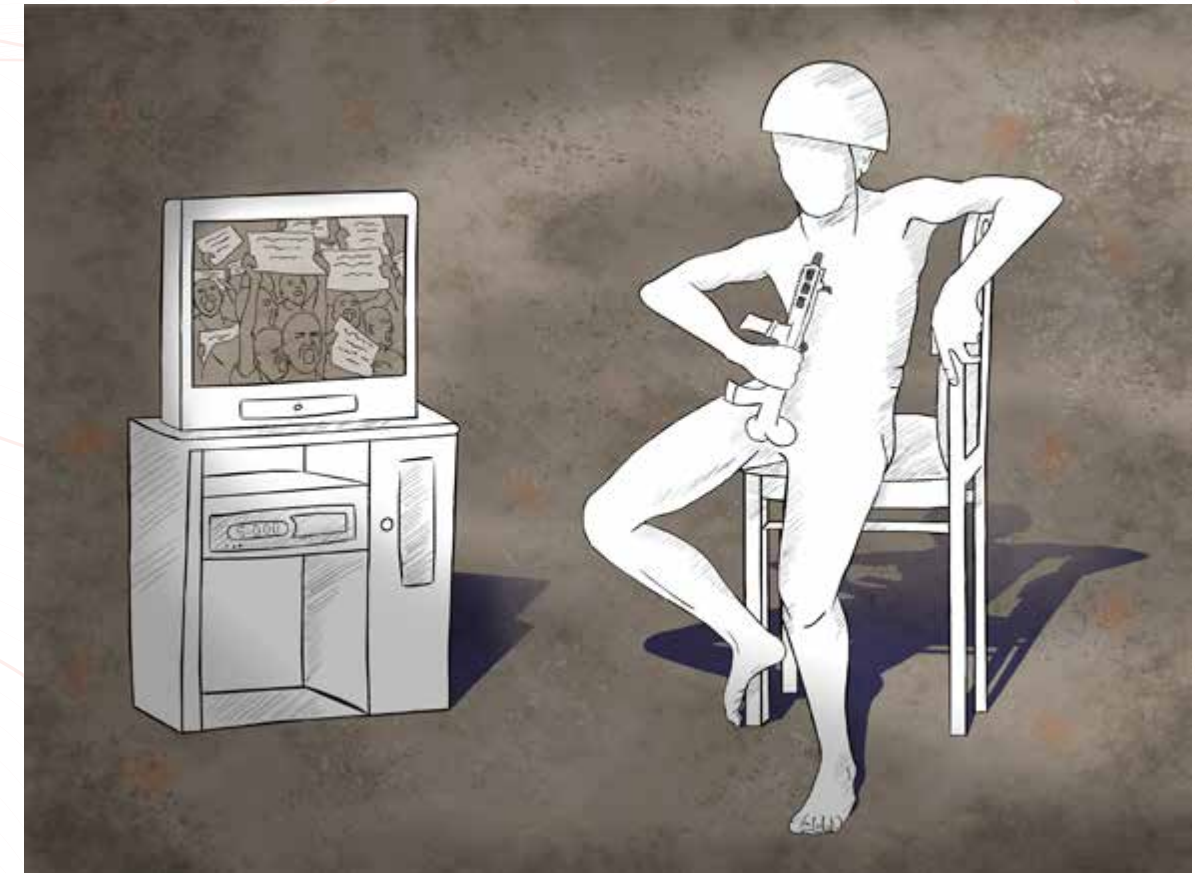
I worked in animation at the beginning of 2000, when we launched the Spacatoon channel, the first Arab satellite television channel that specializes in children and youth programs. In 2011, when the Syrian revolution erupted, I used the tools I was best at - that is, digital technology and animation - and started producing digital drawings and publishing them in the virtual space. Back then, we were amazed by social media just like we were by satellite TV when it was first launched. Keep in mind that we are talking about Syria, a country where you have to get a security authorization if you are to celebrate a wedding with

more than 100 guests; a country where meetings and assemblies are considered a threat. Suddenly, we had a space where we could hold assemblies, have a free, independent press, and publish art news and works without any political or social censorship.

We were also frustrated with media coverage on the field. Personally, I do not trust what satellite TV channels report, and I certainly do not listen to local media because I also do not trust what they have to say either. However, I listen to my friends living in different regions who publish Facebook posts about their living situation and what they see with their own eyes. This is how the concepts of news, assemblies, communication, and publishing were revolutionized.

I started publishing drawings without having a specific purpose in mind; it was my way of participating in that collective event. Some works were bold, and I had never thought of publishing them before. One example is a piece called "Masturbation," portraying a soldier masturbating using a rifle. It is a daring sexual piece that carries a set of ideas against militarism, war, fear, and isolation, all of which are general human concepts. In my artwork, I always tried to clear of the news style when reporting a humanitarian event based on my personal experience in space and time; an event that a group of people sharing the same feelings, the same concepts against war, armament, militarization, etc. can relate to. At that time, the virtual world was considered a revolution, for it allowed us to convey everything we were living and witnessing.

In 2013, when the restrictions on freedom grew tighter in Syria, I traveled to Frankfurt and completed my studies in contemporary arts. My artwork relocated from the virtual space to the galleries, and I participated in several exhibitions. These were very important to me because we, as Syrians, felt that our voice was not heard. During that



Masturbation 2011



period, events accelerated, and the prevailing narratives in the media described the Syrian revolution as an Islamic and ideological revolution. Our voice and our demands for democracy, justice, and human rights were silenced. This is why transferring our visual and literary works from the virtual space to galleries, books, and media platforms was very important to my colleagues and I in order to convey our voice and to create a space for dialogue with the public. However, between 2014 and 2017, all the political trends we were imagining and the dreams we were weaving went in different directions. We witnessed a bloody war, images of victims and migrants, and other terrifying news, which brought a wave of violence across social media platforms. These sites have become the place where we communicate with our friends and relatives around the world, but also the place where we find a massive number of violent images that make us wonder: Did these violent images contribute to halting violence? Or did they exacerbate it?

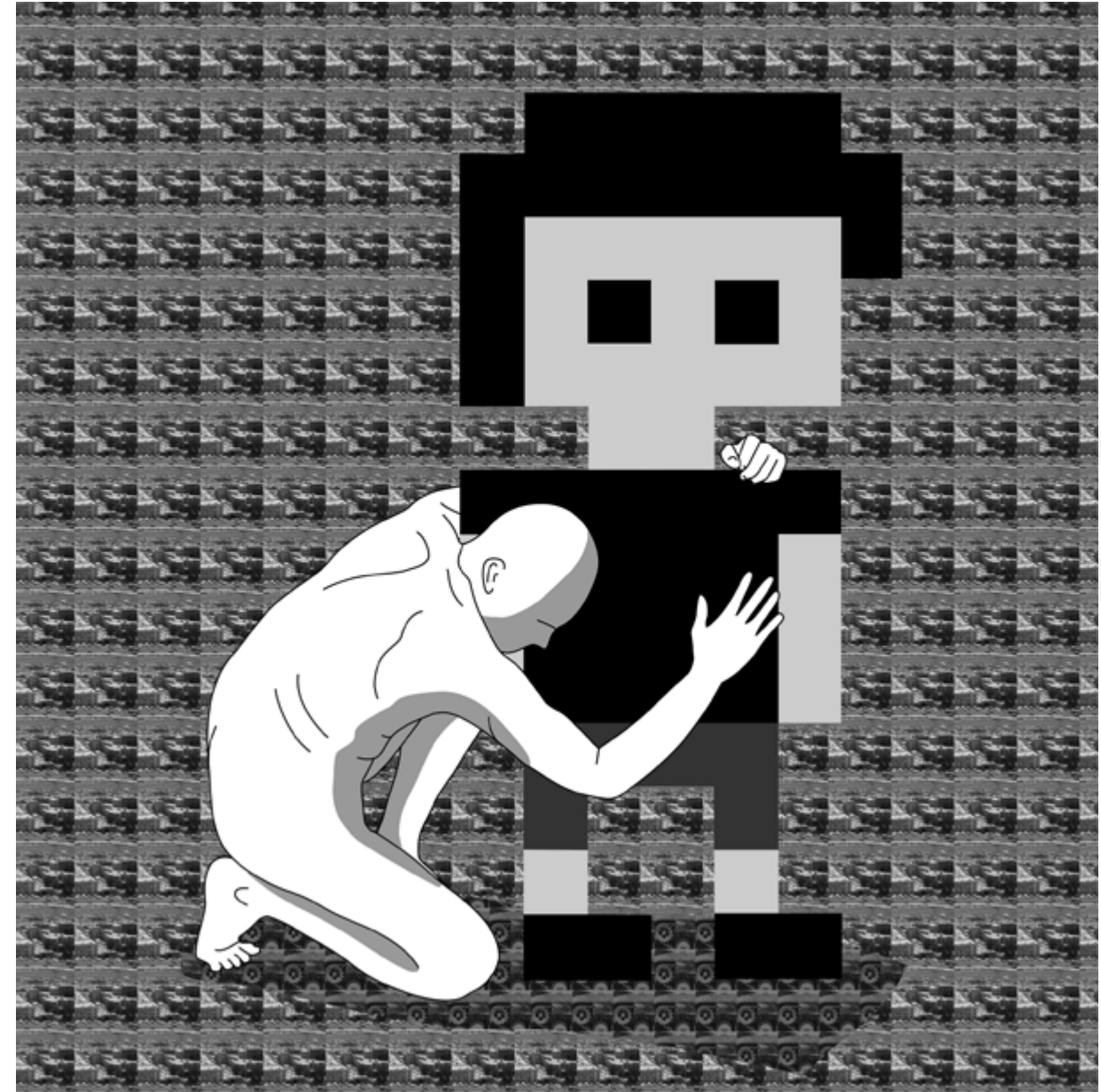
Do we have the right to photograph children or exploit them in the name of ideological purposes? Do we have the right to photograph victims without permission from their families? What is the real source of the image?

These questions are a double-edged sword. Some would adhere to the theories proclaiming that “we must face the terror,” like Syrian writer Yassin Al-Haj Saleh for example, who believes that it is necessary for the world to see these images. Others consider that these images have normalized violence and death and escalated the horrors of war.

I would not be surprised if any Facebook user at that time experienced psychological trauma, due to the spread of images of violence. I tried to convey this in my artwork, and I am certain that some of my works at the time were influenced by all the confusion and turmoil caused by these questions.

Therefore, I took my distance for a while, and in 2016 and 2017, I showcased a collection of pieces under the title “Animated Images,” through which I explored the concept of technology itself, the concept of image, and how we deal with social media, which has turned from a space of freedom and self-expression to a somewhat problematic space, because Facebook’s censorship is itself problematic.

During that period, in parallel with the waves of violence, another topic of debate on Facebook was the freedom of the body and the naked body. It was astonishing to me that within this same space, it was forbidden to see a picture of a naked woman’s body, while it was allowed to see the carnage of a woman’s body blown into pieces. It felt like Facebook was saying that is perfectly fine to display images of our victims, but should a terrorist act occur in another country, any violent images are blurred for national security purposes.



evidence in cases of crimes against humanity. These pictures are once again serving their original purpose, even if the violence and arms trade have not ended yet.

However, any images from the Middle East are permissible, victims command no respect, and violence is permissible or dramatized, to the extent that it is now seen as synonymous with our very identity. With time, pressure began to mount on social media platforms to put an end to this barrage of violent images, and that is how the eye icon appeared on some photos and videos to warn the viewers of possibly disturbing scenes. However, for three years, this option did not exist, and many scandals emerged, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the impact of social media on election campaigns and on people's subconscious in order to reach specific goals... Today, a wind of hope for justice is blowing, as the images of violence found their way from social media platforms to courtrooms, serving as testimonies and evidence in cases of crimes against humanity. These pictures are once again serving their original purpose, even if the violence and arms trade have not ended yet.

Going back to technology: To me, it has always been a tool for work and expression. I am very interested in technology and have always been curious to learn and experiment with it. It also suits my lifestyle; every time I move or travel, I carry my studio and workplace with me, inside my laptop. It allows me to create different and better worlds.

This ability to create worlds through technology is one of the things I am keen to pass on when I run workshops for children or young adults. I love to convey how we can create our own digital narrative, how we can produce a creative space and have the tools we need to express ourselves in the right way in this digital world.

This world even provides us with a "digital citizenship," which allows us to know our rights and obligations and how to express ourselves in the digital world.

New Autonomies

Cultural platforms and
Web3 potentials

Adham Hafez

New Autonomies Cultural platforms and Web3 potentials

Adham Hafez

Since the World Health Organisation's declaration on March 11th 2020 of a Global Pandemic, our international mobility has been greatly reduced, as many restrictions were imposed by local, regional and international authorities. Some of the restrictions included international and local travel bans, while other restrictions caused a shutdown of performing art venues, museums, galleries, and rehearsal studios. The arts sector, and especially performing arts, has been impacted in ways that led several artists and artistic institutions to restructure their entities, or shut down completely. The restrictions equally drove us towards working remotely, working virtually, and reconfiguring what we mean by being together in space. Festivals, conferences, exhibitions and performances at times of restricted mobility and limited congregation, became virtual platforms, and digital encounters.

Most probably everyone reading this essay here has already attended at least one Zoom meeting, or went to a Facebook live conference. In fact, the very symposium that led towards this publication, was a virtual event. Some of us crossed over to a further more intricate site of entanglement between emotions, virtual presence and officiality, by officiating weddings online ([such as Project Cupid in New York City](#)), or graduating from university and receiving a certificate through an avatar within a robotic setting ([Tokyo's Spring graduation ceremonies of 2020](#)), replaced students by robots who embodied the presence of students virtually). This fast-paced integration of digital, and specifically virtual presence and embodiment marked a new turn in

performance since spring 2020, that continues until today. A new turn that redefines and challenges how performance and performing were articulated previously within more traditional academic, curatorial, and even legal and legislative contexts.

And while many of us across the world were mired in this accelerated digital turn, which made the world pretend to be seamlessly interconnected globally at a time of mobility restrictions, many of us equally were challenged by online censorship, and deplatformation. This alarming phenomenon took multiple forms, and took place on several scales, from the invisible to the highly mediatized. The video-conferencing platform Zoom has [cancelled a talk hosting Palestinian activist and public speaker Leila Khaled](#), which was organized by San Francisco State University.

Leila Khaled is a 76 years old activist, who rose to prominence for being credited as the first female hijacker of a plane, after her direct involvement in two plane hijackings in 1969 and 1970. For many, Leila Khaled is a hero, but for several regimes in power currently, she is a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which is considered a terrorist organization by the United States. Leila was scheduled to speak about gender and resistance, when her event was cancelled by the software company itself, Zoom.

The American communication technology company, housed in California, is considered one of the few companies that have greatly benefited from the global lockdowns and travel restrictions, almost entirely replacing physical presence with digital and virtual presence. In fact, [Zoom's CEO Eric Yuan's networth skyrocketed in 2020](#) following the massive global adoption of the application as a site of encounter and of work. Yet, the way Zoom was involved in reorganizing our daily lives and public encounters, Zoom was engrossed in multiple acts of censorship that go beyond the Palestinian Israeli conflict, or the incident with Leila Khaled specifically.

In June 2020, [Zoom closed the account of Zhou Fengsuo, the Chinese human rights activist](#) and former student leader during the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. During that same year, Zoom closed multiple accounts of US and Hong Kong-based users. Later in the second half of 2020, it eventually moved to cancelling several virtual events that were planned to be held across the US, Canada and the UK, discussing Zoom's censorship. Within that movement of discussing digital censorship, Zoom went ahead and cancelled a University of Leeds event, and [moved to disable the personal account of the organiser](#), without any explanation.

These acts of censorship were not specifically rooted in Zoom's company's policies alone. Donald Trump, former US president was deplatformed by Twitter in January 2021. [Instagram removed content related to the Sheikh Jarrah house evictions](#), and shadowbanned accounts sharing material on Gaza. Fashion super-models Gigi and [Bella Hadid reported censorship by Instagram](#) targeting their pro-Palestinian content, between 2020 and 2022. We are in an age where deplatformation and censorship within digital spaces is extremely widespread, and with companies providing digital services further expanding their might and power. More worrisome than the companies' policies that regulate freedom of speech, bypassing constitutional rights, is mass populist ideas that support deplatforming of this camp over the other.

Navigating these treacherous waters is a must, at a time where we are headed towards more virtuality that will redefine not only what we mean by performing and performance, but what we mean by matter and materiality. Rather than thinking of dematerialization, we should articulate new terms and legalities around rematerialization. A digital signature is a legal signature. Cryptocurrency is money. Marriage online is official. And performing in the metaverse is theatre. So much

of this radical turn is grouped up under the term Web3.0, or Web3 for short. A new internet, promising decentralisation, autonomy, data-ownership, individual power over corporate power, opening up new legal and aesthetic paradigms and ontologies.

If we were to think of the earliest phase of the internet as one where we merely watch and read information, what was rebranded as Web1, Web2 came as the answer where microblogging and content production was everyone's prerogative. Under the Web2 regime, we did not own our data, and we did not own the spaces we created online, nor the capital our digital space generated if we were to think of these spaces as real estate. Web3 promises such ownership, through the development of the Blockchain, a new technology that produces a public decentralised ledger that stores our certificate of authenticity and ownership of data, in a way that can never be altered. Think of it as a giant spreadsheet, open to the public to read but not to edit. A virtually and fully decentralised public registry, that is not controlled or owned neither by governments nor by companies, and is not stored on drives or clouds operated by Google, Facebook or Microsoft.

The Blockchain is everywhere, it is the product of users' computers solving complex cryptographic maths problems, generating new blocks as it lives on. On top of the blockchain, multiple new possibilities are constructed. Non-fungible token galleries where digital art can be traded, sold, and auctioned at skyrocketing prices competing with physical galleries and auction houses. Metaversal settings that enable users to experience a heightened illusion of space, time, togetherness and objects across the world. And DAOs, or Decentralized Autonomous Organizations, a new type of organisations that are built entirely on blockchain technology, allowing members to own shares of the organisation, vote on code and governance, and are inherently against censorship or being shut down or subjected to content monitoring.

It is an interesting time indeed. Web2 companies grabbing for more legal (and paralegal) means to craft and manicure content on their platforms, while western democratic regimes remain in conflict between cosyng up to Big-Tech, or invasively regulating and restructuring their powers. On the other hand, Web3 developers and companies work on providing digital utopias where our performances, publications, and digital encounters cannot be shut down, cancelled, or censored.

Very soon we will need legal scholars to embrace the Web3 future as a viable one, and work on redefining new legal paradigms and legislative conditions that would allow, for instance, DAOs to be considered legally recognized organisations. [The Republic of Marshall Islands only recently passed a law](#) that “grants DAOs the same privileges as limited liability corporations”. In the United States, only [the State of Wyoming currently recognizes DAOs legally](#), through a legislation that came into effect July 2021, marking the world’s first legal recognition of DAOs by a sovereign or a state. A Decentralized Autonomous Organization enables its users to own and protect their data, and protects the content against censorship. A possibility that perhaps cultural workers in exile, and in the Arabic speaking region should entertain as a possibility.

DAOs come with a lot of problems, however. The ownership of shares means the voting system is based on token racking. DAOs could also be critiqued for being easily hackable, given that their code is mostly opensource. Equally, the imaginary behind building DAOs is the a product of western democracies and capitalist inclinations, making it urgent for us to imagine and engineer new forms of DAOs, where political strife, the call for freedom of speech, and coding could come together to create new cooperatives and governing collectives. Many radical examples are noteworthy, but most importantly, the work the [Lebanese DAO Taxir](#) has been doing is an important example. Both on the level of structuring a worker owned cooperative, and reinventing their

code to accommodate participatory governance in ways that cultural organisations in Lebanon today would not be able to accommodate, is commendable.

It is easy to reach out for basic luddite arguments, of how Web3 is capitalism reinvented, and that arts and culture from Arab artists back home and in exile should distance itself from such capitalist potentials.

But such arguments are made while using Google Docs, sharing our data on cloud servers, dialling in from iPhones, and using Saas (Software as a Service) delivery and licensing protocols and hosting services.

Vigilance is a must, especially as global Big-Tech companies reach out for more power, by reinventing themselves within the blockchain and Web3 worlds. Collective and regional work is necessary, thinking with the curators at Tunisia’s MONO Gallery or the radical Dar Blockchain, the coders behind Lebanon’s Taxir Collective or the Beirut-based Web3 cafe and hub B.HIVE, or the engineers and educators at Arabs x Blockchain platform. Perhaps as we think of the maps of our encounter across the diaspora, and back home in our Arab cosmopolitan cities, the digital and virtual map that is in a constant state of flux should equally occupy our institutional critiques and futurist thinking. Perhaps our next symposium should insist on virtuality and rematerialization, chronicling ways of making digital space hospitable to our radical aesthetic propositions and political positions.



Personal practice

Ibi Ibrahim



Darling Come - Sitara Series - 2014
Ibi Ibrahim

"There's this sense of isolation when it comes to Yemen.
as a Yemeni artist I always felt that there was a question towards me: Tell us
more about Yemen."



"There were always two dialogues: the one happening between youths inside Yemen, but then there are those living in the diaspora. And this is something that I've always noticed through my work and through the past 10 years: how different we are as Yemenis when we are inside Yemen and outside."

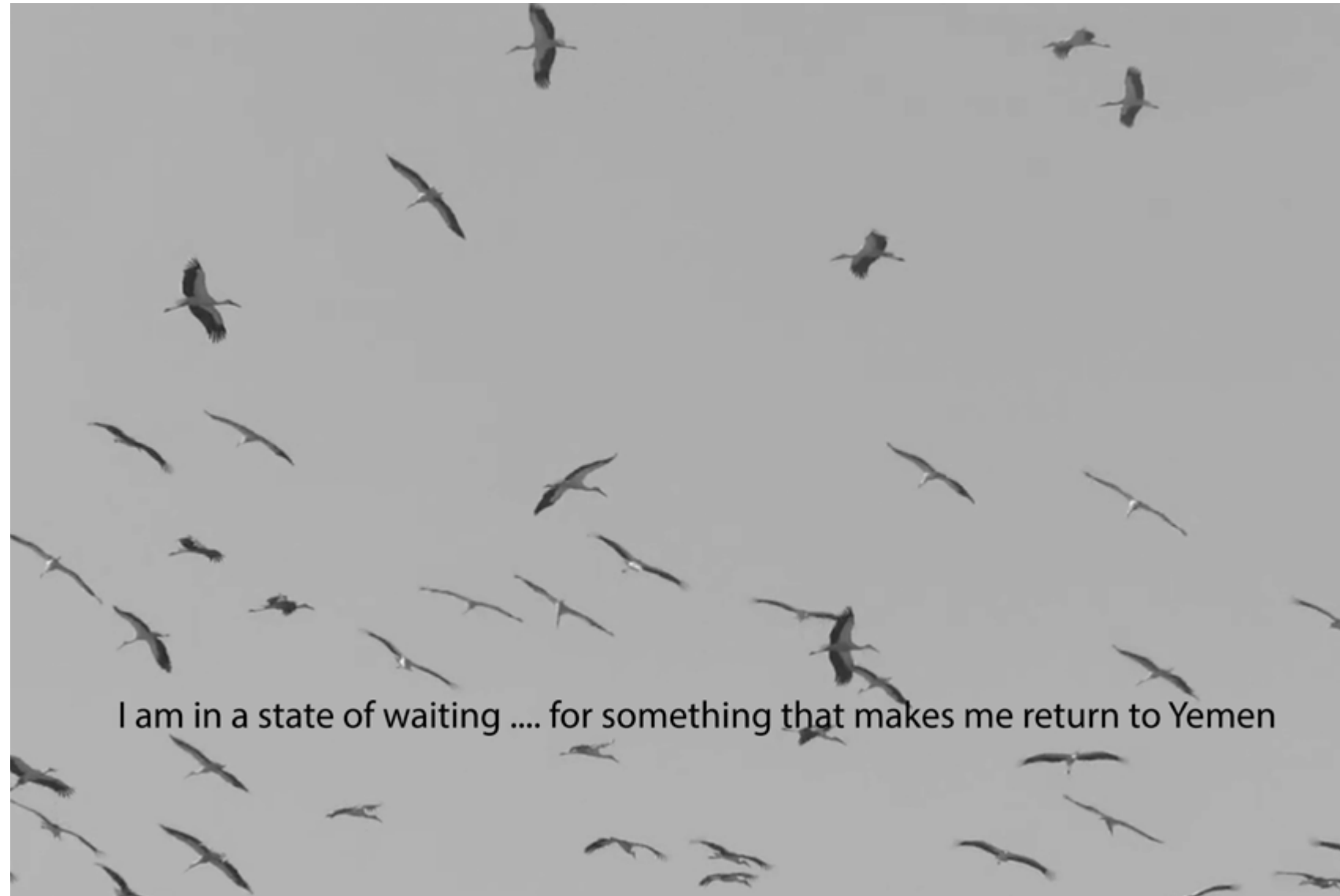


Conflict Book Launch Winter 2019 - Romooz Foundation
Ibi Ibrahim



Installation Shots On Echoes of Invisible Hearts - Berlin-September 2018 - Romooz Foundation.
Ibi Ibrahim

“Overnight, Yemen became nothing but a war zone. I’m sure you’ve all heard about it as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today. I started to ask myself: What do I do if my work is not reflective of the war of the crisis?”



Departure 2017
Ibi Ibrahim

" most of the work that I've done whether it's photography or video, I tend to interview and speak with Yemeni women. Maybe because I find that in the middle of the war, they are the ones who are able to bring families together and to create a safe environment."

"I guess my purpose here is to change the narrative about Yemen for it to not have just that Western narrative, but for those Yemenis, regardless where they live, whether they live inside or outside, whether they're stranded, they're taking agency in telling their own story and their own struggle."



Arrival 2019
Ibi Ibrahim

Writing: An Alternative, Tailor-Made Homeland

Rosa Yassin Hassan

Writing: An Alternative, Tailor-Made Homeland

Rosa Yassin Hassan

To suddenly find yourself in exile does not only mean having to live in an unfamiliar setting under a new system: It also entails something much deeper and harsher. You find yourself trapped in a cultural chasm of which language is just a part. Soon enough, you will notice the deep gap between yourself and western culture, even if you consider yourself open and invested in this culture through readings and insight “from afar.” To live in a certain culture is entirely different from observing it. You will experience this chasm in all its details. You will encounter situations that you will not understand until you acknowledge that you have come to this new region shouldering all the traumas of war and asylum. More importantly, you will not comprehend these situations until you recognize that this is neither shameful nor a product of insanity. You will try in vain to create an alternative homeland where you feel safe from danger, or rather from the accumulated panic that refuses to let you go. A homeland whose details are familiar, with no strange surprises around the corner. A homeland that harbors your loved ones rather than the strange faces around you; including those that haunt you with their relentless anger for the sole reason that you dared come and rival them over “their homeland.” In vain, you will try to explain that humanity has a long history of refuge, that earth belongs to all human beings, but your explanations will fall on deaf ears. You will try to find homeland where you have compiled memories that have shaped you as much as you have shaped them. Then, at some point, you will attempt to carry on in a life where everything encourages you to give up. The only homeland you will ever find is in writing!

Writing is a homeland! I used to shake my head in disapproval whenever I would hear this expression, believing it was a meaningless cliché. However, here in my exile, it has deeply resonated with me. It is no longer just a cliché. How do you compensate for your lost homeland through writing? How do you build a new homeland for yourself in a text? By homeland, I do not solely mean a country constructed through impervious nationalist ideology, but rather the sense of familiarity we find in memories, details, loved ones, ideas, and convictions. Homeland is a culture first and foremost. You will soon find that what persists of our lives is what we document in writing. In our minds, homeland is that which we write about. We begin to build an envisioned homeland, a parallel life where we replace reality with imagination.

Thus, we flee twice: Once to our exile, and then from it!

In your writing, you try to create a space that you had failed to establish in reality, a space with multiple identities and multiple affiliations, similar to your dreamed-of homeland. In exile, you realize how misleading the concept of identity is and how the diversity of identities makes the Other a reflection of us, rather than our enemy, especially since nationalist ideology was so deeply entrenched in our collective subconscious that we assumed that the Other was always the enemy or, at best, someone to be wary of. You realize that being open to others enriches the text as well as its writer. You learn that we understand ourselves better when we understand others.

Does this all mean that we will build a homeland fully removed from all outside influences in our texts? A fairytale homeland? No, because the culture of immigrants, people of color, and the marginalized is a cornerstone of western culture today. It is the (colored) dot on the (white) canvas, as stated by one of the leading post-colonial theorists, Homi Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*.⁴

1- See: Homi K. Bhabha, (*The Location of Culture*, 1994), see: Thaer Dib, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, 2006.

The evolution of western culture in recent decades has mainly stemmed from hybridity: had the “white-centric” culture not cleverly and pragmatically embraced this concept, it would have imploded long ago. Today’s (white) culture is ripe with the memories of immigrant people of color, their stories, their peculiarities, their beliefs, their cuisine, their rituals, their warmth, and their blood. It is changing bit by bit, breath by breath.

With time, writing in exile took on new dimensions: to see one’s reflection in the Other. As such, widely accepted truths were no longer so evident. You begin reconsider them as well as many definitions that were previously considered indisputable. You pay attention to details you had not noticed before; details that shape your unique characteristics, your beauty, and the aesthetic of the linguistic art you create. Even your vocabulary changes, along with your sentence structure and character patterns, because language exposes you. It reveals your culture, your mood, and your creativity or lack thereof. New characters will emerge because your cultural and social resources have changed. New ideas will surface, because hiding in the past will lead to inertia. A new linguistic structure will make an entrance because language and meaning, or form and substance as linguistics call them, are two complementary entities where one only changes when the other does. Here lies the struggle and the challenge: How do I myself change and thus change my language, without losing myself, without looking in the mirror and not recognize myself? This is when you wage a war against the value judgments surrounding you from every side, against prejudices that you realize have been keeping you hostage for too long, and perhaps still are.

Value judgments prompt western readers to group all the writings by refugees in the same basket, just like they group refugees themselves, despite their diversity, as if they all belong to the same, well-defined group of people originating from somewhere far away and speaking one language.

Western readers expect specific writings from you as a refugee/writer. This is a new war you will have to fight, as if all the previous wars that have worn you out were just not enough. This new war comes down to proving yourself as a writer/refugee and not as a refugee/writer.

You will have to fight to write what you want, rather than what western readers want and expect from you, as if you were confirming all the prejudices they had projected onto you before they even saw you. How will you keep yourself from engaging in the dirty game of writing what the others/readers expect from you in order for your works to be promoted? If you decide not to do so, you would be writing without an audience, or only for the very few want to hear from a solo, “unfamiliar” voice that does not align with any predefined labels.

How will you give into this game after refusing to partake in it for so long when you lived in your mother culture, in your previous “homeland”?

Hence the dilemma: If you cannot rely on the Arabic book market or the Western book market, why do you still write?

You write simply because writing is the homeland you have tailor-made for yourself.

Your new journey focuses on attempting to write by transforming the hybrid language into a tool you wield not only to fight prejudices, but also to fight futility, absurdity, and anything that could make us an empty shell of our former selves in the context of asylum/exile.

Since the audience is a key part of the creative process, your new journey begins by rattling the western reader through your hybrid language; you are the periphery rattling the center, shaking prejudices in attempt to eventually change them. Your journey should throw stones into swamps that have long been stagnant to the point of becoming blocks of hardened clay. This will take years or even generations to happen.

A Strange Feeling of Safety in a Dangerous City

Omar Abu Saada

A Strange Feeling of Safety in a Dangerous City

Omar Abu Saada

I started working in theater after graduating from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2011. At that time, my theatrical work was primarily in Syria, with some contributions abroad. However, everything changed after 2011, as all my theatrical works started being performed outside Syria, despite the fact that I still live in Damascus to this day.

People around me always wonder why I decided to stay in Damascus, and so do I at times. At first, I had easy answers that seemed very convincing, but with time, it became harder to answer this question.

It is a complicated mix of feelings, including emotional and family motives, a strange sense of safety in a dangerous city, a nostalgia for a city that only exists in my memory now, and an accumulation of political ideas and artistic and theatrical concepts. Alas, there is no simple answer to this question today.

Over the past ten years, I have tried to forge new friendships to compensate for the departure of all my old friends. Luckily, I have found nice, intelligent, and caring people, but I don't know if I can really call them friends, because I regard friendship as a partnership and a long history of shared memories. Perhaps I am now too old to make new friends; nevertheless, my social life in Damascus remains much better than in Europe. There is a sense of warmth, sweetness, and familiarity

that strongly attracts me to this place. I think this familiarity is the secret of Damascus.

Damascus has been featured constantly in my theatrical works. I have always tried to portray its people, whom I know so well, including the circles of artists and intellectuals, political activists, detainees, simple people, and even the "shabiha,"¹ whom I featured in my work. The stories of these people have been portrayed by actors, and, on other occasions, I have tried to give the real people the chance to perform their own stories on stage. Documentation and fiction have overlapped in all the works I have presented since 2011.

In my latest work, "Damascus 2045," performed on the stage of the Powszechny Theater² in Warsaw, we tried to imagine Damascus in the future, more than twenty years from now. Many pictures came to mind, which we depicted in contrasting ways: sometimes dark, and other times colorful; a destroyed city, but also a developed and vibrant one with state-of-the-art technologies.

However, our vision of the future has not been completely free; in fact, we often felt drawn to the present, or more precisely to that moment in 2011 and before it. To me, the past remains a very tight constraint preventing me from reveling in the ability to imagine the future.

Today, I am working on a new project to build an archive for the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in partnership with Mayada Hussein, my Arab Theater professor at the Institute. We have now finished archiving the first period extending from 1977 to 1992. The archive contains photos and videos from the Institute's performances and theoretical graduation projects of students of the Department of

1- Shabiha: popular designation referring to supporters of the Syrian regime.

2- Teatr Powszechny.

Due to the lack of sufficient material, we have restored the archive by conducting video interviews with a number of professors and students who lived during that period. The archive will soon become available on a website that protects it from damage and facilitates access to it for researchers and anyone interested in viewing it.

Through this archive, we are trying to document cultural and theatrical life in Syria during the late seventies and eighties, which is one of the most complex and sensitive periods in the history of Syria in the twentieth century; a period that has not been discussed sufficiently. Perhaps this archive will contribute in one way or another to reopening this discussion.

However, there is always the possibility of circumventing such restrictions through wonderful artistic means. This is what many artists who have remained in Syria, as well as new-generation artists who grew up during the war, are resorting to.

Finally, the practice of art in Damascus has become more difficult today more than ever before, due to the extremely complex logistical conditions and to the general political and historical circumstances.

Ibrahim: A Fate to Define

Lina Al Abed



Still from
"Ibrahim: A Fate to Define"
Lina Alabed

"My research has become a personal quest to understand how absence has shaped my personality and to delve deeper into the meaning of "homeland" and how I identify: I am a Palestinian/Syrian, born and raised in Damascus for 30 years. My mother is Egyptian and holds a Jordanian passport. I lived in Beirut for 10 years. The film gave me the opportunity to reconsider questions that I thought time had answered long ago. This confrontation, as a girl who lost her father, or even as a Palestinian, was necessary so I can reconcile with myself at the personal and historical levels."

"I was able to understand why people choose radical options, because a person with no memory no longer knows if they are alive or dead!"



Still from
"Ibrahim: A Fate to Define"
Lina Alabed

"Today, homeland for me is where my loved ones are."

“When you tell a story that had shocked you or recount your worst experiences in life, they seem much more bearable. They stops being that monster eating away at you on the inside. The fear dissipates.”



Still from
"Ibrahim: A Fate to Define"
Lina Alabed



Still from
"Ibrahim: A Fate to Define"
Lina Alabed

"At the historical level, when one confronts the past, even if this past was horrific, it is important to see oneself as a survivor and not as a victim."



Interpreting Escapes

Haytham El-Wardany

Interpreting Escapes

Haytham El-Wardany

Moments of escape are pivotal when one era ends, but another does not begin. Moments when one language perishes and another begins to emerge from afar. How can one speak during these fluid moments? With what words? Most importantly, who can do that? The self that is speaking and living in such moments is broken and shattered. It is subjected to an inhumane condition overflowing with violence and cruelty. It may be in its best interest not to speak, but to listen; to listen to what non-humans say, so that it may learn the art of speaking in moments of danger.

“Brother, what do you think is wrong with the king? Why is he staying put?”¹ This was the very first Arabic sentence ever uttered by a jackal. Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa’ had heard it and heard other animals talk. He was a Persian writer who wrote in the Arabic language. He lived a short life in between two states: the Umayyad Caliphate, which saw widespread discrimination between Arabs and non-Arabs, and the Abbasid Caliphate, which saw growing conflicts between the different components of the ever-expanding empire. Ibn al-Muqaffa’ also navigated two languages: Arabic and Farsi. Therefore, the language he had heard or interpreted from animal speak was closer to a dialectical combination of both languages.

Dimna had asked his brother Kalila about the lion near them, initiating a long discussion between the two about the merit of approaching the lion. The language that Dimna had just discovered, or rather reverted

Therefore, animal speak in the Kalila and Dimna book and subsequent books are not an expression of a self, nor are they an expression of feelings, but rather a series of political questions related to the potential of coexistence at a moment when life itself is in danger. Animals speak at specific moments, which could be interpreted as moments of tension between power and knowledge. They speak when the status quo is no longer viable. They speak when the ones who can speak fail to do so. They speak so that those who were excluded from history once again become part of the equation. It is not possible to read the Kalila and Dimna book in Arabic without considering the danger that surrounded its translation and drafting.

How could the author Abdullah Ibn Al-Muqaffa’ hear and interpret the talks of animals? How can this question benefit us in our moment of crisis? In an era like ours, after a decade of aborted revolutions and protests, a decade of forced escape and migration, words either say nothing or lead to death and imprisonment. Therefore, what we may need to do in the darkest of times is to be quiet and listen, so that we may hear a whisper of hope forgotten in the folds of time, in words spoken long ago, saving it from drowning in oblivion by passing it on. Where can this be learned? In fables where those who are not allowed to speak do so. They speak in a moment of danger, when something must be said.

When non-humans speak human language, it is not because they are now human, or because they are masks concealing human faces. They speak human language because the social relationship, which involves humans and non-humans, has reached a critical moment when something must be said. Those who speak up at such moments are the ones who were silenced and excluded. This is observed in the literary genre of fables. A fable is an attempt to escape, to find a way out when history becomes a nightmare.

¹- Kalila and Dimna, Egyptian Ministry of Education Edition issued in 1937, p. 96.

There is no escape without translation, not only because the places we escape to may speak another language, but also because translation is a manifestation of the social relationship in times of crisis. No wonder that *Kalila and Dimna* is a translated book, as it was the literary form reflecting the crisis of coexistence at the end of the Umayyad Caliphate and the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate. The first translators initially interpreted the text orally. They did so not because they had learned other languages that appealed to them, but because their social existence was torn. In most cases, they simultaneously belonged to two groups: One victorious and one defeated, one governing and one governed, such as Acadian Semites living under a Sumerian state, Arab Lakhmids living under a Sasanian Empire, and Persians living under an Arab state, etc. Those were the first translators. At the beginning, translation was not a mere cognitive communication, but rather a social relationship. It is an “undetermined speech” in the process of formation, because it occurs at a moment of crisis thrust on the translator, who tries to translate for conflicting parties speaking different languages.

Translators are speakers by profession; a special type of speakers. They lend their voice to those who are no longer heard in a dialogue, or to those who should be heard. Translators speak in moments of danger, driven by the urgent need to say something to ward off that danger.

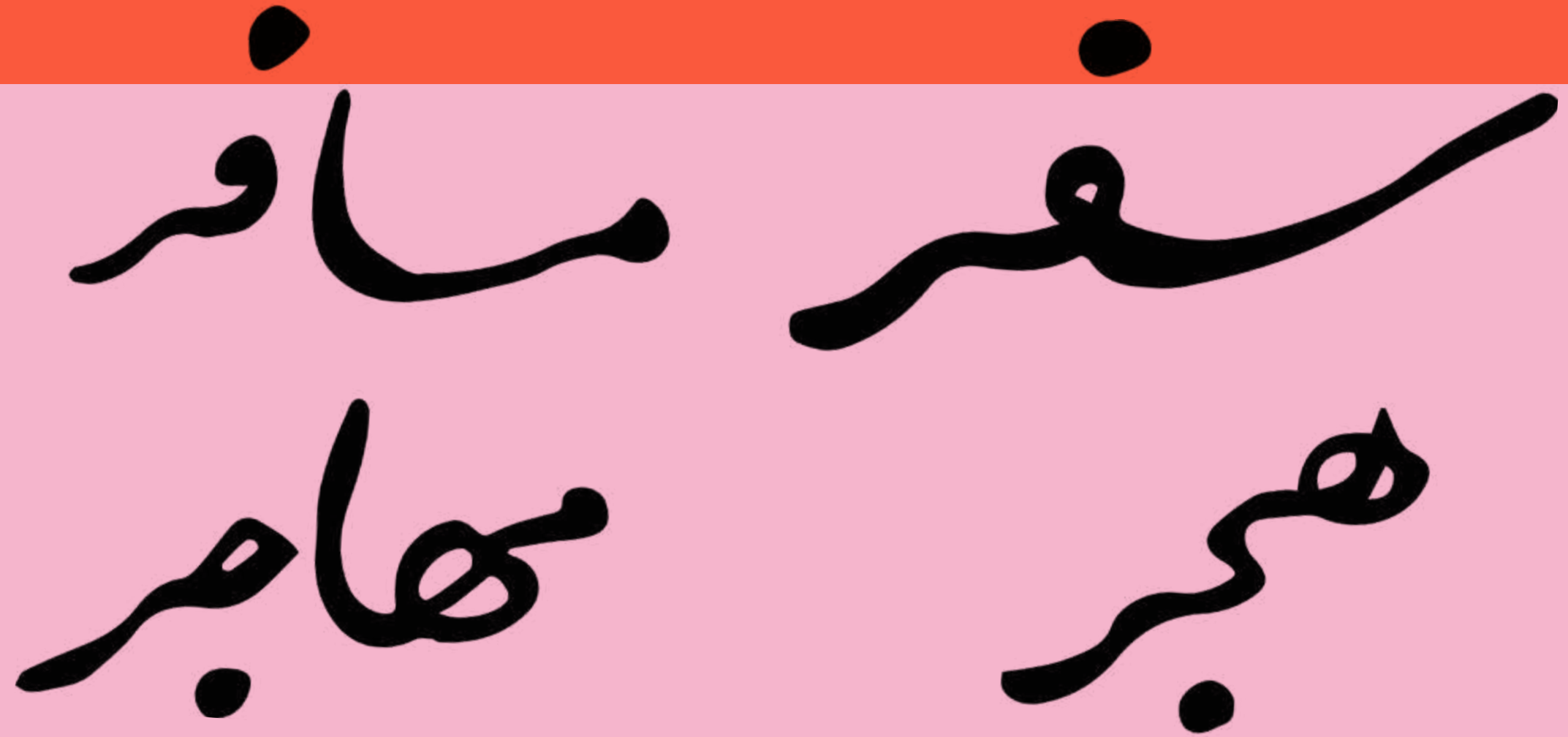
However, their words merely channel the voice of others through their own. They borrow their voice from others, thus eroding the dominance of the single, self-righteous voice.

The self-living in a moment of escape, such as our present moment, is a fractured self. It is searching for an escape, living among discordant contexts, languages, and eras. Such pivotal moments need to be interpreted rather than just narrated. This means trying to pinpoint the schism, which shapes the experiences of those living such moments, by sensing how deep it went in previous moments of escape, rather than just illustrating these moments.

This is what we can learn from the translated *Kalila and Dimna* book, as it evokes other interpretations, the words of non-humans in their attempt to escape the violence inflicted upon them, in order to call for a reexamination of their present situation during a serious moment of escape. It is a book that interprets and translates its present moment instead of just writing it. If this self were to speak, it would follow in the first translators' footsteps. Its speech would be a translation, an interpretation. It would not give translation a lesser role, but would rather make it an integral part of its speech. This self may in fact be a translator, not a speaker, always holding within itself an integral division and an unbridgeable schism.

Intersections

Golrokh Nafisi



“The word “displacement” has its roots in reality and is a common phenomenon of our lives in these times. If millions of people are displaced, it means that those who stayed are also displaced. It is becoming difficult to find someone these days who is not a stranger or feels like a stranger even in their own city. The whole idea of place, home, homeland has changed especially after the pandemic.”

خاطرہ خانہ
زیارت
سیان
حافظہ
فراموشی

برزخ

"I think that the return is always impossible because most of the time we want to go back to a historical point which can be more impossible than going back home. These impossibilities should not stop us from the idea of return. Return by itself can be a source of many ideas, it can create new things despite its impossibility."

"Beyond national borders is not only about going international, it is about going inside of the nations and seeing how connected the variety of lives and perceptions of time and place are."

حضرت دنیا باب
ماضی شاعر

غیر مسکن زوال وطن

"I was involved in different movements in the last ten years and I had a deep solidarity with them. I think that more or less all of them have failed, but what stays in us is the common experience, something that we can always go back to."

غربة
خوف و حياء
غربة

"If we want to experience and imagine internationalism in our time with all the defeats that we are carrying and with the heaviness of the impossibility of return, we need to also think about the locality and to imagine a world full of many other worlds."

Why Do We Speak?

Language and the
Issue of Hegemony

Mariem Guellouz

Why Do We Speak? Language and the Issue of Hegemony

Mariem Guellouz

Why do we speak? The first answer that comes to mind is, "We speak to communicate." What, then, is communication? Is it simply the act of transmitting information? Is language merely an instrument of communication? French linguist Émile Benveniste often criticized this answer, which highlights the communicative function of speech and compares it to an instrument or a means developed by humans.

Benveniste also wrote: "To speak of an instrument is to put man and nature in opposition. The pick, the arrow, and the wheel are not in nature. They are fabrications. Language is in the nature of man and he did not fabricate it. [...] It is a speaking man whom we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man" (Benveniste, 1976: 258).

According to the author, subjectivity is manifested through language. It is through language that humans constitute themselves as subjective beings. Therefore, language is not merely an instrument, and speech is not just a means of communication. They are what define us as subjective beings in our relations with the world. To speak is not only to transmit information or news, but also to talk, to repeat, to act, to transmit previous information, as well as to talk about something unseen to someone who has seen nothing. To speak is to follow the threads of collective memory and to take part in preserving and transmitting it. We do not speak to communicate, but to live. Speech is not only an expression of our feelings and thoughts, but also a space

Speech is an action that affects the entire world, an action that alters reality. It establishes a space for selectivity and hierarchy among speakers. Who has the right to speak? Who holds the power of the word? We are not all equal when speaking. Every word is an action in this world, and every word has an impact.

Speech provokes fear, for it could either liberate or subjugate the Other. To take the floor, i.e. to speak or talk, places the speaker in a certain ethical position. To refuse to give the floor, to deny someone the ability to speak or to monitor speech all constitute a recognition of the power of words.

Therefore, language is not merely an instrument of communication, but rather a battleground where power relations play out among speakers and institutions. The various determinants for classifying languages (e.g. national, formal, dialect or minority) create a value system and a social and institutional hierarchy between languages. Prohibiting or imposing the use of a particular language in administrative or academic fields or media attests to the ideological dimension behind the use of languages, as each language holds a specific value depending on the context in which it is used.

Nation-states have largely contributed to the classification and the creation of hierarchies between different languages with the purpose of building nations and uniting people behind the same national vision. Languages are, first and foremost, social and political structures engraved in the history of nations. As a battleground for ideological struggles, languages witness the relations of hegemony that exist between individuals, peoples, and institutions. Languages are often subject to a hierarchical arrangement by institutions to legitimize certain practices and create differences between individuals. Therefore, languages are also a system of social segregation.

The Arabic language is not exempt from these hierarchies in its relations with other dominant languages, for several practices are embedded deep within it. Arabic is a heterogeneous, multi-form language. Despite the very large number of Arabic speakers today, the Arabic language fails to be recognized as a legitimate language in many countries around the world.

Another issue is choosing which language to use in the cultural and artistic sector. Donor institutions and bodies may impose the use of a specific language and may also set an assessment and selection system for artistic projects based on linguistic criteria. Therefore, the choice of language is of great importance in an artist's career, as it dictates the artist's target audience.

Personally, I faced these linguistic challenges not only as a researcher, but also as an artist/performer. Language-related issues are fundamental in my career. For instance, while working on my performance "Cairo Street - La Rue du Caire," I read orientalist and colonial texts in French. This raised the question of translation from an aesthetic and political point of view: should these texts be translated into English or Arabic when performing in an Arab country? Or should we read them in their original language and display the translation? Many artists in the Arab region face the issue of translation and the choice of language. In the context of artistic research, this is a very pressing and interesting issue that calls for reflection.

During my experience as the artistic director of "Carthage Dance," I also encountered language-related issues. I had chosen the slogan "No Dance without Physical Dignity" for the Carthage Dance Festival. The issue of dignity arises in the freedom of self-expression and the freedom of movement of Arab artists who dream of working without censorship and travelling without visas.

As such, my team and I wanted the Carthage Dance Festival to shed light on Arab and African creativity using the artists' language of choice. However, we found it difficult to obtain a visa for Arab artists to travel to Tunisia. To travel from one Arab country to another, you need a visa, unless you are a Western artist.

Thus, the relation between artists' freedom of speech in the language of their choice and their freedom of movement and travel became very clear. This means that linguistic issues in the cultural field are more closely related to economic ideologies and political views rather than to linguistic ones.

Another important issue related to the Arabic language specifically lies in the racist and fundamentalist discourse that seeks to link the Arabic language to social causes. The Arabic language is often underestimated or marginalized and also linked to negative connotations such as religious extremism or obscurantism.

In light of the various types of discourse and speech, can the Arabic language be considered homogeneous?

This question raises the issue of language in relation to hegemony. We often discuss linguistic hegemony between the West and the Arab World. This is indeed important, but we must also take into account hegemony within the varieties of the Arabic language in the Arab World itself. For instance, in Tunisia, a small country, the bourgeoisie of the north somewhat looks down upon other dialects used inland. Moreover, the analysis of Arabic speakers' discourses reveals the complexity of their relations with the Arabic dialects. This poses the question: What is the voice of Arab peoples? Taking into account the power relations between Maghrebi dialects, which are often downgraded and mocked by speakers of the Levantine dialects, we can see how these power

relations are formed, whereby language becomes a space to assert a sense of legitimacy particularly when comes to questions such as: Who is more Arab, and what is the “authentic” Arabic language? This socio-linguistic conflict, fuelled by Arabs’ misunderstanding of themselves and of what connects and unites them as a nation, is also the result of historical events and the revival of the hierarchical discourse imposed by colonial authorities upon indigenous people. Ending the use of these discourses and restoring the heterogeneity of linguistic practices, with the assumption that this will reunite the so-called Arab nation, can be achieved today through a linguistic and political management to overcome the linguistic imperialism practiced within the Arab region. No one speaks the “true” or “pure” Arabic language. This is purely an illusion. In the mind of an Arab, an Egyptian cannot, for example, understand the Tunisian dialect. But this problem is not linguistic in its essence.

Maghreb countries are very familiar with the artistic and cultural landscape in Egypt and Lebanon, not to mention that Syrian and Egyptian TV series are screened in Tunisia without any subtitles. However, when a Tunisian theatre performance is presented in Lebanon or Egypt, some want it to be accompanied with a translation, as if the Tunisian dialect is a foreign language they cannot understand.

The hegemony between the various dialects of the Arabic language is attributed to historical, political and cultural reasons. For instance, due to the importance of the film industry in Egypt, the influence of the Egyptian culture has played a crucial role in promoting the Egyptian dialect throughout the Arab region and in rendering it understandable by most Arabs.

The issue of linguistic hegemony is not limited to the power relations between East and West; it entails a form of linguistic hierarchy between the Mashreq and the Maghreb, with their various dialects and languages.

In fact, to consider such variety an impediment to communication and the spread of arts is, in itself, an impediment to the dissemination of cultural and artistic productions in the Arab region.

Moreover, when we link language to its broader historical context, particularly to the history of anti-colonialism and its relevance to the emergence and development of the nation-state in the Arab region, we find that the relation between Arabic and French in part of the Arab world also plays an important role. Being francophone does not simply mean speaking the French language; rather, it is more akin to an institution that highlights a certain relation with this language by presenting it as the language of modernity, freedom and advancement. All these characteristics attributed to the French language have a historical basis rooted, on the one hand, in the French Revolution and the role it played in the consolidation of the French language as the official language of one indivisible republic, and, on the other hand, in the colonial history of France, its presence in the Arab world and the French language as the voice of the missions that were believed to have brought civilization to indigenous peoples.

The Maghreb region witnessed linguistic reforms imposed by colonial authorities, whereby the French Decree-Law of 1935 declared the Arabic language a foreign language in Algeria. To avoid a linear reading of colonial history, which would imply that the French language was imposed by force in all the colonies of the Arab world, it is important to take into account the complexity of the relationship between the colonial power and the people of such colonies, as well as the contradictions involved in the process of language nationalization. Colonialism was not necessarily aimed at transforming the entire population of the Maghreb into francophone people, and the vast majority of the indigenous population, whether educated or French-speaking, could not attend public schools. In Tunisia, for example, the Francophonie - especially in Bourguibist discourses during the

post-independence period - was considered an essential tool for the modernization of society. In this context, the Francophonie also refers to an economic institution that transcends the issue of cultural and intellectual colonialism.

It is dangerous to attribute certain characteristics to any language, as it is wrong to consider a specific language more feminist or more patriarchal than others. Racist and Islamophobic discourses in the West have transformed the Arabic language into a language of terrorism and fanaticism. This serves as a flagrant example of such dangerous tendencies. No language is better than or superior to another, or even more feminist and respectful of rights and freedoms.

Therefore, it is important to link language to economic and social dimensions. Many Arab intellectuals also opt to use English and French in their academic works. For example, I, as a subject of the colonial history of North Africa, write and produce in French. Therefore, when I decide to write or produce academic texts in Arabic, this is an important linguistic undertaking for me personally and for other researchers in the region. However, is this enough if the work methodology, technical ideas, and technical references are all Western? Language is an ideological and subjective matter, an instrument of ideological authoritarianism, but, at the same time, an instrument of resistance.

Why do we speak? To live... to be and to resist.

Translation and the Finitude of Speech

Arafat Saadallah

Translation and the Finitude of Speech

Arafat Saadallah

What follows is a series of reflections and questions I have pondered to gain a new understanding of translation. This new perspective draws on the need to rid the act of translation of the current technical approach which uses language as a tool and means of communication.

However, what benefit could these questions and this new understanding offer?

Perhaps, delving into these questions does not directly benefit translation quality, nor current and future outputs... This proposed exercise does not produce a new science nor does it add new techniques to the craft of translation. Indeed, it did not stem from a desire to profit. It is an attempt to address a historical necessity in the era of machine translation, where human intervention has been downgraded from the role of a translator to a temporary proofreader.

Machines, or mechanical systems, have been controlling all forms of communication among people, even with a person's surroundings. This has begged the question about meaning and language beyond age-old definitions sustained by academic curricula. I will stray from bolstering theories regarding linguistics, literary or artistic translations. Therefore, these observations will not follow an argumentative methodology built on proofs and inferences. I will merely describe some cases based on my experience as a translator and participant in the translation process. These cases or situations have always merited attention and a deep dive into the essence of speech through the efforts of translation.

Most of my translation experiences, whether verbal or written, involved theatrical projects with artists from the Arab world and Europe. The primary obstacle that pushed me to work on these attempts and experiences was an intellectual concern of mine: Why did the Arabs not translate Greek tragedies and plays in general during the peak of their thirst for discovery, i.e. the Age of Translation and Documentation (8th and 9th centuries AD)? What can we call this lack of translation: rejection, oblivion, negligence, blindness, forgetfulness, carelessness..., especially since Grecian theatre literature is a pillar of this ancient civilization's legacy.

Either way, I will not go further into analysing these important issues. However, one must note that the matter of lack of translation, lack of need for translation, or the untranslatable falls into the very essence of translation, which we will try to pursue as much as possible.

In 2007, during activities with Siwa Plateforme, a contemporary art laboratory for the Arab world seeking to promote art and intellectual experiences among Arab and western artists, we invited Iraqi and French directors, Haithem Abdullrazak and Michel Cerda to work, during an art workshop, on a play by Iraqi poet and playwright Khazal Al-Majidi. The script, "Hamlet Bila Hamlet" [Hamlet without Hamlet], is an Arabic rewrite of Shakespeare's famous play. This new interpretation is in itself a show prompting reflections on translation.

Al-Majidi named his play "Hamlet Bila Hamlet", for the story starts with Hamlet dying, thus physically leaving the stage, but lingering in the other characters' minds. Here, the play which was written in prose with high musical undertones forces an inevitability: understanding the many layers of Khazal Al-Majidi. This is a true experience of translation, as it goes beyond "conveying" the pre-existing meaning in another language and prompts us to slip into the shoes of those speaking the other language.

If listening to the other's experience proves impossible, it makes us feel the distance between us. Meaning is not a theme on its own. Simply connecting pieces together does not give us meaning.

Khazal Al-Majidi's perspective in Arabic shifted the fundamental questions in the original play to a place where the most important component became conveying the intensity of the experience or interaction. For instance, the famous "To be or not to be" was became in Al-Majidi's text "To die or not to die?". In this case, dying does not replace being, as some may think. However, the existential impact of this question requires an Arabic expression that carries the same power that the act of being carries in Hindi-European languages. Therefore, the untranslatable becomes a driver of poetic innovation calling for new possibilities in language, or at the very least fuels emotions that show the meaning.

As a translator who was present throughout the creation of the play, from the translation of Al-Majidi's text into French to the show, all the way through rehearsals with the two teams, I have seen how both directors have embodied the play through their unique connection with the stage. I have felt how the tension between them kept the joint venture connected and cohesive. They had different interpretations, artistic visions, and connections to the physical and spatial environment. Nonetheless, there was something, hidden like a secret, fostering their connection: a desire to see eye to eye and come to an understanding, sometimes without words, but definitely through differences and conflict.

Based on this experience, I have become aware of the need to reposition the mind and act in this position specifically, where visions and languages face one another but do not clash to reach their fullest potential. The success or failure of this experience comes second to

creating a space where languages, speakers, worlds, cultures, and innovation meet, different though they may be.

Of course, the paths are many and various. Some experiences led nowhere. However, like success, failure adds to our knowledge and teaches us on the potential of dialogue and mutual listening. In other words, the journey of developing the experience has become itself our purpose at Siwa Laboratory. This journey and the time innovation takes to ripen, embody necessarily the struggles and trials of the untranslatable, what cannot cross from one language to another. This is what calls us every time to try to translate. An example of this is the physical and mental effort made during the translation process by both teams throughout stage rehearsals. This effort shows the difference in multiple chronologies: every individual's chronology based on their own experience and feelings, and the collective chronology of a theatre company sharing the same past and social reality. Sometimes, deafness shows among participants, resulting from their projections and power strategies that control them. Moreover, meaning could become evident at the moment when you least expect it, when participants are so tired and they are so close to giving up on the experience. At that moment, an idea, an image, a text, or a reference is apparent to everyone. They have it in common even if it is not related to the experience, but it breathes new life and once again fans the flames of the desire for dialogue. This desire is indeed a fundamental driver for every translation, a desire that translates the essence of translation: a rapprochement that demonstrates rather than refutes the distance.

Translation is mediation, and the translator is a mediator; but what kind of mediation characterizes translation? We usually think that it is dialectic mediation used by the translator to convey a certain meaning (what should be translated) from one (source) speech to another (target) speech, from one tongue to another.

Therefore, the translator enshrines the priority of meaning over speech, or similarly, the primacy of spirit over matter. The translator thus contributes to the history of mind and reason in their journey to liberation (as clearly considered by German philosopher Hegel). Hence, the translator's mediation as a speaker and author is in service of the meaning which must not change or transform. It is the speech, the vessel of the meaning, which changes to succeed or fail in conveying the meaning.

We truly believe that.

However!

In translation, there are other issues to deal with and the translator is the first to feel it. For example, there is the relation between speech and meaning during the translation\mediation process for example, where it is not only a matter of kinetic or transformative transfer, but rather a reformative mediation. The translator plays the role of intercessor and diplomat, bringing closer at least two different understandings -two ideas from two contrasting worlds and two different histories (timeframes).

This process impacts both speech and meaning. Just like every understanding has its own world, every meaning lives in an ecosystem made up of connections built over time with other meanings, defining its identity based on its alignment or misalignment with other ideas and emotions that have been associated with it or have accompanied its development. In the process of translation, translators know that uprooting a particular meaning (in the theoretical definition of meaning as a standalone unit) from its world means tarnishing or killing it entirely.. This feeling illustrates a clear contrast between human translation (and its mortal connotations) and machine translation.

The latter is only built on an analytical and dialectic approach, bound by the notion of splitting meaning into units and values reflected in speech modules (words or sentences) that change with every language. This notion is based on tendencies and principles that have led to mechanized translators, such as the belief in an infinite and universal language beyond the diverse languages and tongues of our species. This universal language is transparent and reflects the first layers of meanings, where mortal speech dissolves into a purely spiritual language, and where utterances not only describe the world but create it. Therefore, machine translation relied on the theological principle of establishing meaning through digital assessment.

To go back to translation from a mortal perspective, translators find themselves faced with the need to bring closer different worlds, more than the need to convey meaning as an unchangeable unit. Given the mortal and limited vision and capabilities of translators, they try to preserve the dynamic rapprochement between these worlds, rather than control the assessment of meanings and speech. One could even say that a translator's actual understanding of meaning is completely different from the common theoretical and theological convention: translators do not see the meaning as a spiritual unit in the act of translation, rather as an existential state where mood and reference share a particular space at a particular time.

There is usually a lot of discussion in translation about loyalty and disloyalty between proponents and opponents. Is the translation disloyal to the original text? Or is the translation's disloyalty a loyal betrayal as many "specialists" say? etc.

What if we consider that this question is indeed loyal to the classic concept of translation? That the issue of loyalty or disloyalty is brought up if we initially accept that something needs to be conveyed soundly

from one language, from one tongue to another through translation, by the translator. This thing is what we refer to as meaning, what is expressed by the author. It could be a perfect meaning (an absolute fact in sports or science), a psychological concern raging inside the author's soul, or a description of an individual or collective observation. Mainly, it is a standalone entity that could be separated and pondered in theory.

However, if we question again and reconsider this metaphysical notion (meaning as a standalone component accessed with an analytical methodology) based on the same translation experience, we would find that multiple theoretical (linguistic) foundations are merely ideological components that we believed to enable forward progression towards technology. A key foundation is the concept of language as a tool or means of communication, and translation as a secondary tool to overcome hindrances to this communication. It is, therefore, a technical concept of language and translation which only sees in language its ability to convey the emotional power to achieve its principal objective: effect. Translators are conductors (think of cables and electrical circuits). They make sure to preserve the same power which transforms into a trigger with a specific reality and a specific impact: achieving something, stirring a certain emotion, depicting a certain idea.... This concept relates to something regarding language indeed, but remains unidimensional because it reduces language to a tool and focuses only on one perspective: effect. Ethicizing translation, by deeming it loyal or disloyal, is an ideological attempt to enshrine this narrowed technical interpretation and to limit language to a tool.

Nonetheless, translation practically engages us in other dimensions of language. It widens horizons, otherwise narrowed by a technical approach to language. This experience of every mortal translator with finite potential and restrictions shifts the question on disloyalty to a

more pragmatic and relevant question: strategies and deception. Every translator is forced to plot and scheme to deal with the references given. Translators, knowingly or unknowingly, choose a certain strategy to mediate between two worlds. They search for a specific path, usually hidden ways to overcome (historical and spatial) obstacles.

They often dance around contrasting expressions to show what is even more beguiling than their role as translators: the guile of language itself.

In order for the target audience to recognize the meaning, a whole world must be uncovered. Meaning would show its connections and vitality, then the target audience would engage with the speaker. This takes us back to the origin of language as communication: not only as a tool to get something across but as a breakthrough into the world, a breakthrough that houses all connections. This breakthrough, which I would call speech rather than language, due to the theoretical residuals that have marred the latter for dozens of centuries, is ephemeral and limited. It cannot fathom eternity and abstract universality.

Mortal as it is, speech demands constant translation. It is translation itself: a continuous dialogue among multiple endings. It is a dialogue where meanings do not live eternally, but take on different forms according to very different speech stylings, and embody negotiations between worlds with contrasting characters and objects. Therefore, the lack of translation into Arabic in the 9th century AD is due to the lack of suitable conditions in Arabic speech to reflect Greek tragedy as a script or theatrical play (on stage or stationary depiction).

However, we will not discuss this issue further. It is cited as an example for the finiteness of speech and its role in the history and transformation of meaning.

I have lived this experience during “Looking for Oresteia”, a theatre project that uses Aeschylus’ trilogy to bring together three directors: Haithem Abdullrazak from Baghdad, Célie Pauthe from Besançon, and Mokhallad Rasem (Iraqi director residing in Belgium).

This project developed through meetings and stays in several cities: Besançon, France, La Fonderie theatre in Le Mans (France), and Baghdad as well.

Different theatrical suggestions would be presented, then scrapped. Conversations would heat up at times then proceed. This shared experience was shadowed by Polish artist, Janek Turkowski who followed all the stages of the work, but often only observed without recording anything, as if he was looking for the traces of convergence in the places wherever it happened. For him, archiving or documenting became about planning for the places where the meeting happened.

The distances that participants crossed to these areas had to be constantly calculated to share the meaning of the experience. The purpose was to figure out the correct distance to see and meet each other.

Janek Turkowski also adopted my perspective, the translator’s perspective to try to understand the crossing between languages and its impact on the translator’s body and mind. It was an opportunity to put the mind at work in exercising translation and delving into the depths of a translator’s being. Like border crossers and smugglers, a translator should never be out of tricks, diplomacy, and deception although it does not often show. A translator’s situation is extremely physical: the body is playing, especially when the translation is impossible or fails, just like a word stripped bare when the expression cannot convey the meaning. Therefore, if dialogue is horizontal, meaning is vertical: an event occurring. Controlling this is impossible, although it reflects a sweeping human desire which has reduced language and translation to a technicality motivated by power and unifying worlds, only to own them.

Beyond National Borders

Yassin al-Haj

Beyond National Borders

Yassin al-Haj

As different as they may be, all Arab countries today are expelling their people. Syria may hold the highest record, since Syrian refugees in neighbouring and faraway countries account for 30% of the country's population¹, many of whom cannot return for political reasons. Therefore, the problem is not only that we are beyond national borders, but also that national borders are beyond us. This is what it means to be exiled. "Beyond the borders" is best description of our current existential and political condition, not only our cultural and aesthetic condition. Today, Syria is a country with no internal or external dimensions and, by extension, with no borders.

The presence of unprecedented and increasing numbers of Syrian and other Arab intellectuals, academics, and students, is a vice that could be transformed into a virtue. Of course, the vice is the fact that these people were forced to leave their countries without notice and often experienced a deep, rather tragic break with their lifestyle. On the other hand, the virtue is represented in the learning opportunities and the new sensitivity in our new environment, the comparative perspective gradually acquired given that we belong to two worlds at the same time, and the newfound opportunity to move around the world from our new exiles. Furthermore, we have more opportunities to engage in European and international cultural exchange networks which widen our horizons and allow us to influence the world around us. On the other hand, we could possibly internalize the logic and perspective behind these networks, which tend in essence to deny our agency.

In general, this article gives an account of my four-year personal experience in Europe, which is far from being representative given my age and my previous refugee status. I travelled to Germany in 2017. At the time, I was in my late fifties, i.e. older than most refugees and most Syrians, as those over 60 does not exceed 4% of the Syrian population. I did not face debilitating hardships, but rather manageable difficulties. However, this is not the case of most Syrian refugees, both men and women, and especially the youth.

I would like to address the impact that the asylum and exile experience has had on my work and content.

The asylum and exile experience is a frequently debated theme, a constant subject of reflection.

I believe it is important to consider the Syrian situation from a broader perspective, or rather to address the Syrian issue in a broad, global light. This is necessary because the tools to undertake this exercise are now more readily available, compared to when we were within our national borders (not beyond them as is the case today). It is also necessary because, today, not only is the world present in Syria, but Syria is present in the world as well.

There is an entire Syria outside of Syria. It is the fleeing Syria. It is an archipelago spread across the whole world, hosting 30% of Syrians. The Syria inside is actually split into five parts (Golan Heights, Assad protectorate, Idlib, the areas controlled by the US-protected Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Turkey-controlled areas) at the mercy of five occupiers: Israel, Iran, Russia, the US and Turkey. So many borders and so many insides and outsides. Syria today is akin to Muhammad Al Maghout's room with millions of walls. It is a labyrinth with neither an inside nor outside, neither borders nor gateways.

1- According to a UNHCR study from 2021, there are 13.5 million Syrian displaced persons and refugees, i.e. almost half of the population. 6.5 million of them were spread across 128 countries at the time of the report. 80% of them sought refuge in neighbouring countries, especially Turkey. See: <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.

I tried to represent this situation using expressions such as “Syria is a microcosm and the World is a macro-Syria” and “Syria as global metaphor.”

Syria is a metaphor in that it sheds light on the global condition, especially amid the lack of alternatives, with the present on full repeat and the future non-existent.

Today’s world promises nothing, just like Syria. This condition is open to dangerous possibilities. Today, we need an alternative represented in progressive, liberating, and living forces in the face of retrograde alternatives such as the “Alternative for Germany” party, populist nationalist movements, or white supremacy. In the Arab and Islamic contexts, we have the Islamist alternative in its nihilistic jihadism or political subordination (of the Muslim Brotherhood variety).

Does the Syrian situation apply to other Arab countries, in that they are countries without promise, even if they are not all human slaughterhouses like the Assad protectorate?

Germany, which I am somewhat knowledgeable about, is already marked by an Arab cultural presence. This begs the question: Is Berlin not the Arab cultural capital? Do we want it to become a European hub or capital for us all?

Whether we stand beyond or within the borders, it is certainly not possible, and naturally not desirable, to speak of our countries as isolated islands or planets. Global dynamics is inescapable. This is already reflected in our writings, and it should be more so.

Arab groups have the opportunity to meet, talk and collaborate. However, they are not shaped into organized associations. It would be very advantageous for them to become better organized, although it

is easier said than done given our lack of control over the conditions of financial sustainability and independence.

Moreover, our relationship with German organizations is that of patronage rather than collaboration and joint action. This status quo is unlikely to change unless we establish our own organizations and have control over their capacity to continue. There do not seem to be many promising opportunities in that regard.

We have suffered from a series of major political failures which have caused hefty human costs. It is a mix of defeats at the hands of our enemies and losses that have undermined our identity and how we define ourselves. Who are we today? Ten years ago, this question was easier to answer: We are fighting for democracy in our countries. However, today’s battles are broader and more complex. They are no longer only driven by democracy. We do not have a clear sense of self to guide our struggles today. To define ourselves is to engage in conflict. It is itself part of the struggle. Knowledge and art have become key battlegrounds in this conflict.

Is there a place for hope? I believe hope is a choice, not an obligation or something that is thrust upon us, as the great Saadallah Wanous once said, claiming that we have no choice in the matter. I choose hope because I have known misery and it does not tempt me. The choice before us today is to embrace our “beyond the borders” condition and accept the challenge to live in two or more worlds. We have forever lost our old stable world. This could possibly mean an uprooted, severed, and suspended existence, a double life, two or more lives, two or more feelings, two or more ideas.

We belong to two worlds at once: One here, close to us, and another distant; the world of survivors who also belong to the world of those who did not survive, those who are gone without a trace. Because we have survived, it is up to us to carry on and find our place in the future.



Conclusion

Ismail Fayed

Conclusion

Ismail Fayed

Over the course of two years of discussions and dialogue with the Ettijahat team, my dear colleague and friend Jumana Al-Yasiri, and the contributors to this publication, we have addressed fundamental questions related to the concepts of nation, language, and the future of artistic practices in a geographical context being reshaped and in a world striving to engage in fruitful cooperation, lest it face inevitable ruin. Such discussions have shed light on the accumulated political and social experiences since the beginning of the twentieth century, whose impact far exceeds the repercussions (however severe) of the pandemic and the ensuing dissemination of digital practices (which increased exponentially during the pandemic). In our various discussions, we also touched upon the question and usage of language. As Mariem Guellouz mentioned in her article, the crisis of language is not only the result of colonialism, but also of the post-colonial experience and the fact that many Arab regimes established a link between progress and the adoption of one language at the expense of another.

Although these questions are axiomatic, they gave us the opportunity to explore several trajectories, each of which reflected upon the past, present, and future [experiences] of participants from the region. This multidimensional vision was the primary outcome of our discussions. The contributions also showed the potential of artistic and cultural practices and their ability to open up alternative horizons, not only to form a different understanding of the past (as Rasha Salti mentioned in her article), but also to take ownership of that past and affirm that the

region's history is part of broader historical processes that shape (and are also influenced by) developments in that part of the world. These processes predate the experience of the pandemic and the predatory nature of late capitalism, which seeks to dilute any progressive political vision and strip it of its content.

Some participants also stressed the need to take ownership of the region's historical narratives beyond the scope of normative Western perspectives, while others highlighted the importance of the experiences of diaspora communities prior to the Arab revolutions (as in the works and experiences of artists Lina Al Abed and Taysir Batniji) and after them (as in the works of Sulafa Hijazi and Ibi Ibrahim). This openness, which occurs voluntarily or forcibly as a result of expatriation or exile, makes it imperative for everyone involved to address the complexity of the local context and its interconnectedness with global events. As such, our experiences in the region are no longer isolated events that occur at the periphery, but rather the direct consequence of larger political decisions and interests that influence and are in turn influenced by us (as Yassin al-Haj Saleh explains in his article). The fact that all of the participants emphasized the global nature of the Arab revolutions and the numerous questions they brought up impels us, whether we live in the region or abroad, to abandon the concept of the "region's singularity" or the notion that the events in it are "unfolding outside the trajectory of history," as many analysts and experts like to believe. On the contrary, as the title of the conference suggests, our analysis stresses that events in the region reach far beyond any geographical confinement.

When reflecting on the concept of the nation, we usually refer to three main components: land, people, and history, each of which can be defined in a multitude of ways. Language constitutes a fourth component that has recently been added to this equation with the

concept is that of an ethnically homogenous people. Although these components and definitions are important, the participants go beyond them and do not see them as absolute. For example, some believe that the diaspora experience could liberate language (as in the article of Rosa Yassin Hassan) or even disrupt language entirely in times of crisis, giving rise to certain patterns of “logic” or speakers whose voices had been suppressed (as Haytham El Wardany mentions in his article). Our different experiences lead to unique conceptualizations of the “geographies” of our nations, with their material and topographical characteristics, but also the totality of human experiences that transpire with these geographies, interact with them, and are influenced by the different relationships that transcend the confines of space.

Despite all of the challenges it poses - be they political (the rise of right-wing narratives, counterrevolutions, etc.), economic (inflation, the disruption of global trade due to the pandemic, the fossil fuel crisis, etc.) or environmental (climate change and its impact on the cycles of precipitation and drought) - we should see the current era as an opportunity to finally address questions that have long been internationalized or deferred. Our discussions and contributions have shown the complexity of historical trajectories and how they transcend the borders of nation-states and continue to evolve long after the demise of globalization.

More importantly, they reveal the diverse perspectives on people’s sense of belonging to a nation or to an alternative geography. The breadth of imagination, art, and literature enables us to reimagine this sense of belonging and its potential manifestations without ignoring or suppressing our past (as authoritarian regimes often do) or undermining our future in favour of a perpetual and unchanging present.

The openness that diaspora experiences generate and the catastrophes that crises engender give rise to new ideas and perspectives that expand our horizons. Therefore, I am grateful to all the participants for their contributions, as well as to my dear friend and colleague Jumana Al-Yasiri and Ettijahat’s team for inviting us to reflect together upon these questions and to imagine broader spaces and geographies that go beyond the confines imposed by authoritarian regimes or our tragic reality.

Participants in the conference A Moment of Art



Adham Hafez

Curator, theorist, choreographer
Egypt/USA

Theorist, artist and curator, Adham Hafez writes on contemporary art history outside of western paradigms, on choreographic systems, climate change, and postcolonial legacies.

As an artist, he works with installation, choreography, and sound. Currently a PhD candidate at New York University's Performance Studies Department, Adham holds a Master's degree in Political Science and Experimental Arts from SciencePo Paris, in addition to a Master's degree in choreography from Amsterdam University of the Arts, and a Master's degree in Philosophy from New York University.

Fifteen years ago, Adham Hafez founded Egypt's first performance studies and choreography research platform, named HaRaKa (movement, in Arabic), and together with his colleagues they produce publications, pedagogic programs, conferences, and works on the lines of visual and performance practices. Adham is currently part of the editorial team of Cairography Publication (Brussels) and Natya Publication (Montreal), and a Global Fellow of the Middle East Studies Academy.

His latest research looked at the history of the Suez Canal through the lens of the anthropocene, and currently he is writing on apocalyptic representations, pathogens, and nonhuman agents in Middle East politics and arts.

<https://www.adhamhafez.com/>



Enrico De Angelis

Researcher and media expert
Italy/Germany

Enrico De Angelis holds a PhD in Political Communication. He mainly works on new media and public sphere in Syria and Egypt, but also on grassroots media, political communication, and journalism in the MENA region.

He did a post-doc at Cedej, Cairo, between 2012 and 2014 analysing the networked public sphere in Egypt. He is one of the co-founders of the Syrian media platform, SyriaUntold.

He currently works as a media researcher at Free Press Unlimited, and he did several consultancies for organizations such as UNESCO, International Media Support, Hivos, Deutsche Welle, and Canal France International. Enrico has held teaching positions at the American University of Cairo, Roberto Ruffilli Faculty, and the Political Science Faculty at the University of Bologna. He published a monograph on media and conflict, and several articles on media in the MENA region.

Enrico is particularly interested in critical approaches to internet studies and the networked public sphere in the Arab world. He has lived in Berlin since 2016.

syriauntold.com/writer/enrico-de-angelis/



Arafat Sadallah

Researcher
Morocco/France

He is a Moroccan researcher in philosophy based in France.

His research is concerned with the concept of representation in Arab art and thought, and the possibility of the translation of representation's aesthetic and cognitive modalities between worlds and cultures.

Arafat is curator and member of Siwa platform: a laboratory of contemporary Arab world. It's a space for artistic and civic experimentation, trying to inhabit many spaces, such as l'Economat at Redeyef (south of Tunisia), and setting up an alternative network for thinking, creating, and translating.

Arafat Sadallah is also member of the group Exilé.e.s : a collective of artists and researchers working on questions of exile and alien experience.



Chrystele Khodr

Performer, writer and director
Beirut

She is a theater performer, writer and director based in Beirut. She studied theater in the Institute of Fine Arts, Lebanese university and was trained in physical theater at l'École Internationale de Théâtre LASSAAD Brussels-Jacques Lecoq pedagogy. Her work springs from the emergency to reconstitute the collective memory from personal stories. In her most recent projects, Chrystèle is increasingly concerned with the movement of History and its impact on time and narrativity as a basic formal dimension of theater.

Her latest production *Augurs* premiered in May 2021 in Beirut.

In 2017 she co-directed *Temporary Stay* alongside Waël Ali - which was performed in festivals and venues across Europe such as *Les Substances* in Lyon, *Zürcher Theater Spektakel*, *Kaaistudio* in Brussels.

Chrystèle was awarded the Ibsen Scholarship to create an adaptation of the playwright's text *The Pretenders*, and is currently working on a new research cycle around the economical speculation and its impact on narrativity.



Haytham Wardany

Writer, Translator
Egypt - Germany

He is an Egyptian writer of short stories and experimental prose who lives and works in Berlin.

He is the author of *The Book of Sleep* (2017, Alkarma Publishing House, Cairo) and *How to Disappear* (2013, Kayfa Ta Publications, Cairo/2018, Sternberg Press, Berlin/NY).

Forthcoming is a short story collection titled *Irremediable*.



Golrokh Nafisi

Visual artist
Iran

She is an illustrator, animator, and puppet maker born in Isfahan, Iran.

Golrokh studied at the Art University of Tehran in Iran, and at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in the Netherlands.

She experiments with performances in public space, and is interested in discovering new forms of collective action, involving bodies and human ideologies.

Golrokh has frequently exhibited her work in galleries, as interventions and performances, and at film festivals, among which Art Rotterdam in the Netherlands, MACRO in Italy, and Beirut Art Center in Lebanon.

golrokhnafisi.com



Ibi Ibrahim

Visual artist, writer, filmmaker, musician
Yemen/USA

He is the founder of Romooz Foundation; an independent, non-profit foundation dedicated to support contemporary Art and Literature in Yemen.

His projects have received numerous art awards including the Institut Français Artist-in-Residence, the Arab Funds for Arts and Culture, Prince Claus Fund, British Council, RedBull Middle East, Culture Resources and others.

His work is part of a number of public collections including Colorado College, Barjeel Art Foundation, and Durham University Museum.

ibiibrahim.com/



Ismail Fayed

writer, critic and educator
Egypt

A writer, critic and educator based in Cairo.

He has worked with key regional institutions and platforms (Mada Masr, Townhouse Gallery, Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences...etc) and internationally (The Museum of Modern Art in New York).

His interests span a broad range of contemporary artistic practices ranging from visual arts, to performing arts, to contemporary Arabic literature.

In 2016 he co-founded the History and Cultural Memory Forum a series of seminars and publications examining the realities of the Arab world post-2011.

He was the associate editor for the MoMA's publication, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (2018) and has contributed to numerous publications such as *ArteEast*, *Aperture*, *Nafas Art Magazine*, *Nachtkritik*, *Mada Masr*, *Ma3azef*, *Manshoor*, among many others.



Jumana Al-Yasiri

Arts manager, researcher, writer and translator
Syria - France

She has curated and implemented residencies, festivals, conferences, and artists support programs across disciplines and continents.

Her numerous collaborations with key regional and international arts and culture organizations include: Damascus Arab Capital of Culture 2008, the Young Arab Theatre Fund (currently, Mophradat), D-CAF, Med Culture Programme, Moussef Nomadic Arts Center, Hammana Artist House, and the Sundance Institute.

She has also contributed to several cultural policies working groups and publications, with a special focus on the representation of artists and cultural workers from the Arab region and the global south in the arts and culture sectors. As a panelist and writer, she is particularly interested in contemporary artistic diasporas, the construction of identity in exile, postcolonial discourses in the arts, and the geopolitics of imagination.

She has also dedicated a large part of her research to the life and work of Arab-American writer and painter, Etel Adnan.



Lina Alabed

Filmmaker
Palestine - Italy

She is a Palestinian filmmaker, her second short, « Noor Alhuda» was granted the DOX-BOX jury award as best Syrian film in 2010.

She was the producer and director for her feature documentary film «Damascus my first kiss» about women's sexual awareness in Damascus (2013). Followed by "A Dream Of Powerful Monster" a short documentary by Bidayyat Productions, about the nightmares of Syrian refugee children living in a Palestinian camp in Beirut, the documentary was awarded the Arab Short Film Festival jury prize as the best short film in 2014.

Her feature film "Ibrahim, a fate to define" is a documentary about her reconciliation with the disappearance of her father 34 years ago. The documentary was screened in different festivals: TIFF, CPH:DOX, IDFA and has been awarded several prizes.



Omar Abu Saada

**Director and playwright
Syria - Germany**

He is an independent Syrian director and playwright whose work focuses on contemporary writing and documentary theatre.

He co-founded the company Studio Theatre, and in 2004 he directed his first play, *Insomnia*, followed by *L’Affiche* (2006). In 2011, his work took a new shift with plays like *Look at the Streets... This How Hope Looks Like*, and *Could You Please Look at the Camera?* (2012). Later on, he worked on the adaptation of Greek tragedies performed by Syrian refugee women.

His world-wide acclaimed trilogy consists of: *Syrian Trojan Women* (2013), *Antigone of Shatila* (2014), *Iphigenia*, produced by the Volksbühne in 2017. His most recent work include: *The Factory* (Volksbühne and Ruhrtriennale, 2018), and *Damascus 2045*, produced by Powszechny Theater in Warsaw (2019). Omar also runs many workshops in the field of contemporary theatre, writing, and directing. He lives and works in Damascus.



Meriam Bouselmi

**International jurist, writer, director,
lecturer and mediator
Tunisia - Germany**

She studied Law and Political Science in Tunis. She’s been a lawyer registered to the National Order of Lawyers of Tunisia since 2010.

Trained to work in different contexts and different languages, as an international jurist, writer, director, lecturer and mediator, she had the double opportunity/responsibility to conceive, manage and take part in wide-reaching artistic, cultural and legal projects in different countries.

Through ongoing thought-provoking work, she is constantly looking to provide fresh insights into a range of politicized topics surrounding social, political and economic inequalities. Her productions address the topic of instrumentalization, labelization and victimization in the construction of the current dominant intercultural narratives. Her academic and artistic research focus on empowerment and resistance narratives. In 2015, Bouselmi took part in the drafting committee of the “Carthage Declaration for the Protection of Artists in a Vulnerable Situation”.

Since 2017, she has been working regularly with the ARTS RIGHTS JUSTICE Academy (Hildesheim University) to lead workshops and write research articles in the field of Cultural Diversity and Artistic Freedom. As part of her PhD thesis at the University of Hildesheim, she is conducting research on the Staging of Justice and the Relationship between Justice and Theater.



Mariem Guellouz

Choreographer and researcher
Tunisia - France

She is an associate professor at Université Paris Descartes and a researcher at the CERLIS (CNRS).

In addition to being a performer and dancer specializing in dance from the Arab world, she is an academic and researcher in sociolinguistic and discourse analysis.

She was the artistic director of the Carthage Choreographic Days (Tunisia) since its first edition in June 2018.

She is the author of several scientific publications which scrutinize the socio-discursive constructions of the artist's/performer's body in Arab and Muslim countries.

She is carrying out research on the history of dance in the Arab countries and particularly in Tunisia.

She is a performer and trainer in oriental and Maghreb dance where she seeks to combine her theoretical knowledge with her dancing practice.



Ranwa Yehia

Co-founder of the Arab Digital Expression
Foundation (ADEF)
Egypt

She is the co-founder of the Arab Digital Expression Foundation (ADEF), which started in 2005 with a mission to explore and develop alternative education methodologies and knowledge production for and by Arab youth, using open source concepts and tools.

A key project she conceived with ADEF is the Arab Digital Expression Camps, an annual experiential co-learning camp for Arab youth, developed and implemented in collaboration with young techies, artists, journalists, and researchers in the region.

Before moving on to a career versed in methodologies of youth work and education, Ranwa's trajectory with knowledge production was centered on journalism and research, where she spent 15 years covering the Arab region for different regional and international media outlets.

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Rosa Yassin Hassan

**Novelist And Writer
Syria/Germany**

She is a Syrian novelist and writer. She was born in Damascus in 1974, and studied architecture at university.

After graduating in 1998, she became a journalist for various Syrian and Arab periodicals.

Her first published book was a short story collection *A Sky tainted with Light* (2000).

Her first novel was *Ebony* (2004), which won the Hanna Mina Prize. Her third novel, *Hurras al-Hawa* (*Guardians of the Air*, 2009) was longlisted for the 2010 IPAF.

Since 2015, she has been a member of PEN International and has been living in Germany since 2012.



Rasha Salti

**Writer, researcher, curator of art and film
Lebanon/Germany**

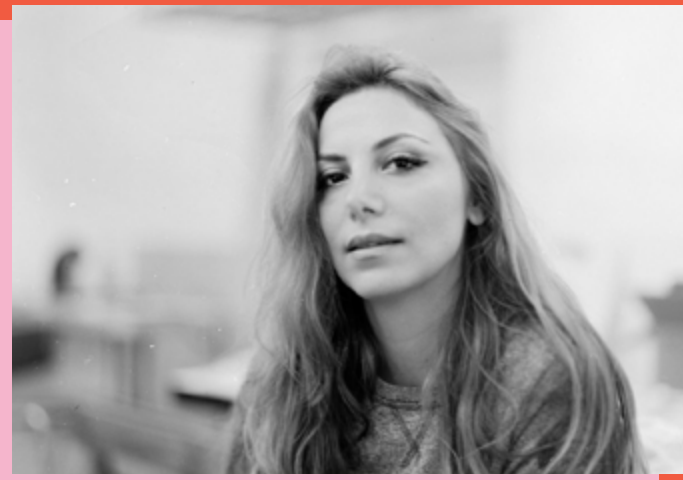
She is an independent writer, researcher, and curator of art and film.

She lives and works between Berlin and Beirut.

She curated several film programs (Lincoln Center, the MoMA, Musée Jeu de Paume) and worked as a programmer at international film festivals including the Abu Dhabi International Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival.

Since 2017, she is the commissioning editor for *La Lucarne* for ArteFrance, the program dedicated to experimental documentary cinema.

She also curated several exhibitions at the MACBA in Barcelona, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende in Santiago de Chile, and the Sursock Museum in Beirut.



Sulafa Hijazi

Director and multimedia artist
Syria/Germany

Born in Damascus, Syria, Sulafa Hijazi is a director and multimedia artist based in Berlin.

She studied at Damascus Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts, where she majored in Theatre Studies.

Sulafa began her career as a writer and director, with a particular focus on children education and social development.

Her animation and multimedia productions are very popular among young audiences in the Arab region. They have been shown on many TV channels and online platforms.

They have also featured in national and international festivals, receiving several awards, such as the best animation award in Hollywood, Russia, India, Cairo, and Iran for her feature animation film, *The Jasmine Birds* (2009). In 2011, Sulafa was involved in the peaceful movement of the Syrian revolution, creating and publishing digital artworks that criticize the political and social oppression.

Due to the diminishing freedom of expression in Syria, Sulafa flew to Frankfurt in 2013 where she studied at the Städelschule Fine Art Academy, and started to experiment with a variety of conceptual and multimedia forms.

Her works have been exhibited in several galleries in Europe and featured in on-line platforms, newspapers, and books, and they are now part of acclaimed art collections such as the British Museum in London, Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, and International Media Support (IMS) in Copenhagen.

sulafahijazi.com/



Taysir Batniji

Visual artist
Palestine - France

He studied art at Al-Najah University in Nablus, Palestine.

In 1994, he was awarded a fellowship to study at the School of Fine Arts of Bourges in France.

Since then, he has been dividing his time between France and Palestine. During this period spent between two countries and two cultures, Taysir has developed a multi-media practice, including drawing, installation, photography, video and performance.

Taysir was awarded the Abraaj Group Art Prize in 2012 and became the recipient of the Immersion residency program, supported by Hermes Foundation, in alliance with Aperture Foundation in 2017.

His works can be found in the collections of many international institutions including the Centre Pompidou and the FNAC in France, the V&A and The Imperial War Museum in London, the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia and Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi.

www.taysirbatniji.com

**A Moment of Art
Beyond the
Boundaries
of Geography**



Yassin al-Haj Saleh

Writer

Syria/Germany

Born in Raqqa, He is now one of Syria's leading and most vocal writers and intellectuals.

Since 2000, he has been writing on political, social, and cultural subjects relating to Syria and the Arab world.

He regularly contributes to regional newspapers and publications, such as Al-Hayat and Al-Quds Al-Arabi. He is the author of nine books including: Syria From Under Shades: Insights from Within the Black Box (2009); The Myths of the Successors: a Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique (2011); Salvation, o Guys: 16 Years in the Syrian Prisons (2012); Culture as Politics: Intellectuals and their Social Responsibility in the time of Monsters (2016); The Impossible Revolution (2017).

His last book: The Atrocious and its Representation was published by Dar al-Jadid in Beirut in 2021.

Yassin is a founding member of al Jumhuriya group that thinks and writes about Syrian affairs since 2012 (aljumhuriya.net).

In 2012, he was awarded the Prince Claus Award, a prize supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs that recognizes intellectuals who make an impact on their societies.. Awarded Omar Ortilan Prize from Alkhabar media institution in Algeria in 2016. In 2017 he was awarded Tucholsky Prize from the Swedish Pen Club. Today, he lives and works in Berlin.



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