



**The Roles of Betweenness:
Visual Narratives by Lebanese and Palestinian Contemporary Artists**

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Index

First Section – Introduction, Methodology, State of the Art	6
1. Introduction and Rationale.	7
2. Research methodology.	16
3. State of the Art and Contextualization of the Research	32
3.1. Introduction to the Concept of Betweenness and to Inside/Outside Experiences.	32
3.2. The Issue of Betweenness in Lebanon and Palestine.	38
3.3. Betweenness Experiences in Palestinian Art History.	41
3.4. Betweenness Experiences in Lebanese Art History	47
3.5. The Role of Art Institutions in Shaping the Concept of Betweenness.	54
3.6. An Overview of Lebanese and Palestinian Artists Engaging with Narratives	61
3.7. Conceptualizing Counter-Narratives	68
3.8. Conclusions of the State of the Art.	71
Second Section – Case Studies.	73
4. Jumana Manna’s <i>Foragers</i> (2021). A Counter-Narrative of Landscape Practices from a Position of Betweenness.	74
4.1. The Debut of <i>Foragers</i> at BAK, Basis voor Actuele Kunst.	74
4.2. Introduction to <i>Foragers</i>	82
4.3. The Ethnographic Methodology in <i>Foragers</i>	83
4.4. An Analysis of <i>Foragers</i> : Examining the Film’s Materials and Sources.	87
4.4.1. Ethnography via Staged Police Interrogations.	87
4.4.2. Landscape Scenes and the Construction of Symbols.	94
4.4.3. Archival Footage and Between-Oriented Storytelling.	96
4.5. Conclusions.	99
5. Jumana Emil Abboud’s Works at documenta 15 (2022): Advocating Folk Knowledge from a Position of Betweenness.	101
5.1. The Context and the Reception of Abboud’s Work in Kassel.	101
5.2. Introduction to Abboud’s Work at documenta 15.	108
5.3. The Research Methodology Behind Abboud’s Artistic Practice.	114
5.4. An Analysis of Abboud’s Works at documenta 15.	116
5.4.1. The Performance <i>My Other Half</i>	116

5.4.2. The Installations at Hafenstraße 76 and at the Brüder Grimm-Museum.	123
5.4.3. Abboud's Last Installation at Hafenstraße 76.	129
5.5. Conclusions	130
6. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's <i>Ismyrna</i> (2016): Betweenness as a Journey Across Personal and Collective Narratives.	132
6.1. The Exhibition <i>In the Heart of Another Country</i> in Hamburg.	132
6.2. Hadjithomas and Joreige's Practice Before <i>Ismyrna</i>	134
6.3. Introduction to <i>Ismyrna</i>	138
6.4. An Analysis of the film <i>Ismyrna</i>	140
6.5. Further Exploration of the Film's Methodologies.	151
6.5.1. <i>Ismyrna</i> 's Auto-Ethnography Methodology.	151
6.5.2. <i>Ismyrna</i> 's Historical Research.	153
6.6. Conclusions.	155
7. Lamia Joreige's <i>Mapping a Transformation</i> (2022): The Impact of the Ottoman Empire's Fall on the Arab World through the Lens of Betweenness	158
7.1. <i>Mapping a Transformation</i> at the 17th Istanbul Biennial and at Marfa' Projects . . .	158
7.2. Lamia Joreige's Artistic Practice Prior to <i>Mapping a Transformation</i>	163
7.3. Introduction to <i>Mapping a Transformation</i>	165
7.4. An Analysis of the Panels in <i>Mapping a Transformation</i>	168
7.5. An Analysis of the Research behind <i>Mapping a Transformation</i>	176
7.5.1. Joreige's Research in the Archives.	176
7.5.2. Re-writing History in <i>Mapping a Transformation</i>	179
7.5.3. Final Reflections on Joreige's Artistic Reinterpretation.	181
7.6. Conclusions.	182
8. Inas Halabi's <i>We No Longer Prefer Mountains</i> (2023): Rewriting the Present of a Community from an Inside/Outside Perspective.	185
8.1. An Overview of the First Exhibitions of the Work.	185
8.2. Introduction to <i>We No Longer Prefer Mountain</i> . The Film's Research Value.	190
8.3. The Use of Oral History in Halabi's Film.	194
8.4. An Analysis of <i>We No Longer Prefer Mountains</i>	197
8.5. <i>Fukeiron</i> : Research Practices in the Landscape.	204
8.6. <i>We No Longer Prefer Mountains</i> : Continuity in Palestinian Landscape Art.	207
8.7. Conclusions.	209

9. Marwa Arsanios' <i>Reverse Shot</i> (2022): Betweenness as a Framework for Cooperative Research.	212
9.1. <i>Reverse Shot</i> shows in London and in Heidelberg	212
9.2. Introduction to <i>Reverse Shot</i> and to Arsanios' Cooperative Research.	219
9.3. Analysis of <i>Reverse Shot</i> .	224
9.4. The Role of Cooperative Research in Shaping the Film's Between Character.	235
9.5. Conclusions.	237
Third Section – Final Comparative Analysis.	240
10. Comparative and Conclusive chapter.	241
10.1. Overview on the Answers to the Key Research Question.	241
10.2. Defining Betweenness: Insights Gained from the Analysis of the Case Studies.	243
10.3. The Role of the Artist-Researcher: The Similar Research Methodologies.	246
10.3.1. The Ethnographic Research of the Artists.	252
10.3.2. Insights into the Artists' Auto-Ethnographic Research.	254
10.3.3. Archival Research: The First Historiographical Method.	256
10.3.4. Oral History: The Second Historiographical Method.	260
10.3.5. Researching Landscape and Its Representations in the Artists' Works.	263
10.3.6. The Role of Cooperative Research in the Artists' Projects.	267
10.3.7. Final Considerations on the Process of Artistic Re-Elaboration.	268
10.4. The Second Role of the Artists: Artists-Mediators.	272
10.4.1. Parergon and Other Mediation Strategies.	273
10.4.2. An Overview of the Different Types of Translation.	277
10.5. Final Reflections on the Art Venues Examined.	281
10.6. Final Reflections: An Ongoing Challenge Ahead.	284
11. Bibliography.	286
11.1. Online References.	293
11.2. List of Interviews.	296
11.3. Visual and Cinematic Works Cited.	297
11.4. List of Figures.	300
12. Figures.	301

First Section

Introduction, Methodology, State of the Art

1. Introduction and Rationale

This dissertation examines the works of several Lebanese and Palestinian artists. It assigns a visual-narrative quality to their works and delves into the nature of these visual narratives. On the one hand, I argue that the works are ‘visual’ since they belong to the field of visual arts. The artists have developed them through various media, but primarily through the medium of film. On the other hand, the adjective ‘narrative’ holds several meanings. First, I use it to refer to the works’ ability to narrate and tell stories. The stories the works tell are all related to Lebanon or Palestine’s history, culture, and traditions. Second, I use it to illustrate the works’ ability to narrate and convey a specific perspective on the issues they address. Indeed, the works reflect the artists’ intention to engage with how specific aspects of Lebanese and Palestinian history and culture are narrated. For this reason, I argue that the works I examine both engage with existing narratives or/and create counter-narratives. At times, they seek to complicate narratives that have become conventional. At other times, they explicitly challenge hegemonic narratives, presenting them before refuting them to construct counter-narratives.

A second aspect that unites the works considered in this dissertation concerns the artists’ biography. Indeed, the artists all have a situation I define as ‘betweenness’. They have their roots in Lebanon or Palestine. Some were born there, while others were born abroad to Lebanese or Palestinian parents and then lived in Lebanon or Palestine. All of them now lead lives and careers ‘between places’: both ‘inside’ Lebanon or Palestine and ‘outside’, in a particular European country. I argue that the term ‘betweenness’ best captures the unique circumstances of the artists’ lives and work. In the chapter State of the Art, I will explain that many scholars in recent decades have used the term ‘in-betweenness’ to describe a situation of double inscription of writers or artists. ‘In-betweenness’, however, indicates a third space between two different poles. It implies the creation of a hybrid language that combines elements from different places. This is not the case with the artists under study here. With the term ‘betweenness’ I want to indicate how they actually live and work ‘between’ different places: both in one place and in another. Thus, the term ‘betweenness’ signifies their ongoing movement between various poles and their active engagement in multiple locations’ cultural and intellectual life.

These are the premises of the dissertation. First, there are artistic projects by Lebanese and Palestinian artists with a ‘visual narrative’ character. Second, the artists who create such projects live and work in a situation of ‘betweenness’ – ‘between’ Lebanon or Palestine and some countries in Europe. In this research, I aim to integrate these two aspects. I aim to examine the potential effects and mutual influences of these unique characteristics that define the artists’ works. The key research question that guides the dissertation is therefore: How does the ‘between’ position of an artist influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? As I mentioned earlier, all the works narrate stories connected to the history, culture, and traditions of Lebanon and/or Palestine. Is there an impact that the artists’ ‘betweenness’ has had on the narratives that such works construct? And if so, what is it? My initial hypothesis is that such an impact exists, that it is multifaceted, and that it can emerge directly from the analysis of the works.

To answer this question, I consider six case studies in the dissertation. These consist of six specific works produced between the second and third decades of the XXI century by six different artists: three Lebanese and three Palestinian. They are the Lebanese Lamia Joreige, the duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Marwa Arsanios, and the Palestinians Jumana Manna, Jumana Emil Abboud, and Inas Halabi. In my research, I emphasize the existence of a common thread that connects their works. This thread encompasses how the works are created, their artistic and technical aspects, and the themes they explore. I selected these works because they particularly highlight the various urgencies that inform this research. This introduction will later explain what these urgencies are. The combination of narrative visual artworks and a situation of ‘betweenness’ of the artists is not a prerogative of Lebanese and Palestinian artists. However, I argue that in the case studies of this dissertation, such issues are particularly evident and thus urgent to address. Despite the artists hailing from different countries (Lebanon and Palestine), I argue that their works exhibit technical-artistic and content-related affinities that render them comparable.

I do not assert that the corpus of this research is entirely exhaustive. The dissertation could have included additional examples of artworks that combine a narrative quality with the ‘betweenness’ of their creators. However, I argue that the works I have chosen make the research question particularly clear and that together, through a comparative study, they allow specific answers to be found. I do not claim that this research is representative of a hypothetical

contemporary Lebanese or Palestinian art scene. My research addresses artists who work in a situation of ‘betweenness’. It could potentially be expanded to include other artists, even from different countries, who create geographical entanglements distinct from those explored here. However, I leave this challenge for other researchers who may wish to pursue it. The dissertation is structured into three sections. The first section includes this introduction, a chapter on research methodology, and the chapter on the State of the Art, which also provides the theoretical contextualization of my research. The second section comprises several chapters, each focusing on a specific case study. Together, they develop the different answers to the research question. Finally, the third section offers a comparative analysis, summarizing the findings and drawing conclusions.

As I mentioned earlier, various urgencies and factors of interest influenced my selection of works by these Lebanese and Palestinian artists. I will introduce them here, as they will serve as a framework for analyzing the artworks. The first urgency is the increasing presence in Europe of artists who have made a career out of a position of ‘betweenness’. Many of them come from the Arab world. This research examines only some of them and, therefore, considers only some specific geographical connections. Situations of ‘betweenness’ occur in the global art scene, where we increasingly encounter works by artists living between places A and B. These artists navigate trajectories that link local (that I refer to as ‘inside’) and international (that I refer to as ‘outside’) realities. The proliferation of this phenomenon and the necessity to study it represent the primary urgency that informs this research. This dissertation aims to contribute to the study of situations of ‘betweenness’. Through specific examples, it seeks to answer questions such as: How do such ‘inside-outside’ trajectories affect the artists’ work? What does it mean for them to live and work in different places, ‘between’ an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’? In the State of the Art, I will examine more in detail such concepts of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. For now, it suffices to say that studying these dynamics involves analyzing the ongoing evolution of the artistic community in Europe and beyond. Thus, this research moves away from national or nationalist narratives of art history in order to study the ‘betweenness’ of the artists. Therefore, I frame and contextualize any reference to a supposedly ‘Palestinian’ or ‘Lebanese’ history of art within a historical perspective.

The second urgency driving this research pertains to the technical and artistic aspects of the works under examination. These aspects highlight one of the similarities that prompted me to

bring them together in this dissertation. I previously explained that the works are mainly films. However, in the context of the art exhibitions, they also involve other artistic media. How do artists translate their stories into the languages of the visual arts and into inter-media installations (which combine different media)? In addition to a narrative character, I attribute a documentary character to the works. My research thus contributes to studying the ‘documentary turn’ in the visual arts, exploring the convergence of artistic and documentary practices. The ‘documentary turn’ (Bruzzi 2006, Bellan 2007, Caillet 2014, Balsom and Peleg 2016) is nothing new in art history. I argue, however, that despite decades of commitment by art historians, the story of such ‘turn’ is not yet over. While my research situates the works within the history of documentary practices by Lebanese and Palestinian artists, it subsequently focuses on the second and third decades of the 21st century. In doing so, I seek to answer questions such as: what are the characteristics and role can the ‘documentary turn’ play in this historical period? How can this ‘turn’ involve media other than film? I hypothesize that the answers to these questions regarding the technical and artistic aspects of the works can reveal insights into the intertwining of narratives and the ‘betweenness’ of the artists.

The third urgency and reason for interest of this research focuses on the art venues that exhibited the artworks and how they functioned and operated. This will be a central focus of the analysis of each case study, emphasizing art venues in different European countries. Indeed, I argue that it is essential to examine not only the artists’ alternative narratives and counter-narratives regarding the history and culture of Lebanon and/or Palestine but also how art institutions respond to and support them. How do these institutions behave? Do they support and guide the artists or, conversely, do they hinder their efforts? What do these possible behaviors tell us about the evolution of the artistic landscape in Europe and beyond? What role do the venues play in the artists’ ‘betweenness’? To answer these questions, I analyze the strategies behind the exhibitions, the political stances that these venues adopted or sidestepped, and the implications of those positions. Overall, my research arises from the need to understand how art institutions can play a social (or political) role today and whether they support artists who seek to position themselves as social actors.

The fourth urgency of my research is the presence and functioning of narratives from Lebanon or Palestine on European territory. In this regard, contextualizing this research within its historical moment is essential. I am writing during a time of profound uncertainty. In fact,

throughout the last year (2023/2024) while conducting this research, the war on Gaza erupted. The ongoing war (as I write) shows no signs of abating, and the likelihood of escalating hostilities spilling into Lebanese territory seems increasingly probable. These events have profoundly affected the Arab world, the European community, and the Arab diaspora living in Europe. They have accentuated the growing polarization in Europe regarding the coexistence of different communities. This polarization predates the war, but has become more evident and widespread because of it. A crucial aspect of this situation revolves around solidarity with the Palestinian cause. This solidarity encompasses both the Palestinian community and all the communities that align with its demands, including segments of the Lebanese community. The polarization is readily apparent and is reflected in the art world. On one pole, some art spaces in Europe keep on organizing awareness-raising and solidarity events. On the other hand, there is a continuous succession of cases of censorship and disinvitations, as well as public debates and controversies.¹ How does such a situation affect artists who live in a situation of ‘betweenness’ that involves Europe? Conversely, what answers can the art world and the artists themselves give? What role can the artists’ counter-narratives about the history of the region play in this context?

At the time of writing this thesis, it is not yet possible to draw definitive conclusions about the unraveling events. Nevertheless, this research aspires to serve as a modest witness to a historical moment of great social meaning, from the vantage point of the art world. As a researcher, I firmly believe that examining the unfolding present, even during its most uncertain moments, is a vital aspect of academic inquiry. The works under examination do not constitute a real-time commentary on the unfolding events that I mentioned. They highlight aspects of the contemporary and historical realities of Lebanon or Palestine that mainstream Western media often overlook. I hypothesize that the works, with their gaze on both the present and the past of Lebanon or Palestine, can play an important social role in the polarized societies of contemporary Europe. I hypothesize that they can offer an alternative perspective on neglected

¹ A list of some of the censored exhibitions in Germany between 2023 and 2024 includes for example: the exhibition devoted to Afrofuturism curated by Anaïs Duplan at the Museum Folkwang in Essen (set to open on November 24, 2023); the *Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie* curated by Shahidul Alam (scheduled in Mannheim for March 2024); the exhibition of the South African Jewish artist Candice Breitz at the Saarland Museum in Saarbrücken; the exhibition of Johanna Hedva planned for the Kunstverein Braunschweig (set to open on March 16th, 2024); an exhibition of the artist Johanna Tagada Hoffbeck in an unspecified German museum in January 2024.

issues, helping to frame even the most pressing questions of the present that may initially seem distant from the works.

In this introduction, I have so far listed some of the urgencies that have inspired me to undertake this research. These urgencies pertain to collective interests. They reflect issues that impact society as a whole and are mirrored in the art world. Thus, they speak to the importance of art not only as an aesthetic but also as a social fact. They raise questions about the role art can play in complicating the narratives that surround us and, ultimately, in crafting counter-narratives. As I will point out in the methodology chapter, I have approached the research in two ways. On the one hand, I developed it in a dialogical way. Discussions, interviews, conversations were fundamental to its realization. On the other hand, the research was also an individual journey. It was a continuous discovery, rediscovery, questioning, especially of my position as a researcher.

The chapter on research methodology that follows this introduction will delve into issues of positionality in greater detail from a methodological perspective. Here, I will briefly highlight some aspects of it to illustrate another perspective from which this research originated and evolved. Almost all of the texts on Palestine and Lebanon that I cite in this research begin with a preface about the authors' connections to these countries. The authors often link aspects of their personal life to their research. This is not the case with this research. I have no biographical ties with Lebanon or Palestine. I embrace an 'outsider' position, which constitutes the perspective of this research. By 'outsider,' I mean that I lack personal connections and life experiences in Palestine or Lebanon. However, while living in the West, I am continually exposed to various narratives about these regions, both within and beyond the art world. Indeed, I discovered the artworks through my life experiences across various locations on the European continent. I mainly analyze them in the way they featured art exhibitions in Europe. This is where the artists and their narratives travel to. Thus, this research is also an experiment. It reflects the potential response of a researcher studying works created elsewhere that travel to where the researcher lives, eliciting reactions based on how they are presented in that context.

A crucial aspect of this research was also the place where I conducted it: Germany. I lived here throughout my research. This is also where I learned what it means to be confronted with a distorted narrative of one's own country abroad. This led me to reflect on what it means for a Palestinian or Lebanese artist to face a distorted narrative and to consider the origins of their

desire to present an alternative narrative that more accurately reflects reality. In general, it helped me understand what it means to be in a context where locals believe they know you and the history of your country, while their understanding is often limited to a stereotypical narrative perpetuated by mainstream media. Hence, I became interested in the role of art in this context, the power that artists have to create alternative narratives.

In Germany I also learned that issues concerning the Arab world are not perceived in the same way in every European country, as each country has its own historical relationship with them. In my experience, I have noticed how research on sensitive topics is received differently across various contexts. I encountered one of the most striking examples of such differences while attending conferences in various European countries. For example, at the 2023 annual conference of BRISMES (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies) in England, I witnessed how the organization embraced the BDS movement's (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) call to boycott Israeli academic institutions. BDS is publicly frowned upon in Germany. This is because in 2019, the German Bundestag passed a resolution against it, describing it as an anti-Semitic initiative. During a conference in Germany, I experienced an unwelcome interruption while presenting on the work of Israeli artist Yael Bartana. A member of the audience aggressively questioned why I was discussing topics about which I supposedly "lacked expertise" and why I was not focusing on issues from my own country. This is not to fall into generalizations, or suggest that there is no freedom of speech or lack of spaces for open dialogue and fruitful exchange within the German academic community. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that conducting research on Palestine in Germany can be particularly challenging. This was not my personal experience, though I acknowledge my position of privilege as a European citizen without a public role that would make me particularly visible. However, it is essential to highlight this potential situation. I believe that it is part of the researcher's role to witness what they have experienced during their research, precisely because the context of its realization is inextricably part of the research itself.

Regarding the challenges of discussing the Palestinian issue in Germany, researchers within and beyond the academic community have conducted substantial studies in the past years. Some examples are by scholar Sarah El Bulbeisi, who in her book *Tabu, Trauma und Identität:*

Subjektkonstruktionen von PalästinenserInnen in Deutschland und der Schweiz (2020)² traces the experience of Palestinians in Germany from 1960 to 2015, or scholar A. Dirk Moses, who in his paper “Affective Colonization as Minority Management” (2022) elaborates on the “German frame” and how in Germany “Palestinians are bidden to feel and experience the world like the German political class if they want public employment or be active in public life: adopting its interpretative frame of reference in relation to the country’s politics and history”.³ Journalist David Kattenburg has written for *Mondoweiss* about “The dangers of advocating for Palestine in Germany” (2022);⁴ researcher Amro Ali on “The Moral Imagination Crisis in Germany’s Approach to Palestine” (2024);⁵ journalist Jad Salfiti has realized for the newspaper *The New Arab* a report titled “How Germany’s history of antisemitism is used to silence pro-Palestine activism”, published a few months before the beginning of the war in Gaza in 2023;⁶ scholars Hanna Al-Taher and Anna-Esther Younes has written an article titled “Lebensraum, geopolitics and race—Palestine as a feminist issue in German-speaking academia” (2023), about the “silence and ideological erasures of Palestine in German-speaking terrains of higher education”.⁷

These themes may seem incongruous for a dissertation in art history. However, the general climate I outlined here directly affects the art world in Germany and internationally. Furthermore, nearly all the works I examine include counter-narratives about Palestine, and many of the artists under study reside in Germany. My dissertation, therefore, aims to be a modest yet significant contribution to the normalization of research on Palestine and the Arab world in Germany. I intend to follow the path outlined by scholar Muriel Asseburg in her 2021

² Sarah El Bulbeisi, *Tabu, Trauma und Identität: Subjektkonstruktionen von PalästinenserInnen in Deutschland und der Schweiz*, Berlin 2020.

³ Moses, A. Dirk. 2022: “Affective Colonization as Minority Management”. In: *RePLITO*, February 2022. <https://doi.org/10.21428/f4c6e600.866f046e>.

⁴ Kattenburg, David: “The dangers of advocating for Palestine in Germany”. In: *Mondoweiss*. Last visited: 18.05.2025.

<https://mondoweiss.net/2022/06/the-dangers-of-advocating-for-palestine-in-germany/>

⁵ Ali, Amro: “The Moral Imagination Crisis in Germany’s Approach to Palestine”. Last visited: 18.05.2025. In: <https://amroali.com/2024/01/the-moral-imagination-crisis-in-germanys-approach-to-palestine/>

⁶ “How Germany’s history of antisemitism is used to silence pro-Palestine activism”, YouTube, uploaded by The New Arab, 6th June 2023. Last visited: 18.05.2025.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=audD1w_cKuI&list=PL45reKQdXWKt0paqocJDrlcPe1NdjmNws&index=8&t=2s

⁷ Al-Taher, Hanna / Younes, Anna-Esther. 2023: “Lebensraum, geopolitics and race—Palestine as a feminist issue in German-speaking academia”. In: *Ethnography*, Volume 25, Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381231216845>

publication in German on Palestinian history from the *Nakba* to the present. In the book's preface, Asseburg explains how the relationship with Israel has strongly influenced the "*bundesdeutsche Nachkriegsidentität*" (West German post-war identity). She argues that while there have always been many books, novels, documentaries, and films about the history of Israel in Germany, there are (at least until 2021, when she writes) many *Lücken* (gaps) regarding Palestine. She also writes that when these documents concern Palestine, they are often very problematic:

“Was hingegen auffällt, ist, wie sehr die Wahrnehmung der Palästinenser durch Klischees – sei es als Terroristen, Ewiggestrige oder reine Opfer – geprägt ist, wie stark israelische Deutungen dabei eine Rolle spielen und wie wenig Fakten über die Geschichte Palästinas bekannt sind. Auch in der aktuellen Berichterstattung werden palästinensische Perspektiven kaum berücksichtigt, und falls doch, dann werden entsprechende Positionen meist aufgrund der deutschen historischen Erfahrung statt der Lebensrealität vor Ort bewertet. Palästinensische Persönlichkeiten aus Politik, Kultur und Wissenschaft sind, mit wenigen Ausnahmen, bei uns kaum bekannt“.⁸

Thus, Asseburg wanted to contribute with her writing to act against these *Lücken*. My dissertation seeks to join this effort by exploring the work of *Palästinensische Persönlichkeiten aus Kultur*, namely the artists. It joins the work of many other researchers who have worked like Asseburg in recent years. I have written in English in order to have a wider audience than the German one, but I still place the research in Germany, where I carried it out.

⁸ “What is striking, however, is how much the perception of Palestinians is shaped by clichés - whether as terrorists, old-fashioned people or mere victims - how strongly Israeli interpretations play a role in this and how few facts are known about the history of Palestine. Even in current reporting, Palestinian perspectives are hardly considered, and if they are, then the corresponding positions are usually assessed on the basis of German historical experience rather than the reality of life on the ground. Palestinian personalities from politics, culture and science are, with a few exceptions, hardly known in our country”. Translation from German by Giacomo Paci.
Asseburg, Muriel: *Palästina und die Palästinenser: eine Geschichte von der Nakba bis zur Gegenwart*. München 2023. P. 4.

2. Research methodology

My dissertation investigates the possible effects that the particular situation of ‘betweenness’ of some Lebanese and Palestinian artists has had on some visual narrative works they created between the second and third decades of the twenty-first century. These artists live and work ‘between’ Lebanon or Palestine, where they have their roots, and several European countries. The key research question is: How does the ‘between’ position of an artist influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origins, Lebanon or Palestine? This question encompasses multiple elements that I will explore throughout the research, as I mentioned in the introduction. This chapter presents such elements from a methodological perspective. This methodological introduction further introduces the research, justifying my choices for its realization. The research methodology includes several parts that I will discuss in turn: the bibliographical references, the interviews that I carried out, and the experiences of travels and exhibitions.

To answer the research question, I selected a corpus of six different case studies: six specific works by six different artists, three Lebanese and three Palestinian. There are several reasons for such selection. These reasons include the works’ artistic value and similar technical characteristics; their ability to reveal something about the artists’ position of ‘betweenness’; the recurring similar artistic research behind them; their creation of alternative narratives or counter-narratives; some specific exhibitions that have presented them and that have shed light on their ‘between’ position; and the recurring themes they address. The works weave together narratives of Lebanese and Palestinian history and culture, often intertwining their subjects, which intersect in significant ways despite originating in different contexts. The selected artists do not all belong to the same generation, but they are all well established. In fact, their success enables them to play an established role in the public sphere, both in Palestine or Lebanon and in Europe. As a result, it is easier to assess the social impact of their work, as it often takes on a significant public dimension. My decision to focus on one specific work from each artist stemmed from a need to closely examine and compare the alternative narratives or counter-narratives they present. Each case study represents a complex project requiring years of work, preparation, and execution. Consequently, analyzing them required the same level of attention. Nevertheless, I present each work as part of a lengthy and intricate trajectory (the artists’ careers), rather than

as isolated or singular representations of their portfolios. In fact, the selected artists also address issues beyond Lebanon or Palestine in other artworks of theirs.

My dissertation adopts a transnational perspective. First, it brings together artworks that tell stories from both Lebanon and Palestine. Second, it considers exhibitions that took place in different countries. In doing so, I follow the example of other scholars who have previously delineated similar comparative trajectories: from Silvia Naef (1996) to Zeina Maasri (2020) to Hanan Toukan (2021). These scholars have articulated clear justifications for their choice of comparative studies. Naef, in her 1996 volume *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, sought to explore the concept of modernity in the visual arts of the three countries she considered the most “*répresentatifs du mouvement artistique moderne*”:⁹ Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq. She writes that her choice was not *arbitraire*, but motivated by several issues that she believed connected these countries: for example, the significance and diversity of modern artistic movements, as well as the concurrent engagements with modern Western artistic traditions. Maasri, on the other hand, in her book *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* (2020), frequently explores the interplay between Palestinian and Lebanese artistic phenomena, focusing on the artistic and political connections that emerged in cosmopolitan Beirut during the 1960s. Finally, Toukan’s *The Politics of Art - Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan* (2021) is a comparative study of three cities in these countries: Beirut, Amman and Ramallah. She acknowledges an oft-repeated “old adage” that has led to many comparative studies of different countries of the Arab world over the years (“Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads”). Still, she distances herself from it by proposing her own original choice. She acknowledges the historical differences among the places she studies, yet she aims to illustrate how, since the 1990s, various issues have created common ground among them. In particular, she discusses how analogous structures have shaped the contemporary art scenes in the three cities, which consequently “were able to consolidate their places as safe havens for internationally funded civil society and democratization projects”.¹⁰

Writings such as those of Naef, Maasri, and Toukan have inspired the comparative nature of my dissertation. They illustrate how a comparative perspective across multiple contexts can enhance our understanding of specific phenomena. Such a perspective can reveal whether such

⁹ Naef, Silvia: *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe*. Genève 1996. P. 21.

¹⁰ Ivi. P. 21.

phenomena are localized or transnational, and what the specific similarities and differences are. With a comparative perspective, I wanted to show that ‘betweenness’ is not a phenomenon that concerns a single geographical context. It is part of the various facets that characterize migration and globalization in the 21st century, which the art world mirrors. Additionally, the works under examination inherently prompt the need for comparison. Indeed, they deal with issues that concern both Lebanon and Palestine. Sometimes, they speak explicitly of these two places together. At other times, they tackle issues that affect both. Finally, the artists themselves frequently intertwine movements in Lebanon and Palestine due to both biographical and professional reasons. Through my dissertation, I wanted to highlight and analyze all of this.

The bibliography of the dissertation consists of several parts. Here, I will briefly outline the different parts and some of the concepts they contain, which I will explore in greater detail throughout the text. First, the research drew on several art historical texts that focus on artists from Lebanon and Palestine. These have been crucial in contextualizing the themes of ‘betweenness’ in the Lebanese and Palestinian cases, of artists creating counter-narratives, and of all the derived themes my research addresses. This art-historical survey provided a contextualized understanding of the research’s origins and helped develop its foundational premises. My research refers to texts that are not in Arabic. The texts it refers to are primarily written in English and French. They target a diverse readership, including those ‘outside’ Lebanon and Palestine, and reflect the transnational perspective of my dissertation. As I mentioned in the introduction, this study does not aim to provide an exhaustive exploration of issues within a so-called local scene. Moreover, I considered both art historical texts in the strict sense and texts that deal with cultural aspects useful for the analysis of the artworks. The authors I considered range from Kamal Boullata to Bashir Makhoul, from Tina Sherwell to Hoda El Shakry, from Elias Chad to Hanan Toukan, from Suzanne Cotter to Atteqa Ali. In the next chapter, State of the Art, I will explore their work in depth.

Secondly, I incorporated a series of texts on the modern and contemporary history of Lebanon and Palestine, which significantly informed my research. Indeed, the selected artworks construct narratives that delve into historical events. Consequently, it was essential to consult historical texts dealing with these events in order to assess the artworks’ veracity. This made it possible to verify the reliability of the artists’ narratives and to compare their research methods with those of historians and other researchers. This comparison between artists and researchers

also revealed the role the artists play in producing knowledge. It allowed me to learn how certain techniques employed by artists in creating counter-narratives mirror methodologies commonly found in the academic realm. This was most evident in a comparison with methodologies such as oral history. For the history of Palestine, such a comparison included the works of Diana Allan, Rosemary Sayigh, and Nur Masalha, who have made significant contributions to this field. Simultaneously, examining the methodologies used by Lebanese artists in crafting historical narratives alongside those employed by scholars of Lebanese history – ranging from Kamal Salibi to Fawwaz Traboulsi to Andrew Arsan – proved invaluable. I also framed the artists' counter-narratives through a set of concepts that have characterized a certain writing of history 'from below' and from an anti-hegemonic perspective. The first concept is Walter Mignolo's 'border thinking', which Mignolo defines as a way of "absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern".¹¹ The second concept is Ariella Azoulay's notion of 'unlearning imperialism' which emphasizes how imperialist narratives become hegemonic, and how such dominance creates a pressing need for alternative narratives that challenge and counteract this process. The third concept is Mostafa Minaqwi's idea of 'microhistory' which explores how to rewrite history from silenced or often marginalized perspectives.

Third, my analysis of the case studies required a set of theoretical references in order to more effectively contextualize the numerous aspects that the works of the artists in question illuminate. To gain further insight into the concept of 'betweenness', I drew on the work of prominent writers and theorists who have explored this notion in the Lebanese and Palestinian contexts and beyond: from Amin Maalouf to Edward Said to Yasir Suleiman, from Nikos Papastergiadis to Daniella Trimboli, from Homi Bhabha to Stuart Hall. One of the central tenets of my dissertation is that the artists in question operate as artist-researchers. The artists' common methodology unites their visual narratives, primarily rooted in historical and ethnographic research. Once again, a comparison with researchers from the academic world and their working methods was necessary in order to analyze these artists' methodologies. One final aspect of the artists' research focuses on specific practices within both natural and urban landscapes, exploring various ways to uncover the political and historical layers they conceal. To analyze

¹¹ Mignolo, Walter: *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton 2000. P. 12.

their similar approaches, I referred to the theories of scholars such as Jacques Rancière, Paul Rodaway, Rebecca Solnit, and Michel Serres. In their writings, I found ways of interpreting the landscape and the relationship ‘between’ humans and nature that reflect some facets of the artworks.

Regarding the technical aspects of the artworks, my analysis focused mainly on their documentary nature. To this end, I referred to various studies in documentary theory by scholars such as Aline Caillet, Stella Bruzzi, and Erika Balsom. In their writings, I found the tools to examine the intersection between documentary practices and artistic practices that the artworks feature. Caillet’s research was beneficial because of the way she explores the connections between documentary practices and ethnographic methods. This, in turn, is a fundamental characteristic of the artworks under study. I primarily drew on writings of installation theory to examine how these artworks are mediated within exhibitions. In particular, it was essential to analyze how the artists create video installations, often reproducing ‘black box’ (commercial cinema) strategies within the spaces of art venues (‘white cube’). Thus, the studies of scholars such as Anne Ring Petersen, Julian Rebentisch, and Andrew V. Uroskie were useful in interpreting these installations as ‘hybrid forms’ between visual art and cinema. Beyond installation theory, I also considered aspects of translation, as my research explores how artists mediate local histories internationally. This meant looking at linguistic translation, where the writings of scholars like Umberto Eco were useful, and visual translations. To analyze the visual translations meant to understand how the artists found non-linguistic ways to translate their stories. My answers ranged from affective strategies (here, Jill Bennett’s theories on ‘affect contagion’ and the affective power of images were particularly useful) to Madelaine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal’s theory of ‘intersemiotic translation’ or non-literary translations (‘intra-semiotic’) that make connections between “different cultures and media”.

Conducting interviews was another essential part of the methodology of my dissertation. My interviews addressed both the artists who created the works and other actors of the art world, and I refer to them throughout the text as additional research material. The interviews with the artists were in-depth and semi-structured, which according to the definition of Janice M. Morse “consist of a question stem, to which the participant may respond freely” and where “probing

questions, planned or arising from the participant's response, may be asked".¹² Some questions were indeed recurring, centering on the artists' relationship with the distance from their country of origin, the concept of 'betweenness', and their involvement in the artistic milieu of various locations. In contrast, other questions emerged organically during the interviews, concerning specific elements of their work and artistic research.

The consideration of ethical issues was an important aspect of the interview process. The artistic projects under study have a strong political dimension, occasionally addressing issues of colonial violence and oppression. In addition, the exhibitions often addressed such sensitive issues and created spaces for debate. I am not mentioning research ethics here to preempt any potentially compromising statements that may arise within my dissertation: there will be none. All my references to problematic aspects surrounding the exhibitions are verifiable through publicly available information sources. I mention ethical considerations here to situate the following research within a broader ethical framework. Indeed, I intend to emphasize that, as a researcher, I was aware of the challenging nature of the subject matter. I take full responsibility for the content of this dissertation. Furthermore, I consider myself part of a community of researchers who adhere to the highest ethical standards. I strove to establish a relationship of trust and mutual respect with the people I interviewed, as I believe this is one of the fundamental responsibilities of contemporary academic researchers.

As I explained, I used my interviews as supplementary reference material for the case studies' chapters. I have tried to ensure a reasonable and judicious use of the artists' words. At the same time, I claim the legitimacy to use their words to elucidate their particular lived experiences and their position of 'betweenness', as this is one of the central aspects of my research project. Indeed, the analysis of their works connects to examining the artists' positions, aiming to understand how their counter-narratives function and what roles they play.

With this methodological choice, I am aware that I enter a decades-long debate on the legitimacy of using the artist's words in the analysis of their work. Since the 1960s, the topic has been much debated, especially when scholars such as Roland Barthes declared "*la mort de l'auteur*" ("the death of the author", essay published in 1968). Barthes studied the path that in "Western literary modernity" led to "*désacraliser l'image de l'Auteur*", up to the "*éloignement*

¹² Morse in: Gubrium, Jaber F.: *The Sage Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*. Thousand Oaks 2012. P. 197.

de l'Auteur”, the distancing of the author from their work. According to Barthes, the literary work becomes an unconstrained entity that the reader encounters independently of the author’s interpretation (“*la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur*”, “the birth of the reader is paid with the death of the author”).¹³ Such statements have found their place also in the art-historical debate. Lucia Farinati and Jennifer Thatcher in their preface to a work on the relationship between oral history and art history cite an anecdote where “formalist art critic Clement Greenberg” warned “fellow critic Irving Sandler” that no artist “like no public figure should be taken at his own word”, and that “in the end you do yourself a disservice by that acceptance”.¹⁴ Despite the potential for conflicting opinions that researchers may encounter, there exists a substantial history of the ‘artist interview’. Scholars like Reva Wolf, along with Linda Sandino and Matthew Partington, have meticulously reconstructed this history in their book *Oral History in the Visual Arts*.

As for my research, I acknowledge Greenberg’s advice, without declaring the ‘death of the author’ like Barthes. Indeed, one of the most pertinent aspect of the artworks I analyze is the presence of the artists within them, the ‘I’ that emerges from them. Hence, an analysis of this ‘I’ proved fundamental. Furthermore, I wanted to analyze the public role that the artists assume from their position of ‘betweenness’ and their role in creating counter-narratives. In doing so, I claim continuity with a certain historical-artistic tradition that has dealt with artists who have created visual narratives. In particular, with this research, I assert continuity with the perspective of Italian art historian Augusto Gentili. In the preface to his book on the visual stories painted by Carpaccio in Venice, Gentili describes his iconological method for identifying images, interpreting allegories, and reading stories in paintings. Concerning the role of the painter who paints stories, he writes that the art historian “exalts, instead of reducing it to the modes of transcription/execution, the role of the artist as a wise organizer of the text, of the discourse, of the language of figurative stories, precisely as a conscious organizer and participant in their meaning”.¹⁵ Likewise, I argue that searching for the voice of the artists in my research, for their ‘I’, was part of such ‘exaltation’ of the role of the artist, of their being ‘conscious and participant’ in the stories they tell, and of their ability to play a role from their position of ‘betweenness’.

¹³ Barthes, Roland / Heath, Stephen: *Image, Music, Text: Essays*. London 1977. P. 142.

¹⁴ Farinati, Lucia / Thatcher, Jennifer: *Theorizing the Artist Interview*. New York 2025. P. 3.

¹⁵ Gentili, Augusto: *Le Storie Di Carpaccio: Venezia, i Turchi, Gli Ebrei*. Venezia 1996. P.14. Translation from Italian to English by Giacomo Paci.

Ultimately, I aimed to connect my research with the tradition of using artist interviews in the study of Lebanese and Palestinian art history. Scholar Tina Sherwell claims the use of interviews already to realize her doctoral thesis (2003), writing in it: “I decided to travel to Palestine in 1995 to interview artists and document their work”.¹⁶ Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon also made extensive use of interviews in their *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (2013), writing that “in interviews with more than one hundred Palestinian artists in the region, we specifically asked for their thoughts on the concept of a single state”.¹⁷ Similarly, Samia Halaby for her book *Liberation Art of Palestine* (2001)¹⁸ also uses interviews to document the work of local and diaspora artists. A similar approach is also found in recent Lebanese art history. Hanan Toukan in her work writes that she used “ethnographic interviewing and participant observation”¹⁹ (2021); Elias Chad for his book *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* has made extensive use of interviews (2018), as well as Katarzyna Puzon in her studies (2016). All these researchers utilize interviews not only to gain deeper insights into the artists’ works but also to explore their social roles, political positions, and how these aspects connect to their projects. My research aimed to reproduce this model by observing the particular position of ‘betweenness’ of the artists considered.

This approach to interviewing artists is an expression of my research’s specific understanding of the phenomenon of art. My research assesses the social role of the artistic projects while contextualizing them alongside the pedagogical value I assign to them. My viewpoint was informed by the writings of the critic and scholar Lorand Hegyi, who has long been concerned with the question of narratives within the visual arts. Hegyi writes:

“the individual work of art is not an allegory, an imitation of something external, but lives in the context of the outside world, of life, of socio-cultural realities, so that the internal structure of the visual-plastic phenomenon receives its meaning obviously and naturally in the anthropological context of our existence. In this sense, the apparent autonomy of the work of art is not to be understood as an allegory of freedom, as long suggested by Greenberg’s interpretation, but as a phenomenon of the obvious, immediate language that is

¹⁶ Sherwell, Tina: *Imagining the homeland: representations of Palestine in Palestinian art and popular culture*. PhD diss., Kent 2003. P. 10.

¹⁷ Makhoul, Bashir / Gordon, Hon: *The Origins of Palestinian Art*. Liverpool 2013. P. 138.

¹⁸ Halaby, Samia: *Liberation Art of Palestine - Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20th Century*. HTTB Publications, London 2001.

¹⁹ Toukan 2021, previously quoted. P. 33.

born and function in the dense anthropological, mental and socio-cultural context”.²⁰

My research looks at the selected works precisely for their way of living “in the context of the outside world”, the way their narratives interact “in the anthropological context of our existence” (as Hegyi would put it). This is why I deem the artworks’ contextualization so important, which consists of an analysis of specific contexts of certain exhibitions they have featured. I argue indeed that such exhibitions determine indeed what Hegyi would call the “socio-cultural contexts”. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the artists’ position of ‘betweenness’, it was also essential to conduct interviews with key actors in the art world, both in Europe and in Lebanon and Palestine. These interviews were also predominantly semi-structured. The interviews I conducted in Lebanon and Palestine elucidated certain local dynamics that emerge from the works. Finally, they provided a valuable contribution to the forthcoming chapter on the State of the Art and Contextualization that will follow this methodological chapter.

In addition to the original interviews I conducted, I also based my research on other elements where the voice of the artists can be found. I defined these as ‘parergon’, using a term coined by Anne Ring Petersen: an element external to the work which nevertheless adds to its narration (or an “outer supplement that nevertheless contributes significantly to shaping the ‘interiority’ of the work”).²¹ I considered the ‘parergon’ to be the equivalent for artworks of the ‘paratexts’ for literary texts. ‘Paratexts’ are a concept theorized by Gérard Genette, who defines them as “all the liminal devices [...] that mediate the relations between text and reader”.²² I interpret the ‘parergon’ in my research also as “all the liminal devices” that mediate the relations ‘between’ the artwork and the viewer. The mediation of the works and their narratives is one of the main aspects that my research explores: for this reason, it was essential to observe all the ‘parergon’ that surround the artworks. These include: conferences held by the artists, podcasts, their writings about their works, and their activity on social networks (especially *Instagram*). The latter is a methodological peculiarity of my research, which at the same time becomes a claim. Today, the art world revolves a great deal around social networks, in particular around

²⁰ Hegyi, Lóránd: *Narratives in Contemporary Art: Five Essays*. Milano 2018. P. 93.

²¹ Petersen, Anne Ring: *Installation Art between Image and Stage*. Copenhagen 2015. P. 33.

²² Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge 1997. P. xi.

Instagram. These are virtual spaces where artists communicate their work, express their opinions, and ultimately play a public role. The public often follows their activity on social networks even more than their work as artists. So much so that it is easier for them to provoke public controversy with their statements or posts on the Internet than with their work. It is imperative to pay attention to these virtual spaces in order to keep abreast of developments in the contemporary art world. They offer insight into the emergence of a new social role for artists that often transcends the conventional boundaries of the art world. This is not the focus of my research, but monitoring this trend was part of its methodology. Furthermore, the role of narratives becomes even more crucial in these virtual spaces.

My incorporation of the artist's voice may challenge the 'Greenberg-Barthes' tradition, which seeks to eliminate the artist's perspective. I am aware that the risk of adhering too closely to the artists' voices is that it may lead to merely echoing their views without engaging in critical analysis. In my research I attempted to avoid this potential pitfall. Nonetheless, I believed it essential to follow a methodology that prioritizes listening to the artists' voices, even if it meant risking the potential pitfalls mentioned earlier. Analyzing as a researcher the work of artist-researchers proved to be a complex and multifaceted undertaking, akin to a game of Chinese boxes. However, an essential and intrinsic aspect of these artists' practice is their ability to act as mediators of their own narratives: not only as creators of such narratives, but also as their interpreters. This is where Jessica Winegar's definition of 'arts interlocutor' proved essential. She coined this term to emphasize the importance of discussion and debate in the lives and work of certain modern Egyptian artists. In the context of my research, it was essential to analyze the modes of transmission of the artworks, hence 'the importance of discussion and debate' by the artists themselves.

Lorand Hegyi has formulated another definition similar to Winegar's 'art interlocutor' that proved useful, although I slightly modified it. Hegyi identifies a type of contemporary artist that he defines as 'speaking artist'. For his definition, he refers to a heterogeneous group of artists such as Miguel Angel Rios, Bernardi Roig, Gloria Friedmann, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Braco Dimitrijevic. The 'speaking artists' feel an "urge to concretize and communicate" as their mission, although this does not concern the most evident events of reality and society. Hegyi attributes to them "a radical and unlimited urge to become active beyond purposeful actions [...], without limits or narrow purposeful objectives, be they practical, political, didactic or

moral”.²³ Concerning the artists from my research, I recovered the label of ‘speaking artists’, for their “urge to communicate”, and the strongly narrative, storytelling character of their works. Contrary to those indicated by Hegyi, however, I underline the attachment of their work to “purposeful objectives”, whether “practical, political, didactic or moral”. The works I study explicitly seek to contribute to the writing or rewriting of historical events. The documentary nature of these works demonstrates a clear intention to avoid the fictionalization of reality. It may seem incongruous to ascribe such an adherence to reality to artistic narratives, which are typically fictional or a deliberate reinterpretation of historical events. Nevertheless, my research argues for the importance of assessing the reliability of these works, particularly their aim to narrate specific historical events in an objective and accurate manner.

So far, I have pointed out different aspects that characterize the methodology of my research: the bibliography, the interviews, and the different strategies for studying artists’ narratives and the presence of their voice in them (such as the ‘parergon’). There is one last methodological aspect to mention: Travel, and what, if I were a trained anthropologist, I would define as ‘fieldwork’. Travel encompasses attending various exhibitions and visiting Lebanon and Palestine. My trips had several goals: to confront some of the realities that the artists speak about in their works, to compare different situations, and to discuss the themes of the research with different people. I did not refer in my text to all these discussions, especially the informal ones, but I would like to mention them anyway as part of the path that led to the realization of my research. Among the most important are certainly those that took place during the trips to Lebanon and Palestine. Concerning these trips, I would like to make some methodological considerations. The purpose of these trips was to learn as much as possible about the participation of the artists under consideration in the local art scene. Of course, my goal was not to create an overall portrait of the local scene: that would be impossible for me and likely unattainable in general. Rather, my goal was to understand and immerse myself in the situation of ‘betweenness’ in which the artists live, and to gather as many useful elements as possible for understanding their work.

The following is not a comprehensive account of these experiences. What follows is a series of considerations that illustrate the value of these trips for research purposes and their role in enhancing my analysis of the selected artworks. As noted in the introduction, I have no ties to

²³ Hegyi 2018, previously quoted. P. 26.

Palestine or Lebanon. Hence, I conducted this research from an external perspective.²⁴ My research originated from confronting the works of Lebanese and Palestinian artists that are exhibited on the European continent, where I am based. My travels to Lebanon and Palestine were thus a fundamental element of the research process, as they provided a unique and unmediated perspective on the places and themes represented in the artworks. The following reflections attest to how useful travelling have been for my research, and how potentially important it can be for those who share my position.

Visits to several Israeli art institutions preceded my first trip to Palestine. These trips were useful in tracing the particular position of the Palestinian artists in this study. Indeed, all of the Palestinian artists in question have lived in Israeli territory, began their careers there, and continued their professional development elsewhere. In the next chapter, I will further explore the issue of Palestinians (artists or not) living and working in Israeli territory. For now, it is important to note why these visits and the discussions that took place during them were essential to my research. The Israeli art scene enjoys greater funding and does not confront the challenges that the Palestinian art scene faces due to the occupation. These challenges include, for instance, the movement restrictions imposed on artists and artworks due to the presence of numerous checkpoints and the separation wall in the West Bank. If the Israeli art scene can be a concrete career opportunity for a Palestinian artist, it also holds many consequences. For a Palestinian artist, participating in this system often means engaging with a politically driven environment

²⁴ By external I mean that I do not have an internal position in Lebanon or Palestine. I do not mean, however, that the geographical position I write from is historically neutral in relation to this region. Europe is linked to the Arab world by a long history of exchanges and colonization. This has led to the birth of certain narratives also regarding Lebanon and Palestine that are still present and active in European territory. Scholars such as Edward Said and Stuart Hall have studied this issue at length. Said for example, already in his 1981 book *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* showed how residing in certain countries of the West means being constantly exposed to certain narratives of the Muslim (or Arab) world. He shows how the media shape their narratives “within a political context made active and effective by an unconscious ideology, which the media disseminate without serious reservations or opposition”. Hall instead in his essay “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power” (1992) argues how the West’s “sense of itself - its identity - was formed not only by the internal processes that gradually molded Western European countries into a distinct type of society, but also through Europe’s sense of difference from other worlds - how it came to represent itself in relation to these ‘others’”. These representations of the “others” (which may concern for example Lebanon and Palestine) remain present in the everyday life of the so-called Western countries. Both Said and Hall show how living in the West means being exposed constantly to such narratives and representations. This is why by exterior I mean a geographical position, but not that it is neutral or not exposed to any narrative concerning Lebanon or Palestine. It is a long and complex theme that has occupied countless scholars for decades. Here I wanted to evoke it only to show that I am aware of what my position might imply.

Said, Edward. *Covering Islam*. London 1997. P. 69.

Hall, Stuart: “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”. In: Hall, Stuart / Gieben, Bram: *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge 1992. P. 188.

that frequently tokenizes them, using their presence to support a pretentious liberal agenda. Such eventual participation also carries the risk of being ostracized by the rest of the Palestinian community.

Confronting the Israeli art world means understanding these difficulties. I am certainly not the one to discover such challenges, nor do I pretend to be an expert on the contemporary Israeli art scene. I will simply state that my visits and discussions served as firsthand confirmation of insights highlighted by numerous scholars in various studies, several of which I reference in the next chapter. On more than one occasion, I verified how a certain political narrative accompanies art exhibitions in Israel. At the Tel Aviv Museum of Modern Art, in March 2022, I visited a reinstallation of the permanent collection whose introductory text at the entrance read: “Israeli art and the national narrative are inextricably intertwined”. It also affirmed the importance of “assigning the Zionist brushstroke a national role”. In the context of these nationalist narratives of art, I argue that the sporadic inclusion of works by Palestinian artists undermines the initiative’s credibility as an inclusive effort. It clearly becomes part of an attempt at colonial control of Palestinian culture. I do not want to name names, but I will mention that in many discussions I have had with workers in the Israeli art world, I have seen evidence of how racism against Palestinians is often present, and sometimes veiled by clumsy attempts to appear “open to the ‘other’”.

A visit to the cultural sites in Palestine provided an insight into the various initiatives that are underway, some of which feature this dissertation. At the same time, it underscored the challenges of living and working under occupation. For this reason, engaging in conversations with gallerists and individuals involved in the Palestinian art world, as referenced in my dissertation, was essential to my research. Once again, I do not claim that my study is an exhaustive survey of the local art scene. Rather, I intend to show how exploring the Palestinian art world, its strengths and its difficulties, has led me to a better understanding of the reasons why many Palestinian artists seek opportunities ‘outside’ Palestine.

Visits to Palestine were also crucial for gaining direct insight into the circumstances depicted in the artists’ works. A firsthand experience of the Palestinian landscape and the pervasive presence of settlements provided a more nuanced understanding of the artistic choices artists face when representing these landscapes. For example, their decision to include or exclude elements of the occupation in their representations. A stay in Nazareth demonstrated me the

impact of Israeli control on a city that has historically maintained a strong Palestinian identity. All the works by Palestinian artists featured in my research revolve around strategies of resistance against efforts to silence Palestinian identity. In Nazareth, I witnessed a poignant example of the significance of such struggle. During my visit to the city in September 2022, pro-Palestinian slogans and murals adorned the walls of its streets. This is just one example of the myriad ways in which images have come to shape the narratives of the Palestinian people over the decades. One such image depicted Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who an Israeli soldier killed on May 11, 2022. Israeli authorities periodically repainted the wall, erasing the portrait, which then the people of Nazareth periodically repainted. However, with the outbreak of the war in Gaza, this practice came to an end. As control over the Palestinian people intensified, no one in Nazareth dared to repaint the portrait, as a friend of mine from the city shared with me.

Visits to Jerusalem revealed the deep militarization of Israeli society and its impact on the Palestinian people, themes that also appear in the artworks I analyzed. The city of Al-Khalil has offered me perhaps the clearest example of apartheid in Palestine, which the artworks often discuss. Al-Khalil is subject to a network of continuous checkpoints that crisscross the city, restricting access to certain areas only to Palestinians. These areas are reserved for settlers and patrolled by Israeli soldiers. In Bethlehem, then, I was able to observe firsthand the impact of the separation wall on the physical and social geography of the city and of the West Bank as a whole. Without the help of a kindly retired pharmacist who had previously lived in Italy, I would not have been able to circumvent the wall and find the Dar Jacir art center, a fundamental stop for my research.

In Ramallah, I once had a brief glimpse into the daily life of many Palestinians. The Israeli military had sealed the checkpoint on the road between Jerusalem and Ramallah for some unknown reason. The bus driver instructed everyone to continue on foot, and a young man heading to Ramallah for a dental appointment helped me find my way. Along the way, there were clashes between the Israeli army and Palestinian demonstrators, and an Israeli soldier even fired a warning shot. In my complete lack of experience and understanding, I felt as if I had suddenly found myself in an apocalyptic situation. However, the man I was traveling with remained calm and assured me that this was just a routine situation and that he would not miss his dentist appointment. I had an appointment with the artist Khaled Hourani in Ramallah, for

which I arrived late. He, like other people I spoke with, was unaware of the accidents I witnessed because (to quote another informal conversation I had that day) “it is impossible to keep up with all the events that happen every day and at the same time live your life”. With this anecdote, I do not want to participate in what sometimes becomes a sensationalization of colonial violence in Palestine. I mention it to reiterate that for the path I took with my research, traveling to Palestine was fundamental to understand better the stories that the artists tell in their works.

A one-month trip to Lebanon had a similar significance for my research. My brief visit clearly did not permit a comprehensive examination of the contemporary dynamics within the local art scene, which is not the focus of my dissertation anyway. Once again, however, engaging with the artistic realities with which the artists I consider work was useful. This let me understand another side of their position of ‘betweenness’. Some inputs from this experience constitute the material I cite in my dissertation. Staying in Lebanon also meant understanding some of the strengths of the local contemporary art scene and the many difficulties it faces. These are very often the structural difficulties that the country is still going through in these first decades of the twenty-first century, and often the reasons why many Lebanese leave their country. Experiences of this kind, where one goes to new places without any previous direct knowledge, easily run the risk of becoming an extractivist practice. As a researcher, I have tried as much as possible to follow what Boaventura de Santos describes as “nonextractivist methodologies, methodologies grounded on subject-subject relations rather than on subject-object relations”.²⁵ This has meant trying to conduct dialogues rather than interviews, hoping that the exchange of knowledge would be bidirectional. In the same vein, I emphasize my perspective as an external observer to uphold the ethical standards of my research. I approach the narratives presented by the artists from an external perspective, examining how these stories move beyond their countries of origin and recontextualize themselves in familiar places I have either lived in or visited regularly.

A component of my research methodology included visiting exhibitions as part of my travels. This entailed physically visiting exhibitions, exploring the art spaces, and documenting how the artworks interact with such environments. Such experiences are the material of this research that I mention in the text. Conducting this research also meant “spending time” with

²⁵ Santos, Boaventura de Sousa: *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham 2018. P. 11.

the works I selected. I borrow this expression from Kobi Ben Meir, the director of the Haifa Museum of Art, who used it during a conversation we had to describe his experience pursuing a Ph.D. in art history. “Spending time” with the selected works meant several things. First, it meant what Ariella Azoulay defines as ‘unlearning with companions’: “questioning our habits of studying the shared world through political concepts and categories, by exclusively perusing library shelves devoted to certain favored philosophers or seeking out the writings of statesmen drafted behind closed doors and later stored in imperial archives”.²⁶ I quote this phrase because the works were indeed ‘companions’ that taught me new aspects and perspectives on certain historical and cultural events. My personal experience with these works is one reason why I assert their pedagogical value. Second, “spending time” meant taking the time to fully understand their stories, compare them with other historical accounts, and reflect on their perspectives. Overall, it meant taking the time to understand them as works of art, and to explore how their pedagogical aspect connects to their visual experimentation.

²⁶ Azoulay, Ariella: *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London 2019. P. 34.

3. State of the Art and Contextualization

3.1. Introduction to the Concept of Betweenness and to Inside/Outside Experiences

The key question of my research concerns the position of ‘betweenness’ of the artists I consider. In particular, I examine how this ‘betweenness’ affects their visual narrative works that deal with issues of Lebanon and/or Palestine. The situation of ‘betweenness’ that these artists live has a very practical nature. They divide their life and work ‘between’ Palestine or Lebanon and a series of countries in Europe. If one were to look at theirs as a movement of migration, one could say with the words of Sara Ahmed that their “journeys of migration involve a splitting of home as a place of origin”.²⁷ Thus, what emerges is a ‘splitting’, a life ‘between’ here, and there. I argue that this also applies to the stories that their works convey. They are born from an ‘inside’ (Palestine/Lebanon), and then travel both in the ‘inside’ and in the ‘outside’. Considering the situation of ‘betweenness’ of both the artists and their works means considering this double trajectory.

When I use categories of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ I am not reiterating a dichotomy, nor suggesting a hierarchical system or binary opposition. I simply want to indicate the actual movement that the works play out, which mirrors the movement of the artists themselves. Through the works, sometimes the artists also make a rapprochement towards Lebanon or Palestine, which follows a moment of distancing. This movement becomes a healing process, countering a distancing from the places where the artists have their roots. I do not attribute this healing process to the works through my research; rather, it is a theme that the works themselves sometimes explicitly address. Furthermore, I will explore how the individual experiences that the artists portray in their works actively seek a collective significance. This significance transcends personal value, aiming to uncover universal meaning within local stories.

To return to the dichotomy ‘inside/outside’, my dissertation does not intend to theorize a presumed West-East movement. I want to avoid any generalization. I simply want to look at the actual path of certain artists, who have similar experiences and ways of working. I am also aware that any definition of the ‘Middle East’ is already a generalization in itself. For this reason, I

²⁷ Ahmed, Sara: *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London, New York 2000. P. 90.

refer to the lesson of the historian Massimo Campanini, who concerning the concept of East wrote:

“East in relation to what? What is the “center”? Why is Europe defined as “West” and, again, in relation to which “center”? Well, in fact, such a center does not exist. Rather, it was European culture that decided to be “Western,” precisely in opposition to an “Orient” that has variously been characterized as “near,” “middle,” “extreme,” etc. The formulation of the idea of the East, even without defining what it actually is, allowed those who had formulated it, namely Europe (and the United States), to identify themselves as something opposite, as something “other” in relation to an antagonist, more or less potential. In short, the East became the “different” and “other” from the West, an area and a set of backward, poor and uncivilized territories (or at most fascinating and exotic), which Europe, rich, advanced and civilized, bore the burden of educating and rebuilding (*the burden of the white man*), bringing back into history the marginalized peoples excluded from progress. This did not consider at all that even the “Eastern” peoples had to look at the West as an “other” different from themselves”.²⁸

Campanini effectively demonstrates how Western methods of defining geographical coordinates stem from both conventions and ideological interpretations of reality. In my research, I am aware that talking about European countries and Palestine/Lebanon may sound like a re-proposal of the ‘opposition’ that Campanini talks about. Once again, however, I reiterate that this dissertation does not want to present any opposition, nor ideas of ‘otherness’, and that I am aware that the geographical coordinates it uses are conventions. My research wants to retrace the path of certain artists and their works. Likewise, the perspective from which I examine these artworks is crucial. As mentioned in the introduction and the methodological premise, my outsider position is integral and significant to my research.

Beyond these preliminary considerations on how conventional geographical coordinates are, it is necessary to trace a brief history of the concept of ‘betweenness’, beginning from the concepts of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that it entails. This clarifies the origins of my research and the historical and theoretical foundations on which it is built. However, I do not intend to trace a generic global history of this concept. Despite any similarities, each geographical context tells its own unique story. Therefore, I will focus exclusively on historical references pertaining to

²⁸ Campanini, Massimo: *Storia del Medio oriente contemporaneo*. Bologna 2020. P. 7. Translation from Italian to English: Giacomo Paci.

Lebanon and Palestine. Even in this context, I do not pretend to reach an absolutely exhaustive result, but only to indicate references that are important for contextualizing this research.

The ‘outside’ is one of the key concepts when talking about modern Palestinian history. Edward Said writes: “ever since 1917 the fate and the political struggle of Arab Palestinians for their national rights has been conducted geographically outside Palestine. Palestinians therefore have always had an extra-national or extra-geographical dimension to their existence”.²⁹ After 1948, through the ethnic cleansing³⁰ of most Palestinians from the territory of the newly formed state of Israel, the ‘outside’ has been the place where most national aspirations developed. This is evident, for example, with the history of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), first based in Lebanon and then relocated to Tunisia following the Israeli assault on Beirut in 1982. In this context, visual arts have also played a role historically. In Beirut operated the Plastic Arts Section of the PLO. One of its projects was the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* (almost completely destroyed during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982), studied by the research and traveling exhibition *Past Disquiet*. Anselm Franke describes it as follows: “The museum that was proposed by the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, organized by the Palestine Liberation Organization in Beirut in 1978, was to be repatriated to Palestine at an undetermined future moment to sow the seeds of a future national art museum”.³¹ Hence, artists have also historically played a role from a position ‘outside’ Palestine. This has involved a contribution with the visual arts tools to envision a future state and its cultural institutions, as exemplified by the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*. Additionally, it has led to the forging of alliances and a network of international solidarity. A succession of events such as the Oslo Accords, the *Intifada*, and the continuous wars have not radically changed such a scenario, since, finally, a Palestinian state was never born. This is why a key urgency driving my research is the need to examine the role that Palestinian artists continue to play in the ‘outside’.

However, there is no unified history of the Palestinian experience in the ‘outside’. Depending on the places and historical moments, it has changed and continues to change.

²⁹ Said, Edward W.: *Reflections on Exile: And Other [Literary and Cultural] Essays*. London 2012. P. 85.

³⁰ Among the countless researches that could be cited on the subject, one should mention Ilan Pappé’s, *The ethnic cleansing of Palestine*. Here he tells the story of the “hundreds of thousands of Palestinians” who “had been expelled by force” “from their villages, towns and cities” and transformed into refugees in 1948. Pappé, Ilan: *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford 2006. P. 156.

³¹ Franke, Anselm. In: Khouri, Kristine / Rashā, Salṭī: *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums-in-Exile*. Warsaw 2018. P. 15.

However, the artists highlighted in this research share similar experiences. They grew up in Palestinian contexts, but in what are now either Israeli territories, or occupied territories as in the case of East Jerusalem. Several scholars have studied the position of Palestinians living in Israel and traced its historical evolution. Sharri Plonski speaks in her study on Palestinian citizens of Israel of the “dynamic antinomies of Palestinian-citizen lived experience - of being inside and outside, absent and present, included and excluded”. She further adds that: “In Israel/Palestine, habits grounded in the logics and anxieties of ethno-colonial divisions inform the marginalization and peripheralization of othered groups, and lines that divide and separate (between national, ethnic and class groups) are encouraged and entrenched (Benton, 2010; Cowen, 2014; Brenner and Elden, 2009; Gordon, 2008)”.³² These considerations underline the issue that the Palestinians who remained in the territory that became Israel have always posed for the Zionist agenda. They have always been the contrasting element, the one that was impossible to expel, and whose integration has always represented a problem. The legislative history of this “marginalization and peripheralization” (as Plonski puts it) is long and it is not up to my dissertation to retrace it. The scholar Shira Robinson has outlined it well in her studies, examining this “paradox at the heart of Israel’s history as a liberal settler state: that the juridical and social content of Israeli citizenship was determined not by an ideal vision of whom to include but rather by the stark imperative of whom to keep out”.³³

One of the latest evolutions of this path of exclusion has been the so-called ethnicity law, which the Israeli parliament approved in 2018 and implemented in 2022 as one of the Basic Laws of Israel. It states, among other things, that “the state of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination”, and that “the realization of the right to self-determination in the State of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish People”.³⁴ For many commentators, it is the ultimate proof of the establishment of an apartheid regime in Israel, since it certifies that the “right to self-determination” belongs only to a part of the population living in Israeli territory.³⁵ For many Palestinians, however, it was nothing more than the confirmation of a situation they had been

³² Plonski, Sharri: *Palestinian Citizens of Israel: Power, Resistance and the Struggle for Space*. London 2018. P.6.

³³ Robinson, Shir: *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel’s Liberal Settler State*. Stanford 2013. P. 72.

³⁴ Document from the website of the Knesset: “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People”. Last visited: 10.10.2024 <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/Documents/BasicLawsPDF/BasicLawNationState.pdf>

³⁵ Pappé, Ilan: *Israel and South Africa: The Many Faces of Apartheid*. London 2015.

living in for decades, as second-class citizens, at the same time “included and excluded,” as Plonski writes. Such issues recur in the works of the Palestinian artists I will analyze.

The historian Adel Manna, father of one of the artists who will feature this dissertation, has studied the history of those “Palestinians who remained in their estranged homeland after the *Nakba*”.³⁶ He writes that “the *Nakba* isolated them from their people and the neighboring Arab states: either to become refugees and go into exile, or to stay and cooperate in some way with the victors” and that many felt “obliged to bow to and cooperate with the occupation and its policies so that it would consent to their remaining in their homeland”³⁷ The art world mirrors this situation. Hence, historically, the position of Palestinians in Israeli territory is challenging from several points of view. As Manna writes, on the one hand their difficulty is linked to the isolation from other “neighboring Arab communities”, and in particular from the rest of the Palestinian community living between the West Bank, Gaza, and in the international diaspora. On the other hand, actively participating in the Israeli art scene may be perceived as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause by a Palestinian artist.

Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon have discussed in depth the difficulties of Palestinian artists in Israel. They report that “to call oneself Palestinian in this context is symbolically to pick at the seam outlining the nation state”. They continue writing that “for many Israelis, this is a provocation and undermines the cohesiveness of the nation-state, whereas for others, perhaps more problematically, it adds to the appeal of the art, lending an aura of liberal inclusiveness and cultural plurality to what most Palestinians and their supporters regard as a fundamentally racist state”.³⁸ Makhoul and Hon assert that many Palestinian artists participate in Israeli cultural scene, since its rich institutions offer good opportunities for success. However, they note that this process often implies a ‘negotiation’ with institutions. This ‘negotiation’ entails two significant risks: relinquishing the autonomous definition of one’s identity or allowing that identity to become a token for the liberal agenda of the Israeli art scene, which seeks to project an image of “inclusiveness and cultural plurality”. The artists featured in my dissertation have faced these challenges but have also cultivated a unique position throughout

³⁶ Nur Masalha defines the *Nakba* as follows: “the Palestine Nakba (Catastrophe), the up-rooting of the Palestinians and the dismemberment and de-Arabisation of historic Palestine”. Masalha, Nur: *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*. London 2012. P. 1.

³⁷ Ivi. P. 6.

³⁸ Makhoul and Hon 2013, previously quoted. P. 138.

their careers. Biographical and career reasons have led them to move a lot, both ‘between’ the various Israeli and Palestinian territories, and abroad. My research will examine their established contacts and connections in all these locations. In their works they also often deal with the living conditions of different Palestinian communities in Israeli territory.

Lebanon also has a long and complex history of movements of ‘betweenness’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the country, often intertwined with the fate of Palestine. As it was the case for Palestine, writing a history of the Lebanese diaspora would require much more than an encyclopedia, and it is certainly not the aim of my dissertation. Here I only want to point out some useful points for the contextualization of my study. The historian Andrew Arsan writes that “the Lebanese themselves, like the Irish or the Italians, are an unusually diasporic people, migrating in their hundreds of thousands in a series of waves that began in the late nineteenth century”.³⁹ These “series of waves” were caused by numerous and different historical events. In the 20th century, the Civil War (1975-1990) caused enormous displacements.⁴⁰ Already in the war’s first phase, up to 1977, historian Rosita Di Peri writes that internal migrations alone (about 600,000 people) had “biblical dimensions for a country of three million inhabitants”.⁴¹ Depending on where these “migratory waves” were headed, in any case, different scenarios and contexts opened up. Andrew Arsan delves into this topic in a book that specifically deals with the Lebanese diaspora “in colonial French West Africa”. Here Arsan traces a history of the relations between the “*al-muqimin*”, “‘resident’, as those who remain in Lebanon are known in official parlance” and the communities “in the *buldan al-ightirab* – the ‘countries of migration’”, the migrants, or ‘*al-muhajirin*’.⁴² He analyses the vision that many have shared

³⁹ Arsan, Andrew: *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments*. London 2018. P. 11.

⁴⁰ The Lebanese Civil War is a long and complex event, which includes several phases, and which is difficult to summarize in a few lines. To give some indication, I will mention that it exploded after years of growing tensions. It saw the opposition from 1975 of various militias that had formed and continued to form over the years (as in the case of Hezbollah). On one side there was the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), which included various groups born from Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and which was supported by several other Lebanese groups such as the Lebanese National Movement such as the Progressive Socialist Party, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist party in Lebanon. In the second phase of the war, which lasted from 1982 until about 1990, the newly formed Hezbollah, a Shiite group, also played a key role. On the other side, there was the Lebanese Front, with some militias such as the Kataeb, predominantly Maronite, the Lebanese National Liberal Party, Marada, supported by Israel. Israel invaded the country several times: in 1978, in 1982, when it besieged and bombed Beirut from June 14 to August 21, until the PLO retreated to Tunisia. Israel finally occupied part of Syria and some areas of Lebanon until 2005, and invaded Lebanon again in 2006 during a new war with Hezbollah.

⁴¹ Di Peri, Rosita: *Il Libano contemporaneo: storia, politica, società*. Roma 2019. P. 76.

⁴² Arsan, Andrew: *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa*. New York 2014. P. 249.

over the decades, according to which the *al-muhajirin* “remained integral constituents” of Lebanon: “they were ‘Lebanese’, no matter in which ‘place’ they lived’. In this vision, diaspora and homeland came to resemble the panels of a diptych: while the two were quite distinct, neither could stand entirely alone, devoid of its complement”.⁴³ The diaspora has historically played a very important economic role for Lebanon, supporting the local economy in various difficult moments. This context continues in 2023, when the World Bank calculated that the diaspora sent 6.7 billion dollars to Lebanon.⁴⁴ In this complex scenario, it is important to keep in mind this history of the relationship ‘between’ the diaspora and Lebanon, ‘between’ a part of the country ‘outside’, and one ‘inside’. This is in fact one of the main themes that my dissertation deals with, through the lenses of the art world.

Hence, although there are similarities in many stories of migration and life ‘between’ different places, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, my research deals with specific cases, looking at the individual stories of certain artists. As Arsan writes, it is, in fact, difficult “to speak of diasporic experience in the singular. Travelling existences take a multiplicity of different forms, as men and women go – and are led down – down different routes through life”.⁴⁵ Despite the similarities among the stories I explore, no two cases are identical. My dissertation brings together the various stories of the artists because I argue that they indicate a common thread, but without ever claiming that they are totally superimposable.

3.2. The Issue of Betweenness in Lebanon and Palestine

When one talks about a seemingly ‘inside/outside’ dichotomy and an issue of ‘betweenness’, the concept of ‘in-betweenness’ may come to mind. This concept has a long history. One of its major theorists is Homi K. Bhabha, who explored it in depth in his work *The Location of Culture*. While commenting on the work of the literary critic Fredric Jameson, Bhabha describes the space of ‘in-between’ as “a third space - where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences”.⁴⁶ The ‘third space’ is therefore

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Bechara, Stephanie: “La diaspora a envoyé 6,7 milliards de dollars au Liban en 2023, selon la Banque mondiale”. In: *L'Orient le Jour*. Last visited: 04.10.2024. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1419245/la-diaspora-a-envoye-67-milliards-de-dollars-au-liban-en-2023-selon-la-banque-mondiale.html>

⁴⁵ Arsan 2014, previously quoted. P. 254.

⁴⁶ Bhabha, Homi K.: *The Location of Culture*. London 2003. P. 13.

an ‘in-between reality’, characterized by ‘hybridity’, ‘borderline existences’, that Bhabha attributes for example to the “colored South African subject”⁴⁷. According to Bhabha, having an ‘in-between’ identity means occupying a hybrid space, which “eludes the politics of polarity”. Thus, someone in an ‘in-between’ position does not align with either side of a particular dichotomy but exists in the middle, within a ‘third space’. Bhabha indicates the stairwell as a spatial metaphor of the ‘third space’, which he also defines as “liminal space, in-between the designations of identity”⁴⁸. The scholar Nikos Papastergiadis cites the entrance of the space frequented by the Stoics – group of ancient Greek philosophers – as a historical example of an ‘in-between’ space. He asserts that the Stoics envisaged cosmopolitanism [GP: as a space of cultural hybridity] “not only as a moral duty towards strangers and a political system for universal governance, but also as an aesthetic engagement with cultural difference”⁴⁹. Hence, the meeting point of these “cosmopolitan philosophers” was symbolically the *stoa*, serving as the entrance to their academy: “an in-between and transitional space, neither outside nor inside”. Therefore, according to Papastergiadis the *stoa* is another spatial metaphor for the liminal (‘in-between’, ‘third’) space.

Since the artists featuring my research live and work ‘between’ an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, one might imagine that they too inhabit a transitional space, and that their works, with a visual narrative character, are affected by a situation of ‘in-betweenness’. I do not want to deny from the outset that this possibility exists. However, I do not aim to discover a possible ‘third space’, but to study the actual participation of the artists in different realities, their double inscriptions in different places. Indeed, their situation of ‘betweenness’ is a reality, and this is where my research ensues from. Hence, I want to focus on how the artists live and work ‘between’. I want to examine their way of life with “a foot in both worlds”⁵⁰, and how it influences the narratives contained in their works. My initial hypothesis is that the artists find strategies to position themselves and their works in this situation of ‘betweenness’, maintaining a double inscription.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ivi. P. 4.

⁴⁹ Papastergiadis, Nikos: *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*. Cambridge 2012. P. 81.

⁵⁰ I borrow this expression from a novel by Osman Yousefzada, *The Go-Between* (2022), in which the author recounts his life in the 1980s in Birmingham in the Pakistani Pashtun community to which his family belongs, and his feeling of being part of different worlds, of feeling ‘in-between’ parallel realities. Yousefzada, Osman: *The Go-Between: A Portrait of Growing Up Between Different Worlds*. Canongate Books, London 2022.

I hypothesize that their works and their approach to operating in their ‘betweenness’ directly reveal these strategies.

My research aims to study ‘betweenness’ as a procedural situation. For such perspective, I refer to the words of scholars Nikos Papastergiadis and Daniella Trimboli. In a joint paper, they dealt in depth with the history of the concept of ‘in-betweenness’, tracing three traditions or ‘models’. Regarding the third model, they write: “the third model of *hybridity* allows us to recognize the borders of globalization as something in-process, materialized in cultural interactions and exchanges, and thus as capable of being harnessed and channeled in different ways”.⁵¹ Even though I do not look for a ‘hybridity’, the words of Papastergiadis and Trimboli inspire the perspective that my research will adopt for its own study of ‘betweenness’. I will look at the artists’ situation of ‘betweenness’ “as something in-process”, examining the “cultural interactions and exchanges”, and discovering the channelization “in different ways” that their works imply (as Papastergiadis and Trimboli would put it). For this reason, I do not simply study the artworks, but also the ways in which they are mediated, or “channeled”: the art exhibitions.

This concept of process relates to the potential effects of ‘betweenness’ on the artists’ works and their positioning. Their works tell stories that are deeply anchored in local issues. I will examine such stories, the medium choices of the artworks, and their technical and artistic properties. One of my goals will be to learn whether the artists have acquired particular ways of working from their experiences of ‘betweenness’. Concerning identity issues, my goal is not to define the artists’ identity, but to understand how they ‘negotiate’ their position in their ‘betweenness’. I borrow the term ‘negotiate’ from Edward Said. Said’s life has also been characterized by a constant movement. He was born in Palestine, studied in Egypt, lived and worked in the United States and Lebanon. In his writings, he often addresses the question of his own identity and his participation in multiple worlds. For example, he writes: “like so many others, I belong to more than one world. I am a Palestinian Arab, and I am also an American. This affords me an odd, not to say grotesque, double perspective”. The ‘double perspective’ that Said discusses closely resembles the ‘double inscription’ I mentioned earlier, which pertains to the artists I consider. Finally, Edward Said talks about a ‘negotiation’ linked to his position: “I am required to negotiate the various tensions and contradictions implicit in my own

⁵¹ Papastergiadis, Nikos / Trimboli, Daniella: “From Global Turbulences to Spaces of Conviviality. The Potentialities of Art in Mobile Worlds”. In: Dogramaci, Burcu / Birgit Mersmann: *Handbook of Art and Global Migration: Theories, Practices, and Challenges*. Berlin 2019. P. 44.

biography”.⁵² My research examines whether the artists undergo a similar ‘negotiation’ in their own ‘betweenness’, which does not necessarily lead to a ‘hybridization’.

In the Lebanese literary field, the writer Amin Maalouf has elaborated about his particular position of ‘betweenness’. He left Lebanon, where he was born in 1976, for France, and he asserts that when people ask him whether he feels “*plutôt français*” ou “*plutôt libanais*” (more French or more Lebanese) he answers: “*L’un et l’autre!*” (both of them). Thus, Maalouf talks about his identity as a non-hierarchical co-presence of multiple components. He writes in his book *Les identités meurtrières*: “What makes me myself and not someone else is that I am thus on the edge of two countries, two or three languages, several cultural traditions. This is precisely what defines my identity. Would I be more authentic if I were to amputate a part of myself?”.⁵³ Finally, Maalouf adds, in line with what Said writes about ‘negotiation’, that identity “is not given once and for all, it is built and transformed throughout existence”.⁵⁴ Through my research I will look at artists who present a similar life path. My goal is not to establish whether they feel “*plutôt français*”, “*plutôt libanais*”, or “*l’un et l’autre*”, since this question concerns only their private sphere. My goal is to understand whether a possible ‘process of negotiation’ in their positioning, in their experience of ‘betweenness’, has had an influence on their work.

3.3. Betweenness Experiences in Palestinian Art History

To contextualize and theorize the issues related to the concept of ‘betweenness’, I referred so far mainly to examples from the world of literature. However, it is possible to analyze a history of such issues also in the visual arts world, that my research addresses. To point out this history does not mean insinuating that there is an evolution in a positivist sense. I do not intend to suggest that the Lebanese and Palestinian artists I consider in this dissertation have a more significant ‘betweenness’ than other Lebanese and Palestinian artists from the past. Even less I intend to suggest that the Lebanese and Palestinian cases in general are exceptional. To provide a contextualization, I will focus exclusively on cases of ‘betweenness’ in the history of Lebanese and Palestinian art, as they are instrumental to my research. Each historical and geographical context has its own particularities, just as the individual experiences of each artist are unique.

⁵² Said 2012, previously quoted. P. 375.

⁵³ Maalouf, Amin: *Les Identités Meurtrières*. Paris 1998. P. 9.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

As Maalouf writes in his essay on identity: “All of humanity is made up of special cases, life creates differences, and if there is ‘reproduction’, it is never identical”.⁵⁵ Tracing a (partial) history of how the concept of ‘betweenness’ developed in Lebanese and Palestinian contexts is not meant to highlight an evolution. My goal is to underline how there have already been situations in the past where an experience of ‘betweenness’ (‘inside/outside’) had effects on certain artistic practices. Therefore, the primary objective of my research will be to examine whether similar effects exist in specific works created during the second and third decades of the 21st century.

To discuss the ‘inside/outside’ positioning of Palestinian artists, it is crucial to recognize the range of distinct experiences and situations that exist. In a conversation I held with her, scholar Tina Sherwell stated:

“I think there are different experiences of the inside and the outside, and I think it is worth breaking them down into the complexity. Because you have those people on the outside who were in Palestine, and then left and then sometimes come back. You have those who were in Palestine, who left and cannot come back. You have those who are outside and can never come to Palestine. You have these different positionalities of being in exile that artists explore. Take for example Basma Alsharif: she is from Gaza, but she cannot go to Gaza, and so also does all her work from this outside position and she is looking also at the different kind of questions of identity and the complexity of this position of outside and creating particular narratives”.⁵⁶

Sherwell’s words remind us that depending on where a Palestinian artist is positioned, their experience of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ can be radically different. As I mentioned earlier, the Palestinian artists featured in my research have experienced relative freedom of movement, allowing them to explore multiple paths throughout their careers and potentially live in a situation of ‘betweenness’.

I want to consider Kamal Boullata (1942-2019) as a first example for a historical survey in the field of Palestinian art on experiences of ‘inside/outside’ and their effects on artistic practice. Boullata has experienced various displacements in his personal history. He was born in Jerusalem in 1942. During the 1967 war, he moved to Lebanon, and then moved again between

⁵⁵ Ivi. P. 30.

⁵⁶ Sherwell, Tina: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, June 23rd 2022.

the USA, Morocco, and France, always remaining far from his homeland. During his life and career, he developed a particular role as an artist and an art historian. This is an aspect that I will explore in more detail later. In his writings he deals a lot with the experience of other artists, aiming to define some historical coordinates of Palestinian Art. However, while his gaze often turns outward to others, he also engages deeply in self-reflection and examines his own experiences. Regarding his own biography, he wrote that “exile became a central reality in [his] life”. Boullata reflects a lot on his movements ‘between’ the Arab and Western worlds. He explains: “I had been declared an ‘outsider’ in my place of birth and was identified as ‘other’ in my place of residence”.⁵⁷ He describes this feeling as an experience of dualism. On the one hand, despite his participation in the European art milieu, he has always felt a certain form of exclusion or tokenization. He claimed that this derived from the Eurocentrism dominant in the European territory. He writes: “I was aware that art created by non-Westerners like myself did not cease to be categorized as “minor” or as an “ethnic” form of expression”.⁵⁸ Despite his career having led him to live geographically in the center of Europe, he has always felt on the margins.

At the same time, Boullata expresses that he has also experienced a form of marginalization regarding the Arab culture of his origins. He writes that “the overwhelming dominance of oral expression over other forms of expression has for centuries determined the course of cultural hegemony”.⁵⁹ According to Boullata, this form of “linguistic predominance” would have condemned the visual arts from within the Arab world throughout the twentieth century. Hence, he speaks of his perceived exclusion from two different centers, the Western and the Arab. Whether this accurately reflects reality or contains generalizations is inconsequential. What matters is that, based on this feeling of double exclusion, he developed his own artistic practice and, above all, his distinctive pictorial style. Boullata believed that his abstract geometric pictorial style reflected his experience of living in a ‘no-man’s-land’, a third space arising from exclusion from two distinct centers. For him, his geometric style corresponded to a synthesis ‘between’ the Western modern pictorial tradition (from Mondrian to Malevich, from Albers to Anuszkiewicz) and the role played by geometric forms such as the square in his culture of origin. He writes about the latter: “from the seventh-century arabesques of the Dome of the Rock of Jerusalem to today’s cross-stitched embroidery of Palestinian women, passing through the

⁵⁷ Boullata, Kamal / Finbarr, Barry Flood: *There Where You Are Not*. Munich 2019. P. 28.

⁵⁸ *Ivi.* P. 29.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*

Byzantine iconography of my Jerusalem childhood, the basic form of the square acted as a fundamental geometric unit preserving the matrix of abstraction that constituted a decisive part of my cultural memory”.⁶⁰ Here, I want to emphasize how his life of ‘betweenness’ – specifically Boullata’s engagement with various geographical and cultural realities – has influenced his art. Despite his feeling of double exclusion, Boullata wanted to find through his art a synthesis of these different worlds. Finally, he felt that such a synthesis represented his feeling of being ‘in-between’ them. Hence, such a form of ‘hybridization’ could result from a double inscription. Through my research, I will look at the work of artists who do not seek a synthesis, but who focus on stories with a strong local character. Likewise, I will explore the potential effects on their art that may arise from their experience of ‘betweenness.’

The Palestinian artists living in Beirut between the 1960s and 1970s represent another significant historical example of a ‘between’ situation. Boullata has once again well described their experiences in his art-historical writings. In a broader reflection on the emergence of a Palestinian Art scene in Beirut, he writes: “Beirut may be invisible in the works of Palestinian artists who lived there for almost three consecutive decades, yet nowhere outside the Lebanese capital could their art have evolved in the way it did there”.⁶¹ According to Boullata, the relocation in Beirut had different effects on the various artists, depending on their particular situations. He divides between artists who lived in refugee camps, to whom he associates a more figurative style that mirrors “the explicitly narrative imagery popularized by the nationalist rhetoric of the time”, and the “urban refugees” (or “*Ras Beirut* refugee artists”), whose art was more “experimental and personal”. Concerning the difference between these groups of artists he also writes: “unlike the camp artists, some of whom had hardly had the opportunity to step inside a gallery or art museum, the *Ras Beirut* artists, who were at the very least bilingual, were very much abreast of the latest art trends in the West. Many of them had spent long periods in Europe and the United States”.⁶² On the one hand, refugee camp artists such as Isma’il Shammout (1930-2006), Mustafa al-Hallaj (1938-2002), Naji al-‘Ali (1937-1987) and Ibrahim Ghannam (1931-1984) developed figurative styles that were occasionally experimental, with the primary aim of contributing to a political struggle, expressing popular sentiments of nostalgia and the desire to return to Palestine, and supporting the Palestinian national cause.

⁶⁰ Ivi. P. 31

⁶¹ Boullata, Kamal: *Palestinian Art: 1850-2005*. London 2009. P. 123.

⁶² Ivi. P. 143.

Their position ‘outside’ Palestine nourished their art of nostalgia. Their paintings reflected a dreamed ‘inside’ (Palestine) to be reconquered (emblematic is Shammout’s painting *We Shall Return* from 1954, which depicts Palestinians of different ages walking on the road to exile and visibly dreaming of a return).⁶³

On the other hand, *Ras Beirut* artists such as Jumana al-Husseini (1932-2018), Juliana Seraphim (1934-2005), and Paul Guiragossian (1926-1993) showed a radically different experience of the ‘outside’ through their art. Their painting style was more defined and personalized, incorporating elements of geometrization, abstraction, surrealism, and dreamlike lyricism, while striving for uniqueness in line with the principles of international modern art. Nonetheless, Palestine, the lost ‘inside’, frequently emerged in their works, as exemplified by al-Husseini’s series of paintings dedicated to Jerusalem. Though, their style spoke of their participation in the vibrant art scene of avant-garde galleries in Beirut in the 1960s. It showed their access to international art that their colleagues from the refugee camps lacked. Hence, in these two groups of Palestinian artists different experiences of the ‘outside’ emerge, as well as different effects that such experiences had on their art. Inspired by Boullata’s writings, my research hypothesizes to find effects stemming from the particular ‘inside/outside’ experiences of the selected artists.

A final, more recent example of a Palestinian artist contemplating the ‘inside/outside’ position and its effects on artistic practice is Aissa Deebi. Like the artists from my research, Deebi also has experienced life in Israel. Nonetheless, his experience abroad, in the ‘outside’, has greatly influenced his practice. This led him to develop overarching reflections on the experience of Arab Diaspora culture, culminating in a doctoral thesis he published in 2011. He started it reflecting on his own position and the numerous displacements he had encountered throughout his life and career. He writes, for example, that a move in 2002 from New Hampshire to New York was a ‘turning point’ for his practice: “it forced a new process of reflection on my position as an immigrant and an artist. I was back in the city and there, for the first time in my life, I belonged to an ethnic group. In Israel, I had been a stranger in my homeland. In New Hampshire, I became an alien immigrant in a foreign land. But upon arriving in New York, I found an Arab-American identity ready and waiting for me”.⁶⁴ Hence, starting from his personal

⁶³ Shammout, Ismail: *We Shall Return*, 1954, Oil on Canvas, 79x94cm, Private Collection.

⁶⁴ Deebi, Aissa H.: *Who I Am, Where I Come From, and Where I Am Going*. PhD diss., Winchester 2011. P. 88.

experience, he then moves to examining a collective experience of ‘inside/outside’. His writing comes to theorize an Arab Diaspora culture as a “creative space in the field of the visual arts”.

Deebi begins his text with a lexical overview of the Arabic definitions of diaspora. He mentions several Arabic terms that are often referred to: *shatat*, or scattering, often used in a Palestinian context (“*shatat ahli*”, “the scattering of my people”); *manfa*, “exile”; *mahjar*, from *hijra*, “migration”; *ghorba*, of Islamic origin, “the position of being cut off from God”.⁶⁵ However, Deebe concludes that none of these definitions is univocal and all-encompassing for the entire Arab diasporic community. Such a community remains a plural entity, which includes several different experiences and positions. Beyond the attempts to define a shared collective experience, Deebe in his research turns his attention to how his life in the ‘outside’ has influenced his own artistic practice. For example, he considers his project *Don’t you forget about me!*, an experiment in online networking that he realized while living in Thailand. The artist circulated a poster among his “friends and acquaintances” so that “they would not forget him”, and this action soon evolved into an online curatorial project that left no physical traces. Deebe realized that the distance he felt while living far from his familiar milieu was the primary inspiration for this experimental project. He writes: “to live in Bangkok had brought with it an acute sense of intellectual and cultural separation that I had never experienced before”.⁶⁶ Distance, therefore, the position of ‘outside’, inspired him. It led him to experiment with new ways to overcome a sense of separation. This led to an exploration of the new networking possibilities offered by virtual spaces, where he sought to transform such possibilities into concrete yet ephemeral projects. Thus, he also found in his personal diaspora, or position of ‘outside’, that ‘creative space’ that he describes in his doctoral thesis. Building on Deebe’s example, my research will also examine whether the considered artists make a ‘creative space’ out of their own position of ‘betweenness’. As I explained in the methodology chapter, virtual spaces are not the central theme of my dissertation. However, in studying the ‘betweenness’ of the selected artists, I will also examine the impact that virtual spaces can have on their artistic practice, as well as the overall role these spaces play, similar to what Deebe did.

⁶⁵ Makhoul and Hon also discuss the reasons why there is no “positive and cohesive term to describe the dispersal of the Palestinians”. They write: “it could imply an acceptance of the situation”, and “it could be inferred that the diaspora is effectively permanent, eventually developing a distinct and established culture and language that would detach Palestinian identity from the land”. Makhoul and Hon 2013, previously quoted. P. 188-189.

⁶⁶ Deebe 2011, previously quoted. P. 94.

The examples of Boullata, the Palestinian artists of Beirut, and Deebi are just a few of the many that trace a history of the effects of ‘inside/outside’ experiences on the practice of Palestinian artists. I could have considered Jawad Ibrahim (born in 1953 in Ya’bad, near Jenin, in Palestine), that the scholar Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh describes as “one of the most prominent artists among those who personify the nomadic condition”, and as “the Palestinian *flâneur* par excellence”.⁶⁷ Ibrahim has developed his art career both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Palestine, frequently participating in international conferences, seminars, and art symposia to define his own situation and explore how it relates to that of other Palestinian artists. Or, I could have considered Sama Alshaibi. Alshaibi has also written about her diasporic experience, including her trip to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where she was detained at the airport as a terrorist suspect and had to defend herself by stating, “I’m just an artist”. She claims that her art has played a specific role in its development ‘outside’ of Palestine. She writes about it: “my art provides the “flip side of the coin” narrative; a reclaiming of a history, as well as a voice to current struggles “silenced” by Israel’s domination tactics and subsequent demonizing of the Palestinian identity”.⁶⁸ Hence, the history of Palestinian art that traces ‘inside/outside’ trajectories is long and complex, and the following research aims to contribute to its writing. The artists that I mentioned so far as examples of this history (Kamal Boullata, the Beirut artists, Aissa Deebi, Jawad Ibrahim, Sama Alshaibi) are not only producers of their own art, but also of their identity as artists. They accompany their art with a dissemination activity, critically reflecting on their position. I hypothesize that the artists in my research fit within this history of dual activity. I aim to both examine their artistic practice, which leads them to create works with a visual narrative nature, and to determine whether the artists engage in mediation or dissemination practices, and to identify what these practices are, if they exist.

3.4. Betweenness Experiences in Lebanese Art History

Concerning questions of ‘inside/outside’, the Lebanese artistic panorama is different from the Palestinian one. This is due to historical-political reasons. Unlike Palestine, Lebanon is not

⁶⁷ Al-Shaikh, Abdul-Rahim: “Palestine: The Nomadic Condition”. In: *Third Text* 23 (6) 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820903403579>. P. 768.

⁶⁸ Alshaibi, Sama: “Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 27 (2) 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2007.0000>. P. 31.

under colonial occupation. Certain areas in the South, such as the Shebaa Farms, experienced Israeli occupation well into the 21st century, while others continue to live in a state of constant fragility and the looming threat of war. However, unlike Palestine, Lebanon does not suffer from a legal system that prevents some of its inhabitants from returning to their territories, forcing them into exile for nearly a century. Nevertheless, the situation of economic and political instability in Lebanon leads more and more artists to seek opportunities elsewhere, or to end up living in a situation of ‘betweenness’. In an interview I had in Beirut with him, the artist Akram Zaatari (who also lives in a similar situation) stated that “less and less artists continue to live here”.⁶⁹ This does not imply that all artists from Lebanon share the same experiences or follow identical paths. The reference geographies extend far beyond the European art world discussed in my research, encompassing the Gulf countries, the African continent, and reaching from Asia to the Americas. I highlighted this through my reference to Andrew Arsan’s specific study of the Lebanese diaspora in colonial French West Africa.

As I already mentioned for the context of Palestinian Art, it is not possible here to trace an exhaustive history of Lebanese artists who have lived an ‘inside/outside’ situation. I will focus on some historical-artistic references, to show how a concept of ‘betweenness’ has developed over time. Scholar Sarah Rogers writes that “the defining characteristic of the history of modern art in Lebanon is the movements of individuals, institutions, art and ideas”.⁷⁰ This is in line with the claim of the historian Andrew Arsan, who defines the Lebanese as an “unusually diasporic people”. At the same time, this does not mean that historically every Lebanese artist who has been “on the move” has, as the art historian Marie Tomb writes, “always sought to reclaim their Lebanese identity”. Tomb writes: “some do not self-identify nor identify their art as Lebanese [...] whether because they believe their art is universal, or they refuse to be imposed a label, or do not want to be made into a representative of their homeland”.⁷¹ The scholar Zeina Maasri has also deeply delved into this theme. In her study of Beirut in the 1960s as a cosmopolitan city, she thoroughly questions the concepts of identity in artistic communities with different origins.

⁶⁹ Zaatari, Akram: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, February 1st 2023.

⁷⁰ Rogers, Sarah: “Imagined Geographies: Diaspora and Contemporary Arab Art”. In: Amirsadeghi, Hossein. *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*. London 2009. P. 38.

⁷¹ Tomb, Marie: “On the Lebanese-ness of Lebanese Art”. In: Maamari, Janine. *Rebirth: Lebanon XXIst Century Contemporary Art = al-Wilāda Min Ġadīd*. Beirut 2011. P. 15.

Building on the examples of Tomb and Maasri, I do not aim to impose labels, but to look at artists whose works have a strong relationship with Lebanon.

Questions of identity have always engaged art historians dealing with Lebanese art, who have studied the artists' movements and the impact of the displacements on their practice. Shafic Abboud (1926-2004) is the first example I want to outline of an artist whose work has been examined in this perspective. Shortly after Lebanon independence Abboud moved to Paris, where he pursued his artistic training and career. Zeina Maasri writes about him: "he represents the artist of the diaspora whose hyphenated identity, caught between a Lebanese artist in Paris and a Parisian artist in Beirut, has preoccupied art critics and historians in both city".⁷² One of the intriguing aspects of Abboud's work is, as Maasri explains, that both his art and identity attracted critics' attention in Paris and Beirut. However, Abboud was not concerned about feeling "*plutôt français*" and "*plutôt libanais*" (as Maalouf would put it). In his career, he explored different possibilities of artistic expression that found inspirations from his double inscription. On the one hand, he developed a personal and characteristic style of abstract painting, which he did not feel "concerned with questions of cultural authenticity that preoccupied Arab artists of later generations".⁷³ On the other hand, with some projects like the artist book *Maqamat al-Hariri*, inspired by an Arabic literary classic from the *Nahda* period, Abboud goes in another direction. As Maasri writes about it: "the Lebanese *émigré* in Paris, abstract painter and supposedly uninterested in questions of cultural locality for his art, decides to reinterpret the much-touted exemplar of illustrated books from the perceived Arabo-Islamic 'golden age'".⁷⁴ Abboud's illustrated plates for this project develop in parallel with his series of abstract paintings. Hence, instead of striving to develop a hybrid style, Abboud explored various inspirations stemming from his experience of 'betweenness.'

Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017) is an artist almost contemporary to Abboud who took a different path. Choucair pursued academic studies in Beirut, then settled in Iraq with her parents, where she taught drawing for several years. In 1937 she returned to Beirut, before moving to Paris in 1948, where she came into contact with the various currents of European art of the time. A few years later she finally returned to Beirut where she spent the rest of her life and career. Her European experience also involved discovering the Islamic heritage that remains

⁷² Maasri, Zeina: *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*. New York 2020. P. 128.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ Ivi. P. 117.

on the continent, which she had the opportunity to explore in Andalusia. Choucair's characteristic artistic style shows a skillful synthesis of various inspiring elements. The contact and exchange with artists such as Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier influenced her abstraction and her interest in architecture. Indeed, the abstract geometric and modular forms of her paintings and sculptures reveal her interest in modern architectural forms. Her path towards abstraction, however, was also strongly influenced by her direct knowledge of Islamic artistic traditions, both in the Arab region and in Europe. Her wooden sculptures, for example, show this mix of influences. The critic Stephanie Bailey describes her sculpture *Interform* (1960-1962) as follows: “speaking to Choucair’s enduring interest in architecture, a wood block carved with curved voids recalls the skeleton of a high-rise building. Choucair would title subsequent series ‘sculptural poems’, pointing to Arabic poetry’s structural influence”.⁷⁵ Thus, I argue that Choucair marks a difference from Abboud, seeking a synthesis that recalls that of Kamal Boullata. I argue that this already highlights two possible artistic approaches that come from a situation of ‘betweenness’: the creation of hybrid artistic languages, or parallel artistic projects that follow specific influences without mixing them.

In the history of modern Lebanese Art there are many other different examples of artistic practices that arise from situations of ‘betweenness’ or from experiences of ‘inside/outside’. For instance, I could have mentioned artists contemporary to Choucair and Abboud such as Etel Adnan (and her life ‘between’ Lebanon, the United States and France), Huguette Caland (Lebanon, Italy, and the United States), Helen El-Khal (the United States and Lebanon), Simone Fattal (Lebanon, the USA and France), Dorothy Salhab Kazemi (Lebanon, Denmark, Scotland), and many others. The experiences of ‘inside/outside’ of these artists often inspire subsequent generations. For instance, I want to highlight Walid Sadek’s project *Love is Blind* (2006), which precisely illustrates this inspiration while exploring the work of pioneering Lebanese artist Moustafa Farroukh (1901-1957).⁷⁶ In addition to his artistic project, Sadek – who is also a professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the American University of Beirut – has dedicated an essay to Farroukh. In his essay Sadek writes how Farroukh, born to a humble Muslim family in Beirut, had his artistic education ‘between’ what was available at the time in Lebanon, and

⁷⁵ Bailey, Stephanie in: Kholeif, Omar. *In the heart of another country: Erzählungen aus der Diaspora*. Köln 2022. P. 125.

Choucair, Saloua Raouda: *Interform*, 1962, Wood, 60x32x11.5 cm, Grey Art Gallery, New York.

⁷⁶ Sadek, Walid: *Love Is Blind*, 2010, Text-based installation, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.

the various trips he made to European art capitals such as Rome, Paris and Madrid. Farroukh was interested in both the history of European Art and the Arab-Islamic artistic tradition, which he also discovered in Andalusia as Saloua Raouda Choucair would later do. However, Farroukh eventually felt a strong aversion to modern European art, which he saw as a perversion of art. As Sadek writes, he would try to remain “with one foot on the axioms of a conservative and academic European art and the other foot on the remnants of an ancient Arab-Islamic civilization”.⁷⁷ What strikes Sadek about Farroukh is his ability to think outside the box, to explore different realities ‘outside’ Lebanon, and to develop his own style through a mix of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ experiences. Indeed, Farroukh really pushed himself to his limits, which according to Sadek justifies his lack of understanding of modern art. The installation that Sadek dedicates to Farroukh, *Love is Blind*, combines several texts written in Arabic and English – labels for Farroukh’s paintings – without including the actual images.” Sadek produced this work in a difficult moment for his country. In 2006 another Israel-Hezbollah war outburst, which led to various Israeli bombings throughout the country, including in Beirut. Sadek’s work conveys a look at the past, which however omits the images that come from it. According to the critic Suzanne Cotter, this is a metaphor, suggesting “the impossibility of imagining a future that, for many, has been achieved in the past”.⁷⁸

Hence, with Walid Sadek I have made a leap in time that follows the first artists considered. The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) is another historical phase that records many ‘inside/outside’ experiences. The war, as I have mentioned, was a great reason of displacement. Once it was over, in Lebanon the so-called *jeel al-harb*, or the ‘war generation’, arose. Many scholars, such as Elias Chad, have studied it in depth. Chad examines the role of artists who led a “resistance to Lebanon’s state-sponsored amnesia”⁷⁹, and the “role that the cultural field has played in framing public debates over collective memory”. One element I want to highlight here is that many of the artists of the *jeel al-harb* were forced out of Lebanon because of the war,

⁷⁷ Sadek, Walid in: Cotter, Suzanne. *Out of Beirut: Exhibition Out of Beirut*. Zürich 2006. P. 66.

⁷⁸ Ivi. P. 78.

⁷⁹ Post-war Lebanese government sanctioned collective amnesia by law, as scholar Chad Elias explains: “Adopting the logic of *la ghalib la maghlub* (no victor, no vanquished), the Lebanese government passed an amnesty law in 1991 effectively granting any former members of militias exemption from criminal prosecution. The law applied to crimes committed before March 1991, including “crimes against humanity and those which seriously infringe human dignity.” Only crimes perpetrated against religious or political leaders were exempt from the amnesty provision.” Elias, Chad: *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*. Durham 2018. P. 7.

and they forcibly lived an ‘inside/outside’ experience. After the war, many of them returned to the country carrying with them the experiences they gained abroad. However, several artists, such as Akram Zaatari, Walid Raad, Rahib Mroué, continued to have a career in a situation of ‘betweenness’, participating both in the international art scene and the local one. Some of the artists featuring my research are part of this generation. However, I focus not on their works related to the Civil War but on more recent pieces that provoke reflections on ‘betweenness’ in a contemporary context.

I wrote how war leads to forced choices: one leaves their country for a question of survival. However, the phenomenon of migration is often driven by the search for opportunities that are lacking in one’s homeland. The art world is no exception. Scholar Lina Khatib has effectively explored how this phenomenon is evident in the Lebanese context through her studies on cinema. Khatib writes that “the war also resulted in a brain drain, where several young Lebanese people left the country to study and work abroad”.⁸⁰ Though, the “brain drain” she talks about did not stop with the war, but continued through the various economic and political crises Lebanon went through. Khatib adds that many directors such as Ghassan Salhab, Jocelyne Saab, Leila Assaf, and Danielle Arbid have also followed this path. She writes that “the combination of the presence of talent outside Lebanon and the lack of resources inside Lebanon has resulted in the creation of a transnational Lebanese cinema whereby most Lebanese films made in the last 30 years are international co-productions, with the funding coming from countries like France, Belgium and Italy”,⁸¹ and that many of these films are often screened more in Europe than in Lebanon. In analyzing its case studies, my research also focuses on the issue of funding. In fact, I will often investigate how funding mirrors the international networks that the artists build.

The need to leave one’s country to find opportunities as an artist affects not only Lebanon, but also Palestine. Scholars of contemporary Palestinian art have frequently debated this topic. I have often discussed such topic during my travels in Palestine. For example, the artist Ziad Hajali told me during a conversation at the Birzeit University Museum, where he works: “There is a limitation of institutions, and it is difficult to work with them, since there is a huge number of artists. This is why I exhibit most of my work outside, at Art Dubai, in Jordan or in Kuwait.

⁸⁰ Khatib, Lina: *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*. London, New York 2008. P. 21.

⁸¹ Ivi. P. 22.

I look for opportunities mostly outside, as most Palestinian artists do. In Art Dubai, for example, this edition (2022) has four sections about Palestinian art. So, in general, it is easier to send the portfolio outside, than to do it in Palestine”.⁸² Hajali also noted that after the Second *Intifada* (2000-2005), the number of artists “radically increased”, along with the number of institutions; however, this growth was not proportional, making it even more challenging for those seeking to pursue a career in the arts. At the same time, leaving Lebanon and Palestine does not guarantee immediate success; often, achieving it requires accepting a series of compromises. One example of this compromise is tokenization, similar to what I observed in Israeli art institutions that pursue a liberal agenda. This is part of the process by which institutions and curators select Lebanese and Palestinian artists to broaden the range of their exhibitions and collections and to maintain “an aura of liberal inclusiveness and cultural plurality” (to use Makhoul and Hon’s words again). Tina Sherwell has defined such process as a ‘curatorial safari’, a phenomenon she says she saw many times in Ramallah during her tenure as director of the International Academy of Art. Indeed, Sherwell noted that many curators visit Ramallah with this approach, often for brief stays of just a day. She writes about it: “What they are researching is ambiguous, and often they are just coming to “view” works, as though they will intuitively and innately know the work of art when they “discover” it and the artist. A certain exoticism and neo-orientalism prevail in this approach; the curator is on a curatorial expedition in “unknown” and “dangerous” terrain and “discovers” the artist, thereafter bringing them forth onto the international art stage”.⁸³

Though, let us not be naive. Many curators seek fame, and some artists are willing to play along. This dynamic is understandable given the challenging quest for artistic and economic opportunities. During an interview I had with him in Beirut, the artist Vartan Avakian illustrated this reality with a fitting metaphor. Avakian argued that some artists behave towards an art world in search of tokens condescendingly, simply producing what is requested, like expert sellers: “do you want fish? I will give you fish!”.⁸⁴ This is not the direction of the artists I consider in this research. However, the framing of these dynamics typical of the art world introduces another important theme of my research: art institutions. When I discuss the specific artworks (case

⁸² Hajali, Ziad: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Birzeit, March 24th 2022.

⁸³ Sherwell, Tina: “Curatorial Expeditions: The Ramallah Safari”. In: *Stedelijk Studies Journal Issue* (1) 2014. <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/curatorial-expeditions-ramallah-safari/>

⁸⁴ Avakian, Vartan: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, January 20th 2023.

studies), I also explore relevant exhibitions to analyze the behavior of art institutions. Analyzing the political positioning of these venues will help determine whether the institutions genuinely support the artists or are merely ‘looking for fish’. It will be a way to determine whether they are enacting a ‘curatorial safari’. However, my aim in examining art institutions extends beyond merely evaluating their behavior. Indeed, I hypothesize that questions related to the artists’ ‘betweenness’ also emerge from the venues’ positioning and their role in creating ‘inside/outside’ connections. This is another key reason for my focus on art venues.

3.5. The Role of Art Institutions in Shaping the Concept of Betweenness

I highlighted that for artists, the pursuit of ‘inside/outside’ trajectories can stem from a genuine desire to connect with the ‘outside’ for various reasons, as well as from a quest for opportunities and funding. For art institutions, the discussion is similar. One scholar who has addressed this issue is Atteqa Ali. She wrote in a 2020 publication: “In more recent years in the MENASA, there has been a sustained effort to construct a web beyond the local in order to activate interchange and partnership and create a system of cross-promotion and funding”.⁸⁵ Ali has studied and linked this “effort” to both individual artists and, more importantly, to various independent artistic venues and realities: from the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo to the Darat al Funun in Amman, from the *Palestine Hosting Society* project by artist Mirna Bamieh to the *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* by Tentative Collective. Artistic projects and venues of this nature inherently aim to foster networking opportunities. In terms of the concept of network, in this research I refer to the scholar Caroline Levine’s definition. Building on network theories emerging across disciplines, Levine defines the network “as distinct forms – as defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience”.⁸⁶ While looking at the relations between artists and institutions, my research looks for the “patterns of interconnection and exchange” that organize a “social experience”. I investigate ways of being and doing that transcend the limitations imposed by geography and political circumstances. I will now present examples of institutions, some of which are included in this research, to illustrate the various ways that different art institutions in Lebanon and Palestine have sought to

⁸⁵ Ali, Atteqa: *Collaborative Praxis and Contemporary Art Experiments in the MENASA Region*. Cham 2020. P. 13.

⁸⁶ Levine, Caroline: *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton 2017. P. 132.

create such ‘patterns of interconnection’ over the past few decades. Throughout my research, I examine how some institutions integrate into an international network also through the works of the artists I consider, ultimately fostering specific connections.

Dar Jacir is one of the institutions I explore, as it exemplifies how an arts organization can facilitate the creation of networks. It is a cultural and artistic center in Bethlehem, Palestine (occupied West Bank). Palestinian artists Emily Jacir and Annemarie Jacir established it in 2014 in their family’s house, a historic building dating back to the Ottoman era. Despite its architectural significance, the center is situated near one of the most contentious sites of ongoing protests against the Israeli occupation, which continually puts it at risk.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, since its inception, it has served as a venue for artists seeking to engage with the region, conduct research, and coordinate artistic programs and activities. Dar Jacir is a relatively recent addition to Bethlehem, providing the city of a new and prominent international platform. It has rapidly evolved into a venue with a strong local focus, while maintaining a global outlook, fostered by the founding artists’ extensive international network. This is evidenced by its recent collaboration with Venice Biennial in organizing a collateral event in 2024. Over time, Dar Jacir has created connections with artists from various regions, including Latin America (where a significant Palestinian diaspora is present), Ireland, and Italy. Its resident artists organize events, such as educational projects and workshops, which often involve children from the refugee camps in the area.⁸⁸

In addition to its local commitment, one of the main characteristics of the center is its networking capacity. In an interview I had with her in Bethlehem, Program Director Aline Khoury explored this aspect in depth. One of the center’s most elaborate international networking projects involves dance laboratories. Khoury explained in the interview: “the connection with Italy was born from Emily Jacir’s residency in Italy. She invited pizzica players and dancers (a traditional dance from Southern Italy) who came to Palestine for the first time. We did workshops focused on an exchange between Italian dances and Palestinian dances. It

⁸⁷ In May 2021, it suffered its most severe attack. During a Palestinian protest, the Israeli army entered the center, which was closed at the time, and appropriated it as a fortress. In doing so, it confiscated material from the center, set fire to the garden, and damaged the building. See: Bishara, Hakim: “Artist Emily Jacir’s Bethlehem Arts Center Ransacked By Israeli Army”. Last visited: 04.10.2024. In: *Hyperallergic*. <https://hyperallergic.com/646833/artist-emily-jacirs-bethlehem-arts-center-ransacked-by-israeli-army/>

⁸⁸ A couple of examples are Nicolàs Jaar, Chilean sound maker with Palestinian roots who organized in his residency workshops for the youth from the surrounding refugee camps, or Mohammad Saleh, a permaculture designer and activist who curated the house’s garden, again often with parallel activities like workshops.

was incredible to detect similarities between cultures, to have an exchange, and I believe dance itself was a way to connect. Recreating hybrid dances together was also a healing practice”.⁸⁹ Subsequently, Dar Jacir organized similar workshops in Italy, further strengthening its international network. Thus, its connections follow different trajectories: towards exchanges in the Mediterranean, towards South America,⁹⁰ towards Europe, and also towards the Palestinian diaspora in general, trying to overcome the divisions created by the Israeli occupation. In overcoming divisions, internet has played a crucial role. In our interview, Khoury mentioned that it was during the Covid-19 pandemic that they recognized this: “during the pandemic we did a lot of programs online, and for instance reconnect to the artists that had been here. When we announced an online workshop with Michael Rakowitz, we were flooded by internationals, outside of Bethlehem. We had not realized that our social media channels were followed so much abroad, by the diaspora community, and that they wanted to get involved”. Dar Jacir’s experience thus demonstrate how internet can serve as a tool for fostering unexpected connections that transcend political obstacles. Although it is not the main focus of my research, I still look at internet’s role both for the artists and for the art spaces where they organize the exhibitions. My goal is to learn how internet implements networking strategies and tells of a certain way of living a situation of ‘betweenness’. However, Dar Jacir is not the first venue to rely on online strategies to build community and bypass the occupation’s restrictions. Another example would be the Birzeit University Museum, created thanks to the initiative of the artist Vera Tamari. The museum implemented a range of online initiatives, including a virtual gallery, to navigate the blockade imposed by a checkpoint between Ramallah and Birzeit, which restricted travel between the two locations for several years during the Second *Intifada* (2000-2005).

Many other initiatives in Palestine have tried to create an international network besides Dar Jacir. For example, I could examine the initiative Qalandiya international, an international art biennial in Palestine founded in 2012 which aims to create collaboration ‘between’ Palestinian and international artists; or the International Academy of Art Palestine (which one of the chapters of the dissertation will mention); or the Al Ma’mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, founded in 1998 by Jack Persekian, who wanted to found it to face the “lack of interaction and

⁸⁹ Khoury, Aline: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Bethlehem, March 21st 2022.

⁹⁰ The history of trade between Bethlehem and South America dates back to the 19th century, when many families began to go there in various countries for trade, as Aline Khoury explained me during our conversation.

exchange with the outside world” and with the idea of creating “a place in Jerusalem founded on the exchange between artists in Palestine and abroad”.⁹¹

However, I argue that along with non-profit centers and venues, commercial galleries can also play a role in promoting the development of ‘inside/outside’ trajectories. Among the various examples in the Palestinian context, I would like to highlight the Zawyeh Gallery in Ramallah. It is a gallery that has continued its activity overcoming moments of serious crisis for Palestine, also thanks to the international network that it has managed to create. Concerning the daily challenges a gallery in Palestine faces in its interactions with the ‘outside’ world – such as the movement of artworks, customs issues, delays, inspections, and police investigations – Yusef Hussein, the gallery’s manager, elaborated during an interview I had with him: “if you and me were to exchange positions, you would be shocked by the amount of daily challenges that we face”.⁹² However, concerning Zawyeh’s role in creating an international network, he stated: “as a gallery we focus on Palestinian art, promoting and showcasing these talents to the international scene. Here we have a great influence over an artist’s career, because we are able to show the works not only locally, but also internationally. And when you show internationally, most probably museums, collectors and organizations would come for these artists, and this is going to increase their presence, and influence their careers by diversifying”.⁹³ The diversification Hussein describes has meant an expansion in multiple directions, including participation in art fairs in Paris, Beirut, Istanbul, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai, where Zawyeh Gallery has also established a new space.

In Lebanon, the history of how galleries, similar to Zawyeh Gallery in Ramallah, have favored ‘inside/outside’ trajectories and the relationship of artists to an international scene is very important. As such, the sixties are among art history’s most studied and discussed moments. The 1960s saw economic growth in Lebanon, fueling significant experimentation and artistic initiatives, especially in Beirut. Such period has often been idealized, neglecting the social contradictions that existed in Lebanon. Though, it has certainly left its mark on the history of Lebanese Art. In 2022, a traveling exhibition focused on this period showcased first at the Gropius Museum in Berlin and later at the Biennale in Lyon. The co-curator of the exhibition

⁹¹ “Le musée palestinien par Jack Persekian”, YouTube, uploaded by Institutcultureislam, 30th June 2016. Last visited: 04.10.2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYcVIKjeENY>

⁹² Hussein, Yusef: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, April 12th 2022.

⁹³ Ibidem.

Sam Bardaouil states that the show revisited “the idealized period of global influence in Beirut” and showed “how the encounter between art, culture and polarized political ideologies transformed Beirut’s art scene into a microcosm where larger transnational tensions were expressed”.⁹⁴ Thus, the exhibition brought together artworks that span the period from the crisis of 1958 (when Lebanon narrowly avoided the outbreak of Civil War) to 1975 (when Civil War actually broke out). It is a period of several decades in which various initiatives developed in parallel or synergy. These ranged from the *Salons d’Automne* regularly organized by Sursock – the Museum of Modern Art officially inaugurated in 1961 – to Dar El Fan, an artistic and cultural space opened by Janine Rubeiz in 1967 to support an international artistic community, to the more than forty private galleries active between 1955 and 1975.

Many of these galleries contributed to the internationalization of Beirut and Lebanon. Zeina Maasri has studied some of them in her work *Cosmopolitan Radicalism - The Visual Politics of Beirut’s Global Sixties* (2020). For example, Maasri examines the history of Gallery One, founded by artist and critic Helen El-Khal. Born in Pennsylvania in 1923 to a family of Lebanese immigrants, she settled in Beirut in 1946 alongside her husband, poet Yusuf al-Khal. Maasri writes that at “the opening of the gallery, Helen al-Khal noted that the gallery would ‘strive to be a link between Lebanese and Arab artists, and a forum where they can gather freely, discuss their affairs, and establish relationships with one another’”.⁹⁵ Another gallery that Maasri highlights as a platform for transnational encounters is the Contact Gallery. Graphic designer Waddah Faris (b. 1940) founded it. Maasri writes that Faris set it up “as a venue for contemporary art and, with Césaire Nammour and Mireille Tabet as business partners, he tapped into a booming transnational market for modern art that Beirut offered to its visitors and inhabitants”.⁹⁶

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) ravaged the city of Beirut. This situation inevitably resulted in the closure of many of the spaces I mentioned, disrupting the cosmopolitan spirit that had flourished through the ‘inside/outside’ trajectories. In recent times, despite the country’s ongoing difficulties, there has been a reopening of similar spaces. Andrée Sfeir-Semler’s gallery stands out as one of the most significant examples of such re-birth. I also refer to it in the

⁹⁴ Bardaouil, Sam / Till, Fellrath: *Beirut and the Golden Sixties: Manifesto of Fragility*. Milano 2022. P. 11. Translation from French by Giacomo Paci.

⁹⁵ Maasri 2020, previously quoted. P. 74.

⁹⁶ Ivi. P. 98.

research. The eponymous founder, born in Beirut in 1953, opened her first galleries in Germany after studying art history: in Kiel in 1985 and in Hamburg in 1998. After working for many years mainly with Western Minimal artists, Sfeir-Semler began to get involved with artists from the Arab world in the early 2000s. She also began to cultivate the idea of opening a space in Beirut, now that the situation in Lebanon felt more secure. With the help of the architect Bernard Houry, she found a space in a former factory, where the architect also had his own studio. Sfeir-Semler opened at a difficult time for the country, when Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated (2005). This event triggered the uprising in Lebanon known as the “Cedar Revolution”. It demanded the withdrawal of the Syrian army, which had occupied the country since 1976 and that the protesters accused of orchestrating the attack. At the time, the Syrian occupation imposed a curfew. On the opening day, the gallery decided not to respect it. What began almost as an act of resistance turned out to be a successful gamble. The Sfeir-Semler Gallery soon established itself in the Lebanese Art scene. From the outset, the gallery exhibited an international character and demonstrated a strong ability to network. This was mainly due to its founder’s ability to live in a situation of ‘betweenness’, ‘between’ Germany, Lebanon and beyond, and to become a mediator ‘between’ different realities. Even today, in the second decade of the 21st century, the venue in the Lebanese capital is unique in its international position, maintaining relationships with various entities, from Art Basel to Art Dubai, and enabling the artists it represents to exhibit abroad. However, in a conversation I had with Lina Kyriakos, who works at the Beirut branch of the gallery, she explained that the gallery “is not really close to its artists, since only two of them live in Beirut permanently, since this implies facing all the difficulties that the country has been going through for years”,⁹⁷ though it carries out a unique work of support for the production of their works. So, these are other ways the gallery fosters a development of ‘inside/outside’ trajectories that impact artists’ careers.

Even in Lebanon, of course, it is not only the commercial galleries that are carrying out this function. Places like the Beirut Art Center, co-founded by the artist Lamia Joreige, whose work features my research, aim to cultivate an artistic scene that bridges the local and the international. Scholar Atteqa Ali has studied some of these alternative realities. They include Ashkal Alwan, an organization dedicated to promoting contemporary art, which according to Ali “has achieved a globally recognized status with support from international sources” while

⁹⁷ Kyriakos, Lina: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, January 21st 2023.

remaining “tied to the local community”. Ali writes that Ashkal Alwan was born “as a collective of artists interested in supporting each other and an extended community of artists in the city, country, and beyond”, and that it became soon “renowned for its programs including *Home Works* that has offered a platform for artists and arts professionals, both local and international, to gather together and discuss critical issues of the field in the Arab region and globally”.⁹⁸ Ashkal Alwan’s strength lies precisely in being anchored in the local, yet open to the international. It follows ‘local/global’ or ‘inside/outside’ trajectories that can benefit the participating artists.

Scholar Sarah Rogers has also examined the trajectories shaped by the Lebanese Art scene, which she has defined with the slogan “going global, acting local in Beirut”. According to Rogers, they follow a perspective that is not “one of a local movement being exported to an international market”,⁹⁹ but of projects like that of Ashkal Alwan and its ‘local/global’ trajectories. Rogers emphasizes the role of artists who trained abroad during the war years and then returned to Lebanon to develop such initiatives. This introduces one of the main themes of my research. So far, I outlined how in both Lebanon and Palestine artists have played a fundamental role over the decades in developing institutions that operate locally and aspire to become international. Behind most of the initiatives that I have cited (Dar Jacir, the gallery of Birzeit University, the International Academy of Art Palestine, the Al Ma’mal Foundation, the historic Gallery One and Contact galleries in Beirut, Beirut Art Center, Ashkal Alwan) there is in fact the initiative of the artists themselves. There is a history of how artists have lived a situation of ‘betweenness’ through a double action. They remain active in the international arena, the ‘outside’, while actively participating in developing the local art scene, the ‘inside’. One of the key questions guiding my research revolves around how the artists under consideration navigate their experiences of ‘betweenness’. I specifically aim to investigate whether they belong to the history of artists fulfilling a role that I have highlighted.

3.6. An Overview of Lebanese and Palestinian Artists Engaging with Narratives

⁹⁸ Ali 2020, previously quoted. P. 92.

⁹⁹ Rogers in: Amirsadeghi 2009, previously quoted. P. 39.

By looking at art spaces in Lebanon and Palestine, I outlined that there is a history of artists playing a role of responsibility from their ‘inside/outside’ position. However, I argue that this role has not only materialized over the years through artists’ involvement in founding venues. Indeed, artists can also express their search for responsibility through their projects. My research focuses on artists whose work has a visual narrative character. One of my initial assumptions is that narratives carry a social role and can actively influence the public sphere. Therefore, one of the main questions of my research concerns the possibility that artists try to play a role by creating visual narratives. My hypothesis is that this role is linked to their position of ‘betweenness’, which can also influence how artists develop their narratives.

My hypothesis stems from the fact that there is a history of artists in both Lebanon and Palestine who have dealt with narratives by interpreting a social role based on their situation of ‘betweenness’. I argue that in the case of Palestine, this is particularly evident in the efforts that many artists have made to write art history in English texts, thus targeting an international audience. Many scholars have addressed the issue of Palestinian artists writing Palestinian art history. Makhoul and Hon write about it: “What we see in their writing, as well as in their work, is the origination of Palestinian contemporary art. [...] The artists are producing their own context and this is the origin of Palestinian art - that is, the origin as produced by artists”. Makhoul and Hon interpret the artists’ writing action as an intention to create a narrative, that of the history of Palestinian Art. Originally, the artists wrote to address a gap in art history. In her doctoral thesis published in 2003, Tina Sherwell writes about it: “my study of Palestinian visual representations has been undertaken in the absence of a canon of art history on Palestinian art and in the context in which very few academic texts exist on the subject”.¹⁰⁰ A few decades after Sherwell’s publication, the situation has improved considerably. Many texts have appeared in the academic field that have partially filled the gap that Sherwell highlighted. However, the “absence of an art historical canon” that Sherwell spoke of can explain the impulse that led in the past many artists to create their own narrative of Palestinian Art History. I argue that the numerous examples of non-Arabic texts authored by artists in an ‘inside/outside’ position reveal the artists’ intent to communicate their narratives to a diverse audience. This underscores their desire to embrace a role within their situation of ‘betweenness’.

¹⁰⁰ Sherwell 2003, previously quoted. P. 8.

Palestinian artists also wrote the history of Palestinian Art as a political act. Their narrative has historically served to counter Israel's attempt to conceal the Palestinian presence. Such an attempt reflects what historian Ilan Pappé defines as 'cultural memoricide'. It is a concept later taken up by the historian Nur Masalha, who defines it "the systematic scholarly, political and military attempt in post-1948 Israel to de-Arabize the Palestinian terrain".¹⁰¹ Therefore, for Palestinian artists, creating a narrative of Palestinian art history means resisting this process of de-Arabization. Writing their narrative in other languages for the artists also means giving it the possibility to expand 'outside' Palestine, and to find legitimacy both 'inside' and 'outside'. I argue that some artists' historical role in their position of 'betweenness' is precisely the assumption of this responsibility.

The first artist I want to mention again is Kamal Boullata. In his writings, Boullata has often elaborated on this sense of responsibility. Already in 1970, he wrote in a text: "as a Palestinian who has chosen the hard way to respond to the call of history, I shall - within the limits of my vocabulary - attempt the difficult task of stating what I see, not as a witness to history should, but as a committed Palestinian must".¹⁰² Boullata associates his Palestinian identity with a responsibility: the duty to respond to the "call of history". Similarly, throughout his career, writing the history of Palestinian Art has been a political act for him. I argue that this recalls what Nur Masalha also writes about his work as a historian: "To write more truthfully about the Palestinian *Nakba* is not merely to practice professional historiography, it is also a profoundly moral act of liberation and a struggle for truth, justice, equality, return (both mental and physical return) and a better future".¹⁰³ I argue that Boullata's response to the "call of history," which he describes as a "moral act of liberation", parallels Masalha's own notion of a "moral act of liberation". One of Boullata's most comprehensive works on the history of Palestinian Art, published in 2009, covers a period from the 1850s to the present day. Boullata thus lists numerous phases that have followed one another: a religious art dedicated to creating icons, the first pioneers of modern art, Palestinian artists in Beirut, Palestinian artists scattered all over the world, up to the most recent era of the 2000s. Starting the history of Palestinian art in the 19th century, along with its ongoing resistance to occupation, entails documenting a narrative that predates the *Nakba* of 1948 by several decades. Boullata's goal is to assert that Palestinian

¹⁰¹ Masalha 2012, previously quoted. P. 89.

¹⁰² Boullata 2019, previously quoted. P. 152.

¹⁰³ Masalha 2012, previously quoted. P. 18.

identity is deeply rooted in its own history, and not merely in opposition to colonial power. Finally, telling it in English means trying to legitimize this narrative ‘outside’ Palestine.

Like Boullata, many other Palestinian artists have written texts on the history of Palestinian Art in English. Among them, I argue that Samia Halaby stands out. In her writings, Halaby often reflects on her experience as a Palestinian living “in the West”: “My father’s choice to settle us in the U.S. forced me to measure the hostile propaganda and racism towards Palestinians (and others) by the yardstick of my Palestinian reality”.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Halaby discussed the pressure she felt to create art that was distinctly ‘Palestinian’: “at the opening of a small exhibition of Palestinian artists, a brave young activist asked me: ‘where is Palestine in your work?’”. However, Halaby has consistently regarded her abstract art as a political act, viewing it as a manifestation of creative freedom fueled by her activism: “the energy of seeking liberation liberated my creative process”.¹⁰⁵ Her writing has consistently carried significant political weight, often arising from a desire to challenge the stereotypical and Orientalist narratives of Palestine constructed in the West. Halaby aimed to provide a “flip side of the coin narrative”, to use again the words of artist Sama Alshaibi.

One of Halaby’s most significant texts in this regard is a response to the catalogue of a 1998 exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm, where she participated. The exhibition had a troubled history from the start, due to a “pro-Israeli lobby at the Academy” that tried to boycott it and create a counter-exhibition in response. Moreover, Halaby writes that the catalogue of the exhibition on Palestinian Art “was not about art but rather a misinformed and insulting travelogue through Palestine with a shocking focus on the propaganda of Zionism”. She then lists all the problems of the text. Halaby writes that the curator saw the Palestinian artists he invited “as the ethnic other, while he is unaware that we see him and came visiting hoping for natural interaction”.¹⁰⁶ To this highly problematic text, Halaby then responded with her writing, “which attempts to do what the book sets out to do”: “it tells who we are and describes our art and its sources and influences”. I argue that this experience shaped a distinct role played by Halaby, rooted in her double inscription. Through her political activism within

¹⁰⁴ Halaby, Samia: “The Political Basis of Abstraction in the 20th Century As Explored by a Painter”. In: *Manazir Journal* (1) 2019. <https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2019.1.1.7>. P. 83.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

the art world, she sought to challenge and dismantle the Western narrative surrounding Palestine.

Halaby exemplifies a Palestinian artist who transitions into the role of art historian as a response to her position of ‘betweenness’. Her work culminates in influential texts like *Liberation Art of Palestine* (2001). The theme of artists acting as art historians frequently emerged in my conversations with the artists I interviewed for this research. In one of these conversations, the artist Faten Nastas Mitwasi, who has also written several books on the history of Palestinian Art in English, stated: “many of us [GP: Palestinian artists writing Palestinian art history] are not professional art historians. Part of our motivation to write comes from the fact that we know the story from the direct resources, and we are confident about the information”.¹⁰⁷ Overall, I want to emphasize the role that these artists choose to play, their response to the “call of history,” and the position they adopt in their experience of ‘betweenness’. My hypothesis posits that the artists under study in my research craft strategies to complement their visual narratives, much like the artists I have presented who engaged with their art historical texts along their artistic practice. My analysis thus explores the potential existence of these strategies.

My hypothesis is also informed by the fact that Lebanon has a history that closely parallels the Palestinian one I have described. In Lebanon, too, artists have also dealt with writing the history of art, often from an ‘inside/outside’ situation. The historical reasons for this phenomenon are different from those of Palestinian artists. As I have already pointed out, writing history and art history in Lebanon is not an act of liberation or resistance against a colonial power. However, it also has an important identity value. A *leitmotif* often found in books on Lebanese history is that there is no single version. This is partly due to the sectarian and communal divisions that have always characterized the country: “a political system based on the institutionalization of religious sects (‘sectarianism’)”¹⁰⁸ which the historian Fawwaz Traboulsi defines as one of the “main themes around which Lebanon’s modern history is articulated”.¹⁰⁹ Many stereotypical historical narratives often overlook Lebanon's history of coexistence, dialogue, and the relationships between its diverse communities. I do not intend to

¹⁰⁷ Mitwasi, Faten Nastas: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, June 16th 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Sectarianism is a form of political system unique to Lebanon, according to which, as Andrew Arsan writes, “Parliamentary seats, ministerial appointments, and positions in the army and the civil service are all distributed on the basis of confession”. For example, “by convention the president of the republic is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of parliament a Shia”. Arsan 2018. P. 13.

¹⁰⁹ Traboulsi, Fawwāz: *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London 2007. P. vii.

repeat them here, nor is it the task of my dissertation to explore this issue more than necessary. I want to highlight that, on the historiographical front, scholars have long noted the challenges of writing a unified history of Lebanon. Indeed, they pointed out that this difficulty arises because various communities perceive history through their unique perspectives. The Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi addressed this issue in 1988 in a text with a particularly apt title: *A House of Many Mansions - The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. Salibi's metaphor of a house with different mansions symbolizes the division of Lebanon into various communities, a fragmentation that the Civil War – ongoing at the time of Salibi's publication – further intensified. One of Salibi's book's chapters is devoted to the “war over Lebanese history”. In the chapter, among other things, the historian highlights the discrepancies in the educational texts used in schools across various communities during the war years. For example, he talks about “the war against the official Lebanese history” that arose in the *Maqasid* schools (Sunnite schools), as well as in the Druze schools, which considered this history as “a Christian invention”, “deliberately intended to serve Christian interests in the country, and ultimately Western imperialist interests in Syria and the rest of the Arab world”.¹¹⁰ I already mentioned how the Lebanese government after the Civil War did not solve the problem of writing history. On the contrary, it aggravated the problem by following the logic of *la ghalib la maghlub* (“no victor, no vanquished”) and by passing an amnesty law that encouraged to forget what had happened, instead of building a new national unity that would deal with the recent past.

I also mentioned how, in this scenario, the world of culture and art, especially in the post-Civil War period, has tried to make its contribution and oppose this logic of *la ghalib la maghlub*. The historical narratives by Lebanese artists hold a distinct political value that, while different from that of Palestinian artists, remains profoundly significant. The same goes for their writing of art history. I want to highlight here the role that artists have played in writing a narrative, both of history and of the history of Lebanese Art. Many of these artists have also written from an ‘inside/outside’ experience, similar to their Palestinian counterparts. My research does not focus on the Civil War, but aims to verify elements of continuity or divergence from a particular tradition that has developed in the history of Lebanese Art. Indeed, in the history of Lebanese Art, there are many cases of overlapping roles: artists who were simultaneously engaged in their own artistic practice and forms of dissemination. As with

¹¹⁰ Salibi, Kamal: *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. London 2002. P. 203.

Palestinian artists, my research aims to explore how the Lebanese artists I examine, who create visually narrative works, accompany these narratives. I hypothesize that specific strategies emerge in this context, tied to the artists' position of 'betweenness'.

A first example of overlapping roles that I want to consider is Gregory Buchakjian. Buchakjian has spent most of his life in Lebanon, except his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. His choice to write in English and French, however, shows how he addresses both the 'inside' and the 'outside' of Lebanon. In an interview I had with him in Beirut, he revealed that as an artist he has taken a different path from others of his generation. "While artists like Akram Zaatari are born as artists, and then to express their ideas they end up applying scientific methods, I have a background as an art historian, and I became an artist to find other means to express mine".¹¹¹ Buchakjian's work as an artist is therefore intertwined with his activity as an art historian. In his text for the volume *L'Art au Liban*, he wonders how to contribute to a "book dedicated to the modern art in Lebanon". He writes: "*quelle approche privilégier: l'analyse scientifique de l'historien de l'art, les inspirations de l'artiste, ou la nostalgie subjective de quelqu'un qui a grandi à Beyrouth pendant la guerre civile?*".¹¹² With this question, Buchakjian shows that the perspective of an artist and that of an art historian are not entirely superimposable, almost suggesting that the "scientific analysis" of an academic cannot be found in the narrative work of an artist, who would only follow "inspirations". This introduces one of the central themes of my research: the evaluation of the reliability of the artists' narratives, their lack or possession of a "scientific analysis".

Jalal Toufic is the second example I want to mention of an artist who accompanies his artistic practice with an activity of narrative creation, from a particular 'inside/outside' position. He was born in Beirut in 1962, the son of a Lebanese mother and an Iraqi father. After his first studies in Lebanon, he lived for a long time in the United States, between New York, Illinois, and California, holding various academic positions. Toufic has always devoted himself to writing. His numerous books often reflect his experiences as an 'outsider', and on how, for example, he feels "far better appreciated abroad" than in the "Arab world".¹¹³ At the same time, he is a

¹¹¹ Buchakjian, Gregory: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, 25th January 2023.

¹¹² "Which approach should we favor: the scientific analysis of the art historian, the inspirations of the artist, or the subjective nostalgia of someone who grew up in Beirut during the Civil War?" Translation from French: Giacomo Paci. Buchakjian in: Abillama, Nour Salamé / Maalouf, Amin / Tomb, Marie: *L'art au Liban: artistes modernes et contemporains; 1880-1975. Tome 1*. Beirut 2012. P. 309.

¹¹³ Toufic, Jalal: *Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell You*. Sausalito 2005. P. 115.

member of the *jeel al-harb* (war generation) and has written extensively on the role that artists can play in the elaboration of collective memory. His book *Undeserving Lebanon* (2007) addresses this issue in particular. Here he writes: “thinkers, writers and artists have to complement this basic task with creating concepts and artistic works that make us merit what has happened to us instead of feeling that we are victims”.¹¹⁴ Toufic insists a lot on the idea of “merit” that the “other Lebanese” must show towards artists and their work. He acknowledges the role artists can play but insists it must be in harmony with the wider needs of society. Drawing from this example, my research will also explore the dialogue artists can establish with society.

A final example of the interplay between artistic practice and theoretical engagement from a specific ‘inside/outside’ perspective is Walid Sadek, whom I previously mentioned for his text on Moustafa Farroukh. He studied and lived in the United States before returning to Lebanon, where he developed a career ‘between’ Lebanon and abroad, including representing the Lebanese pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Among the various texts that I could cite by Sadek, I want to mention his contributions to the *Tamass* project. *Tamass*, following the words of its director, the curator Catherine Davide, is a “long-term project which includes seminars, presentations of works by different authors (...), performances and publications, with the aim of encouraging production, circulation and exchange between the different cultural centres of the Arab world and the rest of the world”.¹¹⁵ One of the editions of *Tamass* was dedicated to Beirut and Lebanon and was presented at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona in the summer of 2002. Sadek contributed two critical texts to the catalogue. The first text is about the participation of Lebanese artists in the globalized art scene after the end of the Civil War, and what he defines as a “arresting collection of films, installations, images and texts that insist that the Lebanese, or at least those artists among them, are now worthy again of belonging to the rest of the world”.¹¹⁶ The second text instead focuses on the “conspicuous spread of an artistic theory and practice” of *Tajheezieh* (Installation art) in Post-War Lebanon. With this contribution, I argue that Sadek assumes the dual role of art producer and art theorist, shaping a narrative of Lebanese Art for both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of Lebanon. My initial hypothesis for this

¹¹⁴ Toufic, Jalal: *Undeserving Lebanon*. Forthcoming Books, New York 2006. P. 14.

¹¹⁵ Davide, Catherine: *Tamass Contemporary Arab Representations. 1: Beirut, Lebanon*. Beirut 2002. P. 11.

¹¹⁶ Sadek, Walid: “From Excavation to Dispersion: Configurations of Installation Art in Post-War Lebanon”. In: Davide 2002, previously quoted. P. 15.

research is that also the artists I examine, who create visual narrative works, develop specific strategies to complement their narratives within their position of ‘betweenness’. In the cases of Sadek, Toufic, and Buchakjian, I noted their production of narratives in English or French – languages that resonate with both audiences in Lebanon and Palestine and those abroad. The question of linguistic choices and their implications will remain central to my analysis of the case studies.

3.7. Conceptualizing Counter-Narratives

I have mentioned that the works under consideration are not only narratives, but counter-narratives. A counter-narrative is an alternative or counter-hegemonic narrative that opposes a hegemonic narrative. There is a history of the development of this concept in the milieu of visual art studies related to Lebanon and Palestine. Here, too, I will offer only a few exemplary references, since it is not possible to reconstruct an utterly exhaustive overview. One of the most recent examples I want to cite is a text by Hanan Toukan on the “politics of art” in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. Toukan writes about her use of the term ‘counterhegemonic’: “By my use of “counterhegemonic,” I draw explicitly on Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of it as the site where organic intellectuals formulate ideas and construct, along with publics, critical counter-discourses to challenge hegemonic assumptions and beliefs about what cultural production can and should do in society”.¹¹⁷ My research intends to move in the same direction, looking at the artists under study as those “organic intellectuals” who “formulate ideas and construct critical counter-discourses” in their works. Examining contemporary Lebanese art, Toukan then delves into the work of artists who use archival practices in their work. She considers how “a counternarrative to the official state-imposed amnesia about the war unfolded in contemporary art practices”¹¹⁸ (words that recall what I already outlined with Elias Chad). Conversely, scholar Sune Haugbolle, in her 2010 book, speaks similarly of a “counterhegemonic memory culture” developed by those she calls “memory makers”, or “people of the creative class” who, through various media, are concerned with “memorializing the war”.¹¹⁹ Moreover, Lina Khatib (2013) builds on Haugbolle’s studies, showing that the issue of counter-narratives in Lebanon is not

¹¹⁷ Toukan 2021, previously quoted. P. 6.

¹¹⁸ Ivi. P. 143.

¹¹⁹ Haugbolle, Sune: *War and Memory in Lebanon*. New York 2010. P. 8.

limited to a simple opposition of an official state narrative and a memory ‘from below’, which ‘memory makers’ could advocate for. Different communities produce different narratives. Haugbolle and Khatib point out how this becomes visible from how in the period after the Lebanese Civil War (“and even before”) certain geographical areas in the country “have been visually marked through the presence of posters (as well as other public space markers like graffiti) belonging to particular groups, transforming those zones into “pure” “Hizbullah,” “Kataeb,” “Amal” or “Progressive Socialist Party” areas, while excluding “others”.¹²⁰ These posters have a “symbolic, sectarian, political” and “physical boundary marker” role, but they also become vectors of different, often contrasting narratives. Khatib finally writes: “This process of multiple exclusions can be read as a product of the “fragmentation of the social into a multiplicity of hegemonic formations” in Lebanon, whereby there is no centralized hegemonic force, but where, instead, each political-sectarian group constitutes its own regime of truth”.¹²¹ My initial hypothesis for this research is that the artists under study not only create counter-narratives but also complicate the oversimplified narratives about Lebanon and Palestine often found in the West. Overall, I want to verify whether this happens and how the narratives of these artists or ‘memory makers’ (as Haugbolle would write) function from their particular position of ‘betweenness’.

In the Palestinian context, numerous studies highlight how artists have historically created counter-narratives to challenge prevailing Western narratives. Tina Sherwell, for example, has addressed this issue in relation to the years around the First *Intifada* (1987-1993). She writes: “in the 1980s and 1990s, artists were confronting with challenging the dominant stereotypes of Palestinians as terrorists or stone throwers as was frequently broadcast in ‘western’ media. Thus, on the one hand there was an impetus to counter such imagery, however, on the other hand, artists were also engaged with the question of how to keep pace with the representation of events that were changing rapidly on the ground”.¹²² Sherwell then examines the work of a series of artists with ‘inside/outside’ life experiences, such as Mona Hatoum, Sharif Waked, or Taysir Batniji, who use various media to mock stereotypical Western narratives about Palestinians.

¹²⁰ Khatib, Lina: *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*. London 2013. P. 15.

¹²¹ Ibidem.

¹²² Sherwell, Tina: “Time’s Loop: Contemplations on Palestinian Video Art”. In: Makhoul, Bashir. *Palestinian Video Art: Constellation of the Moving Image*. London 2013. P. 219.

Batniji, for example, was born in Gaza in 1966, studied in Nablus and later in France, and then lived in a situation of ‘betweenness’, dividing his time ‘between’ France and Palestine. From this position, he has developed a multimedia practice, often creating installations that both ironically and seriously denounce the tragic history of Gaza.¹²³

Artists from Gaza have historically developed a robust artistic practice centered around counter-narratives. Scholar Hania A.M. Nashef argues in an article published in 2021 that greater access to cameras has also enabled anyone in Gaza to make video works that travel easily and can reach international audiences. She writes that since the Second *Intifada* (2000-2005), “the ubiquity of mobile devices and cheaper cameras has resulted in a marked increase in ‘performance’ towards foreign audiences”, and that the “availability and affordability of these mobile devices have allowed Gazans to narrate their stories, provided a counter-narrative to a story of silencing”.¹²⁴ The historical moment in which my research is inserted repeats exactly this pattern. In the almost total absence of images from Gaza during the 2023/2024 war (given that the Israeli government has banned foreign newspapers from entering the Strip), it is the population itself that provides live images of what is happening in the territory.¹²⁵

The visual narratives from this dissertation do not have anything to do with Gaza, nor are they made by artists who can only rely on “mobile devices and cheap cameras”. Nevertheless, I argue that they align with some dynamics described by Nashef, such as ensuring a “performance towards foreign audiences” and “provide a counter-narrative to a story of silencing”. Their narratives provide alternative images to an international audience, that “challenge hegemonic assumptions and beliefs” (to use Gramsci’s words quoted by Toukan) present in the “West”. My research aims to understand how artists formulate their visual narratives, how these narratives function within their situation of ‘betweenness’, and how this ‘betweenness’ ultimately influences their artistic development.

¹²³ I can mention, for example, the installation *GH0809 #2 (Gaza Houses 2008-2009)*. Batniji created it after Israel’s assaults on Gaza in 2008 and 2009, which left over 1,300 Palestinians dead —65% of them civilians— and 5,450 wounded. He was unable to go home because of the Israeli blockade established in June 2006, so, he asked journalist Sami al Ajrami to photograph for him several houses damaged by Israeli bombardments. The artist then selected 20 of these images and displayed them like real estate ads, accompanied by detailed commentary below. A certain ironic tone therefore concealed the tragic nature of the images.

¹²⁴ Nashef, Hania A.M: “‘The Right to Narrate’: Gazans Contest Popular Geopolitics with Film”. In: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 57 (6) 2021. P. 3.

¹²⁵ “Media organizations urge Israel to open access to Gaza”. Last visited: 10.4.2024.
<https://cpj.org/2024/07/media-organizations-urge-israel-to-open-access-to-gaza/#full-letter-below>

3.8. Conclusions of the State of the Art

The central research question that guides my dissertation is: How does the ‘between’ position of an artist influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? This chapter on the State of the Art has served to understand this question better. It has explained the different elements that the question contains and has contextualized them historically and theoretically. A first part of this question concerns the situation of ‘betweenness’ in which the artists under consideration live and work. My research seeks to explore what it actually means for them to live and work in different places, ‘between’ an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. A historical overview of the history of Lebanese and Palestinian art has showed some examples of the effects that an ‘inside/outside’ experience can have on an artist’s work. I outlined examples of hybrid and non-hybrid artistic languages.

My research focuses on works with a visual narrative character created between the second and third decade of the 21st century by artists who share similar ‘inside/outside’ experiences. I will primarily seek the effects of a ‘between’ position in the technical and artistic properties of the works. For example, I will examine the documentary properties of the works to see how they fit into the history of the ‘documentary turn’ in the visual arts, and what meaning they have in their historical-social context. I will examine the installation strategies, both in video works and in works that incorporate other media. Finally, I will analyze the linguistic choices of the works, examining the concept of translation from both a linguistic and a visual point of view.

In this chapter, I have pointed out a history of Lebanese and Palestinian artists who, starting from an experience of ‘inside/outside’, have chosen to cover a particular social role. I hypothesize that the artists I consider in this research fit into this history of dual activity that I outlined. I hypothesize that the artists actually combine their narrative works with a particular mediation, which would give them a particular role precisely in their position of ‘betweenness’. In my research I also evaluate the reliability of the artists’ narratives. This also allows to understand their value as counter-narratives.

Finally, in my research I examine the network (the “patterns of interconnection and exchange”, as Levine would write) that artists create from their position of ‘betweenness’, assuming that it is one of the crucial elements to be observed. I aim to explore what role art spaces play in this network. I aim to study the possibilities they offer to artists, for example, in

terms of funding. At the same time, I want to evaluate their behavior. I aim to analyze whether they support and guide artists or, conversely, whether they hinder them. For this reason, it is particularly important to contextualize my research in the tragic and uncertain historical period in which it is inserted. Overall, my research seeks to understand the role of art spaces and institutions in mediating the narratives created by artists. Finally, on the question of the network, I also look at the role that virtual spaces play in the situation of 'betweenness' of the artists.

These are the directions that my research takes to study the possible effects of the situation of 'betweenness' on the visual narrative works of the artists. The section that follows, the second of my dissertation, will be dedicated to analyzing the case studies. Through the analysis of these cases I seek the answers to the questions I posed here. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific work of art. I chose this order because I believed it would best highlight the findings of the research. Each chapter begins with an analysis of a particular exhibition in which the work was showed, explaining the reasons for its interest, and then continues with an analysis of the work. In the final section, the third of the dissertation, I then collect the answers found, compare them, and draw the final conclusions.

Second Section

Case Studies

4. Jumana Manna's *Foragers* (2021). A Counter-Narrative of Landscape Practices from a Position of Betweenness

The analysis of the work *Foragers* by Jumana Manna serves as the first case study in my research. It aims to begin to answer the research question: How does the 'between' position of an artist influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? Manna was born in Princeton in 1987 to Palestinian parents and grew up in Shu'fat, East Jerusalem. Over the years, she has lived and worked 'between' Palestine and abroad, maintaining relationships both 'inside' and 'outside' Palestine. The work in question deals with narratives linked to a certain traditional practice of the Palestinians in the territory, which also has a personal value for the artist. The work's goal is also to oppose a particular narrative that is representative of the Israeli oppression and that aims to silence the Palestinian narrative. Through the analysis of *Foragers*, I want to begin to answer the questions that emerged in the first section of the dissertation. I hypothesize that there is a particular way of working of the artist that informs about her situation of 'betweenness'. I hypothesize that this particular way emerges from the work and its mediation. For this reason, my analysis will follow several directions. On the one hand, I want to examine how the artist mediates local stories on an international level. What mediation strategies does the artist use? To answer this, I will start from a specific exhibition in Europe in which she presented the work: *No Linear F***ing Time* at BAK in Utrecht, the Netherlands (December 3, 2021 - May 22, 2022). On the other hand, I will analyze the film in depth, in its artistic and technical features. What can the artist's choice of medium and the way she uses it tell about her situation of 'betweenness' and her attempt to create a counter-narrative?

4.1. The Debut of *Foragers* at BAK, Basis voor Actuele Kunst

Manna's film *Foragers* had its premiere in December 2021 at the exhibition *No Linear F***ing Time* at BAK, in Utrecht (Netherlands). The film is the culmination of an extensive research project carried out in Palestine.¹²⁶ I argue that such research employed primarily ethnographic methods, which I will examine later on. The debut of *Foragers* in this exhibition

¹²⁶ Manna, Jumana: *Foragers*, 2022, Palestine, 64 min, 2K video.

space is not coincidental, given that the Dutch art foundation participated in the commission of the work. However, BAK was not the only venue to fund the work. Manna's project received support from various countries' museums and artistic foundations. I argue that these together reflect the artist's 'between' positioning, and provide insights into her biography and her international network. As I anticipated in the State of the Art, in my research I rely on the scholar Caroline Levine's definition of the concept of network, "as distinct forms – as defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience".¹²⁷ Thus, I argue that such relationships with art institutions 'between' different countries represent the "patterns of interconnection and exchange" that Manna has established over the years, and that "organize" her work "experience".

Among them, for example, Fritt Ord and Kulturrådet (Arts Council Norway), two Norwegian foundations, stand out. This tells of Manna's relationship with the Scandinavian country, where she started her artistic career. Indeed, after a first short experience at Bezalel academy in Jerusalem, she studied at Oslo art academy. She could join it thanks to particular events that affected the Palestinian art world in the early 2000s. As a side-event of the Oslo accords,¹²⁸ Norwegian funding started to support cultural institutions in the West Bank. This funding contributed significantly to the creation of the Palestinian Art Academy, which opened in 2007 and operated for approximately ten years. A series of workshops organized by Palestinians and Norwegians during the academy's establishment promoted scholarships to study at the Oslo Art Academy. Manna successfully applied to this scholarship and became one of the first Palestinian students to be admitted to the program. Afterwards, she started her professional career in Norway, and even represented the country at the Nordic Pavilion of the 57th Venice Art Biennial.

The Californian institution Berkeley Museum is another art institution that funded *Foragers*. California has also been part of the artist's biography. Indeed, after Oslo, Manna continued her studies at the CalArts Academy in Los Angeles, where she could relocate thanks to her US passport. Manna states that it was in the US that she began to reflect on issues related to

¹²⁷ Levine 2017, previously quoted. P. 132.

¹²⁸ The Oslo accords were agreements towards a peace plan signed in 1993 between the Israeli government and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization). As historian Ilan Pappé describes them: "the Oslo document represented the meeting point between an Israeli wish to compromise territorially and a PLO willingness to begin peace negotiations with such a compromise". Pappé, Ilan: *A History of Modern Palestine*. Cambridge 2004. P. 241.

Palestinian history and identity, examining them from a distance. In an interview I had with her, she stated: “Here I could go back to political and identity issues [GP: something she claims was ignored in her time at Norwegian academia]. I started to think again about being Palestinian, about my positionality as a Palestinian living abroad, and that of my generation”.¹²⁹ For example, in this period she produced the short film *The Goodness Regime* (2013), which she created in collaboration with the Norwegian artist Sille Storihle.¹³⁰ The film examines the myth of Norway as a peacemaker country, specifically focusing on the Oslo Accords, and other episodes of recent Palestinian history.

One final organization worth mentioning that also funded *Foragers* is the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, based in Beirut. It highlights the connections Manna has cultivated with the artistic community across the Arab world over the years. Moreover, it serves as an initial example in my dissertation of how the artists under study move ‘between’ Lebanon and Palestine. This demonstrates the interest of looking at their works together. In summary, I argue that the network of art foundations that financially supported Manna’s project represents the connections ‘between’ different countries that the artist has created through time. Such network also shows her prominent role in the international art scene. The BAK, Basis voor Aktuele Kunst, in the Netherlands, is part of it. It offered an exhibition space for the work and a synthesis of the international network behind it.

BAK was established in Utrecht in 2003. It has developed ever since a particular focus on research-based contemporary art, such as Manna’s. It has consistently provided a platform for artists whose work seeks social impact, encouraging their attempts. It has also actively aimed to contribute to art as a practice of knowledge production, organizing symposiums, exhibitions, lectures, and publications (such as *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder, Binna Choi). The venue is not a conventional white cube space. Its current location (2024) is within an industrial-type building that previously housed a music center. It is situated in a historic district of the Dutch city, surrounded by low, traditional houses. Though it does not surpass the height of the surrounding buildings, BAK stands out with its distinctive horizontal alignment. The upper portion of the glass facade displays many city names from around the globe. This positions BAK as a nexus

¹²⁹ Manna, Jumana: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, April 21st 2022.

¹³⁰ Manna, Jumana: *The Goodness Regime*, 2013, Palestine, 21 min, HD video.

for cultural exchange and interaction. Over the years, it has hosted exhibitions of international artists from many countries. Last among these is Lebanese artist Marwa Arsanios (2024), whose work will also feature my research as a case study. Hence, like other art spaces I examine in this dissertation, BAK is part of those venues creating a new international art community in Europe.

BAK's accompanies its commitment to become an international platform of exchange with strong political stances. This is not trivial, particularly in a historical moment that has been highly divisive and polarizing, both in the social and in the art world. In 2021, the space published a letter of solidarity against the Israeli attacks on Gaza. From 2023 onwards, it organised events in solidarity with the Palestinian people in the context of the war on Gaza. Moreover, BAK participated in the strike for the International Day of Solidarity with Palestine on November 29th, 2023. These positions reflect BAK's commitment to aligning with and supporting the artists it collaborates with.

Manna joined a show in late 2021 at BAK titled *No Linear F***ing Time*. The exhibition called “upon a wide range of practitioners who examine and embody alternate scales, rhythms, and conceptions of temporal experience in order to explore how looking and working beyond linear, progressive, and globally-synchronized time can contribute to a more plurally-determined and sustainable existence”.¹³¹ The research at the basis of Manna's film *Foragers* is consistent with this direction. The movie examines traditional foraging practices in Palestine, which represent an alternative to industrial agricultural production. It shows how Israeli authority would prefer to impose the latter, thereby controlling the production of herbs used in traditional Palestinian cuisine. *Foragers* does not offer a slower way of experiencing the land as an alternative temporality to presumed modernity; instead, it frames it as a claim to identity. Finally, the practice of foraging, which the Israeli authorities prohibit, serves in the movie as a metaphor for the condition of the Palestinian community in present times.

In the context of the exhibition in Utrecht, Manna's work participated in a dialogue ‘between’ cultures. In the show, artists from different geographies were the “practitioners” who described situations of on-going colonial struggles like her. By bringing them and their works together, BAK achieved the overlapping of different temporalities, or the “plurally-determined existence”, that it claimed to seek. It presented a spectrum of artists who study local problems, and fostered discussions among them. Among the many artists who presented their work there,

¹³¹ From the booklet of the exhibition.

like the Lebanese Simone Fattal or the Peruvian Antonio Paucar, BAK welcomed three practitioners with newly-commissioned works: Femke Herregraven, Jumana Manna, and Claudia Martínez Garay. On the day of the exhibition's vernissage, these three artists participated in a symposium in the BAK auditorium (which would then feature Manna's work). I argue that Manna's involvement in BAK's public program is a first representation of the role of mediation that she takes on, which is an integral aspect of her artistic practice. With *Foragers*, she brings forth aspects of traditional Palestinian culture. Afterwards, she finds other ways to mediate them to the international public. Such mediation strategies accompany the work and align with its pedagogical goal, which aims to address a mixed audience (Palestinian and not).

Participation in BAK's public program is not the only way Manna accompanies her work. The artist regularly participates in dissemination events. For example, she has talked about *Foragers* (its production, its goals) on numerous podcasts, including *The East is a Podcast* with Duke Professor France Hasso, the artist-run podcast *Docs in Orbit* in an episode hosted by Teyama Alkamli, and the *Art Monthly Talk Show* hosted by art historian Sarah E. James. She also wrote an article for the journal *e-flux*. As I will show later on, this text reveals some elements which do not feature *Foragers*, but help to understand it better. All of these mediation strategies are parallel to the work, though they accompany it, mediate it, add elements to its narrative. For this reason, I label them 'parergons', a term coined by the scholar Anne Ring Petersen. The 'parergon' is the equivalent for works of art of 'paratexts' in literary texts. 'Paratexts' are a concept theorized by Gérard Genette, who defines them as "all the liminal devices [...] that mediate the relations between text and reader".¹³² I interpret the 'parergon' as an element external to the work that nevertheless contributes to its narrative: to use Petersen words, "an external addition that nevertheless contributes significantly to shaping the 'interiority' of the work".¹³³

I consider 'parergon' also the activity on social networks, which Manna uses as yet another platform to mediate her work. I argue that all the 'parergons' collectively reflect the mediating role the artist chooses to adopt. This role shows the artist's positioning in her 'betweenness', since the mediation strategies address both the 'inside' and the 'outside' of Palestine. I argue that the role of mediator ultimately shapes how Manna interprets her artistic practice and

¹³² Genette 1997, previously quoted. P. xi.

¹³³ Petersen 2015, previously quoted. P. 33.

influences the way she creates her works. To interpret this role, I refer to the concept by art historian and curator Lorand Hegyi of ‘speaking artist’. Hegyi defines as ‘speaking artists’ those artists who feel that their mission is to “concretize and communicate”. He ascribes to them “a radical and unlimited urge to become active beyond purposeful actions [...], without limits or narrow purposeful objectives, be they practical, political, didactic or moral”.¹³⁴ On the one hand, the concept of the ‘speaking artist’ suits Manna’s activity, since her activity displays an “urge to communicate” that accompanies her visual narrative works. On the other, there is a difference with what Hegyi writes. Unlike the artists Hegyi talks about, Manna’s dissemination work, as well as her art projects, refer to “purposeful goals”. Indeed, her work addresses real, concrete situations. I contend that Manna seeks to convey local stories on an international stage, driven by both political and educational intentions.

Manna’s film in Utrecht was screened in the auditorium, where it was presented in a way that transformed the space into a cinematographic environment. In her previous exhibitions, Manna often created seating with architectural or sculptural elements that resonated with the content of the films being presented. At BAK, instead, the artist’s intervention in the space was minimal, with the film being screened on the large wall of the room using a single projector. *Foragers* occupied the largest space dedicated to a single work at BAK. It was also isolated from the rest of the exhibition, as accessing its screening required entering through the auditorium door. Consequently, while the other works engaged in overlapping and dialogic interactions, *Foragers* established its own universe. BAK’s auditorium is equipped with three rows of reclining chairs, which can accommodate many attendees. Such number may vary significantly during the exhibition time. Moreover, in the auditorium, there was a significant distance between the seating area and the projection wall. The windows at the top of the room had been darkened, transforming the space into a cinema that screened Manna’s film on a continuous loop.

Foragers established an ambiguous space in the exhibition that straddled the line ‘between’ a museum video installation and a traditional commercial cinema. This is not a novelty in the history of cinematic installations within art museums. The scholar Juliane Rebentisch for example describes this type of installation as a “hybrid between visual arts and cinema”, adding

¹³⁴ Hegyi 2018, previously quoted. P. 93.

that “it is neither one nor the other but both at the same time”.¹³⁵ In the case of Manna, I argue that this duplicity also reflects the very identity of the work. Indeed, while many art foundations funded it as an artistic research project, *Foragers* does not exclusively focus on museum exhibitions. After its debut at BAK, the film has screened at various film festivals, such as the Euganea Film Festival in Italy (2023), the Ciné-Palestine Film Festival in France (2023), the Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival in Greece (2023), the BlackStar Film Festival in the USA (2023), and the Alfilm Festival (Arabisches Filmfestival) in Germany (2024). These film festivals function as innovative platforms in Europe, facilitating international encounters. Manna’s participation in them also demonstrates her desire to extend her art beyond the traditional confines of art institutions. Indeed, *Foragers* is capable of adapting to different contexts. It showcases an experimental nature that defies the conventions of a standard television documentary, existing in a space ‘between’ artistic and non-artistic projects. It is, therefore, noteworthy that it debuted at BAK. This venue has consistently nurtured practices and research that culminate in works challenging conventional notions of artistic creation.

Foragers however was not the only work that Manna displayed in the exhibition in Utrecht. Throughout BAK, she showed sculptures from her *Bread* series.¹³⁶ These works faithfully reproduce in ceramic fragments of Palestinian bread forms: *ka’ak al-Quds* (a typical ring-formed bread from Jerusalem, *al-Quds* in Arabic, covered in sesame seeds), and *taboun* (flat bread). She arranged the sculptures on concrete blocks around the edges of the walls, often encasing them in transparent plastic bags. According to Manna, the display mimicked the practice of “leaving old or unwanted bread outside in the streets of Jerusalem, as in other parts of the world”.¹³⁷ The sculptures mimic the deterioration that inevitably occurs in abandoned bags. Reproducing the texture of rotting food in clay, these pieces serve as a *trompe-l’œil*, metaphorically freezing the decay process. Additionally, the bread sculptures delve deeper into food traditions, highlighting their significance within Palestinian culture and identity.

As I noted earlier, Manna took an active role in the exhibition context, personally participating in its public program. I argue that this reflects her longstanding commitment, which

¹³⁵ Rebentisch, Juliane: *Aesthetics of Installation Art*. Berlin 2012. P. 183.

¹³⁶ Manna, Jumana: *Old Bread International*, 2022, Ceramics, plastic bags, newsprint, concrete bricks, and metal grates, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.

¹³⁷ “No Linear Fucking Time: Online Opening Program”, Youtube, uploaded by BAK basis voor actuele kunst, 21st December 2021. Last visited: 04.10.2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=805VLT1DvbY>

she has maintained through her various relocations. Manna refers to the experience of growing up in Shu'fat, East Jerusalem, as the origin of her political consciousness. Shu'fat is a neighborhood which extends to a refugee camp annexed by Israel illegally (under international law) after the 1967 Six-Day War.¹³⁸ Manna explained in a talk in Berlin: "The city conditioned the way I see the world, and how I work. It is a city conditioned by history, and a testing ground for how history has been used to manipulate the present, to buttress claim the land, and to construct mythologies".¹³⁹ Opposing narratives and counter-narratives about Palestine are indeed a recurring theme in her art, as apparent in *Foragers*. While navigating 'between' opposing narratives, however, Manna does not remain neutral, and takes explicit positions. I contend that this positions her as a political artist, a role that, whether intended or not, often involves a degree of antagonism within society. This is especially evident in Germany, which is the 'outside' part of her situation of 'betweenness'. In Germany, discussions surrounding Palestine are very often framed as political stances. Since her relocation to Berlin, Manna has inevitably become entangled in this reality. Indeed, her public statements and positions have sparked significant debate. They have often been the subject of criticism and even defamatory media campaigns, resulting in negative consequences for her career in Germany.¹⁴⁰

Foragers also illustrates an activist stance. Manna's standing subtly but unmistakably imbues the film. Moreover, the film has a personal dimension, as it delves into local practices that are familiar to Manna and her family. My analysis of the film will concentrate on the

¹³⁸ The Six-Day War was fought between the Israeli army and a coalition of Arab states from 5th to 10th June, 1967. As a result, Israel seized Syrian's Golan Heights, the West Bank (and East Jerusalem), and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. While the latter was restituted to Egypt in 1982 after the Camp David Accords, East Jerusalem and the West Bank have suffered ever since Israeli occupation.

¹³⁹ „Preis der Nationalgalerie 2017 | Künstlerinnengespräch / Artist Talk“, Youtube, uploaded by Freunde der Nationalgalerie, October 23rd, 2017. Last visited: 04.10.2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTH74EUYWMI>

¹⁴⁰ Some articles that appeared in the conservative newspaper *Die Welt* stand out. The result of this media exposure seems to have been the cancellation of more than one event in Germany, such as her exhibition at the Kunstverein in Heidelberg, and the extension of the contract at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste München. This eventually led the artist to expose herself publicly once again, through an article in response to what she had suffered in the art magazine *Hyperallergic*.

Pofalla, Boris: „Israelis unerwünscht“. In: *Welt*. Last visited: 04.10.2024.

<https://www.welt.de/kultur/plus238589969/Israelis-unerwuenscht-Eine-Documenta-Recherche.html>

Pofalla, Boris: „Der Israelhass ist ein strukturelles Problem“. In: *Welt*. Last visited: 04.10.2024.

<https://www.welt.de/kultur/plus247900902/Rechtfertigung-des-Terrors-Der-Israelhass-ist-ein-strukturelles-Problem.html>

Guggenberger, Jonathan: „Es fehlt die Klarheit“. In: *Taz*. Last visited: 04.10.2024.

<https://taz.de/Antisemitismus-in-Institutionen/!5998648/>

Manna, Jumana: "The Embargo on Empathy". In: *Hyperallergic*. Last visited: 04.10.2024.

<https://hyperallergic.com/854193/the-embargo-on-empathy/>

research methodology underlying it, which enabled a reconnection process and facilitated sharing this experience with the public.

4.2. Introduction to *Foragers*

Foragers lasts for just over one hour. It addresses the prohibition against foraging *za'atar* and *'akkoub*, two endemic plants in Palestine that are widely present in Palestinian culinary traditions. The ban has been in place since 1977, when the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture designated them as protected plants. Ever since, the Israeli government has asserted that the measure is necessary to protect the plants. Palestinians have always rejected this narrative, describing the law as a political instrument designed to control their lives, deny their traditions, and force them to rely on the Israeli cultivations of these herbs. Many studies exist on the politics around *za'atar*, *'akkoub*, and other wild herbs, which connect them to Israeli restrictions on Palestinian food sovereignty.¹⁴¹ Ted Swedenburg wrote in 1995 in his book *Memories of Revolt*: “a further example of Green-Zionist policies’ negative impact on Arabs is the military administration’s ban on gathering wild thyme or *za'atar* in the West Bank”,¹⁴² and he added on how this ban endangers traditions passed down through generations.

Manna’s work is situated within an already established academic research context. Therefore, I argue that it contributes to the exploration of the topic through visual arts. However, her artistic research is often informed by sources similar to those that inspire researchers in other fields. One of the most comprehensive studies on the subject is by the Palestinian scholar and lawyer Rabea Eghbariah, member of *Adalah*. This organization advocates for Palestinian human rights in Israel. Eghbariah has explored the topic in a long article titled “The Criminalization of *Za'atar* and *'Akkoub*: On Edible Plants in Palestinian Cuisine and Israeli Plant Protection Laws” (2017).¹⁴³ Here, he begins by analyzing the context as a paradigm of colonial power that seeks to depict the indigenous Palestinians as inferior, harmful to the environment, and incapable of

¹⁴¹ Graddy-Lovelace, Garrett: “The Starvation of Gaza, Palestinian Food Sovereignty & The Question of Accountability”. In: *Maydan*. Last visited: 04.10.2024. <https://themaydan.com/2024/07/the-starvation-of-gaza-palestinian-food-sovereignty-the-question-of-accountability/>

¹⁴² Swedenburg, Ted: *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*. Fayetteville 2003. P. 59.

¹⁴³ Eghbariah, Rabea: “The Criminalization of *Za'atar* and *'Akkoub*: On Edible Plants in Palestinian Cuisine and Israeli Plant Protection Laws”. In: *Law, Society & Culture Series*, 2017.

properly caring for it. He draws several parallels to comparable situations of settler colonialism, including those in Australia and the USA. Afterwards, Eghbariah presents a response to the Israeli narrative. First, he highlights the undeniable significance of the banned wild herbs for Palestinians. He cites poets and writers to demonstrate the herbs' presence in the Palestinian literary tradition. Among the passages he cites is a well-known excerpt by Edward Said that discusses the connection between *za'atar* and Palestinian identity.¹⁴⁴ Finally, Eghbariah illustrates how Israeli authorities have never adequately provided scientific evidence to justify the ban and shows that data indicate that those subjected to fines and arrests have consistently been exclusively Palestinian.

I argue that Manna's *Foragers* is an extension of Eghbariah's work. This parallel to a scientific work shows the artist's work's reliability. Some of the sources of Manna's film are the same as Eghbariah's paper: some archival material. However, the film employs them in a different manner, concentrating on their visual properties. The divergence between the Manna's and Eghbariah's works lies also in their method. Indeed, I argue that the artist's research primarily relies on ethnographic methodology. Her narrative is based on the encounter with people, their portrayal, and the display of their traditions, daily life, and struggles. Her narrative style is 'from below', from a not-hegemonic position. Manna challenges the dominant and hegemonic narrative of the Israeli authorities – characterized by its legislative power – by amplifying the voices of members from the oppressed and silenced community. Indeed, the film debunks the claim of scientificity of the Israeli ban through these people's voices and knowledge. The ethnographic methodology enables the artist to juxtapose narratives 'from below' with the various ways of experiencing the territory these narratives promote.

4.3. The Ethnographic Methodology in *Foragers*

¹⁴⁴ "Let me tell you another story that will show you what I mean. A close friend of mine once came to my house and stayed overnight. In the morning we had breakfast, which included yogurt cheese with a special herb, *za'atar*. This combination probably exists all over the Arab world, and certainly in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. But my friend said: "There, you see. It's a sign of a Palestinian home that it has *za'atar* in it." Being a poet, he then expatiated at great and tedious length on Palestinian cuisine, which is generally very much like Lebanese and Syrian cuisine, and by the end of the morning we were both convinced that we had a totally distinct national cuisine". Said 2012, previously quoted. P.185.

The juxtaposition of artistic practices with ethnographic methods has been a focus of critical studies for several decades. One of the most pivotal texts in this context is “The Artist as Ethnographer?” by the American scholar Hal Foster, a concise essay from 1995.¹⁴⁵ Numerous studies have followed, focusing on the so-called ‘ethnographic turn’ in the visual arts field. Also, many anthropologists have explored the similarities between ethnographic and artistic practices developed in recent years. Among them is George E. Marcus. Relying on the “so-called Writing Culture critiques of the 1980s”, Marcus examines the intersection between disciplines, and the overlapping of methodologies. However, to demonstrate Manna’s ethnographic practice, I will primarily adhere to anthropologist Tim Ingold’s definitions. Ingold has explored the similarities between anthropology, ethnography, and artistic practices in several of his writings. For instance, his book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* unites these four disciplines, emphasizing how they share a common process of “thinking through making”. Here Ingold defines the ‘fieldwork’ as the main methodology of ethnography, writing that “many fieldworkers are committed to documenting the lives and times of their host communities”, and that “this work of documentation is known as ethnography”.¹⁴⁶ He then adds that: “ethnography is a study of and learning about, its enduring products are recollective accounts which serve a documentary purpose”.¹⁴⁷

I argue that Manna’s movie *Foragers* is mainly based on fieldwork research. Indeed, through fieldwork the artist could “document the lives and times” of Palestinian people foraging, and create through the camera “accounts which serve a documentary purpose” (to use Ingold’s words). I argue that the process behind the film qualifies as fieldwork precisely because it embodies the characteristics of “firsthand experience” and “spending a long period of time on a particular site, familiarizing oneself with the everyday practices of the others”, to use the words by scholar Esra Oskay Malicki from her comparative study of art and ethnography.¹⁴⁸ Two particular aspects of Manna’s case deserve particular attention. Firstly, I contend that her research does not solely serve a ‘documentary purpose’. A clear political activism imbues the

¹⁴⁵ Foster, Hal: “The Artist as Ethnographer”. In: Marcus, George E., Myers, Fred R.: *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. University of California Press, Los Angeles 1995.

¹⁴⁶ Ingold, Tim: *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London, New York 2013. P. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ivi. P. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Oskay Malicki, Esra: “In the close encounter between art practice autoethnography: the figures of displacement in contemporary art”. In: *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication*, Volume 9 October 2019. P. 475.

film. Indeed, *Foragers* explicitly advocates for the preservation of endangered cultural and identity practices, and presents them through a narrative aimed at an international audience. This is why I have also labeled the nature of the film as pedagogical. The second interesting point is the concept of ‘the other’. In recent decades, the discipline of ethnography has sparked significant and ongoing debate, particularly concerning the ways in which some practitioners engage with the concept of ‘the other’. Certain approaches to ethnography have led to the development of an abstract concept of ‘the other’ through processes of ‘orientalization’ and ‘primitivizing’. Many scholars have emphasized these processes as reflections of ethnography and anthropology functioning as instruments of colonial and imperialist power structures. Edward Said has particularly wrote about “a genuine malaise about the sociopolitical status of anthropology”, considering how anthropology above all [...] has been historically constituted and constructed in its point of origin during an ethnographic encounter between a sovereign European observer and a non-European native”.¹⁴⁹

In contrast to the problems that sometimes arise within the discipline of ethnography, Said presents what he defines as “native point of view”: “not an ethnographic fact only, is not a hermeneutical construct primarily or even principally; it is in large measure a continuing, protracted, and sustained adversarial resistance to the discipline and the praxis of anthropology (as representative of “outside” power) itself, anthropology not as textuality but as an often direct agent of political dominance”.¹⁵⁰ Through her own artistic research, I argue that Manna precisely reproduces such ‘native point of view’. The “others” of her film are both the people she encountered during fieldwork, and members of her family. Although Manna does not appear in *Foragers*, her name is mentioned multiple times throughout the film, and her presence behind the camera is evident on several occasions. Thus, she becomes a member of the community depicted in the film, along with her family. Therefore, Her ethnographic documentation practice does not originate from the oppressor's perspective, the “agent of political dominance” as Said would say. Instead, she becomes an ally to the oppressed – those silenced individuals to whom she gives a voice. This is also evident in the film’s visual choices, as I will show in my analysis.

Hence, *Foragers* relies on an extensive fieldwork research methodology. This entailed a significant time spent in Palestine, in the ‘inside’. Here Manna as an artist-researcher engaged

¹⁴⁹ Said 2012, previously quoted. P. 288.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem.

in long interactions with the local population, listened to their stories, documented their daily lives and routines, and reenacted episodes that particularly affected them. Afterwards, she organizes into a film all the collected data. Consequently, the movie weaves together a tapestry of diverse perspectives, narratives, and points of view, seamlessly integrating the experiences of many from the Palestinian community.

Manna conducted the initial phase of the research at Dar Jacir. It is a cultural and artistic center located in Bethlehem, Palestine (occupied West Bank) that offers art residencies. I outlined its history in the first section of this dissertation (in the State of the Art). Dar Jacir was part of the network that supported Manna's project, and it was symbolically and practically relevant for the artist's research. '*Akkoub*, a traditional foraging resource for Palestinians, is more prevalent in the Galilee region than in the Bethlehem area (hence, further north). Nevertheless, Manna could use the center as a base to conduct her fieldwork research, explore the Palestinian landscape, and document foraging practices. Concurrently, the center aligns with the principle of her project. Indeed, Dar Jacir is situated at a nexus 'between' the local and the international. Similarly, *Foragers* is deeply rooted in the local context, yet Manna also crafted it to make it resonate with an international audience. Consequently, Dar Jacir becomes another focal point in the artist's network of relationships, which she has cultivated over the years through her ongoing engagement both 'inside' and 'outside' Palestine.

Through *Foragers*, Manna immerses herself in the Galilee landscape. She narrates the foraging activities of Palestinians and the authoritarian control exerted by Israeli forces. I contend that the film embodies the characteristics of an *enquête* ("inquiry"), as defined by scholar Aline Caillet. Caillet is yet another scholar who has conducted extensive research on the similarities between ethnographic and artistic practices, with a focus on documentary practices. For example, she has written that the two disciplines share a "certain practice of the field," which is "based on meeting and observing".¹⁵¹ In describing the work of artists who similarly to Jumana Manna realize documentary films, Caillet defines their practice of *enquête* as the ensemble of "*gestes, manières d'être et d'agir dans le réel*" ("gestures and ways of being and acting in the real").¹⁵² In Manna's case, I argue that her "way of being" is primarily represented by her act of exploring the landscape with a camera, capturing both the lives of its inhabitants

¹⁵¹ Caillet, Aline: *L'art de l'enquête: savoirs pratiques et sciences sociales*. Paris 2019. P. 16.

¹⁵² Ibidem.

and the topography in which their activities unfold. This does not mean that the entire film unfolds in real time; in fact, many scenes feature re-enactments. However, the artist experiences the territory through the camera, which enables her method of “acting in the real”. The film then transmits such “acting in the real” to the public. I argue that Manna’s camera thus serves as a medium: an intermediary ‘between’ the artist’s field research experience and the audience.

As I already mentioned, for the majority of the film, the artist remains in a concealed position behind the camera. Her camera films the territory and the people, records their words, and does not include a voice-over intervention by the artist. I argue that this distinguishes the film from the typical characteristics of a television documentary. Furthermore, the absence of voice-over and captions identifying the names of places or individuals on screen reinforces this distinction. In doing so, Manna’s counter-narrative, constructed ‘from below’, prioritizes the foragers themselves. In one unique scene, the artist’s voice is audible. Notably, in this moment, she emerges as an active participant rather than a neutral observer. I will argue in my analysis how this scene further defines her research methodology, her “*manière d’être*” in the landscape, in accordance with Tim Ingold’s definition of “participant observation”. I will now proceed with an examination of the various sources and diverse materials that make up the film. Indeed, there is no particular plot to follow, aside from people’s daily lives, their stories, and the repercussions they face for their foraging activities.

4.4. An Analysis of *Foragers*: Examining the Film’s Materials and Sources

4.4.1. Ethnography via Staged Police Interrogations

Foragers interweaves original material (by the artist) and archival footage. The different elements that compose the movie are: scenes where people (the foragers) tell their stories and where they forage, excerpts of television programs, clips filmed by phones, and landscape scenes. The oral tales of the foragers are often masked as police interrogations. Re-enacting multiple interrogations, the film shows how Israeli police usually interrogates the people they arrest for foraging. Since the questioning is not real, these moments allow the people featured to freely discuss their family history, traditions, perspectives on life in Palestine, and opinions about the Israeli ban. Hence, although these scenes do not strictly adhere to the conventions of ethnographic interviewing, I argue that they exhibit certain parallels with this methodology.

During the simulated police interrogations, the participants discuss how certain traditions are passed down through generations, their sense of connection to the land, and how these traditions serve as an assertion of their identity. All this, I argue, classifies as ethnographic investigation.

These scenes feature only Palestinians. In contrast, the film depicts Israelis only in marginal roles or in brief moments, such as in television clips. Once again, this is a deliberate choice by the artist, deviating from the typical both-sided approach commonly seen in traditional television documentaries. Manna's decision corresponds to a political standpoint, and it enables the community to present its counter-narrative, which counters the Israeli one. *Foragers* includes a solid number of interviewees. This demonstrates that the arrests and interrogations are not isolated or exceptional cases, but rather shared and frequent occurrences within the community. Moreover, the average age of the foragers in the film is quite advanced. They are witnesses to multiple generations, which confers legitimacy upon their accounts. The film frames the interrogation scenes from the perspective of the interrogators, showing the arrested people from the front. This visual choice positions the viewers directly in front of the foragers portrayed as victims, creating a more intimate and confrontational experience. Even though the interviewees do not make direct eye contact with the camera (and therefore with the viewers), it is clear that Manna seeks to foster an emotional connection between them and the audience.

The first interviewee is Ahmad. The police allegedly surprised and arrested him while he was foraging *hyssop* (the Hebrew name for *za'atar*) near Bat Shlomo, in the Galilee (00:04:30). The film depicts him in close-up, half-length, while seated at a table that evokes the classic scenario of a police interrogation. In response to the accusations that the policeman reads to him from off-screen, Ahmad offers the following reply: "Let me tell you something. I am part of nature. I would not harm myself (...) When I go into nature, I go in order to find myself. Picking up *za'atar* is illegal? For Arabs it's definitely forbidden". This first forager already claims a position which opposes the Israeli ban (and narrative), and argues that such ban only addresses Palestinians (Arabs).

Others respond in a similar manner, often using irony and sarcasm as they reaffirm their connection to the land. Some of them admit to their transgressions, justifying their actions with the need to provide for a large family. Two women in particular emphasize the Palestinian counter-narrative, aiming to debunk the Israeli law's claims. The first one asserts that the Israeli theory that the '*akkoub* is becoming extinct is a "simply a lie". She argues that the law forces

them to purchase herbs from *kibbutzim* (i.e. Israeli cultivations), preventing them from equally profiting from the herbs. The film frames her like Ahmad, in a half-length pose, although the location of the interrogation is different. The background remains consistently bare.

Another woman, Wardeh, refutes the scientific claim of the ban (00:21:45, fig. 1). She argues: “We’ve been foraging from this land all our lives. Since the age of my father and grandfather. My father used to bring back stems this long. Next year it’d grow back and we’d do the same. Since you banned us from foraging, *za’atar* is harder to find. We don’t find what we used to. *Za’atar* needs to be trimmed, like all plants. The more it’s clipped, the stronger it grows back. (...) Since the ban, there is less of it and we’re not able to forage as before”. In essence, she challenges the Israeli narrative through an ancestral knowledge which has safeguarded the plants long before the enactment of the ban that purportedly protects them.

I argue that these statements that respond to the staged police interrogations also possess an ethnographic value. Indeed, they describe in detail the practice of foraging as a tradition passed from generation to generation, which has defined the connection of the Palestinian people with the landscape. The interviewees claim that foraging has a dual value: to some it provides a valuable livelihood, and for many, it is a way of maintaining a connection with the land, while spending time on it. The way the foragers link their practices to something learned from previous generations creates what could be defined as a ‘genealogical chain’: a term that the scholar Ted Swedenburg uses in his study on the connection between the Palestinian people and the Palestinian land.¹⁵³ An alternative term could be the similar concept of the ‘web of belonging’ that scholar Rosemary Sayigh employs to describe the way Palestinians have “built up through their historical experience in Palestine”.¹⁵⁴ Overall, the staged police interrogations become ethnographic interviews where the interviewees (whose life remain mostly a mystery otherwise) discuss the practice of foraging about its history and its cultural and identity value.

However, Manna’s film does not merely record the foragers’ words; it also follows their actions. It films their foraging (fig. 2), and follows them in their daily lives. It presents the most ordinary aspects of their lives, including phone calls, shopping for groceries, or a swim in the lake. The ethnographic gaze of the camera thus also portraits the daily existence of these people, as if to demonstrate how the practice of foraging fits naturally into the routine, rather than as an

¹⁵³ Swedenburg 2003, previously quoted. P. 80.

¹⁵⁴ Sayigh, Rosemary: *The Palestinians*. London, New York 2007. P. 41.

exceptional activity. In the scenes depicting the foraging process, the artist's camera aims to capture every single detail. Manna mainly focuses on the hands of the foragers, which she frames in close-up (00:10:40, 00:15:30). She illustrates the meticulous way in which they harvest the herbs, cut them precisely with a knife, and remove thorns from the '*akkoub*. While portraying these activities, Manna also films the landscape, holding the camera from her point of view. Hence, I argue that the artist connects these two subjects – foraging and the landscape – trying to show how foraging maintains a connection with the landscape.

However, the film presents more than just the natural landscape as its context. People's private spaces (houses), public and urban space also play a pivotal role in the film. For instance, one scene portrays a particular interaction within the Palestinian community of a village. It shows a small collective daily ritual, demonstrating the role of wild herbs not only on an individual level but also on a group level. One of the foragers from earlier in the film is selling the herbs he has collected to passers-by in a village street (00:18:10, fig. 3). Some women approach and talk to him, while he weighs the '*akkoub* and fills bags with it. The sale of the '*akkoub* is a clear violation of Israeli law and a boycott of the crop, hence another act of rebellion.

I argue that this particular portrait of a forager by Manna is a continuation of the figure of the *fellah* (peasant) that is traditionally present in the modern iconography of Palestinian Art as a figure of resistance. Art historian Tina Sherwell, while examining classical works by Palestinian canonic modern painters like Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, or Tayseer Barakat, describes the *fellah* as “the personification of *sumud* and resistance to occupation, as well as to resistance to the operation of time that works to destroy memories of the past”.¹⁵⁵ Likewise, I claim that also Manna's foragers are personifications of *sumud* (resistance). Their actions resist to the attempt to “destroy memories of the past” – i.e. the foraging tradition, and its values both for the individuals and for the community as a whole. The medium that Manna uses to portray the foragers (film) is different from those that artists such as Mansour and Anani use for their *fellah* (painting). Nevertheless, the messages are analogous, and thus the figures are in continuity with one another. I observe another similarity in the lack of individualization of both the classic *fellah* and of Manna's foragers. For example, in Mansour's paintings, the features of the *fellah* who pick oranges or olives, or work the fields, are often generic and lack

¹⁵⁵ Sherwell 2003, previously quoted. P. 158.

individualization (see, for example, *Olive Harvest*, 1988).¹⁵⁶ This approach creates an idealized, generic prototype of a Palestinian who resists while maintaining a connection to the land. Similarly, Manna's film does not individualize the foragers: the viewer learns nothing about them other than their foraging and their connection to it, which is their own resisting action.

However, *Foragers* does not only depict the act of foraging; it also portrays its consequences. To achieve this, the film re-enacts scenes where the police pursue the foragers and arrested them for their actions. It transitions into an action movie, featuring chase scenes set against the backdrop of the surrounding hills. In the background, Ennio Morricone's score from the Western film *Per un pugno di dollari* plays at one point, enhancing the atmosphere of conflict. The foragers are frequently arrested, yet occasionally they can retaliate. One exemplificatory scene shows a forager clandestinely puncturing the wheels of an INPA (Israeli Nature and Parks Authority) vehicle (00:03:15).

While for the majority of the film Manna remains a silent observer of the events, in one scene her voice and her presence are perceivable behind the camera (00:39:25). In this scene, she confronts a Palestinian man working in a *kibbutz* that produces 'akkoub – an activity that is in stark contrast to traditional foraging practices. Agriculture transforms what is initially a wild plant into a product of cultivation. The discussion between Manna and the man is tense. On the one hand, Manna defends Palestinian rights, reiterating some of the knowledge about the caretaking of the plants that previously the foragers conveyed. Conversely, the farmer seems to accept as an inevitable reality the unequal system where Israelis have access to superior land and insurance. He then ends the discussion, visibly embarrassed and unwilling to engage further. In this scene, the artist relinquishes her role as a potentially impartial observer and intervenes personally to defend the foragers. In the context of her ethnographic research, I argue that here she engages in what Tim Ingold would define as 'participant observation'. Ingold states that 'participant observation' is a practice specific to anthropology (and not to ethnography, whose "purpose" is solely "to describe the specificity of things as they are"). He defines it as "absolutely not a technique of data collection", but as "a way of knowing from the inside".¹⁵⁷ In describing it, Ingold states what for him should be the final objective of anthropology: "to open up a space for generous, open-ended, comparative yet critical inquiry into the conditions and

¹⁵⁶ Mansour, Sliman: *Olive Harvest*, 1988, Oil on Canvas, 66x57cm, Private Collection.

¹⁵⁷ Ingold 2013, previously quoted. P. 4.

potentials of human life” and “to join with people in their speculations about what life might or could be like, in ways nevertheless grounded in a profound understanding of what life is like in particular times and places”. During the interview with the farmer, Manna shifts from entrusting the camera with the ethnographic responsibility of reporting an account of the events to a personal intervention in them. With her reflections she joins “the speculations about what life might be like” that the foragers had begun. Indeed, the words of the farmer, who appears resigned and almost complicit to the ban, contrast with the traditional knowledge and care of the wild plants. Manna’s explicit stance thus emerges from the “profound understanding of what life is like” gained through her interviews with the foragers. The artist becomes from a silent observer a participant (and militant) observer.

Including Manna’s family members in the film further supports this position. Hence, the movie assumes a personal character, although this is not explicitly stated. Indeed, the film does not explicitly clarify the familial connections between the artist and the people on screen. Yet, certain dialogues referencing her name reveal these connections. In one scene, the camera follows her parents (uncredited) in a car ride, and subsequently in their foraging activity (00:31:00). Then, they carry the gathered herbs to the artist’s aunt’s house. Here, the camera intrudes upon a private space, showcasing how the collected wild herbs become part of another daily ritual: their preparation and cooking by a couple of women, presumably Manna’s relatives, as suggested by the way they mention her name. They are sitting at the table in the kitchen, with a large plate of ‘*akkoub*’ in front of them. They meticulously clean it before cooking it. Meanwhile, they discuss traditional dishes like *Mjadara*, *Khubeizeh* and *Kubbeh*.

Manna has written an article about her and her family’s relationship with foraging, that I argue to be a ‘parergon’. I argue that the article enhances the pedagogical aspect of Manna’s artistic practice by incorporating external channels that complement the film. In her article, Manna describes foraging as “an intimate practice that strengthened my sense of belonging and connection to the landscape”. She recalls the activity as a family tradition: “For as long as I can remember, we would get ‘*akkoub*’ from my aunts in the Upper Galilee. They would have generously done the hard labor of cleaning the plant of its thorns, and we would prepare it for cooking. My aunts still live within the routines and time-space of rural life, wherein picking and peeling ‘*akkoub*’ is not considered time wasted”.¹⁵⁸ Manna describes and advocates for the

¹⁵⁸ Manna, Jumana: “Where Nature Ends and Settlements Begin”. In: *e-flux*. Last visited: 05.10.2024.

practice of foraging. She explains how it goes back to generations, and how it creates a link with the landscape.

Overall, Manna's parents are the artist's most present family members in the movie. It is not the first project where they appear, especially her mother. Her father, Adel Manna, is a historian who has widely written about Palestinian history. This makes Manna's storytelling practice the continuation of a family legacy. The most recent publication by Adel Manna (that I mentioned in the State of the Art) is *Nakba and Survival: The Story of Palestinians Who Remained in Haifa and the Galilee, 1948–1956* (2022). Here, the historian explains how his work originates from his family history: the attack on Majd al-Krum village in the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, which forced Manna's family to displacements – as Jumana Manna often tells in her activity on social networks. Adel Manna writes: “The stories of Palestinians who remained in Israel after the *Nakba* occupy a grey area between the private and the personal, and between the public and the historical. I therefore decided to share my personal and family history with the reader, in the form of memories that are an important source for making heard the voices and the point of view of those who have been silenced”.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Adel Manna writes that his research “tells the stories of many ‘ordinary’ people who remained in their homes despite the massacres and the expulsions”. Both father and daughter's storytelling practice thus contain an anti-hegemonic vision, which includes the points of view of “ordinary people”. The lack of individualization of the foragers in Jumana Manna's film makes them “ordinary people”. They are the personification of any Palestinian, and of all “those who have been silenced”. This personification concerns also the artist's family members, who are present throughout the film and participate in the resistance to the ban and to the Israeli narrative. This is why *Foragers* is a work that straddles the boundaries between the private and the collective, where the personal becomes universal (for the Palestinian community) and political. In summary, the act of foraging serves as a metaphor for the broader experience of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, a theme that also the artist's father explored in his own research.

4.4.2. Landscape Scenes and the Construction of Symbols

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/113/360006/where-nature-ends-and-settlements-begin/>

¹⁵⁹ Manna, Adil: *Nakba and survival: the story of Palestinians who remained in Haifa and the Galilee, 1948-1956*. Oakland 2022. P. xvii.

In addition to being the background of the foragers' actions, the landscape often becomes the main subject of Manna's film. In some instances, the movie depicts the surrounding hills, green meadows, and small shrubs that grow from above (00:30:20, 00:25:45, fig. 4). I argue that use of a drone to capture these images imbues them with a distinct metaphor of control from above. The intermingling of these images with the chase scenes creates the impression that the INPA, which patrols the territory, is always poised to obstruct any foraging activity. It is worth noting that concurrently with the show featuring *Foragers* in Utrecht, Manna participated in an exhibition that explored different methodologies for observing the territory, influenced by an originally colonial approach to control. This is an example of Manna's participation to the Palestinian art world, the 'inside' of her situation of 'betweenness'. The exhibition, entitled *Palestine from Above*, was held at the Qattan Foundation in Ramallah. The show was inspired by the archival aerial photographs of Palestine at the Bayerische Kriegsarchiv in München, taken by the German Air Force during the Sinai and Palestine campaign of World War I. In an interview I had with him in Ramallah, Yazid Anani, one of the curators, stated: "we were wondering what the pilots would see in the land, without having any relationship to the everyday life on the ground. We decided to do something about the discrepancy between how people, us Palestinians, perceive the land from our human eyes, from our experiences, emotions, history and memory, and how this is deleted from above".¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Manna's film explores various ways of perceiving the territory and the narratives that emerge from those perspectives. On one hand, the foragers perceive the territory as a space to experience from below, embracing their traditions and the most effective ways to care for the land. Conversely, the shots from above effectively represent the antagonistic narrative of the Israeli authorities and their patrol control.

In the exhibition *Palestine from Above*, plants indigenous to Palestine were the protagonists. Several artists were invited to each focus on a specific plant, creating an artistic project dedicated to it. For example, Manna realized a project dedicated to the *convolvus arvensis*, while Jumana Abboud to the *Lolium temulentum* and Inas Halabi to the *hippocrepis unisiliquosa*. I will address Abboud's and Halabi's works in following chapters: their participation in this show serves as initial evidence of their involvement 'inside' Palestine, much like Manna's. The exhibition in Ramallah aimed to present a vision and knowledge of the landscape 'from below' through the plants. In the words of the curator, the goal, finally, was to reverse the "Western scientific

¹⁶⁰ Anani, Yazid: Interview. Conducted by the author, Ramallah, Palestine, 17th March 2022.

taxonomy of plants” which “had suddenly classified many of the domestic species as harmful weeds”, and re-instore “knowledge of plants as part of the identity of the geography and people of Palestine” that had been “limited to a utilitarian thesis”.¹⁶¹ I argue that this spirit of the exhibition closely mirrors the motivations that inspired Manna to create *Foragers*. In her film, Manna aims to challenge the dominant narrative of the Israeli authorities, who appropriate wild plants by claiming to protect them while simultaneously treating them as agricultural products, driven by a “utilitarian thesis” (as Yazid Anani would put it).

I argue that in Manna’s film, the plants symbolize Palestinian resistance, embodying the knowledge and historical connection that the Palestinian people have with their land. From a visual perspective, the plants frequently serve as both the main subject and symbols. I assert that in this way, Manna continues a tradition of symbol-making deeply rooted in modern Palestinian Art history. Many scholars have extensively studied this phenomenon: for instance, Hania A.M. Nashef. She dedicated her book *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba – Wearing Witness* to the study of “symbols have evolved into icons that represent Palestine” in the field of the arts (both visual and written). Nashef’s book looks both at the history of plants, such as the cactus, “indicative of the rooting in the land”, “stubborn” and that “cannot be easily destroyed”, and of people, such as “Hanthala”, the depiction of a stylized child from behind of the artist Naji al-Ali, a “little boy” who “is now synonymous with Palestine [...], a symbol of unyielding defiance” and finally “icon that transcends space”, and even of animals, like the horse in the paintings of Tamam al-Akhal, “a symbol of being rooted in the land”.¹⁶² Through *Foragers*, I argue that Manna continues this tradition of creating symbols of resistance and of Palestinian icons. The wild plants themselves assume this role throughout the film. In one particularly illustrative scene, they appear alone on the screen. Here, the plants collected in a previous scene are separated by type (*shomar*, *hindbeh*, and *za’atar*) and arranged on a table, which is then framed from above (00:16:50). Each herb occupies its own space, with artificial lighting enhancing their colors. Together, they form a domestic archive and a still life, as if the camera were emulating a genre painting (fig. 5).

Finally, I argue that this parallel between the scene and a painting clarifies a distinct difference between the artist-ethnographer and the traditional ethnographer. Manna is not

¹⁶¹ Yazid, Anani: *Palestine from Above*. Ramallah 2021. P. 3.

¹⁶² Nashef, Hania A.: *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba: Bearing Witness*. New York 2019. P. 110.

merely describing visually through the camera or providing an account of reality (as an ethnographer would do). As an artist, she plays an active role in transforming images into visual symbols. This framing of the images is particularly evident in the scene depicting the domestic archive of wild plants, as well as in the scenes where I assert that the foragers connect with the figure of the *fellah*, thus becoming part of a broader symbol-making process.

4.4.3. Archival Footage and Between-Oriented Storytelling

In addition to the scenes with the foragers' interviews and landscape shots, *Foragers* also includes archival footage. I argue that this enhances the film's storytelling, making it completer and more accessible for an international audience that may be encountering the topic for the first time. Thus, Manna's strategy of mediating local histories within a global context is also evident here. As I mentioned earlier, I argue that this role as an artist-mediator is yet another facet of her position of 'betweenness'. These scenes of archival footage feature non-original material, setting them apart from the staged scenes in both content and image quality, which is notably lower.

The first piece of archival footage is a television excerpt from an interview conducted in 1978 for Israel Channel 1. The clip opens with a scene in the fields where some men collect *za'atar* (00:03:50). The quality of the video is rather low and grainy, suggesting that the source is quite old. A voice-over commentary narrates in Hebrew (subtitled in English) that "*za'atar* is a wild plant that grows in Israel, primarily in the Galilee and Jerusalem" and that "this plant is basically the national food of the Arabs" [GP: Palestinians]. A brief clip features the preparation of *Mana'ish*, a traditional Levantine dish made with *za'atar*, while an interview begins with Ze'ev Ben-Harot and his son Yoram. Together, they were the first Israeli to invest in *za'atar* cultivations, which contributed to the process of appropriation of this herb by Israeli society. They are all sitting at a wooden table outdoors, and the journalist asks them: "so, you want to sell *za'atar* mixes to the Arabs? You want to sell ice to the Esk*mos¹⁶³? [...] So, you combined the advantages of the Land of Israel and the Jewish mind...". Ze'ev claims the *za'atar* that they sell will become the most popular souvenir for the hundred thousand of tourists from across the

¹⁶³ I am aware of the racist and colonial nature of this term, and I quote here the Israeli journalist's question showed in the clip in the film.

Arab world visiting the West Bank (claiming that to import it there “the Nature Authorities had to instruct Jordanian customs to confiscate all *za’atar* but ours”). Yoram adds that “after many trials, and after dad got different recipes from Nablus and Jenin, finally we managed to make a good *za’atar* mix. You can’t fool an Arab. An Arab knows exactly what good *za’atar* is”. The clip ends with the following exchange of words between him and the journalist: “for me, *za’atar* is national pride – as they say, Coca Cola is USA or oregano is Italy, you want them to say: - Exactly: *za’atar* is Israel”. The farmers in the clip appear very proud of what they define as a trailblazing work in Israel, connecting to the Zionist concept of pioneering. However, in the interview I had with her, Manna claimed that her film aims “to show how the notion of pioneering is part of economic imperialism and cultural appropriation, as the pioneers come to embody the working and the knowledge of the land as the indigenous”.¹⁶⁴

However, the artist’s inclusion of this clip represents the Israeli perspective. Hence, it ensures a more nuanced comprehension for a viewer approaching the topic for the first time. Clearly, the artist herself chooses the sources, and as I argued, she is far from a neutral observer. More importantly, she aims to infuse her work with pedagogical value. This demonstrates her role as artist-mediator of local stories at an international level. Such role emerges especially in a space like the BAK, in an exhibition that calls on various artists to become interpreters of parallel and coexisting geographical situations and historical events. The inclusion of a televised segment enhances the film’s narrative clarity and accessibility, making it easier for an international audience that may come from diverse contexts to understand. For the Palestinian audience, the topic is typically more familiar. Cultural appropriation of Palestinian cuisine by Israelis is a constant concern for them.¹⁶⁵ Without this type of framework, which equips viewers with the necessary elements to assess the issue, the film would lack a pedagogical character. I argue that it would probably have resembled the two-channel video *Talqit* (تلقيط) by the artist Jafra Abu Zoulouf, who similarly portrays people picking *za’atar* and ‘*akkoub* but without the explicatory narration created by Manna.

¹⁶⁴ Manna, Jumana: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, April 21st 2022.

¹⁶⁵ About this, I refer here in the note an informal discussion I had in Nazareth in September 2022 with a Palestinian boy who told me about a seminar he had at the University of Haifa which he attended, which was about cultural appropriation. At the teacher’s request to make a presentation in class that framed the topic, giving a specific example of cultural appropriation, he dedicated one to the subject of originally Palestinian falafel appropriated by Israeli cuisine.

Another scene featuring non-original material presents a mobile phone recording by a man (and forager) named Kayed Boshnaq. The closing credits reveals his identity. A staged chase scene among the fields precedes the video (00:43:40). Through the clip, the film format transforms, shifting to a vertical perspective typical of phone videos. This change in shooting mode also leads to a deterioration in image quality. While the staged scenes are typically filmed with a steady camera positioned at a distance, this particular clip is shaky and pixelated. In custody for foraging, Boshnaq films the police officer as he collects his identification and processes the paperwork for the fine (730 shekels). The man laments the absurdity of his situation, stating that “the season of fines has begun” (00:45:15).

The film displays the credits for the video shot with a cell phone at its conclusion. The authenticity of the video is ultimately irrelevant, as the primary importance is the visual effect it produces. The distinct format and quality of the footage, along with its clear differences from the staged segments – particularly the chase scenes involving the Israeli authorities – provide viewers with a sense of ‘access to reality’. The promise of ‘access to reality’ is a recurring expression in film studies dedicated to documentaries, which often indicates it as one of the main characteristics of this type of film. I argue that Manna’s film develops through what the expert documentary film scholar Stella Bruzzi would define as “a fusion of documentary footage and dramatic reconstruction”.¹⁶⁶ The ‘dramatic reconstruction’ are the staged scenes created by Manna in the Galilee countryside, while the ‘documentary footage’ are the mobile phone scene on the other archival footage. *Foragers* fulfills its pedagogical purpose by utilizing this material to provide nearly unfiltered access to reality. Scholar Tom Holert writes: “Art in ‘documentary mode’ promises access to the real, after all. Although it is a promise virtually impossible to keep, it obviously represents a valuable support for the credibility of institutions”.¹⁶⁷ It is evident that even *Foragers* cannot, like any film, offer a truly authentic representation of reality without applying filters. The phone clip represents its most extreme attempt at this representation. As Holert would write, this also gives credibility to the ‘promise’ of the institution, in this case of BAK, to have real “access” to parallel situations in our globalized world. The visual effect is essential in reinforcing the artist’s intention to establish herself as a researcher and mediator, capable of depicting a reality in which she and her family are deeply immersed.

¹⁶⁶ Bruzzi, Stella: *New Documentary*. London, New York 2006. P. 44.

¹⁶⁷ In: Gierstberg, Frits: *Documentary Now! Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts*. Rotterdam 2005. P. 183.

4.5. Conclusions

I chose to analyze Jumana Manna's *Foragers* as the first case study for this dissertation, to begin to answer the central research question: How does an artist's 'between' position influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? The answer that emerges from the analysis is twofold. I claim that the artist assumes from her position of 'betweenness' two particular roles: on the one side, that of researcher, on the other, that of mediator. First, Manna's role as an artist-researcher supports my initial hypothesis: that it is possible to identify a distinct approach to her work that reveals her position of 'betweenness'. In fact, she realizes her artistic research based on the network she has created both 'inside' and 'outside' Palestine. In addition, artistic research allows her to create a counter-narrative, which opposes the Israeli narrative that seeks to silence the Palestinian one. Secondly, I have outlined how the artist assumes a special role of mediator in her position of 'betweenness'. In fact, I highlighted certain strategies that the artist uses to realize this role, which I also hypothesized in the introduction.

On the one hand, I thoroughly analyzed Manna's role as an artist-researcher and how this emerges in the film *Foragers*. First, I pointed out how the various art institutions that funded and enabled her work represent the network, the "patterns of connection and exchange" (Levine), that the artist created over the years from her position of 'betweenness'. Afterwards, I argued that the artist worked as an ethnographer, and that this is evident in the way she constructed her film. I interpreted Manna's research through anthropologist Tim Ingold's reflections on the history of the ethnographic discipline (e.g., 'fieldwork' and 'participant observation'). I also argued that the film mirrors what Said, in his writings on anthropology, defines as a 'native point of view'. I argued that the 'native point of view' allows the artist to create a counter-narrative. This is particularly evident in the film's ethnographic interviews, which Manna often stages as police interviews. These interviews are an important source for bringing out the voices and views of those who have been silenced. They highlight voices that challenge the oppressive Israeli narrative, defending a tradition passed down through generations. To verify the reliability of the artist's narrative, I compared it with the work of other researchers who have dealt with the subject. I argued that the film aligns with the work of

Palestinian scholar Rabea Eghbariah, who also used similar material in his research, and that this further validates Manna's narration.

On the other hand, I outlined how Manna's mediation of her own work shows a role of mediator that she assumes from her situation of 'betweenness'. I found the mediation strategies that I initially hypothesized in what I labelled as 'parergons'. These are the external elements that accompany the work: participation in BAK's public program, podcasts, articles, and activity on social networks. In fact, these 'parergons' promote the mediation of local stories in an international context. For this reason, I referred to Lorand Hegyi's concept of the 'speaking artist'. I also emphasized that *Foragers* employs a language and communication strategies that make the subject more accessible to an international audience encountering the topic for the first time. One example of this is the inclusion of archival footage, which enhances the film's narrative clarity and comprehensibility.

The next chapter examines the work of another artist, Jumana Emil Abboud, who explores traditional practices of the region and the specific folk knowledge associated with them. However, Abboud realizes the narrative character of her works through different media than Manna's. I will also explore a context in which the exhibition of works related to Palestine has faced significant challenges: documenta 15. I will analyze how this situation may have impacted the artist's work. My goal is to determine whether the findings from this first case study are echoed in a second case, as well as to identify any differences and continuities.

5. Jumana Emil Abboud's Works at documenta 15 (2022): Advocating Folk Knowledge from a Position of Betweenness

The first case study, the work *Foragers* by Jumana Manna, suggested a double answer to the key research question: How does an artist's 'between' position influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? It concerned the particular roles of researcher and mediator that Manna assumes precisely from this position, something that emerges from the work itself and its mediation. With this second case study, I want to examine possible elements of continuity and discontinuity. I will consider the work that the Palestinian artist Jumana Emil Abboud presented at documenta 15 in Germany in 2022. Abboud has always lived and worked both 'inside' and 'outside' Palestine, and her work has a constant narrative character. Similar to Manna, her works for documenta 15 explore aspects of traditional Palestinian culture and its connection to the landscape. I argue that this contributes to a more complex mediation of Palestinian culture and identity on a European level. Indeed, it goes beyond the logic of conflict concerning Palestine that dominates mainstream Western media. Compared to Manna, Abboud chooses different artistic media, creating mixed-media installations and performances. In order to find answers to the central research question, the analysis will again develop in several directions. On the one hand, I will analyze the artistic and technical characteristics of the artworks. What do Abboud's specific choices tell us about the situation of 'betweenness' and her attempt to give voice to popular knowledge? On the other hand, I will examine how she mediates this local knowledge on an international level. Which strategies does the artist use? Finally, what are the peculiarities in the specific German context, where the exhibition of works related to Palestine has often been highly problematic?

5.1. The Context and the Reception of Abboud's Work in Kassel

Since its founding in 1955, documenta (held every five years) has become a key event on the European art scene. Many consider it as a barometer of contemporary art trends. Over the years, it has broadened its scope to include international perspectives. In this sense, Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor curated a pivotal edition in 2002, marking a turning point. He established five platforms that explored themes such as "Creolite and Creolization", and invited

numerous artists from the African continent. The fifteenth edition of the exhibition in 2022, featuring Jumana Abboud, was expected to continue this trend. The Indonesian art collective ruangrupa was invited to curate it. Their intention was to create a showcase to primarily pay homage to artistic projects from the so-called Global South, which they did, marking yet another historical moment for the exhibition's history. Nevertheless, the predominant focus of many artistic projects on unresolved colonial issues gave rise to numerous controversies, debates, and discussions, demonstrating how some of them are still open wounds. Moreover, as I will show, topics related to Palestine generated a public scandal in Germany.

ruangrupa organized documenta 15 around the concept of *lumbung*: “the Indonesian word for a communal rice-barn, where the surplus harvest is stored for the benefit of the community”.¹⁶⁸ They derived the inspiring concept from a local Indonesian phenomenon. Yet, they proposed it as a potential framework for an international discourse on themes such as collaboration, cooperation, and an art form that emerges from collective action rather than individual expression. Through these inspiring concepts, ruangrupa mainly invited art collectives to participate. Many of them presented archival works at the Fridericianum museum (the main venue), such as *The Black Archives*, a historical archive documenting the history of Black emancipation movements in the Netherlands, and the *Archives des Luites des Femmes en Algerie*, an initiative born in 2019 to tell the history of Algerian feminist movements since the country's independence in 1962. Furthermore, they invited individual artists part of collectives or who initiate collective creations. For example, Richard Bell, who opened a stand for an “Aboriginal Embassy” on the lawn in front of the Fridericianum; Lebanese artist Marwa Arsanios (whose work also constitutes a case study); and Jumana Abboud herself.

The works that Abboud presented in Kassel had a collective dimension, which was consistent with the methods of artistic research that she has been engaged in for several years. She traveled to Germany along with a collective that she founded, the Water Diviners. The collective helped her with the research for her artistic project and took part in her performance. Moreover, the artist played an active role within documenta 15, collaborating with ruangrupa and already showing a mediation role within the organization of the show. In particular, she joined a seven-part conversation series called *lumbung* calling, which preceded the public program of the exhibition. Each episode addressed a *lumbung* value (local anchor, humor,

¹⁶⁸ From the website of the exhibition: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung/> Last visited: 05.10.2024.

generosity, independence, transparency, sufficiency, and regeneration), and consisted in a group debate live-streamed on YouTube. In the episode dedicated to ‘generosity’, for example, Abboud was one of two hosts, along with the artist and ruangrupa member Mirwan Andan. Here she engaged in a conversation with the guests Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, an artist, and Mamou Daffé, a cultural worker and the founder of Festival sur le Niger. In such instances, Abboud assumed an active role in the mediation of documenta 15’s values within the international platform that ruangrupa sought to establish.

Just like Jumana Manna with BAK, Abboud’s participation in these parallel activities is not the only type of dissemination the artist engages in. She also produces what I label as ‘parergons’, the “outer supplement that nevertheless contributes significantly to shaping the ‘interiority’ of the work” (to refer again to the term coined by Anne Ring Petersen). As with Manna, these include several writings (which I will mention), various public interventions, and several podcasts such as the one for the 23rd Sydney Biennial in July 2022, or one titled *Aridity Lines* by TBA21 - Academy (2022), or one titled *Promise No Promises* by the Institute Art Gender Nature HGK FHNW in Basel (January 2023). While with Manna I referred to the concept of ‘speaking artist’ to frame these activities, with Abboud I rely on that of ‘art interlocutor’ by scholar Jessica Winegar. Winegar coined this term for a series of modern Egyptian artists along the XX century: “a term that emphasizes the importance of discussion and debate in their lives”.¹⁶⁹ She discusses about how these artists combined artistic production with discourse activities. In addition to producing “art objects”, these artists engaged in critical activities to outline their roles and practices. Winegar defines the term ‘discourse’ by drawing on the work of scholar Katherine Verdery, who describes it as a ‘signifying practice’. Winegar defines artists’ ‘discourse’ as “a complex of ideas about the world that were ‘materialized in action’”.¹⁷⁰ Finally, she also states how ‘discourse’ was a way for ‘art interlocutors’ to connect with an international artistic network. Winegar writes that through ‘discourse’ “Egyptian arts

¹⁶⁹ Winegar, Jessica: *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. Stanford 2006. P. 10.

¹⁷⁰ An alternative definition of ‘discourse’ to the one Winegar indicates could be that of Stuart Hall, who in his article “The West and the Rest” dwells at length on the definition of this term. Hall writes: “A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - i.e. a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic”. According to him, “the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way”. The activity of ‘discourse’ both by Egyptian artists and by Jumana Abboud can therefore be seen as a way of “representing”, of “constructing the topic in a certain way”: topics such as art and Egyptian identity, or popular knowledge and Palestinian identity. Hall 1992, previously quoted. P. 201.

interlocutors have been part of international circuits of artistic production and consumption”, transmitting their reflections on contemporary Egyptian art, on its identity.¹⁷¹ Despite the temporal and geographical distance between Abboud and these artists, I argue that there are some parallels that legitimize the use of the term ‘art interlocutor’ also in the case of the Palestinian artist. First, I argue that Abboud similarly accompanies the production of “art objects” with an activity of ‘discourse’ (the ‘parergons’) with which she defines her own work. I argue that her ‘discourses’ are also a way to connect with an international artistic network – as the ‘parergons’ of documenta 15 demonstrate. Through ‘discourses’/‘parergons’ she accompanies her narrative visual works, and transmits her reflections on Palestinian cultural heritage. I argue that such activity lets her mediate local stories on an international level, giving her a role as a mediator from her position of ‘betweenness’, similarly to Jumana Manna.

Mediation was a key part of the many artistic projects she presented in Germany, which comprised drawings, sculptures, performances, and installations inspired by Palestinian folktales and landscape. Through them, the artist sought to act as an intermediary, conveying and interpreting aspects of Palestinian culture. Her works, as I will demonstrate, integrate an element of artistic experimentation with an explicit pedagogical value. However, the particular context of documenta 15 influenced the latter, which needs analysis. First, because it helps to understand the way the artist assumed a role as mediator. Second, because the negative public reception of the show indicates that the changes in the European art scene I want to highlight are not always peaceful and harmonious. The exhibition in Kassel was one of the most discussed and criticized in recent years. The extensive media coverage surrounding the discussions and controversies testified to this. Abboud’s work was not in the eye of the storm. Her work was criticized, although this did not reach a wider public sphere. However, the artist participated in the defense against the aggression that ruangrupa and their collaborators suffered. Providing a comprehensive account of the events surrounding documenta 15 is challenging. Here, I will attempt to elucidate some of the most significant occurrences, and their implications for Abboud’s presence in Germany.

From the outset, the inclusion of Palestinian artists on the list of participants in documenta 15 provoked considerable debate in the mainstream German media, which criticized the absence

¹⁷¹ For example, Winegar writes that through ‘discourse’, “they have both resisted and promoted internationally circulating ideas about Pharaonic artistic achievements, Western modern art superiority, backward Egyptian imitation, and liberatory and repressive Third World nationalism”. Winegar 2006, previously quoted. P. 26.

of Israeli artists as an allegedly necessary counterpart.¹⁷² Moreover, their invitation was met with allegations of alignment with BDS (the movement that seeks to exert pressure on Israel through an international “boycott, divestment, and sanctions” campaign). In Germany, this movement is perceived in a particularly circumscribed manner. This is because in 2019, the German parliament passed a resolution against it, describing it as an anti-Semitic initiative.¹⁷³ During this pre-exhibition phase, the German press was already articulating divergent perspectives. Elke Buhr, editor-in-chief of the art magazine *Monopol*, for instance, expressed reservations about the quality of research evident in articles published in prominent newspapers such as *Die Zeit* which supported the “BDS accusations”.¹⁷⁴ Hence, Buhr was one of the critics who positively embraced the exhibition’s principles and the projects it showcased. Nevertheless, media pressure forced ruangrupa to organise a talk to respond, which they titled *We need to talk! Art - Freedom – Solidarity*. However, in the face of relentless criticism, they suspended it and published a public letter to refute the accusations. They claimed that most of the attacks were inspired by the WordPress blog *Bündnis gegen Antisemitismus Kassel* (“Alliance against Anti-Semitism Kassel”). They wrote that “despite its name, this ‘alliance’ seems to consist of a single person who has links to an extremist splinter group”, and that it had “nothing to do with the Jewish Community of Kassel”. They went on to quote passages from various articles from the blog, exposing the falsity of the statements and the racist tone that they often concealed.¹⁷⁵ Finally, they criticized the “German culture of equating anti-Zionism and even non-Zionism with anti-Semitism”, which would “exclude, smear and silence Palestinians and non-Zionist

¹⁷² Fanizadeh, Andreas: „Kunstfreiheit und Antisemitismus“. In: *Taz*. Last visited 05.10.2024.

<https://taz.de/Debatte-um-BDS-und-documenta-15/!5825724/>

¹⁷³ Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw20-de-bds-642892>

¹⁷⁴ Buhr, Elke: „Antisemitismus-Polemik gegen die Documenta geht nach hinten los“. In: *Monopol*. Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/antisemitismus-polemik-gegen-die-documenta-geht-nach-hinten-los>

Schmidt, Thomas E.: „Verschweigen, das geht nicht mehr“. In: *Die Zeit*. Last 05.10.2024.

<https://www.zeit.de/2022/03/documenta-15-kassel-antisemitismus>

Greenberger, Alex: “Documenta Responds to Allegations of ‘Anti-Semitic’ Connections to BDS Movement”. In: *ARTnews*. Last visited: 05.10.2024.

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/documenta-15-anti-semitism-allegations-bds-1234615801/>

¹⁷⁵ As ruangrupa writes in the letter: “In between making false accusations, the blog text sprinkles in some racist humor: “ruangrupa has launched the so-called ‘lumbung’, which is not an alcoholic mixed drink, but means ‘collectively managed rice barn’”—an allusion to the infantile racist joke-name “Lumumba” for a cocktail mixed with cocoa and rum, named after the assassinated Congolese freedom fighter and former president Patrice Lumumba. Such racist jokes are seamlessly intertwined with the accusations of anti-Semitism that were adopted by numerous major German newspapers—largely uncritically and in defiance of basic journalistic standards.”

ruangrupa: “Anti-Semitism Accusations against documenta: A Scandal about a Rumor”. In: *e-flux*. Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/467337/diversity-as-a-threat-a-scandal-about-a-rumor>

Jews from the fight against anti-Semitism by declaring them to be themselves anti-Semites”.¹⁷⁶ Hence, even before the show inaugurated, ruangrupa found itself in a difficult position of antagonism.

The attacks intensified in the following months. They culminated in several episodes of vandalism against the documenta venues (also before the vernissage). On 28th May, the space that was to host the Palestinian collective Question of Funding was covered with spray-painted threats. These included the number “187”, a reference to the Californian penal code, a slang term for murder, and “Peralta”, which may have been an allusion to Isabel Peralta, an anti-Semitic and far-right Spanish activist.¹⁷⁷ On another occasion, slogans were projected onto the main building housing documenta 15, renaming the event “documenta 1933” in gothic script, ironically saluting it for its alleged Nazi ideology.¹⁷⁸

The opening of documenta 15 only intensified this tense atmosphere. One work in particular generated an excellent public scandal: *People’s Justice* by the artistic collective Taring Padi, a large painting on cardboard measuring 8x12 meters.¹⁷⁹ The painting drew inspiration from the genocide that occurred in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966, looking at its perpetrators and supporters. During this period, the Indonesian army, with the support of numerous Western countries, attacked various groups. These groups included members of the communist party, the women’s organization Gerwani, ethnic Javanese Abangan, ethnic Chinese, and atheists. The painting depicted many figures, but two in particular attracted considerable attention. The first was part of a group of policemen depicted as animals, intended to represent police violence. It was an agent of the Mossad (the Israeli secret service): The Star of David of the Israeli flag stood on his uniform, and he had a pig’s face. The second was one of a series of shady figures representing the greed of capitalism, and it was an Orthodox Jew wearing an SS insignia printed on his hat. The press and even members of the German government collectively condemned these figures as anti-Semitic. ruangrupa recognized the mistake, accepted the removal of the work and published a statement of public apology, where they stated that they “collectively

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁷ Greenberger, Alex: “Documenta Files Criminal Complaint After Exhibition Space Is Vandalized Amid Anti-Semitism Controversy”. In: *ARTnews*. Last visited: 05.10.2024.

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/documenta-15-exhibition-space-vandalized-1234630388/>

¹⁷⁸ Lohr, Matthias: „Kunstattacke auf documenta: Schwere Vorwürfe gegen Leiter“. In: *HNA*. Last visited: 05.10.2024.

<https://www.hna.de/kultur/documenta/kunstattacke-auf-documenta-91612162.html>

¹⁷⁹ Taring Padi: *People’s Justice*, 2002, Oil on Cardboard, 8x12m, Collection of Taring Padi.

failed to spot the figure in the work, which is a character that evokes classical stereotypes of antisemitism”.¹⁸⁰

The Indonesian collective also asked that the work put into creating documenta 15 not be overshadowed by this mistake. Nevertheless, the controversies persisted, giving rise to new unrelated instances of censorship. This prompted ruangrupa to issue a new statement of protest, entitled “Censorship Must Be Refused” which also Abboud signed. Here, they once again acknowledged “the pain caused by the sequence of events in relation to Taring Padi’s work”. However, they also pointed out the ignored “racism and violence that the artists and the artistic direction and team had been exposed to over the past eight months”. They included a list of some of the attacks and censorship cases they had gone through, both ‘in real life’ and online. They called for an end to a revision process initiated by the supervision board of documenta and for creating “a safer environment free of all forms of discrimination and attacks”.¹⁸¹

In following months, however, the attacks and censorship attempts continued, spearheaded by a newly-established scientific committee. In September, ruangrupa issued a third statement (that once again Abboud signed). It denounced more cases of censorship, such as the cancelation of the *Tokyo Reels Film Festival*, which the *Subversive Film collective* organized and that included movies on the Civil War in Lebanon and on Palestinian issues. Finally, they complained about the climate that persisted for the entire duration of documenta and which, in their opinion, highlighted the “Eurocentric—and in this case specifically Germancentric—superiority, as a form of disciplining, managing and taming”.¹⁸² This complex situation partly affected Abboud. The blog *Bündnis gegen Antisemitismus Kassel* cited and attacked multiple times her work, uncritically accusing her of “proposing anti-Israeli propaganda financed by the German taxes” (“*sie verbreitet durch Steuern finanziert im documenta - Handbuch und auf der Ausstellung anti-israelische Propaganda*”).¹⁸³ In contrast, the artist consistently signed ruangrupa’s letters and actively participated in the defense against the attacks.

¹⁸⁰ Last visited: 05.10.2024 <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/ruangrupa-on-dismantling-peoples-justice-by-taring-padi/>

¹⁸¹ ruangrupa: “Censorship Must Be Refused: Letter from lumbung community”. In: *e-flux*. Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/481665/censorship-must-be-refused-letter-from-lumbung-community>

¹⁸² ruangrupa: “We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united: Letter from lumbung community”. In: *e-flux*. Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/489580/we-are-angry-we-are-sad-we-are-tired-we-are-united-letter-from-lumbung-community>

¹⁸³ Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://bgakasselblog.wordpress.com/2022/07/11/sie-wussten-was-sie-taten/>

The charged atmosphere of documenta 15 did not overwhelm Abboud's work, but its influence was still noticeable. While her installations survived the 100-day exhibition period without incidents, she had to scale down and rethink the series of performances, through which she had hoped to engage with the local population. The performances she had prepared with her collective occurred only once instead of multiple times as planned. The reasons for this failure also had to do with the specific meteorological conditions, as I will show. However, there was also a clear lack of interest and support from documenta's institution (i.e. not ruangrupa, but documenta's organization).¹⁸⁴ The evidence available does not clearly show whether the broader controversy and censorship around the exhibition influenced these limitations. Whether or not this case becomes an example of a Palestinian artist's challenges in Germany, it reveals something clearly. It demonstrates that the results can also be disastrous beyond the artists' intentions and desires to act as mediators, as with Manna and Abboud. The overall context of documenta 15 shows that a socially-oriented art practice addressing colonial history and promoting decolonial ideas is not always well received. On the contrary, it may spark antagonism, limitations for the artists and censorship, and highlight the ongoing difficulties of confronting certain historical events and present realities in specific contexts. The case of Germany and issues concerning Palestine exemplify this.

5.2. Introduction to Abboud's Work at documenta 15

Abboud's works in Kassel revolved around two themes: Palestinian folktales and traditional ways of living and perceiving the landscape in Palestine. These subjects were not new to her; rather, the artist had been developing them for a long time. On the one hand, her endeavor has a collective scope. As an artist-researcher, Abboud has significantly contributed to illuminating Palestinian traditions and widespread knowledge. At the European level, this contributes to a more complex mediation of Palestinian culture and identity. It extends beyond the narratives of conflict that Western mainstream media often focus on. She achieved this through both personal investigation and the exploration of existing texts on the subject. Moreover, the works at

¹⁸⁴ The events surrounding documenta 15 suggest a divide within the event's organization. This divide is evident in the differing positions between ruangrupa and the documenta organization. However, without an internal perspective, I cannot fully verify this hypothesis, leaving it as mere speculation.

documenta 15 represent a further stage in the artist's ongoing process of personal reconnection with Palestine.

Abboud was born in 1971 in Shefara'm, a town today in northern Israel whose population is almost entirely Palestinian. The city reflects the demographic changes that many places in the Galilee region endured after 1948, "partly due to the massive evacuation of local families who became refugees in neighboring Arab countries, and partly due to the reshuffling of populations within Israeli borders [...] as the result of official government policy"¹⁸⁵, as scholar Majid Al-Haj writes. The artist's family has an ancient bond with the town. Abboud recalls: "All of my family, since dating back to my great, great, great parents, were all from this village".¹⁸⁶ However, when she was eight years old her family moved to Canada for work reasons. Abboud has called this transfer the first "cut off"¹⁸⁷ from her home that she experienced in her life. In America she began studying art in high school, and later enrolled in the Ontario College of Arts in Toronto. In 1991, Abboud's father suddenly passed away, and her mother decided to move back to Shefara'm with her five daughters. The period marked a turning point in the Palestinian/Israeli history. The first *Intifada* was in its fourth year.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, a historical peace conference took place in Madrid, which, although unsuccessful, triggered a diplomatic process leading to the Oslo Accords in 1993.¹⁸⁹ Thirteen years had passed since Abboud left Palestine. She has described this return as a young adult as "the second major cut" she has experienced. The places seemed different to the artist, and heavily affected by the ongoing political upheaval. She explains: "I felt that this private world of my childhood (and the private landscape associated to it) were no longer intimate spaces, but spaces of great violence and

¹⁸⁵ Al Haj, Majid: *Social Change and Family Processes: Arab Communities in Shefar-a'm*. New York 2019. P. 25

¹⁸⁶ "Being With: Community – Jumana Emil Abboud", Youtube, uploaded by biennaleofsidney, 22nd July 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgxKDnAMn-Y>

¹⁸⁷ "BALTIC Bites: Jumana Emil Abboud", Vimeo, uploaded by BALTIC Archive, 26th May 2016, <https://vimeo.com/168208918>

¹⁸⁸ The first *Intifada* was a popular upheaval resulting in a series of protests and riots that took place between December 1987 and September 1993. It was a "spontaneous, bottom-up campaign of resistance, born of an accumulation of frustration and initially with no connection to the formal political Palestinian leadership", as Khalidi, Rashid Ismail: *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. New York 2020. P. 182

¹⁸⁹ The Oslo accords were the results of a negotiation between the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) and Israel. Historian Pappe writes: "The agreement came into being in the form of a document called the Declaration of Principles (DoP), which was proclaimed on 13 September 1993 and signed on the White House lawn". It was meant to be a premise to a two-state solution, but resulted in a complete failure. Pappe 2006, previously quoted. P. 274.

aggression, of claim and territory”.¹⁹⁰ Abboud experienced the turmoil of the 1990s as a young adult, yet she also observed the glimmers of hope that emerged during this period. She witnessed the rebirth of the Palestinian art scene that took place in that moment. This included the establishment of new institutions and venues where she could exhibit her work, like the Al Ma'mal Foundation in Jerusalem, the first independent art gallery in the Palestinian territories.

Over the years, the artist has long pondered her experience of reconnecting to Palestine and its culture. She has spoken of a feeling of ‘fragmentation’ (“a non-connectedness to the place that is meant to be [her] home”), and of ‘disconnection’ (“accompanied by a desire for reconnection”).¹⁹¹ Her choice of words echoes that of the Palestinian scholar Edward Said, who similarly in his autobiography talks about ‘a dissociation’ and an ‘unreconciled duality’¹⁹², to describe his diasporic background and his connection to Palestine. Indeed, Stuart Hall writes that “the diasporic is the moment of the double inscription, of creolization and multiple belongings”.¹⁹³ I will outline how Abboud’s art effectively shows her ‘double inscription’ ‘between’ Palestine and abroad. I argue that it expresses her ‘betweenness’, her attempt of reconnection, which follows the various displacements she has experienced.

Hence, Abboud’s work, including the pieces presented at documenta 15, often conveys a personal value that she makes explicit. Conversely, she designs her practice to carry significant pedagogical value. Consequently, her art projects are a fitting addition to the academic studies that have explored similar themes, in the same way I pointed out for Manna’s work. For instance, folktales exemplify this. They have become a significant area of study within Palestinian studies in recent years. Scholars who have explored this topic often highlight its ability to reveal a more complex phenomenon than it initially seems. Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, who have curated a collection of Palestinian Folktales first published in 1989, wrote in the first introduction that these stories “offered a rare combination of ethnographic and literary glosses on details that afford a unique glimpse into the subtle nuances of Palestinian Arab culture”.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Abboud, Jumana Emil / Khaldi, Lara: *In Aching Agony and Longing I Wait for You by the Spring of Thieves*. London 2018. P. 2.

¹⁹¹ Ivi. P. 6.

¹⁹² Said, Edward W.: *Out of Place: A Memoir*. New York 2000. P. 65.

¹⁹³ Hall, Stuart. *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands*. London 2017. P. 144.

¹⁹⁴ Muhawi, Ibrahim / Kanā‘nah, Sharīf: *Speak, Bird, Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales*. Oakland 2021. P. 8.

Abboud also shows a similar interest in exploring through folktales different aspects of Palestinian society, through what I will later claim to be an ethnographic research.

While some researchers focus on the topic's collective and social value, many also express a personal connection to it, similar to Abboud. In the introduction to her book on the topic, Palestinian scholar Farah Aboubakr reveals that her research has also been a personal journey. She writes: "The fact that childhood memories have always been associated with my mother and her stories about Palestine has helped me to overcome the amnesia of diaspora. My life was always on the move from one place to another, leaving me completely dependent and seeking with nostalgia to protect my childhood memories, as to me they represented the only comforting and stable source of identification. This book as a result draws on two key concepts that affected me, namely, memory and folktales".¹⁹⁵ These words resonate with some biographical aspects of Abboud and the way she addresses them in her artistic practice. Indeed, Abboud frequently describes her life as a constant relocation, "always on the move from one place to another" (to use Aboubakr's words), where memories are a way to fight the "amnesia of diaspora" and to facilitate reconnection with Palestine.

However, Aboubakr can also move away from the more personal aspects and reflect on the cultural significance of folktales. In her book, she shows how folktales are not merely childish educational stories, but instruments that strengthen "communal bonds",¹⁹⁶ and that create a sense of political and cultural identity in both the individual and the collective. These folktales define an oral cultural heritage that transcends the limits of geographical boundaries, and preserves an important part of the Palestinian identity and the connection to the Palestinian territory, even in the diaspora. Similarly, Abboud's art has always straddled the individual and collective spheres. In a catalogue dedicated to her work, she reveals in an endnote how she first learned about stories from family members telling them in a familiar environment.¹⁹⁷ Abboud takes inspiration from the stories, and transforms them into drawings, sculptures, videos, and

¹⁹⁵ Scholar Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana write about this cultural phenomenon: "the Palestinian folktale is part of the Arabic folk narrative tradition. The tales are told in the Palestinian dialect, with its two major divisions of *fallahi* (village speech) and *madani* (city speech)". Ivi. P. 13.

¹⁹⁶ Aboubakr, Farah: *The Folktales of Palestine: Cultural Identity, Memory and the Politics of Storytelling*. London 2019. P. 139.

¹⁹⁷ She writes: "Thank you to my aunts Adele, Wedad, Elaine and Lourice, for telling tales to remember, and above all, thank you to my mother Clemence Abboud and Basmeh, my grandmother, for being the givers and keepers of the stories forevermore". Abboud and Khaldi 2018, previously quoted. P. 11.

performances. In the latter, she preserves their oral nature, but takes them out of their original intimate, familiar or communal context, and shares them in art spaces.

The transposition that she performs is not a trivial operation. Scholar Ibtisam Barakat notes that “when the tale moves from the “oral” tradition to the “written” tradition, this is a daring action. It signifies entry into a more deliberate world, and a more permanent record is established”.¹⁹⁸ This applies likewise to Abboud’s work, which transforms the stories with visual arts languages. Like the researchers Muhawi, Kanaana, Aboubakr, the artist trans-lates (i.e. transports) the folktales to a “more permanent” and safer form, joining a resistance against the silencing of Palestinian cultural identity. Thus, I argue that with her artistic practice Abboud carries out an ‘intersemiotic translation’. I rely on scholars Madelaine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal’s definition of this notion. They describe it as a type of translation that is distinguished from literary translation (or “intra-semiotic”), where “a text is translated into another text using purely verbal means”. In fact, “in contrast, intersemiotic translation carries a source text (or artefact) across sign systems and typically creates connections between different cultures and media”, while involving “a creative step in which the translator (artist or performer) offers its embodiment in a different medium”.¹⁹⁹ As I will show with the analysis, I argue that this is the type of responsibility and ‘creative step’ that Abboud takes. She gives an innovative form to stories (‘translating’ them) that had until then survived only through the medium of oral storytelling. I argue that this ‘step’ helps the artist reach a mixed (international) audience and join discussions about the similarities between popular cultures from different places.

Though, folktales are not the only source of inspiration for Abboud in the work presented at documenta 15. They constitute an important part of what I will argue to be her ethnographic research, which however also includes other aspects of life in the Palestinian territory. Through her practice, the artist explores the ways Palestinians have traditionally humanize and enliven the natural landscape, how over the centuries they charged it with various stories, interpretations and symbols. She then incorporates this way of living and interpreting the environment into her drawings, sculptures, videos, and performances, once again through what I label as an ‘intersemiotic translation’.

¹⁹⁸ Barakat, Ibtisam in: Muhawi, Kanā‘nah 2021, previously quoted. P. xii.

¹⁹⁹ Campbell, Madeleine / Vidal, Ricarda: *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders*. New York 2018. P. xxvi.

I argue that Abboud's research also concerned a travel in time. Indeed, it went back to traditional ways to perceive the landscape, and examined how they survive in present time. This is why the texts and work of the early XX century Palestinian scholar and ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan have been a crucial encounter for her, since he had explored the same topic. As Tina Sherwell writes, "Dr. Canaan was a physician who worked in Jerusalem between the 1920's and the 1950's. Many of his patients came from villages that surrounded Jerusalem and from them he documented popular religion and medical practices".²⁰⁰ Through his patients, Canaan collected amulets that told of specific beliefs linked to the landscape. His ethnographic collection, housed in the Birzeit University Museum, is still today one of the largest ones in and about Palestine, and was a significant source of influence for Abboud's sculptural work.

The text by Canaan that most inspired her was *Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine*, published in 1922. It contains an "analysis of one hundred and twenty inhabited springs" in Palestine, following the "old and wide-spread belief in all Semitic countries, that springs, cisterns, and all running waters are inhabited".²⁰¹ Many of the folktales that inspired Abboud echo these beliefs, and they are part of the cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation, as the artist herself explains: "For hundreds if not thousands of years, women and children collected water from natural sources across the Palestinian countryside [...] to provide for their villages. In these informal gatherings, stories were 'written' in the oral tradition and passed on through generations. The tales invoked the magical and powerful spirits that inhabited or haunted each water site – teaching the community (often through inciting a healthy sense of fear) to value, respect and share the precious resource and not to abuse it through overuse, greed or contamination. These folktales' lessons continue to be significant to contemporary times".²⁰²

In her research in Palestine, Abboud retraced the path of Canaan. This is one of the reasons why I argue that she worked as an ethnographer. She travelled across the Palestinian landscape, looking for the same water sources one century after Canaan's publication. Some of them are almost intact, some others have disappeared, or have changed radically. Some are polluted, or

²⁰⁰ Sherwell 2003, previously quoted. P. 41.

²⁰¹ Canaan, Tawfiq: "Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine". In: *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, Vol. I, Jerusalem 1922. P. 153-170.

²⁰² "BALTIC Bites: Jumana Emil Abboud", Vimeo, uploaded by BALTIC Archive, 26th May 2016, <https://vimeo.com/168208918>

are inaccessible because of illegal Israeli settlements or because they lie on confiscated Palestinian land. So far, the artist has found about 20 out of 100 water sources. This search took years, and required the help of many collaborators. This kind of treasure hunt is the first part of Abboud's artistic practice: the first immaterial step, which is the decisive inspiration for her artistic projects. I argue that she worked as a true ethnographer also because she compiled a research diary (yet another 'parergon'), later published in the book *In Aching Agony and Longing I Wait for You by the Spring of Thieves*. She called it "Journal of Journeying", and used it to document her travels around the Palestinian territory.

Her artworks are the result of her research, which develops as a "type of investigation", to use the words of G. James Daichendt from his book on research-based art.²⁰³ While studying the practice of artists-researchers, Daichendt defines research as "a process involving the collection of information and eventual discovery of new or revised knowledge".²⁰⁴ Indeed, Abboud gives an ideal continuation to Canaan "collection of information", i.e. the list of water sources. She investigates the landscape a century after him and "revises" the knowledge he had shed light on, practicing a prolonged fieldwork within local communities. Overall, I argue that Abboud's research corresponds to what the French scholar Aline Caillet has defined as "*pratique enquêtrice*" ("inquisitive practice"):²⁰⁵ a kind of investigation taking place in an "intermediary space" between different disciplines and methodologies. Before creating her artworks, Abboud works as an ethnographer and geographer. What distinguishes her from Canaan or more recent researchers who have approached the same subjects is the subsequent 'intersemiotic translation' that she gives to the knowledge she collects and revises.

5.3. The Research Methodology Behind Abboud's Artistic Practice

Although Abboud's research started outside academia, the artist eventually brought it into that setting. In 2019 she began a PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, the historical art department of UCL (University College London). Here she pursued a research project investigating the role of folktales as an empowerment device, with a strong emphasis on the Palestinian tradition. I argue that the experience at Slade has a double meaning for the artist's

²⁰³ Daichendt, G. James: *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing and Research*. Chicago 2012. P. 11.

²⁰⁴ Ibidem.

²⁰⁵ Caillet 2019, previously quoted. P. 16.

work. First, it confirms her role as an artist-researcher, in the context of a university that has integrated arts-based curricula since 1871. Second, it also highlights her ‘between’ position as an artist who, rooted in Palestinian traditions, draws connections with other regions, explores similarities, and links Palestinian issues to a larger intercultural conversation.

Abboud’s research aligns with her longstanding position of being both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Palestine. While securing a position in the UK, Palestine is where her artistic research mainly develops. Here, she employs what I claim to be a specific type of fieldwork methodology, similar to that of Jumana Manna. Its main objective is not to document “the lives of the host community”,²⁰⁶ to use the definition of the anthropologist Tim Ingold already seen with Manna, but to study with the help of the “host community” the Palestinian landscape and certain traditional ways of perceiving it. The assistance of local communities has been crucial, particularly to identify the water sources and the associated traditional narratives which feature the art projects she presented at documenta 15.

During a significant stay, the artist resided for twelve months in the village of Ein Qiniya, a few miles west of Ramallah. Just like a trained ethnographer, she was aware of the risks of an extractivist scientific practice. She knew that since she was not from the place, she ran the risk of acting as a parachute scientist, travelling there and appropriating (extracting) people’s knowledge without questioning the ethics of her acts. She understood that earning the villagers’ trust would take time, especially given its fragile situation in the West Bank. This is why her stay there was so prolonged, and did not only focus on collecting data through “extractive practices”. Indeed, she organized projects and activities within the local community of Ein Qiniya. In an interview I had with her, she explained: “I realized, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, that we need to work slow. Because a community is not formed within a few days or a few weeks. To expect to come to a new space, a town, anywhere in the world, quickly, do a research and leave, for me, it does not work like that”.²⁰⁷ The artist’s words reveal her view of fieldwork as a dialogical process that unfolds over time, guided by a philosophy of both giving and receiving. The artist shows how she reflected on her position before joining a community that was unfamiliar to her. Obviously, as Palestinian, she was never a total stranger there. Just like Jumana Manna, I argue that she fully qualified for Edward Said’s ‘native point of view’.

²⁰⁶ Ingold 2013, previously quoted. P. 2.

²⁰⁷ Abboud, Jumana Emil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, 21st February 2022.

Nonetheless, her position as a researcher put her in risk of reproducing a power structure which often comes from ethnographic practices. Her position in Ein Qiniya had a dual value. On the one hand, she was willing to actively contribute to the community and to reinforce the sense of collective through her artistic contributions. On the other hand, her artistic projects have helped share the community's knowledge, acting as a bridge 'between' the community and the 'outside' world.

Organizing workshops was the most important part of her community-building efforts in Ein Qiniya. They consisted in the narration, collective re-imagination and group re-writing of traditional stories. This is an activity the artist has been involved in for many years and has offered in various geographical contexts, linking different stories from diverse backgrounds. The workshops give Abboud's practice a relational and participatory dimension. In Palestine, such activities combine collective and personal values. On a personal level, community-building actions meant for Abboud to rediscover a social dimension she had known in her childhood. On a collective level, reshaping traditional stories aimed to revitalize a shared heritage. During her explorations, Abboud also established a collective called the Water Diviners, which then traveled to Kassel aiming to foster new communal bonds.

In her time at Ein Qiniya, Abboud could also rely on Sakiya, a local experimental academy that hosted her. Artist and co-founder Nida Sinnokrot describes Sakiya as "a progressive academy, residency program, research hub, and farm located in Ein Qiniya [...]", that seeks "to create new narratives around their relationship to land, knowledge production", right in line with Abboud's goals.²⁰⁸ Sakiya supported Abboud in her process of connecting with the territory and its inhabitants. I argue that connections like this one with Sakiya demonstrate the artist's ability to build a network of 'betweenness': one that develops in the 'inside', and of which she then becomes the spokesperson in the 'outside'. I argue that her role as intermediary 'between' Palestine and abroad appears clearly from all the artistic projects that Abboud presented in Kassel. I will now analyze them, starting with her performance titled *My Other Half*.

5.4. An Analysis of Abboud's Works at documenta 15

5.4.1. The Performance *My Other Half*

²⁰⁸ Sinnokrot, Nida: *Palestine Is Not a Garden*. London 2024. P. 31.

Before documenta, Abboud was already very familiar with performances, having experimented with them throughout her career. The workshops have also been a learning ground for interacting with the public. She has organized them in various cities around the globe, including Cologne (2020), Athens (2022), and Dubai (2022). I argue that they show the artist's ability to disseminate Palestinian stories internationally, while connecting them with other cultural contexts. This already shows a certain pedagogical role she assumes. Workshops and performances have provided a way to bring her artistic research out of the often-elitist realm of art spaces and into a more public sphere. Over the years, she has carried them to international art and public places, as was the case in Kassel.

In Germany she looked for a space with water where she could transpose her storytelling practice. She found it in the city's Northern Park, with its stream, the Ahne (fig. 6). It was not an abandoned place, and this is what particularly appealed to the artist. The people of the neighborhood, where many students and refugees live, cross it on their walks on a specific point where some columns placed on the ground connect the two sides. Abboud decided to implement this crossing point, and asked the Indian architect Sourabh Phadke to design a bridge of clay, tree trunks and other sustainable materials to be placed above. Phadke thus created a stage, on which the artist made her performance. She was not alone, as three other guests and members of the collective Water Diviners took part to it: the actress Yasmine Haj, who has appeared in several films by the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, and the artists Anna Sherbany and Mounya Elbakay. The public sat on the big steps already present before the artist's intervention on the sides of the stream.

Before the performance began, the four performers distributed to some members of the audience 20x30cm square pieces of white cloth embroidered with the name in red of a Palestinian water spring (one of the many that Abboud "rediscovered" 100 years after Canaan). Then, they began to perform a welcoming proem, greeting the spectators: "we are the sun setting in your eyes, we are the water sources listening to your sweet voices". Then, they took turns to speak. Each of the performers headed in turn to the stream, and roughly picked up some water with a cup and then with their hands, to then distribute it to the others. This ritual, which at some point the performers also extended to the audience, was reminiscent of the way families in the villages traditionally share the water from the springs or wells. Abboud then called out the name of a spring: the person in the audience who had received the piece of cloth with the name on it

had to stand up and hold the cloth up. Meanwhile, the artist told the characteristics or the stories associated with that place. The recovery of the original Arabic names of Palestinian water wells had a profound meaning. Through the performance, spectators briefly embodied these names, giving them new life as they lift them. The artist herself has elucidated in a podcast the importance of the name choice: “many of the springs’ names have been changed since the formation of the state of Israel [...]. It creates a distance, when we can no longer identify the place’s original name. This is why when I share these stories, I am very adamant in my insistence on the name of the springs”.²⁰⁹ Calling the springs by their original names becomes part of a process of reconnection, both for the artist and for a wider Palestinian community. I argue that it is also a decolonizing act. Many scholars have widely studied the practice of renaming land and replacing original indigenous names in the context of settler colonialism. In the Palestinian case, scholar Nur Masalha has coined the term ‘toponymicide’, which he defines as: “the erasure of ancient Palestinian place names and their replacement by newly coined Zionist Hebrew toponymy”.²¹⁰ Abboud actively resists to this process of ‘toponymicide’ with her performance. Hers is a ‘decolonizing methodology’, to use a concept by scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who also writes about it in the context of resistance to newly imposed colonial toponymy.²¹¹

Abboud’s decolonial practice also incorporates implicit and explicit references to colonial violence against the natural landscape. Such violence includes the construction of illegal settlements that encroach upon the landscape, as well as the deprivation of water and access to water sources for the indigenous Palestinian people, in favor of the settlers. Thus, while reviving traditions and ancient beliefs that reflect the Palestinian people’s deep connection to their homeland, the artist also sheds light on the daily lives of Palestinians living under the Israeli colonial regime. I argue that this is an element of ethnography in Abboud’s work, which brings her closer to those scholars who delve into similar topics in the field of anthropology. Palestinian anthropologist Rami Salameh, for example, writes that for Palestinians, indeed, violence is “not an event but a structure, a way of living and experiencing life, something that is lived continuously and that people are exposed to daily”.²¹² This is also the reality that Sakiya, the

²⁰⁹ “Being With: Community – Jumana Emil Abboud”, cit., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgxKDnAMn-Y>

²¹⁰ Masalha 2012, previously quoted. P. 10.

²¹¹ Tuhiwai Smith, Linda: *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London, New York 2007.

²¹² Salameh, Rami: “A Critical Autoethnography of Teaching and Writing from Palestine”. In: *World Humanities Report*, CHCI 2023. P. 1.

institution that hosted Abboud in Ein Qiniya, constantly faces. Over the years, Israeli settlers have attacked Sakiya on several occasions.²¹³ Throughout the performance Abboud also told the story of how she was able to find the particular spring in Palestine. For example, this is what she said about a spring called عين العصفور (ein al'3sfur), “the eye of the bird”. She talks directly to the spring, including it in the performance as if it was a sentient being:

“Very often we name our springs after a nearby village. In your case, there was not a village called “al-3sfur” (which means the bird in Arabic). *Ein* in Arabic has two meanings: the human eye we see with, and the source, the water source. Your name, also mean the eye, or the source of the bird. It is a beautiful name. Do you feel privileged to have such a beautiful name? You are one among seven endangered springs in a small village in Ein Qiniya, near Ramallah. We found you by chance. It was almost a year and a half ago, I was doing research there with the Water Diviners, a group of young and elderly individuals. Together we would take water walks, to find water sources across the valley. They told us about you but we could not find you, we were walking on the hilltops and it felt like we were making loops. We were never complaining of course, because it was a wonderful moment in nature. But then we were hungry, and we felt like we were giving up. We found a huge slab of stone, and I got a call, it was a friend who wanted to tell me where to find you. I said we got tired and we were giving up, and that we sat on a slab stone. And he said: “you found it, this is *ein al-3sfur*. It is so minute, the water spring, it can barely be seen”. This is why they named you the bird spring: you are so tiny, beautiful, and precious. [...] You have been cut, but it does not mean that you have forgotten your roots. You’ve never forgotten your roots. What more can I say on your spirit? If you look closely you can see a crack. You can see a crack across the ring of your heart, that is where your wounds are”.

In moments like these, the artist reworks her firsthand experience in the Palestinian territory, transmitting it to the spectators of the performance. Such moments are decisive, because they consist in the re-elaboration of what was collected in the field-research, and in the transformation of these data into a story aimed at an international public. Moreover, the performance also evolved through brief moments of interaction with the audience, especially while some spectators briefly held the name of a Palestinian water spring. Here, spectators transformed into performers, contributing to revitalizing the springs and their stories. Overall, the performance comprised different elements. These included real-life accounts, some of the

²¹³ The most recent one was on 12th August 2022, when a group of approximately 20 settlers stormed the place after having forcibly entered by breaking locks and gates and destroying several research and art projects. Last visited 05.10.2024 <https://artscatalyst.org/blog/sakiya-arts-science-culture-raided/>

stories created during the workshops at Ein Qiniya, but also poetic parts, somewhat hermetic. Overall, Abboud and the other performers relied on a particularly elaborated linguistic and narrative choices. This connected their narration to the Palestinian storytelling tradition, which according to Muhawi and Kanaana “follows linguistic and literary conventions that set it apart from other folk narrative genres”. The two scholars write that “it relies on verbal mannerisms and language flourishes not used in ordinary conversation”,²¹⁴ similarly to the narrative style of Abboud’s performance. However, one thing that obviously distinguished the performance from the Palestinian tradition was the choice of language. In fact, it was not just an exploration of the linguistic possibilities of the Arabic language. The performance had a multilingual nature, where English, Arabic, German and Spanish alternated one after the other. Additionally, in the artist’s original plans, each repetition of the performance (which never happened) would have included new languages and translations. The linguistic choices of the performance brought together the Water Diviners performers’ native languages and addressed the international audience that was present.

Hence, I argue that translation was an instrument of inclusion. The artist’s sensitivity to issues of inclusion through languages directly results from her personal life experiences. In Canada, her difficulties with English led her to pursue visual arts classes in the first place. Upon her return to Shefara’m, she had a similar experience of alienation. She explains: “Since we spoke Arabic at home I thought I knew it, but when we arrived I realized that my accent was foreign and my vocabulary was poor. In Shefar’am, we were considered ‘the Canadians’”.²¹⁵ Abboud’s words echo Edward Said’s when he writes: “I have never known what language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt”.²¹⁶ Abboud has thus personally experienced how language can be both an instrument for reconnecting to one’s culture, and a reason for estrangement. I argue that the choice to hold the performance in multiple languages seems to be the antidote to a possible exclusion that comes from foreign languages. Translation becomes in *My Other Half* a way to connect, to speak to a wider public, and thus an instrument of inclusion.

Such language choices show the double value of her artistic practice, which addresses both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of Palestine. On one hand, they express a personal desire to

²¹⁴ Muhawi and Kanā‘nah 2021, previously quoted. P. 3.

²¹⁵ Ankori, Gannit: *Palestinian Art*. London 2006. P. 203.

²¹⁶ Said 2000, previously quoted. P. 11.

reconnect with Palestine and to amplify a collective effort to preserve endangered practices connected to the landscape. On the other, the multilinguistic nature of the performance let the stories travel also ‘outside’ Palestine. Translation is more than just a linguistic process; it is a means to transfer the collected stories to different geographical contexts and connect them with similar narratives in other regions. For this reason, during the performance the artist occasionally referred to other water sources ‘outside’ Palestine, connecting their stories to the ones of the Palestinian springs. By making these comparisons, she suggests that the challenge of preserving them is similar in various locations. I argue that connecting diverse stories helps foster a deeper understanding of a context that might otherwise seem distant to an international audience. The linguistic choices and references to other geographical areas thus serve to internationalize Abboud’s performance. This shows again her position at the nexus of Palestine and abroad, ‘between’ an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, and her ability to act as a mediator from a ‘betweenness’.

At documenta 15, Abboud takes on the role of gathering stories through both performances and other artistic projects. I argue that she and her collaborators (and partially the audience) become a “living mobile account” in the performance.²¹⁷ I take this expression from scholar Farah Aboubakr, who draws on studies of collective memory and applies it to Palestinian oral history, especially regarding the transmission of folktale heritage. Abboud’s performance thus became a means to embody and transmit the stories. The artist mediated the stories to a different cultural context, and involved the audience in Kassel as she already did in Palestine. Indeed, as I previously observed, she engaged the public in the ritual of sharing the stream’s water, and she encouraged their participation by requesting that some of them briefly embody Palestinian water sources.

I argue that the artist created a sense of complicity with the audience. She engaged with it in the similar collaborative spirit that had guided her research in Palestine. The emotional bond she created paved the way for her final request to the public after the performance’s conclusion: that they remember the stories she has told them and become their bearers worldwide. Additionally, she gifted the pieces of cloth embroidered with the name of a Palestinian water spring to some spectators, thereby providing them with a tangible memory of the event. The artist transforms the audience’s role from passive to active, elevating the performance to a relational level. The demand of the artist to remember the stories projects her work into the

²¹⁷ Aboubakr 2019, previously quoted. P. 10.

future. Hence, I consider her performance an archival endeavor, as it collects both the locations of the Palestinian water springs and the folktales associated with them. To use philosopher Jacques Derrida's words about the archive, Abboud refers to "a promise and responsibility for tomorrow".²¹⁸ She asks the Water Diviners and the public to share this responsibility and task. On her part, Abboud uses her performance to shed new light on the stories, make them accessible to a broader audience through translation, and preserve them using memory diffusers like the pieces of cloth she gives to spectators. Overall, I argue that she acts as a mediator between the local Palestinian and international contexts that may help defend the stories.

Abboud sought to replicate in Germany the aggregational nature that have inspired her projects. Her performance explored the possibilities of creating new community bonds. She selected the Northern Park in Kassel as the site of her project because she perceived the potential for establishing a new network of relationships there and sought to contribute to its growth. Nevertheless, as I anticipated, her endeavor ultimately proved partially unsuccessful. In fact, the artist had planned to repeat the performance *My Other Half* several times throughout the 100 days of documenta 15. Each time she had imagined adding new languages to her narrative, new translations, possibly new stories. It would have been a collective and collaborative work, but it did not happen. The performance that took place during the first week of documenta 15 remained a one-off. Nature was partly to blame for the disruption. During a heavy downpour, the tiny Ahne stream flooded and severely damaged the platform built on the river crossing. documenta organization did not intervene properly: it took too long to rebuild, and the new structure seemed unsafe to support the performers. No significant progress was made in the following months, and all performances were cancelled. However, Abboud engaged with the neighborhood's community center at the last moment, organizing a talk and a walk with the people there. "It was lovely as it was unexpected. And it was good to engage with German people, with everything that was going on at the time, with all the attacks perpetrated against us",²¹⁹ she stated in the interview I had with her. Without a thorough institutional and journalistic investigation, which is beyond the scope of this chapter, it will be impossible to determine whether documenta's refusal to act properly stemmed from technical difficulties or external influences related to the events surrounding documenta 15. However, it is clear that the failure

²¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques: *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago 2015. P. 51.

²¹⁹ Abboud, Jumana Emil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, 21st February 2022.

to acknowledge Abboud's series of performances is a further failure of documenta institution to assume responsibility for an invited artist, thereby contributing to the already tarnished reputation of edition.

5.4.2. The Installations at Hafenstraße 76 and at the Brüder Grimm-Museum

Beyond the performance at the Ahne stream, ruangrupa provided Abboud with several spaces to showcase the works that emerged from her research. The most relevant venue was Hafenstraße 76. Here, in an abandoned industrial building where concrete colors predominated, the artist exhibited in several rooms. The biggest room housed a collection of artworks of different media, all inspired by Palestinian folktales, traditional perception and beliefs around water sources. Abboud displayed them with red backgrounds in showcases (fig. 7). Handwritten captions in white explained their meaning or gave a synthetic context. Most of them were little sculptures out of beeswax that reproduced natural objects that one can find near the Palestinian water sources (fig. 8). They referred to folktales or popular knowledge about these places: pomegranates (as the caption reads: "collected from 'ein um al ruman, 'Ein Qiniya. Pomegranates fill the hearts with faith – and is used for fertility"), knuckle bone ("used to dispel evil"), broken jar ("believed to help the bearer find all things lost"), a twig ("magic wand, a talisman, the key of return, carried on person and by the water"), the "*ghoul*'s" tooth ("carry to foreign destinations to help guard against bites of strangers"), okra ("a magic wand, for protection and longevity"), pelvis bone ("keep on your desk to aid your concentration – particularly during study of history). Overall, I argue that they provided ethnographic information that ensued from the artist's ethnographic research.

These little sculptures draw inspiration from Canaan's collection of Palestinian amulets.²²⁰ The wax was meticulously molded: some pomegranates, for instance, were cut in half, to show the singular seeds or the stem cavity carved inside, while the colors range from different shades

²²⁰ About the amulets from plant elements, Canaan has written: "When we consider the influence of plants on the religion of the people we find that the peasant has an acute sense of the beauty of trees, herbs and flowers. Their growth, their green foliage, lovely blossoms and refreshing fruits he acknowledges as evidence of a secretly-working life-force of supernatural power. He perceives in them the ruling Creator. The Palestinian does not look at the trees simply as plants, but as beings endowed with supernatural powers. The spirits of the upper (and to a lesser degree those of the lower) world, even his local saints, the *awlia*, may live and appear in them". Canaan, Tawfiq: "Plant-Lore in Palestinian Superstition". In: *Jerusalem Quarterly* 24, 1928. P. 61.

of yellow to orange. The display cases also included other objects, such as watercolor drawings, folded and decorated papers, small wooden sculptures (busts, little birds, trees, a hand), twists of goat hairs or various types of amulets. The written captions underneath each item underlined the collaborative spirit behind the project. Indeed, they pointed out that many of the small artworks were “made in collaboration with Issa Freij, and the Water Diviners Palestine”, while the embroideries pieces were “hand made by Clemence Abboud” (the artist’s mother).

While the little sculptures were reminiscent of the traditional amulets that people collected in the areas around the water springs, the watercolor pieces contained references to Palestinian folktales. Their style was quite childlike, reflecting the universe they explored. Disproportionate body parts overlap, the lack of perspective mixed with shaded colors to create dreamy atmospheres. The references to the stories were minimal: only some of them had a short inscription written on. For instance, one in similar dimension to an A4 paper had written on it “the girl whose hands were cut off and the magical snake that restored them”, and it showed the portrait of a girl whose hands were indeed cut off (and only hinted at with a pencil line). Here, the artist portrayed the girl naked, sitting with her gaze directed towards the viewer. In some points, the pink of her body merged with the blue of the background (fig. 9).

Aside from a few small references, Abboud did not provide these small works with enough detail for them to actually tell Palestinian fairy tales. This choice was not accidental, as it deliberately left the interpretation of the works to the international audience of documenta 15. Abboud wanted the viewers to be able to decipher the works by referring to the folktales they know and which come from their different cultural backgrounds. Her goal was to establish a continuity ‘between’ different cultures. I argue that in doing so, her work echoed the well-established theory according to which folktales recur with similar structures in different geographical contexts. In folklore studies, the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index has historically highlighted this. The index takes the name from the Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne, the American Stith Thompson and the German Hans-Jörg Uther, who in different years (1910, 1928, 1961, 2004) have created and expanded a catalogue of folktale types, i.e. narrative types that recur similarly in different national settings. For example, the small painting by Abboud that I have described is inspired by the Palestinian folktale “The Woman Whose Hands Were Cut Off” (from the title that Muhawi and Kanaana give to it). This is a version of a fairy tale which occurs in various versions in different languages. The Aarne-Thompson catalogue classifies it with the

number 706. The Brothers Grimm collected a similar one in their work *Children's and Household Tales* from 1812 (number 31), with the title “The Girl Without Hands” (in German: “*Das Mädchen ohne Hände*”).

Hence, the interpretation of Abboud's drawings depends on the cultural references of the viewer. I argue that the apparent ambiguity of Abboud's work thus fosters a process of hybridization between different cultures. Finally, Abboud's research on folktales is not limited to Palestine; it extends to an international context. This again reveals the role of artist-mediator, connecting Palestinian culture with other foreign cultures, that the artist assumes from her position of ‘betweenness’. Homi K. Bhabha writes in *Nation and Narration* that “the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ about the body politic, generating other sites of meaning”.²²¹ By expanding the meaning of her works beyond Palestinian references, Abboud achieves the creation of “other sites of meaning”. She fosters hybridization, and leaves the interpretation to the viewers. She gives new life to Palestinian traditions, she advocates for them, but she does not cage them. Rather she makes them dialogue with other traditions and cultures and with an international audience.

The mixed-media installation where these works were inserted encouraged this process of exchange. Anne Ring Petersen writes that in such mixed-media installations “several elements [GP: in Abboud's case: the drawings, the sculptures, the embroidery, and a video] invite viewers to “create” the work together with the artist, and they also set the viewers the challenge of navigating between, and of coordinating, different systems of representation”.²²² In the installation in Kassel, in fact, there was no precise path to take; the public could create its own path and its own “system of representation” and interpretation, and navigate from one piece to the other. Abboud's showcases in Kassel were purposely ambiguous. I argue that they mimicked the content and disposition of an ethnographic museum. More specifically, the little wax sculptures, along with the other small artefacts, mimicked Canaan's collection of amulets and talismans. However, I claim that the scientific precision of a museum display was at once an imitation and a mockery. The captions were often puns, poetic, or slightly ironic. Next to some beeswax sculptures, for example, one could read: “the *ghouleh*'s ear, whisper your worries, she's always listening”, or “I turned my lover into a hairpin, still my mother found him”.

²²¹ Bhabha, Homi K.: *Nation and Narration*. London 1990. P. 4.

²²² Petersen 2015, previously quoted. P. 156.

Nevertheless, I argue that beyond a sort of playful dimension, the archival goal of the installation was serious. It brought together the artist's years of research into Palestinian folklore and gave it a physical and artistic form. In doing so, I argue that it followed a long-standing tradition of artists relying on archives as a materialization of their artistic research. In Kassel, Abboud's installation echoed the famous section *Museen von Künstlern* curated by Harald Szeemann in 1972 for documenta 5, which featured archival installations that unfolded as mocking museums by the artists Claes Oldenburg, Marcel Broodthaers, Ben Vautier, Herbert Distel, and Marcel Duchamp. Like the artists who came before her, Abboud turns the act of archiving into a playful exercise, as many of the objects in the showcases are accompanied by humorous or ironic explanations. At the same time, the objects convey real information about the use of amulets in Palestine, thus combining the playful aspect with a concrete pedagogical aspect inspired by the ethnographic practice of Canaan.

As I have highlighted, Abboud's pedagogical endeavor goes beyond Palestine, and seeks to create a dialogue with other international contexts. I argue that this is why, for example, in Kassel she exhibited some of her showcases and drawings at Brüder Grimm-Museum, a museum dedicated to the most famous German storytellers of folktales. Here, her installation sat next to the museum's permanent exhibition, which explains the biography of the Grimm brothers and the stories they collected through different panels and installations. For perhaps the first time in history, elements of Palestinian folklore and popular knowledge were juxtaposed with European counterparts. For example, the viewers could move from observing the drawings inspired by the Palestinian folktale "The Woman Whose Hands Were Cut Off" to learning more about the German version of the folktale in the museum "*Das Mädchen ohne Hände*". Abboud's work ventured into a venue that has not traditionally welcomed contemporary art, exemplifying the artist's aspiration to expand her audience and to disseminate her research.

A final element which featured Abboud's installation at Hafenstraße was an 8 minutes-long video entitled *I feel everything*.²²³ It included various scenes of landscapes, especially around some water springs, and a voice-over narration (by Abboud herself), which was slightly inspired by the Palestinian folktale "Half-a-Halfling". This folktale tells of a man who has two barren wives. On an adventure, he finds two special pomegranates that could cure their condition. On his way home, however, he gets hungry and eats half a fruit, so one wife only gets half of the

²²³ Abboud, Jumana Emil: *I feel everything*, 2022, Palestine, 9 min, HD video.

magical remedy. As a result, she gives birth to “half a human being, and they called him Half-a-Halfling” (who eventually will become the hero of the story).²²⁴

In the video, the voice-over partially recounted elements of the folktale. In the introduction the voice-over says: “my story was born from the half of the pomegranate of my mother” (00:00:30). It is difficult to interpret whether the narrator identifies with the half-halfling (whose story is occasionally mentioned), with a spring of water, or with the artist herself. The storytelling continues as follows: “In childhood we passed our days, curled up in your arms. You were my favorite story, she begins. The story of ‘Ein, the place where we meet. I still carry you in my mouth. Sugar on the surface of my tongue”. These words mix references to the landscape showed in the video and the artist’s seemingly nostalgic recollections. They also fit in with the scene showed in the meantime, entitled “Ways of Remembering” (00:01:30). This too speaks metaphorically of the artist’s reconnection with the Palestinian landscape. The screen is split into two: in the upper half, a hand holds a dry branch, while the background shows the typical Palestinian hilly landscape; in the lower half, another hand copies it on a big white paper sheet, presumably from memory.

Overall, the narrative style is largely poetic, deliberately confusing the audience with its ambiguities. Plays on words are again a crucial part of Abboud’s storytelling, which develops in harmony with the visual parts of the video. One particular scene illustrates this synergistic combination of words and images, and a play on words and their similar transcriptions (00:03:20). The camera frames the ground where some rocks form the word بيت “*bait*” (home) in Arabic letters. In step motion, some rocks move, to create the words نبت “*nabt*” (plant), and finally بنت “*bint*” (girl). These are all words that feature the story. Visually, *I feel everything* offers the artist’s point of view in her exploration of the Palestinian landscape and water sources. As a result, I argue that it has a documenting character: it traces the movements of Abboud in the landscape, and it gives a representation to her research process.

In the beginning of the video, a wide shot captures the floating water of a shallow but large stream, as the camera moves following the water flow (00:00:30). A later scene is titled “walking among anemones field” (00:01:20). The camera wanders among the red flowers, on a deserted green hill on a sunny day, lingering on the vegetation with close-ups. Such scenes show how the video is a key component of the installation. It superimposes the small sculptures from

²²⁴ Muhawi and Kanā‘nah 2021, previously quoted. P. 112.

the display cases onto images of the landscapes that inspired them that feature the film. The landscape on the screen is empty. It appears almost completely uninhabited, frozen in time. Abboud decides not to include and film any reminder of the on-going Israeli occupation, such as the illegal settlements which are so easily visible on the Palestinian hills. Philosopher Jacques Rancière has written that “a landscape is the reflection of a social and political order”.²²⁵ I argue that the artist’s intention here is to conceal this ‘reflection’: her representation escapes reality by aiming to reproduce the enchanted atmosphere of folktales.

However, human elements are not entirely absent from the video. First, the camera suggests the artist’s presence behind the lens, reproducing her walks around and her reconnection to the natural environment. The hands, which appear in multiple scenes, also play a central role in this process. The video shows the hands touching stones, dry branches, and stream water. One scene recreates the same ritual from the performance of sharing water from the river hand to hand (00:05:30). I argue that the sense of touch is key to Abboud’s exploring of the Palestinian environment. In the words of scholar María Puig de la Bellacasa on touch as “way of knowing”, Abboud’s sense of touch “expresses a sense of material-embodied relationality”,²²⁶ as it creates a connection between the body and the materiality of the natural environment.

Finally, in one scene a human body appears almost in its entirety (00:03:00). A woman (presumably the artist), framed from behind, stands half submerged in a natural pool, her figure a possible further reference to the folktale “Half-a-Halfling” (fig. 10). Here, the artist wanted to depict the spirit that inhabits the spring and, as Tawfiq Canaan’s would put it, visually represent the “old and wide-spread belief in all Semitic countries, that springs, cisterns, and all running waters are inhabited”. Likewise, these images further represent a reconnection with the natural environment, particularly with water. Throughout the short film, water is the protagonist. In Palestine, water appropriation is one of the most dramatic emblems of the Israeli occupation. Indeed, the Israeli settlements in the West Bank have always been a source of water deprivation for Palestinians.²²⁷ Abboud, however, decides to keep this issue out of her images. I argue that

²²⁵ Rancière, Jacques: *The Time of the Landscape: On the Origins of the Aesthetic Revolution*. Cambridge 2023. P. 67.

²²⁶ Puig de la Bellacasa, María: *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis 2017. P. 20.

²²⁷ McKernan, Bethan: “A precious resource: how Israel uses water to control the West Bank”. In: *The Guardian*. Last visited 05.10.2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/17/how-israel-uses-water-to-control-west-bank-palestine>

the scene of immersion in the spring resembles a baptism: not religiously, but in the sense of purification, reconnection with nature.

5.4.3. Abboud's Last Installation at Hafenstraße 76

Abboud exhibited in two other rooms at the venue of Hafenstraße 76. One room featured blurred photographs of the artist Issa Freij, who has collaborated with Abboud on other installations in Kassel. His work was in continuity with Abboud's research on the Palestinian natural environment. One last work by Abboud consisted in an intervention in a collective sound installation. The installation was placed in the middle of a darkened room. Some hooks attached to the ceiling helped to support four plastic panels, which showed the photographs of four different women printed on them. One of them was Abboud, smiling and holding an olive branch in her hand. Four speakers also hang next to the panels. Visitors could hear the women's personal stories through them. Only by standing near a specific speaker a visitor could clearly listen to one story undisturbed, as all the speakers played simultaneously.

Abboud's story concerned her family's traditional gathering during the olive harvest. She speaks about how her family gathers under an olive tree in the house's backyard to divide the fruit according to colour. This is the place where her mother tells stories. Abboud explains how her emotional connection to storytelling might stem from these very memories: "it's us being with the earth, that's what we are celebrating, and I find that so important [...] and maybe even the reason why I am so attached to storytelling today are these moments when we were together doing this, listening to mom, and being transported to several places, to several different times as well". It is an important moment of self-reflection for the artist, who shares it with the public of Kassel. On a research level, I argue that it represents a process of auto-ethnography, that is part of the ethnographic inquiry she carried out in Palestine. Here she presents her positionality as a researcher, the reasons that led her to investigate on Palestinian storytelling traditions. Finally, she presents her own body as the vessel for the stories she collected. Once again, the personal memory that she shares opens up to a collective dimension. Indeed, at the end of her narration she states that she will always cherish those stories and that she is "sure she is not the only one" to have those kinds of memories. This echoes the Palestinian saying "my story is the

story of my people”²²⁸ which emerges from the work of many scholars who have worked on Palestinian oral history. Once again, Abboud’s installation in Kassel unfolds as a majestic endeavor to bridge her personal and collective memory.

5.5. Conclusions

Through the second case study, the works that Jumana Emil Abboud presented at documenta 15, I continued to answer to the central research question. In Abboud’s case, too, the answer concerned a dual role of the artist as researcher and mediator, resulting from her situation of ‘betweenness’. Thus, on the one hand, I focused on analyzing the role of the artist-researcher that emerges from her works. I outlined how Abboud created them from a network she established both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Palestine, from the Slade School of Fine Art in London to the Sakiya experimental academy in Ein Qiniya, near Ramallah. I argued that also Abboud worked as an artist-ethnographer to conduct the research that underlies her work. For her, too, I drew on concepts that I borrowed from Tim Ingold and Edward Said (‘native point of view’), while paying particular attention to her attempt to avoid a parachute-science approach. I also analyzed how the artist hints at an ongoing process of personal reconnection with Palestine that she realized through the works, similar to what I have already pointed out in Manna’s work.

On the other hand, I have analyzed the various components of the mixed-media installations that Abboud presented in Kassel to examine how she translates her research into art projects. I argued that in order to ‘translate’ what she has collected through her research into different artistic media, she engages in an ‘intersemiotic translation’. I relied on the theorization of this particular concept by scholars Madelaine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal. Following their definition, I have pointed out the artist’s ‘creative step’ that helped her breathe new life into traditional Palestinian folktales and ancient beliefs about the land through various artistic media, including sculpture, painting, and performance. Finally, to assess the scientific value of Abboud’s artistic projects, I compared the work of other researchers who have addressed the same issues in the academic field. For example, I considered the work of scholars like Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana on Palestinian folktales, as well as the work of ethnographer

²²⁸ Allan, Diana: *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*. Stanford 2014. P. 53.

Tawfiq Canaan on traditional ways of perceiving the Palestinian landscape (the same one that inspired Abboud's work).

On the other hand, I examined the particular role of mediator that the artist assumes from her position of 'betweenness', leading her to mediate local stories in an international context. As with Manna, I analyzed the numerous 'parergons' that accompany the artist's narratives as mediation strategies: her participation in the public program of documenta 15, the podcasts, and her writing "journal of journeys". I claimed that this activity of mediation can be defined through the concept of 'arts interlocutor' coined by the scholar Jessica Winegar. I pointed out how documenta 15 was surrounded by several challenges, including public controversy and censorship. This has illustrated the potential failure of the mediation process undertaken by artists, especially when dealing with issues related to colonial history, which often remain contentious. Finally, I have emphasized how Abboud's works are made accessible to diverse audiences and serve as a conduit 'between' cultures, explicitly intending to unite disparate realities while documenting Palestinian traditions. This was particularly evident in the exhibition of some of her works at the Grimm Museum in Kassel, which created an unprecedented dialogue between Palestinian and German folklore traditions.

In the two case studies presented so far, I analyzed the work of two artists who I argue act as artist-ethnographers to explore a common Palestinian cultural heritage. In both cases, there were also personal reasons that guided the artists in their work. Their attempt to reconnect with Palestine through their work is particularly evident in the 'parergons'. In the following chapter, I will look at a work in which the personal aspect is even more prominent and becomes the main stimulus for its realization. It is the work of a Lebanese artists duo, presented in another exhibition in Germany. In this way, I aim to seek the answers to the central research question in a different context.

6. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Ismyrna* (2016): Betweenness as a Journey Across Personal and Collective Narratives

With the first two cases I began to outline a particular response to the key research question: How does an artist's 'between' position influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? In both cases, I argued that the answer concerned a dual role that the artists interpret from their position of 'betweenness', of researcher and mediator. I argued that such roles emerge from their work. Both cases had to do with the collective Palestinian cultural heritage. However, I highlighted how these works combine a collective and personal interests. This personal interest is the artists' desire to get closer to Palestinian culture, which I claim that the 'parergons' made by the artists often emphasized. I will now examine a work where personal interest is the main reason for its creation. It is the film *Ismyrna* by the Lebanese artist duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, who also live and work in a position of 'betweenness'. The movie explores Hadjithomas' family history, focusing on the event of her family leaving the city of Smyrna for Lebanon during the fire of 1922. It addresses deeply the family's subsequent longing and desire to return, passed down orally through generations. What are the strategies for navigating the narratives related to this event, and the personal connection to them? Are there elements in the approach to the artistic medium that tell us something about the artists' 'betweenness'? How does the work mediate such a personal and local history in an international context? What are the elements of continuity or discontinuity in comparison to the previous case studies?

6.1. The Exhibition *In the Heart of Another Country* in Hamburg

Ismyrna underwent a long gestation period.²²⁹ The artist has stored her family memory since childhood, making it a long-standing desire to deal with it. Thus, the 52-minute film took years of research and discussions. The title mixes the historical Greek name (*Smyrna*) of the city with the current Turkish one (*Izmir*), creating a hybrid. The artwork premiered at a joint show titled *Se souvenir de la lumière* ("to remember the light") at the Jeu de Paume museum and at the Sharjah Art Foundation. Already in 2016, this event marked an unprecedented collaboration

²²⁹ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: *Ismyrna*, 2016, Lebanon/UAE/France, 50 min, HDCam.

between a foundation in the United Arab Emirates and a European institution. The exhibition *In the Heart of Another Country* presented the work in Germany in 2023, with a show that continued the collaborative spirit of 2016.

Over the years, Sharjah has become a leading city in the artistic world of the Arabian Peninsula. Its Biennial, founded in 1993, and its related cultural events such as the *March Meetings* conferences have significantly impacted the geography of the contemporary global art world. The city has also provided new sources and alternative opportunities for artists from the Levant region. Thus, the Biennial quickly became a prominent meeting platform. In addition, the Sharjah Art Foundation was established in 2009 to provide continuity and structure for the artistic projects in the emirate. The foundation commissioned a collection of works, featuring in Hamburg its first exhibition abroad.

The show in Hamburg brought together the work of artists that explore diasporic experiences. It took the title from the homonymous publication by the artist, poet and philosopher Etel Adnan, which reflects on her life movements ‘between’ Lebanon, France and the USA. As I will show later on, Adnan also features the film *Ismyrna* as a co-protagonist along with Joana Hadjithomas. The curator Omar Kholeif writes that the exhibition aimed to “animate a form of cultural invention that exists in and of itself, not as subordinate, or in constant opposition, to a Western hegemony” and that “the diasporic artist here [had] the right to set the terms by which their work is seen and their stories heard”.²³⁰ This statement partly reflects the directions that will guide my analysis of *Ismyrna*. I aim to verify how the artists place the work in a situation of ‘betweenness’. I want to discover what are the “terms by which” they want their work to be “seen and their stories heard”.

I argue that in the Hamburg exhibition *Ismyrna* takes on new meaning. Indeed, the film explores concepts such as feeling at home and being displaced in a particular geographical context find fertile ground within the show. The film follows an investigation that travels both East to East, from Izmir to Beirut, and West to East, starting in Paris where Etel Adnan lived in the later part of her life. Moreover, in Hamburg it met a particular audience. For several decades, the city has been a hub for Arab world art, largely due to the presence of Lebanese gallery owner Andree Sfeir-Semler. I outlined the gallery’s story in the State of the Art, as an example of an institution fostering positions of ‘betweenness’. When *Ismyrna* traveled to the exhibition in

²³⁰ Kholeif 2022, previously quoted. P. 17.

Hamburg, I argue that it contributed to a long historical path of dialogue and exchange, showing the ability of the German city to expand the European artistic community.

The Deichtorhallen, a highly symbolic location, hosted the show. The building was originally an ensemble of market halls constructed at the beginning of the 20th century on the grounds of the previous Berliner Bahnhof. This latter was once the final station of the Hamburg-Berlin route, which ended at the Hamburger Bahnhof in the German capital – today also a contemporary art museum. Therefore, the building in Hamburg holds significant historical value due to its connections to exchanges and movements. Today, the space has become a contemporary art venue while still retaining its original industrial structure as a backdrop. The show presented temporary structures inside the large hangar to exhibit the Sharjah collection, simulating the pristine walls of a white cube space (though some walls had different colors). Hence, the exhibition had a pre-established path, which crossed different sections or “chapters”. It featured around 150 works by 61 artists, created over a span of time from 1935 to 2020. It also featured many works by Etel Adnan, especially from her series of abstract paintings. Adnan was thus symbolically present both as an actress in Hadjithomas and Joreige’s film and as an artist and muse of the show.

Indeed, *Ismyrna* was displayed next to a work by Adnan, creating a dialogue between the two pieces. Adnan’s work was a large tapestry (220x165) depicting an abstraction in various colored patterns and placed on a rectangular platform to elevate it from the floor.²³¹ The film was projected onto a television hung on the white wall a few meters away. The disposition of the video work resembled that of many paintings in the exhibition. Two speakers hung lower, and their sound became audible only as one approached, isolating it from the rest of the show. Overall, I argue that *Ismyrna* was treated as an animated painting, as its arrangement mimicked that of a traditional art gallery painting. A rectangular wooden sofa covered with a red velvet cushion was positioned in front of the television to enhance such classic disposition and allow viewers to enjoy the piece. It stood a short distance away from the screen, allowing the viewers to be fully immersed in the images.

6.2. Hadjithomas and Joreige’s Practice Before *Ismyrna*

²³¹ Adnan, Etel: *Arbres*, 2015, Wool tapestry, 220x165cm, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.

The film presented in Hamburg is yet another project in the prolific career of the Lebanese duo. It stands out for its personal character, setting it apart from previous works that focused on a more collective dimension of memory. Although it specifically deals with Hadjithomas' family history, it is still a joint production by the couple. In fact, working together has always been a defining aspect of Hadjithomas and Joreige's activity. The two artists work almost in symbiosis, whether they are creating a piece or developing theoretical concepts that guide their poetics. Scholar Charles Green, who has extensively studied collaboration in modern art history, states that "another entity emerges in artistic collaboration by couples: a third artistic identity superimposed over and exceeding the individual artists".²³² Similarly, I argue that a third identity emerges in the joint work of Hadjithomas and Joreige. This is particularly evident in their interviews (as the one I conducted with them), where the two seamlessly complete each other's sentences and take turns to respond. *Ismyrna* may have also drawn on Joreige's personal experience as a Palestinian on his mother's side, and his own concept of exile. However, the film only focuses on the biographies and family histories of Hadjithomas and Etel Adnan, who participates in it as a co-protagonist.

Over the years, Hadjithomas and Joreige have established themselves as artists with a 'between' position. This depended on the lifestyle choice of living 'between' Beirut and Paris. They work, hold public debates, give personal presentations, and create networks in both places (and beyond). Nevertheless, their artistic activity started right in Lebanon. In an interview I had with them, they said that, during the 90s, they felt a sort of frustration towards the dominant representation of the country and of their generation. In this interview they stated that they "started to want to produce images that were closer to [their] narratives, as a way [they] represented [themselves] and free [themselves] from the representation, a kind of orientalist representation, and other kind of representations that were not [them]".²³³ Over time, they became essential members of a generation of artists classifiable as a group formed after the end of the Civil War in 1990. The grouping was a spontaneous occurrence, though the artists shared a sense of collaboration and a commitment to rebuilding and taking responsibility for working on the collective memory of the war. Hadjithomas and Joreige, however, reject the often-used 'post-war generation' label. In my interview, they stated that the artists "came together because

²³² Green, Charles: *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*. Minneapolis 2001. P. 179.

²³³ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, 12th March, 2024.

[they] felt that nothing was resolved, and that [they] were not in a phase of post-war”.²³⁴ Indeed, after 1990 Lebanon suffered from the presence of the Syrian army until the Cedar Revolution, which followed the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. Additionally, there has been a continued Israeli occupation in the south of the country, which Hadjithomas and Joreige explored in their project titled *Objects of Khiam* (2008).

Despite not having an academic background in art and research, the two have always worked as artists-researchers. Their projects illuminate forgotten stories that can significantly contribute to a new perspective on the past. They do not adhere to a specific methodology, but rather adapt to each situation to effectively convey a story. When discussing the activity of “artists after 1990” in Lebanon (like Hadjithomas and Joreige), scholar Hanan Toukan quotes the novelist Elias Khoury, who writes that “their very being is afflicted by a crisis, searching for a significance in the only reference available to them, namely in the very artistic forms they create”.²³⁵ Therefore, there is a noticeable departure from the previous generation, with a newfound freedom in selecting and creating various media. I argue that the narrative and pedagogical aspects are crucial elements in their works, choosing medium essential in effectively conveying the message. For instance, *Wonder Beirut* (1997-2006) is a project that utilizes photography to narrate the story of a fictional Lebanese photographer who symbolically documented the destruction of the city during the war by gradually burning his own photographs.²³⁶ *Time Capsules* (2017), on the other hand, showcases sculptures made by placing materials obtained through core sampling into long, hanging glass cylinders, offering insights into the stratification of history in cities like Beirut, Paris, and Athens.²³⁷

However, one constant in Hadjithomas and Joreige’s activity over the years has been the production of films. The films do not target solely the art world audience, as they often aim to transcend the art world’s boundaries. I argue that this also indicates the artists’ positioning and the public role they aspire to assume, which they do not confine to an elitist art world. The most recent example in this sense is *Memory Box* (2021), which received a nomination as Lebanon’s official entry to the 2023 Oscars for Best International Feature Film. Thus, I argue that the

²³⁴ Ibidem.

²³⁵ Toukan 2021, previously quoted. P. 120

²³⁶ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: *Wonder Beirut*, 1997-2006, diasec, 47x58cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

²³⁷ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: *Time Capsules*, 2017, Minerals, Resin, Plexiglas, 150x11cm, Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Vitry-sur-Seine.

geographical ‘betweenness’ of the artists expands in their approach to the artistic practice. The duo works in a deliberately ambiguous way, moving from ‘white cube’ works to almost commercial films. They claim a certain freedom, which goes hand in hand with the desire to explore hidden stories and act as spokespersons for them. Finally, like Manna and Abboud, they accompany their narratives with multiple ‘parergons’, such as public interventions and podcasts, both in Lebanon and abroad. Like Manna and Abboud, I argue that through these ‘parergons’ – which engage both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of Lebanon – they perform a mediating activity that positions them as ‘arts interlocutors’ or ‘speaking artists,’ to draw again on the concepts by Lorand Hegyi and Jessica Winegar.

The two artists showcase their projects and stories in various settings, both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Lebanon. In doing so, they consider how the same images are perceived and received in different locations and situations. For instance, with the project *Lebanese Rocket Society* they researched the overlooked story of a group of teachers and students from a university in Beirut who engaged in space exploration activities during the 1960s, even testing the launch of several rockets. The outcome consisted of a documentary, and of various related artistic experiments.²³⁸ For example, Hadjithomas and Joreige reconstructed one of the rockets and transported it on a vehicle through Beirut as a performance-act. The police escorted the operation, up to the university where the space project originally began. The artists filmed the transportation, to record the reactions of the people who saw it. Since in Lebanon war imagery remains prominent, many viewed the object as an explosive device, leading to concern.

Much of Hadjithomas and Joreige’s art investigates the action of images. They study their impact on people, and the distance ‘between’ a mental image and the image in reality. In *Lebanese Rocket Society*, they aimed to highlight how an imaginary based on an unavoidable reality (the war experienced by the population of Beirut) influenced the perception of a given image (the reconstructed rocket). *Ismyrna*’s case is different. Here the artists start from a situation without images. Both Hadjithomas and Adnan have never seen the city of Smyrna, but they created mental images based on the oral stories they heard in their family. The intention was to go to the city for the first time, to compare the images created by the imagination with real images, thus studying the distance ‘between’ imagination and reality. Hence, the project

²³⁸ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2012, Lebanon/France/Qatar, 95 min, HDCam.

reflects on physical distance as well as on the distance ‘between’ mental and real images, and how these different images act. I argue that the film operates a sort of Platonic reconciliation in bringing the ideal image and the actual image closer together, as a cure for both physical and visual distance. Despite its highly personal and autobiographical nature, *Ismyrna* is in continuity with the artistic duo’s previous projects. Like its predecessors, it explores themes such as memory management, latency, reactivation of past stories in the present, rewriting of history, and overlapping temporalities. However, it stands out for what I argue to be an auto-ethnographic process that lies behind it.

6.3. Introduction to *Ismyrna*

The city of Izmir has a rich history of cosmopolitanism. Throughout the centuries of Ottoman rule, the city nurtured a harmonious coexistence among various communities, providing stability and serving as a refuge for endangered groups. Scholar Leyla Neyzi writes that in the nineteenth century “its population included families of European descent (Levanten), Muslims, Greek Orthodox (Rum), Armenians and Jews, among others” and that “in the late Ottoman period, Izmir developed an urban identity which transcended the boundaries of its various ethnic-religious communities.”²³⁹ The international character of the city however dates back to centuries. Scholar Sibel Zandi-Sayek writes, “above all, Izmir was a significant breeding ground for the mixing, crossing, and redefinitions of ideas and identities integral to the Eastern Mediterranean experience”.²⁴⁰ Izmir has always been a significant trade center, bringing prosperity to its inhabitants and attracting people from across the Mediterranean.

With the end of the Great War, significant changes occurred. The Allies defeated the Ottoman Empire and agreed to divide its territories. Consequently, the western territories of Anatolia fell under Greek ambitions, which sought to annex them in pursuit of the ‘Megali Idea’: a project aimed at restoring the former borders of the Byzantine Empire to a Greek state. In May 1919, the Greek army occupied Smyrna, citing the large Greek community in the city as justification. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 guaranteed Greece’s possession of this new territory, but Turkish forces opposed it. The result was the 1919-1922 Greek-Turkish war. The Greek

²³⁹ Neyzi, Leyla: “Remembering Smyrna/Izmir: Shared History, Shared Trauma”. In: *History & Memory* (October) 20 2008 <https://doi.org/10.1353/ham.0.0007> P.110.

²⁴⁰ Zandi-Sayek, Sibel: *Ottoman Izmir: The Rise of a Cosmopolitan Port, 1840-1880*. Minneapolis 2012. P. 9.

occupation of Smyrna ended in September 1922 when Turkish nationalist troops, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, launched a successful counter-offensive and regained control.

The reoccupation led to the great fire which Zandi-Sayek describes as a “retaliation of Turkish troops to the three-year-long Greek military occupation of Western Asia Minor”, and which was accompanied by a “persecution of large numbers of Izmir Greeks and Armenians”.²⁴¹ The non-Turkish population of Smyrna was forced to leave as part of the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey, which relocated approximately 1.6 million people between Greece and Turkey. For those displaced, the loss of the homeland was a traumatic experience that would be passed down through generations.

I argue that Hadjithomas and Joreige’s work is part of a broader research panorama that explores the legacy of these historical events. In 2012, Greek film director Maria Iliou, with the assistance of historian Alexander Kitroeff, released the documentary *Smyrna: The Destruction of a Cosmopolitan City*.²⁴² The film weaves together historical images and a voice-over from historians and experts who reflect on the city’s cosmopolitan character, its tolerance, and the harmonious coexistence of its inhabitants. It also includes the voices of various descendants of the city’s exiled inhabitants. One of them is historian Victoria Solomonidis, who states in the film: “I was not born there, but this heritage weighs so much in my heart that I always profess that my country of origin is Smyrne” (00:06:20). Another historian, Eleni Bastera, third generation Smyrniot, states that she is slowly “getting the license to uncover Smyrna, and to try to find a way to talk about it that does justice to [her] Greek family and to the discipline of history” (00:12:25). Among the others testimonies, Smyrna-born Armenian Jacques Nalbantian shares his story and says: “Smyrna has given me the challenge of having to overcome the wrong of humanity, in a sense of responsibility. Smyrna gave me responsibility.” (01:20:45).

Hadjithomas and Joreige’s film shares some similarities with this work, but also exhibits substantial differences. *Ismyrna* lacks the precise contextualization present in Iliou’s film, but I argue that it still explores memory and history with the rigor of academic research. In its inquiry, it lets introspection play a decisive role. Its historical research avoids solely focusing on the past, and addresses explicitly the present. As I will demonstrate, the artists capture contemporary visuals while layering them with imagery from the past. I argue that *Ismyrna* displays its

²⁴¹ Ivi, P. 7.

²⁴² Iliou, Maria: *Smyrna: The Destruction of a Cosmopolitan City - 1900-1922*, 2012, Greece/Turkey, 87 min, HD video.

historical narrative using an oral history methodology. Indeed, the conversation between Hadjithomas and Adnan often takes the form of a mutual interview, in which they share historical knowledge through references to the histories of their families. In my analysis I emphasize what I argue to be auto-ethnographic aspect of the research behind the film. However, it is essential to highlight that the oral component aligns with significant historical research that utilizes oral testimonies to bridge gaps in Izmir's history and how it is perceived by various communities. Historian Leyla Neyzi, for example, in her article "Remembering Smyrna/Izmir: Shared History, Shared Trauma" relies on the "oral history narrative of an elderly Smyrniote/Izmirian" in her attempt to look at how different communities perceive the events.²⁴³ Likewise, *Ismyrna* also brings two similar but also profoundly different family experiences (of Hadjithomas and Adnan).

6.4. An Analysis of the film *Ismyrna*

The movie starts with Hadjithomas' voice telling the story of her family leaving the city. From the beginning, she takes charge of family memories and anticipates their connection to a collective history. The essayistic character of the film emerges from her voice working in symbiosis with the images. She says: "the harbor of Smyrna. We are all gathered there. My mother worries because I don't have my wool jacket. I remember thinking, we're probably all going to die, and my mother is afraid I'll catch a cold" (00:00:20). The artist speaks in the first person, but does not report an experience that she has lived. In the interview I had with her, Hadjithomas stated that she was trying to "awaken the voice of [her] grandfather" and to "talk in his name".²⁴⁴ Thus, she re-activates the memory of the past in the present. She shows its unresolved nature, both on a family and collective level. Hadjithomas' words convey the sensations that others experienced during the tragic events. This suggests that the emotions associated with the memories have been transmitted through generations, allowing her to recall them with such ease in present times.

The film thus introduces the figure of Hadjithomas' paternal grandfather, who was born in Smyrna. At the age of 12 he was forced to escape the city on a boat with his family during the

²⁴³ She writes for example: "While the Asia Minor "disaster" is mourned in Greece, it is the "liberation" of Izmir that is commemorated in Turkey". Neyzi 2008. P. 106.

²⁴⁴ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, 12th March, 2024.

fire, when the Greek neighborhood where he grew up was destroyed. The film details the harrowing escape at night, shrouded in darkness and filled with the cries of the people as Turkish soldiers seized control of the city. Simultaneously, it features period footage of the fire in black and white. The use of archival material will be a consistent strategy throughout the film. Due to their impersonal character, these images are in contrast with the very intimate story that the artist tells. The people who appear in these images remain anonymous, and are not connected to the personal stories that Hadjithomas shares. At the same time, these images provide a visual dimension to a family narrative that has traditionally lacked representation due to its exclusively oral transmission across generations.

Following the opening titles, the camera centers on the dialogue between Joana Hadjithomas and Etel Adnan, a theme that recurs throughout the film (fig. 11, 00:03:25). It initially focuses on their faces up close, aiming to convey the subtlest emotions and expressions. The film gives the viewer the impression of being a silent participant in the interaction between Hadjithomas and Adnan, as it shifts from individual portrayals to a depiction of them together. Hadjithomas begins to tell Adnan about her grandfather's escape aboard a French ship during the fire of Smyrna and his experience of rowing among the dead bodies. Adnan responds that, as her mother recounted (having lived in the city until the end of 1923), the city burned simultaneously from multiple sides. This exchange helps viewers gain insight into historical events that they may be unfamiliar with.

In the voice-over, Hadjithomas recounts her first meeting with Adnan 15 years earlier. She reveals that what brought them immediately closer was their families' bond with Izmir, which she defines as "*une presence absence, un territoire de fiction*" (00:04:35). On one hand, Hadjithomas' maternal grandfather, Thomas, was born into a Greek family in Smyrna, but was later expelled by the army led by Atatürk in 1922. This traumatic experience left a lasting impression on him, and he passed the story down to subsequent generations. In contrast, Adnan's mother came from a relatively impoverished Greek background in Smyrna. Her father was a Syrian officer in the Ottoman army who ascended to the role of commander in the city, where he met Adnan's mother. Hadjithomas recalls in the voice-over how she and Adnan immediately began planning a trip to Smyrna as they discussed their connection to the city. This event could have been a turning point in the family histories of both, because no member of their families ever returned there after the fire and annexation by Turkey. However, the film

tells that Adnan's mobility difficulties due to her old age prevent her from traveling. Therefore, they can only stay in Adnan's Parisian apartment, delving into memories and discussing, at least until Hadjithomas decides to make the journey alone. This will provide both of them, albeit indirectly for Adnan, with access to the contemporary reality of the city.

French is the *lingua franca* of their discussion, as Hadjithomas is not proficient in Greek, while Adnan struggles with Arabic. French is one of the languages that Hadjithomas speaks in her position of 'betweenness'. English subtitles have been added for non-French-speaking viewers of the film. The film's linguistic choices therefore seem forced, given the circumstances. Additionally, it seems primarily aimed at an international audience and at those in Lebanon who are proficient in foreign languages.²⁴⁵ As I will show, there are slight differences between the original audio and the subtitles, as the latter occasionally fail to accurately translate certain subtle French expressions. This is a recurring issue in the works I considered in this research. I argue that the use of subtitles for translation to engage a broader audience represents a form of 'negotiation', a concept that semiotician Umberto Eco deeply explored. Indeed, Eco describes the process of translation as one of 'negotiation' where inevitably something gets lost, as one "always negotiate[s] the meaning that the translation has to express, because in our daily life we constantly negotiate the meaning we confer to the expressions we use".²⁴⁶

I argue that the subtitles represent a form of 'negotiation', much like the overall discussion between Hadjithomas and Adnan. Indeed, the two artists establish common ground in a *lingua franca* – French – where they 'negotiate' the meaning of their thoughts in a language distinct from the one in which they may have initially conceived them. In their dialogue, they translate family stories into a different language from the one in which those stories were originally told. I argue that these considerations follow what the historian Yasir Suleiman wrote in his essay "The betweenness of identity - Language in trans-national literature", where he deals with the "polyphony of Arab diaspora". Regarding "hybrid texts" (not-Arabic texts written by Arabic speakers) he writes that they "may be regarded as implicit translations, at least in some parts, from the language(s) of the home country". I argue that Hadjithomas and Adnan's conversation exemplifies what Suleiman refers to as 'hybrid text'. The 'implicit translation' he discusses

²⁴⁵ In Lebanon English has become increasingly common, while French, a legacy of the protectorate (colonial) period and relations with France, is less and less spoken.

²⁴⁶ Eco, Umberto: *Dire quasi la stessa cosa: esperienze di traduzione*. Milano 2012. P. 94

aligns with the ‘negotiation’ between languages of the two that I mentioned earlier. Suleiman adds that “Writing, under this interpretation, becomes an exercise in palimpsestry”. He writes that scholar “Soraya Antonius reaches the same conclusion when she says, ‘those who write in foreign languages are really translators of their own essence’ (2000: 267)”.²⁴⁷ Finally, he interprets this “exercise in palimpsestry” as part of an identity of ‘betweenness’. I argue that the polyphony of languages (Arabic, French, English) that Hadjithomas and Joreige use in their works is also an “exercise in palimpsestry” – with French acting as neutral meeting ground. Translation is a way to express “their own essence”: through it, they can connect with those who have similar life experiences. Finally, I argue like Suleiman that such an “exercise in palimpsestry” is an indicator of an identity of ‘betweenness’.

The camera follows Adnan as she talks about her family and retrieves various objects, books, and documents to support her narration (00:05:15). The film shows her as she makes her way into her home, allowing the viewers to discover her intimate and domestic spaces. For instance, a painting by her hangs on the wall in the background of a living room, blending seamlessly with various everyday objects. I contend that the conversations taking place in these domestic spaces further reinforce their significance as oral history. Indeed, the scholar Alessandro Portelli writes that oral history allows one “to search out the memories in the private, enclosed spaces of houses and kitchens – to connect them to history and in turn force history to listen to them”.²⁴⁸ Adnan retrieves a book containing an old map of the city, which she and Hadjithomas use to identify the areas where their respective families lived. They make a list of the various ancient neighborhoods (Turkish, Armenian, Jewish, Greek) while the camera captures their emotions as they recall inherited memories. Adnan claims that her mother described it as a cosmopolitan reality, where everyone inhabited their own world. This echoes the words of the historians I previously mentioned.

Adnan then tells her father’s story in detail (00:07:50). His name was Assaf Kadri Beik, as evidenced by the initials on a letter seal of his that she still possesses. He was neither an Arab nor a Turkish nationalist, but rather identified as Ottoman. He was proud of his position in the Ottoman army and of the decoration he received in 1915 from the sultan after the Battle of the

²⁴⁷ Suleiman, Yasir in: Salhi, Zahia Smail / Netton, Ian Richard: *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*. London 2006. P. 18.

²⁴⁸ As in: Rabah, Makram: *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory*. Edinburgh 2020. P. 21.

Dardanelles. However, after the empire's collapse, he suddenly felt stateless. Additionally, the Turks called him a traitor after the reconquest of Smyrna, solely because of his Arab ethnicity and his suspicious (in their eyes) marriage to a Greek woman. Adnan states that leaving was finally inevitable. Her mother perceived as a tragedy the loss of her homeland, which remained her life obsession. She even went as far as writing on her daughter's (Adnan's) documents that she was born in Smyrna instead of Beirut to maintain a connection with it. According to Adnan, her mother always spoke of Smyrna as a lost paradise, where food in the markets was so abundant that it remained unsold and was regularly thrown into the sea for the fish in the evenings. The film does not address the fact that Hadjithomas' grandfather and Adnan's father came from different communities and factions, which could have made them enemies. Nor Hadjithomas and Adnan ever debate this topic in their conversation. In this regard, Hadjithomas stated in the interview I had with her: "this was never really a matter for us, it was not relevant for us".²⁴⁹ The key aspect of the conversation is its reconciliatory nature. In response to Adnan's stories, Hadjithomas offers that of her family (00:05:55):

"What you say about your family applies to my own. The stories... my grandfather used to repeat the same story, we heard it a thousand times [GP: *dix mille fois* in the French original, which is even more]. What's strange is that, although my father used to tell him 'that's enough, we've already heard that story, we're fed up', after my grandfather's death, it's my father who started telling those stories. I've heard those stories throughout my childhood [GP: *que ces histoires*, 'only these stories', in the French original]. And that's why what you told me evokes so many things, because it's as if we were not fully living in this country [Lebanon]. At my grandfather's house, we lived in a special world, although they were connected to Lebanon. My grandfather worked a lot in Lebanon, he made a lot of things, but in the family circle we were somewhere else"

Adnan takes on directly from Hadjithomas' last sentence with the same words, as if she knew already where her conversant was heading. Indeed, she states: "We lived in two worlds, we lived in Beirut with the Lebanese and the children of Beirut, and we went back to our own world. We lived in two worlds that remained apart" (00:06:50).

I argue that these considerations by Hadjithomas, along with Adnan's comment, are among the most significant in the film. Indeed, I argue that they exemplify what I define as an auto-

²⁴⁹ Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, 12th March, 2024.

ethnographic methodology, which informs the artist's research and reflections. Indeed, similar to true auto-ethnographic research, Hadjithomas explores her personal experience through an introspective lens to analyze the dynamics of her own family. She examines how the experience of exile and its associated emotions are transmitted through repetitive oral storytelling rituals, in which her father took on the responsibility of continuing this tradition after her grandfather's passing. Moreover, I argue that the family memory that she describes falls into what scholars Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, following the previous studies of Maurice Halbwachs, define as 'communicative memory'. This means a type of memory transmission that "includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications".²⁵⁰ Indeed, Hadjithomas notes that stories about Smyrna were a routine part of daily life for her family. Through an analysis of her family circle, she reflects on her family's place in the historical context of cosmopolitan Beirut, where certain communities maintain their identity and intimate memories within the domestic walls. I contend that this echoes a metaphor by the Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi, who describes Lebanon as a "house of many mansions", to discuss the coexistence between different communities.²⁵¹

Hadjithomas delves into the familial environment similar to Adnan's, in which she was raised, portraying it as a world within a world. She describes it as a life situation 'in-between' different parallel realities. I contend that this evokes the ideas of Homi Bhabha, a prominent theorist of diasporic identity. In his book *The Location of Culture*, he explores the feeling of a "subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality"²⁵², looking at the experience of "colored South Africans" through an analysis of South African literary works such as Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*. Despite the vastly different geographical contexts of Lebanon and South Africa, it is noteworthy that both Bhabha and Hadjithomas emphasize the domestic sphere as a reflection of the feeling of being 'in-between'. Bhabha speaks of an "'in-between' temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home",²⁵³ precisely like Hadjithomas when she states that at her grandfather's house they "lived in a special world", and that "in the family circle [they] were somewhere else".

²⁵⁰ Assmann, Jan / Czaplicka, John: "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity". In: *New German Critique*, No. 65 Spring-Summer 1995. P. 126.

²⁵¹ Salibi 2002, previously quoted. P. 216.

²⁵² Bhabha 2003, previously quoted. P. 13.

²⁵³ Ibidem.

In *Ismyrna*, Hadjithomas and Adnan conclude that oral storytelling for the family was a form of survival. Their first conversation ends with the old artist retreating to her studio (00:17:30), followed by a clear break in the film. A shot of a plane passing in a blue sky with just a few clouds announces that Hadjithomas has finally undertaken the fateful journey, as she announces in the voice-over. She tells that she has not yet planned her activities in the city because she lacks experience there, as she explains: “I’m wondering what to film. I didn’t inherit photos of Smyrna but only narratives [French: *des récits*]. I built myself an imaginary place with no images but with stories” (00:18:40). The first actual images that the artist takes of Izmir are the overhead shots of the city and its gulf as seen from the plane window.

Afterwards, the visual exploration of the city from up close begins. Hadjithomas takes the first shots of the city from a distance with a stationary camera. She captures an overall image of the bay, with the sea in the foreground, the houses in the middle, and the mountains in the background. Subsequently, the camera moves to focus on close-up details. The sound of the sea waves and seagulls accompanies the re-enactment in the voice-over of Hadjithomas’ grandfather’s memories about the gulf and the sea. The artist reactivates her grandfather’s memory in the present, associating the stories she heard of the tragic event of the city fire with the peaceful and relaxing images of the quiet contemporary city.

Hadjithomas notes that the names she knows from her family’s stories no longer match the city, that has been reconstructed and transformed over the past century. In one scene, she compares an old map of the city with a new one to orient herself and understand the various changes (00:21:30). She claims, for example, that the street where her grandfather’s family once lived no longer exists. The camera frames the maps closely to show the street names marked in small letters, allowing viewers to participate in this orientating operation. The immersion in the city then continues through shots from inside a car. As the film shows Izmir’s streets and alleys, Hadjithomas in the background lists the places she recalls from the stories. The list increasingly grows until the artist’s voice overlaps with itself. The audio reverberation symbolically represents the disorderly ways in which memories often disappear, resurface, or overlap.

Hadjithomas is not just a silent presence behind the camera. Indeed, she occasionally appears on screen, with Khalil Joreige presumably following her with the camera (fig. 12). She walks through the crowded streets, observing her surroundings with a mix of curiosity and confusion, as if searching for things she had so far only heard in stories and that now she seeks in reality

for the first time (00:23:40). Here the camera movement mimics the pace of a typical human step, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in Hadjithomas' slow discovery of the city's various neighborhoods. The shots move from crowded streets of varying widths to quiet tree-lined scenes and rows of houses featuring typical enclosed Turkish wooden balconies. The images linger on some of them, allegedly abandoned, to capture their architectural details or their sometimes-ruined state. The film continuously intertwines images of the contemporary city with Hadjithomas' family memories, hearable from her voice-over. For instance, she recounts the story of her grandfather's mother's dowry, which was kept at the Ottoman bank headquarters in Izmir. She tells that he tried to recover it for a long time, but in vain. As Hadjithomas tells this story, the film shows various shots of the building that once housed the bank (00:27:10). I argue that this creates an irreconcilable temporal distance. With her trip to Izmir, Hadjithomas takes on the responsibility of healing a wound that has persisted for generations. The cycle of longing that has been passed down in the family for decades is interrupted, as she finally returns to the place from which her grandfather Thomas and his family were exiled. This marks a departure from a certain type of practice (of exclusively oral storytelling), which has been a tradition in the family, passed down from the artist's grandfather to her father. Though, while Hadjithomas resolves the geographical distance, the temporal distance remains. The overlap between what she knows from family stories and what she sees in the contemporary city and presents to the audience remains a contrast that cannot be reconciled. Hadjithomas attempts to activate inherited memories of the past in the present, but this is only occasionally successful.

At the same time, the film suggests that the artist is not only collecting images but also internalizing them. I argue that the use of the first-person perspective, along with the artist's appearance and recorded reactions on screen, creates a sense of corporeal experience shared with the viewer. The journey provides the artist with a new embodied knowledge, which her act of walking around fosters. In his study on the philosophy of movement, anthropologist Tim Ingold writes that "people, in the course of their everyday lives, make their way by foot around a familiar terrain" and that this leads these 'paths' to be "incorporated into their own embodied capacities of movement, awareness and response - or into what Gaston Bachelard (1964_11) calls their 'muscular consciousness'".²⁵⁴ I argue that the film shows such process that Hadjithomas carries out. She "makes her way by foot" around the city, becoming "familiar with

²⁵⁴ Ingold, Tim: *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London, New York 2011. P. 47.

the terrain". The acquisition of knowledge becomes an embodied experience, or a new "embodied capacity of movement" and "awareness" as Ingold would write. Not only does the mind compare memories with reality, but the entire body becomes aware of the new dimension (hence the 'muscular consciousness'), which will now shape the artist's perception of the city of Izmir.

In all the shots of the urban and natural landscape around Izmir, the visual aspect is inextricably linked to the verbal one. The viewer becomes familiar with the appearance of the city, and at the same time follows Hadjithomas' stories and reflections. I argue that this process is still part of the methodology of auto-ethnography and the introspective gaze of the artist, who examines the ways of functioning of her own family while telling its stories. I contend that this synergy between visual and oral elements makes *Ismyrna* an 'essayistic movie', in the way scholar Christa Blümlinger defined this term. Blümlinger takes up Alexandre Astruc's idea that an 'essayistic movie' "should represent an author's 'inner landscape' and contain traces of the I".²⁵⁵ The traces of the "I" and reflection on the 'inner landscape' are indeed a crucial aspect of Hadjithomas' auto-ethnographic research. Blümlinger's explores the concept of 'inner landscape' in her analysis of classics of documentary cinema such as Chris Marker's *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958).²⁵⁶ She writes that *Lettre de Sibérie* intertwines landscape shots that Marker took in Siberia, and Marker's voice-over commentary. According to Blümlinger, such commentary constitutes the autobiographical character of the film and "a poetic, interior world, through imaginary landscapes", which adds to the 'external' landscape of Siberia.²⁵⁷ I argue that such an intertwinement happens also in the case of *Ismyrna*. Indeed, *Ismyrna* combines landscape shots (the external landscape) of Izmir with the portrayal of an 'interior world', i.e. all the reflections that Hadjithomas shares and connects to her journey.

The section of the film that covers the trip to Izmir concludes with a walk along the seafront. The artist holds the camera so that the spectators can follow her steps (00:25:30). Then the images become blurred, with multiple shots superimposed on each other (fig. 13). The people passing by become transparent, almost abstract entities, almost symbolizing memories that materialize in the surrounding landscape. Quiet music in the background replaces the artist's voice. A violin and a pianola mix with the sound of the waves and the people who gather to

²⁵⁵ As in: Balsom, Erika / Peleg, Hila: *Documentary across Disciplines*. Berlin, London 2016. P. 174.

²⁵⁶ Marker, Chris: *Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957, Russia, 62 min, Eastmancolor.

²⁵⁷ Ivi. P.176.

enjoy the sunset colors in a dreamy atmosphere. Finally, the darkness of the night covers the city and the scene ends.

The next section of the film shifts back to Paris, where Hadjithomas visits again Adnan at her home (00:32:30). Here Hadjithomas shows Adnan the photos and footage that she took in the Turkish city, beginning with the ones that Adnan explicitly requested. Once again, the camera follows the two closely as they look on the computer images together. Some of these pictures become an excuse to delve into old family stories. By tightly framing their faces, the camera effectively captures the emotions of both artists, especially Adnan's reactions to the city and its surrounding landscape, which she appears to be seeing for the first time in her life (fig. 14). She is particularly impressed by the beauty and imposing presence of the mountains ("*c'est plein*", "it's full of them," she says) (00:33:30).

Examining emotions has been a part of the film's research methodology from the start. Reflections on sadness, melancholy, and boredom have emerged from discussions and personal anecdotes. Creating a history of emotions means revisiting one's own family history and recalling memories associated with it. I argue that this process aligns with Hadjithomas' auto-ethnographic and introspective methodology that guided the movie. However, the film also captures Adnan's emotions and genuine reactions, such as the surprise in her eyes upon seeing images of Izmir for the first time. These pictures finally replace the version of the city Adnan's imagination had previously constructed from oral stories. The process the film shows is highly intimate. It unfolds between personal introspection (expressed through voice-over commentary) and a dialogic exchange (the comparison between the two artists), before being shared with the film's audience. The film's audience may experience a sense of voyeurism, particularly when observing the emotional reactions of Adnan and Hadjithomas up close. This feeling may have already arisen from a sentiment of invading as silent spectators the domestic spaces of the old artist, where the conversation takes place.

Next, Adnan asks Hadjithomas whether she has already showed the photos to her father (00:36:00). Hadjithomas responds that she has not told him yet about her trip, leading to a deeper conversation between the two about how no one in either of their families has ever visited Izmir. Adnan states: "I believe we absorbed our parents' sorrow. And we don't want to be overcome by it. Because you can't explain it: I have been to Istanbul and Bursa, and never to Smyrna. It's as if I refused to do it, as if I told myself that Smyrna is not there". Hadjithomas confirms that

the pain being discussed is not their own, but rather an inherited emotion. Then she shares a personal story about a skin rash she suffered upon her landing in Izmir, which miraculously disappeared the following day. She compares it to an emotional relief of more generations experienced on her body. I argue that through auto-ethnographic reflections, Hadjithomas once again explores how family memory may function, and emotions as a collective rather than a personal experience.

In the final segment of their conversation, Adnan discusses the limited material possessions she has that are associated with her parents. This includes a large photograph of her father with Atatürk. She also shares her challenges in preserving these items due to her frequent moves over the years. Meanwhile, the film visually overlaps old photos of Smyrna with some letters that Adnan mentions. The conversation between the two ends with a last shot of Adnan's studio, while the artist puts the consulted documents back in a drawer.

The film then transitions to a shot of the bay of Izmir during the day, presumably taken from a boat during the exploratory trip. It shows the waves in the foreground and the mountains behind the city disappearing into the mist. Against this backdrop, the film concludes with a final voice-over from Hadjithomas. The voice-over associates the 'external landscape' of Izmir with an 'inner landscape', as Blümlinger would put it. Hadjithomas states that one day she will write her memories in a great book. The book will compile her family's stories, spanning from Smyrna to Beirut, and will draw on a comprehensive collection of documents and memories that she has preserved. She mentions a couple of them, once again recounting aspects of her family's functioning. For example, she talks about "a large photo of [her] great-grandfather wearing a tail coat for his wedding, which [her] father produced for every visitor to prove where we came from" (00:44:55). She claims that she will write what her grandfather could have written but did not, and that the memoirs will be a transcription of the "fantasized identities" heard in family stories, of "those imaginary lives" that "we can only invoke", "like those mountains which Etel spent her life painting, the mountains which she saw from her window in Sausalito, in the United States, and which strangely recall those of Izmir, which she has never seen" (00:46:05).

As Hadjithomas shares this reflection, the screen showcases a close-up of the mountains that form the backdrop of Izmir. Superimposed on them are some paintings by Etel Adnan from the series previously mentioned by Hadjithomas (fig. 15). Their abstract, warm-colored shapes almost merge with the mountain's ripples, gradually replacing them in a process of fading that

concludes the film. In her voice-over, Hadjithomas interprets these paintings as Adnan's attempt to depict something she had never seen but was present in her imagination thanks to family stories. Another Lebanese artist, Simone Fattal, who worked in Beirut in close contact with Adnan, tells us how central the figure of the mountain had become in Adnan's poetics: "All the time she was painting the mountain, drawing it in oil, watercolor, ink, or a combination of all. She made thousands of these drawings. The natural pyramidal shape of the mountain became embedded in her entire being. It became her identity."²⁵⁸ Therefore, I argue that the representations of the mountains in the film take on a final metaphorical meaning. They seem like an attempt to resolve a physical and mental distance inherited from one's family, and the sensation of being 'in-between', which has been one of the main subjects of discussion for Hadjithomas and Adnan.

6.5. Further Exploration of the Film's Methodologies

6.5.1. *Ismyrna's* Auto-Ethnography Methodology

As I observed in the analysis, the film *Ismyrna* condenses years of research into less than an hour. The conversation that takes place in Adnan's home in Paris appears to be a single session, but it is actually a compilation of several discussions held over the years. This is evident because the artists' clothing changes continuously, implying that the different segments of the dialogue between the two took place at other times. The film explicitly responds to Hadjithomas' need to confront and reconcile with a part of her family history. However, I argue that it is not a simple biography, but rather an auto-ethnographic exploration of the artist's own family's functioning, rituals, dynamics, and insertion in a specific social context (in Beirut).

In their work about auto-ethnography, scholars Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis describe this discipline as follows: "Autoethnography" consists of three characteristics or activities: the 'auto', or self; the 'ethno', or culture; and the 'graphy'. They describe the 'auto' as something "that foregrounds the author's personal experience and reflections", in the way "autoethnographers engage in 'memory work'".²⁵⁹ Hadjithomas uses

²⁵⁸ Fattal, Simon: "On Perception - Etel Adnan's Visual Art". In: *Mathaf*. Last visited 05.10.2024. <https://encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/essays/Pages/On-Perception---Etel-Adnan's-Visual-Art.aspx>

²⁵⁹ Adams, Tony E. / Holman Jones, Stacy / Ellis, Carolyn: *Handbook of Autoethnography*. London, New York 2022. P. 3.

anthropological terminology to carry out such an operation while recalling old family stories and verifying them in the ‘fieldwork’ (in Izmir). The three scholars then define the ‘ethno’ as the moment when “autoethnographers use their experience to describe, and sometimes critique, cultural beliefs, values, practices, and identities”. In *Ismyrna*, this is evident when Hadjithomas discusses the ‘practice’ of telling stories about Smyrna as her family’s rituals, led by her grandfather Thomas and then by her father when the former passed away. Likewise, the artist also reflects on the identity of her own family, particularly its insertion into the context of Beirut society. She states that “in the family circle [they] were somewhere else”, with a feeling of living ‘in-between’ different worlds – ‘in-between’ Beirut and somewhere else (Smyrna). Finally, the three scholars describe the ‘graphy’ as “the craft of representation”. The film’s voice-over not only presents narrative aspects, such as family stories, but also suggests a significant moment of writing and reflection, of ‘graphy’, that preceded the film’s realization.

In this process of reflection, I also argue that Hadjithomas seems to react to what scholar Marianne Hirsch would describe as ‘postmemory’. Hirsch defines the term she invented as follows: “Postmemory describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before - to experiences they ‘remember’ only using the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”²⁶⁰ I argue that *Ismyrna* addresses ‘postmemory’ issues in the way it talks about stories that transmitted “personal trauma of those who came before” (Hadjithomas and Adnan’s families leaving Smyrna) to the “generation after” (the two artists). Hadjithomas’ trip to Izmir marks a turning point in her family’s history and suggests an overcoming of the inherited ‘postmemory’. This healing process happens thanks to the images collected during the trip, and shared with Adnan so that she can benefit from them. In the scene where they look at these pictures on the computer together, the viewer witnesses the moment when the two artists’ substitute images made-up from stories with real-life ones.

The film shares this very intimate and personal moment with the audience. The camera exclusively captures the faces of Hadjithomas and Adnan to show every little facial reaction. I argue that this allows the spectators to connect with their emotions while being silent

²⁶⁰ Hirsch, Marianne: *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York 2012. P. 5.

participants to their conversation. Indeed, viewers who do not share a similar ‘postmemory’ to Hadjithomas and Adnan would not experience their same emotional response. Therefore, I contend that to convey the moment's emotions to the audience, the movie’s strategy is to focus on the emotions of the two artists. I argue that through their video portrait, their sensations can reach the film’s audience “through a process of affect contagion”. I borrow this expression from scholar Jill Bennet. Bennet uses it to explain the function of medieval icons representing martyrdom, and their ability “to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event”, and who is “drawn into the image through a process of affect contagion”.²⁶¹ I argue that the faces of the two artists, their emotions, aim to generate this “process of affect contagion” even in the spectators who have not inherited a similar ‘postmemory’.

Overall, emotions act as a bridge, connecting with viewers who may not have encountered similar experiences. I contend that they form a language that imparts an international character to the work, offering an additional layer of translation for its narrative. This is evident in the film’s approach, which not only centers on Smyrna but also hints at potential parallels with other comparable realities that have given rise to similar events and emotions. Adnan, for example, at some point states on those who have experienced the loss of their homeland: “they are possessed by their loss. Some Palestinians are like that. They talk unceasingly about Palestine; it’s in their heads. And some, even if they get a chance to go back, refuse because their Palestine is finished” (00:33:05). *Ismyrna* aims indeed to resolve a distance ‘between’ an (inherited) image from the past, present in memory, and one of the actual present. This metaphorical temporal overlap is evident visually in the scenes where different images interweave, thus visually concretizing the time juxtaposition on the screen. I argue that the emotions generated by this process become then part of the particular international affective language which ensues from the ‘process of affect contagion’.

6.5.2. *Ismyrna*’s Historical Research

While exploring the two artists’ family history, *Ismyrna* also investigates collective history. I argue that its research aligns with the academic work of scholars who engage in historiography ‘from below’. I contend that in the context of the impact of the Ottoman Empire’s collapse in

²⁶¹ Bennett, Jill: *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford 2005. P. 36.

the region and in the Arab communities, historian Mostafa Minaqwi's book *Losing Istanbul. Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire* is the most relevant reference. In the preface, Minaqwi writes that he felt "drawn to the story of Arab-Ottoman in Istanbul and their experience of tenuous belonging, rejection, and loss"²⁶² because of his family history. *Ismyrna* is set in Izmir, not Istanbul, but the triggering principle of its research remains the same as Minaqwi's book: the artist's family connection to the topic.

Minaqwi's book relies on a specific methodology, which looks at collective history through the individual experience of specific families. The scholar writes: "working on a laptop that bore the scratches and scrapes of flying shards of glass from the Port blast [GP: of Beirut], it occurred to me that history, for most people, is about recounting experiences of lived moments".²⁶³ I assert that this premise mirrors that of *Ismyrna*, evident in the opening scene where Hadjithomas recounts the "experiences of lived moments" and emotions surrounding her grandfather Thomas's escape from Smyrna in 1922. Minaqwi defines his methodology as an anti-hegemonic history writing and labels it 'microhistory'. He defines 'microhistory' as a method "which examines all evidence, from the seemingly insignificant to the obviously pivotal, to bring to life an entire world out of the intimate details of people's lives".²⁶⁴ In *Ismyrna*, I argue that this happens for example through Adnan's mother's anecdotes, which "bring to life" the old city of Smyrna through seemingly insignificant memories such as those related to the market and its abundance of food. Finally, Minaqwi analyzes "how traumas of wars, local political conflict, international conflicts, and natural and human-made catastrophes were *experienced* by historical figures living in the empire and how they were reflected the unique and shared conditions that defined each person's lifeworld". In *Ismyrna*, I argue that Hadjithomas employs an auto-ethnographic methodology, reflecting on her inherited 'postmemory' to accurately represent the 'experience' that shaped her family's "lifeworld" (as Minaqwi would put it). When Minaqwi uses the concept "experience", he refers to the Arabic term *tajruba* (تجربة). *Tajruba* means experience in both an active and passive sense. Minaqwi writes: "One meaning refers to something that a person goes through passively, in the process impacting one's senses, disposition, and character. The other refers to experimentation, in which one partakes in "tests", constructs, and ponders one's condition, often acting as the subject, object, and in some cases

²⁶² Minawi, Mostafa: *Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire*. Stanford 2023. P. xii.

²⁶³ Ivi. P. xiii.

²⁶⁴ Ivi. P. 18.

narrator of a perceived reality”.²⁶⁵ I contend that Hadjithomas’ account of her grandfather Thomas’s experience clearly reflects both of these aspects. On the one hand the artist shows him as a subject who “passively goes through” historical events, with the escape and the feeling of total helplessness that he had since the age of 12 (the “impact” on his “senses, disposition, and character”). On the other hand, however, she shows him acting as an “active subject” in the transmission of history. He does so through family rituals of oral stories, where he acts as “narrator of his perceived reality”, “constructs and ponders” it (as Minaqwi would write), finally generating a ‘postmemory’ and a responsibility to transmit it to the next generations further. I contend that the comparison between *Ismyrna* and the work of historian Minaqwi underscores the research value of *Ismyrna*, showing how it adheres to a history-writing methodology prevalent in academia.

6.6. Conclusions

I opened the chapter on *Ismyrna* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige by questioning whether any elements of continuity could be identified with the two preceding chapters. The premise was that personal interest, already evident in the works of both Manna and Abboud, predominantly drives this piece. In the case of the Lebanese artist duo, too, I outlined answers to the key research question that concerned a dual role of researcher and mediator that they play from their position of ‘betweenness’. Consequently, I centered my analysis once more on these two roles, examining how they emerge from the work and its mediation to emphasize the unique aspects of the case.

One of my initial questions was: What strategies do the artists employ to navigate the narratives surrounding historical events and Joana Hadjithomas’ personal connection to them? I argued that the methodology used to conduct the research emerging from the film is auto-ethnography, borrowing its definition from scholars E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. Indeed, I demonstrated how auto-ethnography serves in the film as a method to analyze family memory, to examine the functioning of the family, and to create a story from it. I argued that through this story one can witness an elaboration by the artist of what scholar Marianne Hirsch would call ‘postmemory’. I say that the film ultimately serves as a testament

²⁶⁵ Ivi, P. 9.

to a research process in which the artist transforms an image of a place shaped by the oral transmission of family memory ('postmemory') into a representation that more accurately reflects reality, captured through her firsthand experience. The analysis of the work has showed, however, that her interest was not only personal. This is particularly evident in the inclusion in the research path of the artist Etel Adnan, whose family history is similar to that of Hadjithomas. Thus, I argued that starting from personal and individual family histories, there is an opening towards collective history. For this reason, I attributed to *Ismyrna* a research methodology of 'microhistory', borrowing the term from the historian Mostafa Minaqwi and his reflections on how history is made of active and passive experiences (*tajruba*). To assess the reliability of the narrative in *Ismyrna*, I have once more compared it with the studies of other scholars who have addressed the same issues, including Leyla Neyzi and Sibel Zandi-Sayek.

I also assert that the artists' research transcends personal interest the moment it evolves into a work, forming a narrative and undergoing mediation. One of my initial questions in the introduction to this chapter was: how do artists mediate such a personal and local history in an international context? On the one hand, I have showed how the artistic duo, like Manna and Abboud, regularly creates a series of different 'parergons'. These addressed both the 'inside' and the 'outside' of Lebanon. I argue that this shows a mediating role that the artists assume from their position of 'betweenness'. Additionally, I have emphasized their choice to present their work both 'inside' and 'outside' the art world, transcending the typical boundaries set by this realm and creating their own unique space and perspective. Finally, I highlighted a number of strategies that *Ismyrna* used to convey a local story in an international context, thus placing itself in a 'between' position and addressing a mixed audience. On the one hand, this concerned the linguistic choices of the work, which I interpreted in terms of the scholar Yasir Suleiman's reflections on the 'polyphony of the Arab diaspora' and the 'betweenness of identity'. On the other hand, I ascribed to the film a 'process of affect contagion', using a concept by scholar Jill Bennet, which I claimed was another international language the work displays.

In the next chapter, I will analyze the work of another Lebanese artist who lives and works in a situation of 'betweenness'. This work has a prominent historical writing aspect, which is also a hallmark of *Ismyrna* but will become even more pronounced in the subsequent work. It specifically focuses on the transformation of the Arab region in a certain historical period. The

analysis will aim to verify elements of continuity or discontinuity with what has been seen so far in the answers to the research question.

7. Lamia Joreige's *Mapping a Transformation* (2022): The Impact of the Ottoman Empire's Fall on the Arab World through the Lens of Betweenness

In the three case studies I examined so far, a typical response has emerged, with specific differences, to the central research question: How does an artist's 'between' position influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? My answer concerned the double role of researcher and mediator that the artists assume precisely because of their position of 'betweenness'. So far, I have examined the work of artists who I argue rely on ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methodologies in their research and artistic practice. I argue that building on these methodologies, the artists' research extended into historiography, as I particularly highlighted in the case of *Ismyrna*. Therefore, I have selected as my next case study a work by a Lebanese artist where the historiographical element is predominant, to assess whether it aligns with the common thread I am highlighting: *Mapping a Transformation* by Lamia Joreige. The work aims to study the historical period of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and its consequences for part of the Arab world. Does Joreige's work present methodologies that illuminate the artist's situation of 'betweenness'? How does the artist create her work from such position? Her work, in contrast to those previously discussed, does not feature video elements. Are there elements of continuity with what I have highlighted before regarding narrative strategies? Finally, what strategies does the artist choose to convey the stories in an international context? To answer this question, I will trace the path of the work's exposure at the Istanbul Biennial, in Lebanon, and in France.

7.1. *Mapping a Transformation* at the 17th Istanbul Biennial and at Marfa' Projects

This chapter analyses Lamia Joreige's work *Mapping a Transformation*.²⁶⁶ The work is the first major output of *Uncertain Times*, an extensive research project that has engaged Joreige for several years, and which promises further developments. So far, its most complex presentation has taken place at the 17th edition of the Istanbul Biennial. This stage culminated a long journey in which the artist took her research to various locations. This show held

²⁶⁶ Joreige, Lamia: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2022, Installation, Mixed media on paper, dimensions variable, Pera Museum, Istanbul.

significant symbolic importance in relation to the work's theme. *Mapping a Transformation* focuses on the history of the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the consequences of its fall on the Middle Eastern region. It looks at the different actors, in terms of countries and people, who took part to this process. Its objective is to reveal unheard voices and potential alternative futures that were not realized and remain latent possibilities from the past. This is why situating the work in the Turkish capital was especially impactful, as it returned the artist's research to one of its primary sources of inspiration.

The Istanbul Biennial, established in 1987, has always aimed to position Istanbul as a hub for contemporary art on the global stage. In the words of one of the curators of the first edition, Beral Madra: "In strong contrast to Turkey's state nationalism, the Biennial's non-national structure was the first model for 'borderless' exhibitions [...]. When we think about the role of the Istanbul Biennial we can say that it represented an early post-colonial discourse of the non-West".²⁶⁷ I will argue that Joreige's work aligns with such a post-colonial perspective. Specifically, I will point out how its methodology echoes with the theories of colonial studies experts such as Walter Mignolo and Ariella Azoulay. Her work integrates elements from diverse geographical settings, with Istanbul acting as a central point of convergence. This approach was consistent with the Biennial's identity. Over the years, the organizers of the exhibitions have emphasized the city's position as a reconciliatory place between East and West. Hence, in Istanbul Joreige's work finds a place that synthesizes its itinerant and dynamic nature.

The 17th edition of the Biennial focused on art projects comprising processes of collective knowledge production, following the inspiring concept of 'composting'. In agriculture, 'composting' is collecting organic waste to convert it into natural fertilizer. In the exhibition, it served as a metaphor for bringing together "long-term works that play a transformative role in their own contexts in various parts of the world", enabling "Biennial's participants and viewers to interact, and join the processes of, contribute to and transform each other".²⁶⁸ Interestingly, this concept echoed the *lumbung* concept chosen by Indonesian collective ruangrupa for documenta 15 (similarly based on collaboration and collective research), that I analyzed in the chapter about Jumana Abboud's work. I argue that *Mapping a Transformation* interprets Istanbul's 'composting' concept. Indeed, the work was not an individual endeavor, as Joreige

²⁶⁷ Graf, Marcus: *Istanbul Biennale: Geschichte, Position, Wirkung*. Berlin 2013. P. 145.

²⁶⁸ Dalgıç, Umud K., Bauer, Ute Meta, and David Teh. 17. *İstanbul Bienali-artçı düşünceler = 17th Istanbul Biennial--afterthoughts*. Istanbul 2022. P. 13.

relied on the help of many collaborators. Secondly, it aimed precisely to have “a transformative role” (to quote again the terms by the curatorial team of the Biennial), indicating unrealized potential from an insufficiently analyzed past.

Historically, Istanbul Biennial has mostly taken place in ancient or traditional buildings. The 2022’s edition included, for example, old hammams like the Çinili Hamam or abandoned buildings like the Central Greek High School for Girls. However, Joreige presented her work in a less experimental setting: the Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation Pera Museum. Originally built as a hotel in 1893, it was converted to a museum in 2005, and hosts today three major collection of Orientalist and local art. The museum’s location did not offer the same accessibility as other venues that seamlessly blend into vibrant neighborhoods. In the hammams, for instance, even cats had a simple access. Simultaneously, the museum provided an appropriate setting for Joreige’s installation, which thrived there in its archival and informative context. I argue that the museum’s austerity lent legitimacy to the artist’s narrative.

The installation comprised multiple panels, each focusing on different stories related to the last years of the Ottoman Empire. The materials included official documents, such as letters and proclamations, drawings by the artists, and old photographs. The visitors had unrestricted access to explore them either by themselves or through guided tours. They could spend as much time as they wanted reading the collected documents. Joreige and her collaborators retrieved many of them from state archives in Istanbul. Some of the topics that the documents tackle are thorny issues in Turkey, such as the history of the bloody repression of independentists by the Ottoman forces, or the Armenian genocide and ethnic cleansing. However, given that the Pera Museum is a private institution and Joreige is not a Turkish artist, this likely did not pose any issues during the exhibition. Lebanese history is also a significant topic in the work. The installation drew parallels between past and present events through materials from various archives, some Beirut-based. The research spanned over several years, and outlived multiple difficult recent phases of Lebanon: the Arab springs period, the revolution of 2019, the 2020 explosion of the port, the Covid-19 pandemic. While these events are not directly included in the project, they influenced the artist’s research (especially the port blast), prompting her to embrace a more optimistic perspective on the future rather than focusing solely on the past. Hence, it was essential for the work to travel to the Lebanese capital after Istanbul to have its second show.

In Beirut, Joreige's work featured a solo exhibition at the gallery Marfa' Projects. There, the installation was significantly different from the one in Istanbul. Smaller framed collages replaced the panels, sometimes presenting one single document. This new format better suited the white cube environment of the space, while the historical and political content remained intact. The show ran from November 2022 to January 2023. During this period, the port continued to suffer from the devastating effects of the August 4th, 2020 explosion.²⁶⁹ The gallery was severely damaged on that day,²⁷⁰ as it is located at the explosion's epicenter (*marfa* in Arabic means port). It was successfully reopened one year later. All around, however, the buildings remained destroyed and unsafe, and were still in a slow phase of reconstruction at the time of Joreige's exhibition. Thus, the gallery resembled a cathedral in the desert. Still, Joreige's work engaged with this reality. It brought there its message of hope for a better future, despite its oxymoronic location amidst the ruins of the port.

In Lebanon, Joreige actively presented her work through guided tours, open both to private visitors, school, and university groups. Thus, she contributed in person to the pedagogical character of her work, and its aim to teach history. Additionally, she participated to talks where she discussed the work and the research behind. I define these activities as 'parergons' that accompany the narratives of her art project. I argue that once again (like the artists from the previous chapters) these 'parergons' show how Joreige positions herself as an 'art interlocutor' (or 'speaking artist') from her position of 'betweenness'. Indeed, these 'parergon' address both the 'inside' and the 'outside' of Lebanon. Two are worth mentioning: one in Lebanon, and one in France (whence the 'betweenness'). The first one was a presentation titled *On Artistic Forms of Historical Research*, held at Sursock Museum, the modern art museum of Beirut. In the beginning of February 2023, when the event took place, the museum was still under reconstruction. Prior to 2020, it had recently undergone a restoration cycle, only to be severely damaged by the catastrophic explosion on August 4th. In the presentation, Joreige dialogued

²⁶⁹ On 4th August 2020, an explosion that occurred in the port of Beirut, affecting the entire city. It was the largest non-nuclear blast in modern history. The cause was a deposit of ammonium nitrate stored in a warehouse, which ignited due to an uncontrolled fire. The explosion resulted in over 200 deaths, thousands of injuries, and left around 300,000 people homeless. The investigation into the true cause of this tragedy is ongoing.

Gatya, Dyota / Rudy W / Supriyadi Imam: "Causes of Ammonium Nitrate Explosions and Handling Mechanisms – Case Study of the 2020 Beirut Lebanon Explosion". In: *International Journal of Humanities Education and Social Sciences* (IJHESS) 3 (June). <https://doi.org/10.55227/ijhess.v3i6.1102>. P. 3141.

²⁷⁰ Bishara, Hakim: "A Beirut Gallery Owner Speaks About the Devastation of the Explosion". In: *Hyperallergic*. Last visited: 05.10.2024. <https://hyperallergic.com/581144/marfa-gallery-joumana-asseily/>

with art historian Pelin Tan and historian Salim Tamari. It was one of the first public events held in the building still under renovation, where the spirit of the work of “finding hope among the ruins” found again a suitable space.

The second public discussion I want to mention was titled *Uncertain Times, Fragments d'Histoires* and took place at Le Bal space in Paris. During this event, the artist provided insights into her research methodology by projecting photographs of the panels in a work-in-progress phase. She explained the research in the archives and the handling of the various documents and materials. In both Paris and Beirut, Joreige took actively part in dissemination events. These add to the guided tours she did of her exhibitions. Overall, I argue that these events show how Joreige interprets her position as artist-researcher as a public role. I argue that this aligns with the pedagogical objectives of her project *Mapping a Transformation*. The event in the French capital also had a symbolic meaning because of the location. Le Bal is an art venue born in 2010, focusing particularly on image documents. Between 2023 and 2024 it held a series of conferences dedicated to artistic research. It featured both Lamia Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, giving them a space to exercise a public role of dissemination. Additionally, being Le Bal based in France it highlights the network Joreige has built in a country where she has lived and worked. Indeed, she has had a long-life experience in the country, where she came after fleeing the Lebanese Civil War.

In France, Joreige also pursued an important part of her research for *Mapping a Transformation*. Here, she searched in multiple archives the traces of the French participation to the colonization process of the Arab world that followed the fall of the Ottoman empire. When showed in France, consequently, her work hits differently. In Beirut it aimed to give a different perspective to a history the people know well. In Turkey instead it reminded of the Ottoman historical responsibilities in the region. In France, it highlighted the European ones (and especially the French). To make the work travel around means to activate it differently, according to the context and to the public, which might be more or less familiar with the stories it tells. I argue that such an itinerant trajectory reflects the itinerary that lies behind the work, which comprises materials from different countries and a constant research on the move, mirroring the artist's life of ‘betweenness’. In my analysis of the work I will also frame the itinerant way of Joreige's research as ‘border thinking’, using a concept that scholar Walter D. Mignolo developed. I will show how retrieving documents from various archives of colonial

origins may be seen as part of a process of “absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern”, as Mignolo would put it.²⁷¹

7.2. Lamia Joreige’s Artistic Practice Prior to *Mapping a Transformation*

Lamia Joreige has extensive life experiences abroad. She left Lebanon with her family to escape the Civil War (1975-1990) and has studied and started her career as an artist ‘outside’ her homeland. Over the years, she has established herself as an artist with a ‘between’ position, focusing on issues related to Lebanon and engaging in the globalized art scene. Displacement was the first concept she tackled with her artistic activity. Indeed, *Déplacement* is the title of her first project, “a visual narrative based on videos she filmed in Beirut between 1990 and 1998 [...], composed of outdoor images – fragments of city shot from a car window on the road [...] and intimate images of people and interior spaces [...] that marked pauses in her journey through the city”.²⁷² This project marked the artist’s return to Lebanon in the first post-war period. It was an attempt to reconnect with the place she had been living far away from, now difficult to recognize. In an interview I had with her in Beirut, Joreige also describes it as a reflection on the concept of exile:

“it was connected to the idea that the city had been fragmented, and when we came back, I could not manage to recognize it. I started to think about how to re-appropriate the city of Beirut, (...) I wanted to meet again the city in another way. In the concept of journey lives the notion of exile, displacement. Maybe “exile” is too strong as a word, we were not forced to leave, we left because of the war, my parents thought of protecting me. I personally perceived it as an exile, when I started to reflect on it. And it was especially the notion of displacement (“*déplacement*”) that was particularly important during the first years of my work. Because I was living in an irrational way my deep connection to Lebanon, which was linked to my childhood”.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Mignolo, Walter: *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton 2000. P. 12.

²⁷² Joreige, Lamia in: Falguières, Patricia / Mroué, Rabih / Salhab, Ghassan: *Lamia Joreige: Works 1994- 2017*. Beirut 2018. P. 147.

Joreige Lamia: *Le Déplacement*, 2000, video-stills installation, 190 inkjet prints, 10x13,5cm, Frac Bretagne, Rennes.

²⁷³ Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, 14th January, 2023.

Joreige also lived in the USA, where she studied painting and film-making at the Rhode Island School of Design. Afterwards, she established a situation of ‘betweenness’, living ‘between’ Paris and Beirut. In Lebanon, she actively participated to the reconstruction of the local art scene after the Civil War. For instance, in 2009 she was among the founders of the still-existing Beirut Art Center, a noncommercial art venue. Moreover, she was part of a generation of artists who actively worked with the collective memory of the Civil War. In the words of scholar Katarzyna Puzon, she participated to the art community which played “a significant role within the realm of collective memory in their resistance to state-imposed amnesia²⁷⁴ by challenging images and narratives of the Civil War, and the history of the country more generally”.²⁷⁵ The creation of alternative archives was a strategy many artists adopted to fight amnesia and generate new possibilities of safeguarding collective memory ‘from below’.

The notion of individual or collective memory has been central to many of Joreige’s projects. In *Objects of War*, for instance, she collected objects from various people which told personal stories related to the Lebanese Civil War. Hence, she created a prominent archive combining a material component (the objects) and an immaterial component (the stories from the participants, recorded and played during the exhibitions of the work). The projects aimed to legitimate individual memory, “while going beyond the idea of linearity”²⁷⁶ of history, as Puzon has written. It strived to overcome the idea that history is a linear and singular entity moving constantly from point A to point B. Instead, it advocated for an idea of history which comprises countless personal experiences and individual perceptions of collective events.

From the beginning of her career, I argue that Joreige has developed a way to re-write history as an ‘entanglement’, to use a concept by scholar Achille Mbembe. Mbembe writes that to abandon the view of linear time means “abandoning conventional views, for these only perceive time as a current that carries individuals and societies from a background to a foreground, with

²⁷⁴ Post-war Lebanese government sanctioned collective amnesia by law, as scholar Chad Elias explains: “Adopting the logic of *la ghalib la maghlub* (no victor, no vanquished), the Lebanese government passed an amnesty law in 1991 effectively granting any former members of militias exemption from criminal prosecution. The law applied to crimes committed before March 1991, including “crimes against humanity and those which seriously infringe human dignity.” P. 10 Only crimes perpetrated against religious or political leaders were exempt from the amnesty provision.”

Elias 2018, previously quoted. P. 7.

²⁷⁵ O’Rawe, Des / Phelan, Mark: *Post-Conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts: Cities of Memory*. London 2016. P. 266.

²⁷⁶ Ivi. P. 273.

Joreige, Lamia: *Objects of War*, Video, various objects, 68 min, Display dimensions variable, Tate Modern, London.

the future emerging necessarily from the past and following that past, itself irreversible". He advocates for a "time of entanglement", which includes multiple existences and experiences: a time which is "not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones".²⁷⁷ Indeed, as I will show, Joreige's *Mapping a Transformation* seeks to "abandon conventional views" of history, which consider only time linearity and the past as something "irreversible". She brings back voices from the past to highlight how their stories "interlock" with our present and how their unexpressed potential could lead to a different future.

Through her previous work, Joreige has familiarized with practices of archiving, storytelling and the creation of intermedial installations. Many of her projects also involved fieldwork research and personal investigation, akin to the ethnographic methods I discussed in the previous chapters.²⁷⁸ I argue that *Mapping a Transformation* marks a turning point in her career. Indeed, for the first time, she addresses her attention to stories of the past, whose direct witnesses have all disappeared. Finally, this will lead the artist to create connections to the present and reflections on the possible futures in an unprecedented way, through an 'entanglement' of times.

7.3. Introduction to *Mapping a Transformation*

The title *Mapping a Transformation* sums up the project's purpose: an attempt to navigate a vast and complex historical period. The artist drew inspiration for this work during a pivotal moment in the Syrian revolution when Syria faced the threat of fragmentation. Questioning this possibility, Joreige wanted to rewind history to the moment when the current countries of the Middle East were first created and fragmented. By examining the moment when European colonization changed the region's fate forever, she asked herself (and the public) whether things could have gone differently and whether unrealized scenarios could still inspire hope for change today.

Years of research led to the installation presented at the Istanbul Biennial. I argue that, like the works I analyzed in the previous chapters, its rigor was comparable to that of an academic study. Although Joreige had no official university affiliation, many institutions supported her

²⁷⁷ Mbembe, Achille: *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley 2010. P. 25.

²⁷⁸ Cotter 2006, previously quoted. P. 77.

work. Among them, there was the Institute for Ideas and Imagination, a residential fellowship for visual artists and scholars at Columbia University in Paris. I argue that this further proves the network she created through her life in ‘betweenness’. Overall, Joreige conducted the research in various archives of several cities: Istanbul, Nantes, Beirut. In Beirut she did her research at places like the American University, the Université de Saint Joseph, the Sursock Museum, and the Arab Image Foundation. In all these cities she collected countless documents and images, which she then re-organised to tell multiple stories. Thus, the creation of the installation involved a lengthy process of cataloguing words and images, creating juxtapositions, and revealing their underlying messages. To pursue these goals, Joreige established a dialogue with various academic figures, demonstrating how visual artists today can broaden academic horizons internally and externally.

The artist showcased a preliminary and work-in-progress arrangement of the installation at the institute in Paris. I argue that this rough version of Joreige’s installation was somewhat reminiscent of German art historian Aby Warburg’s panels from his *Mnemosyne* project. *Mnemosyne* (goddess of memory in ancient Greek mythology) is a project that Warburg pursued from 1924 until his death in 1929, ultimately leaving it unfinished. It consisted of multiple panels comprising different images from different historical periods. Warburg aimed to compare these images to examine the evolution of specific themes and styles, ultimately uncovering what he termed *Pathosformeln* – figurative formulas that have endured across centuries, traveling from antiquity to the Renaissance. Temporally and geographically, the German art historian Aby Warburg and the Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige are very far apart. In contrast with Warburg, Joreige could also rely on modern computers to design her panels. A century separates them, and they study and interpret images from very different contexts. Nevertheless, I argue that Joreige’s arrangement of images and documents from various origins parallels Warburg’s approach in *Mnemosyne*, as both seek to draw comparisons and highlight connections among disparate elements. Unlike Warburg, Joreige works extensively with both words and images on her panels. Like Warburg, however, she aims to illustrate parallels, movements, and repetitions of images across time, uniting them within her panels.

The installation in Istanbul consisted of six panels. They were floor-to-ceiling high, some of them double-faced, containing more than one story. In fact, each one carried distinct narrative goals. Each panel had a different background and design to organize the various documents,

photographs, drawings and written comments by the artist. In the interview I had with her in Beirut, Joreige insisted that she did not want “the documents to be decorative”, and that “they maintained their sense, integrated to the tables”.²⁷⁹ However, while they were all easily consultable, the display also gave them an undeniable aesthetic value. Indeed, Joreige often added graphic interventions on them, and played visually with their disposition. The installation had no clear chronological order, as the panels were not numbered. However, a booklet with the English translations available at the exhibition’s entrance suggested a possible order. The booklet referred to the work as a frieze, a classic yet fitting art-historical term. The frieze is one of mankind’s oldest visual forms of expression. It is a decorative element of an architectural structure, elongated and horizontal, often sculpted or painted. Countless examples exist from ancient to modern times, across various geographical contexts, showing how artists created friezes in religious, public, and private spaces to tell stories. Joreige’s work reproduced a frieze’s traditional pedagogical nature, and tells the story of the people of the Arab world. It delved into their internal and external conflicts, the actions and decisions of those in power, and the fate of ordinary people. Unlike an ancient freeze, it did not glorify the history it told, and it asked more questions than it gave answers. Just like a classic frieze, its visual narrative developed horizontally, and integrated the structure of the museum’s room.

Mapping a Transformation in Istanbul intertwined images and text, enabling both a visual and a reading experience. The written portion of the work was extensive and time-consuming to read in full. The accompanying booklet, which provided the English translation, resembled an academic dissertation due to its length. The texts consisted in the archival documents and comments by the artist, which led the historical narration. To make the installation accessible to a wide audience, Joreige organized it as a multilingual effort. The documents were in multiple languages, and the public could obtain an English translation by scanning QR codes. This strategy did not guarantee that all visitors would have the same experience. The visitors would need different levels of translation according to their proficiency in Turkish (Ottoman), Arabic, French, or English. Furthermore, individual perception may have varied depending on the familiarity with the stories being told. Some may have found in them resonances with their family history, as the artist did, and taken the opportunity to look at it from a different perspective. Others may have had the chance to learn about something entirely unfamiliar.

²⁷⁹ Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, 14th January, 2023.

However, I argue that the artist's ability to mediate local narratives for an international audience and make them accessible extended beyond mere linguistic choices. In each context where she presented it, she was able to adapt the work's message according to need. This was already evident in the cases of the talks ('parergons') at Sursock Museum in Beirut and at Le Bal in Paris. In these instances, the ability to mediate went beyond just switching languages (English in Beirut, French in Paris). It also involved adapting the message to the audience's varying levels of familiarity with the region's complex history. I argue that this skill may stem from Joreige's deep understanding of both contexts, shaped by her experience of 'betweenness'. In Lebanon, people are generally more knowledgeable about the entangled history of the region. Thus, at Sursock Museum Joreige did not need to disclaim, as she did in Paris, that she based all depictions of Palestine on imagination and copied from other sources. Indeed, due to the ongoing state of war between Lebanon and Israel since 2006, Joreige, as a holder of a Lebanese passport, cannot cross the Israeli border. Another case of adaptation concerns a piece she presented at the exhibition at Marfa' Projects. It was a large painted cloth, depicting the construction site of a railway, and various written comments, such as: "we could try, amidst the collapse, to imagine a future" (fig. 16). Other sentences, in English and Arabic, equally speak of a "turning point of history" (هدة النقطة الفصلية من التاريخ). The work was exclusively presented in Beirut, and I contend that it played a crucial role in shaping the overall message of the version of *Mapping a Transformation* presented there, specifically tailored to resonate with the local context. Indeed, the quoted words fit perfectly into the context of the port of Beirut under reconstruction, bringing a message of hope for the future.

7.4. An Analysis of the Panels in *Mapping a Transformation*

The first (according to the booklet's order) panel in Istanbul was titled "Letters from planes" (fig. 17). The question in its introductory text, printed in Turkish on the panel, stated: "what do great powers have in mind when they decide to throw propaganda leaflets from military planes to the local inhabitants, whether the Entente in 1915 to the Arab population or, in 1982 and 2006, the Israel Defence forces to residents in Lebanon?". The panel presented some of such leaflets. For example, the ones that the English army dropped in 1915 on the Arab population to incite them to join their fight against the Ottoman Empire, behind the promise (afterwards

unfulfilled) that “at the end of the war (...) the Arab Peninsula and the holy land which it contains will be independent, and that no inch of these lands will belong to us or to any other state”. The artist wrote the following message on the panel next to this leaflet: “I wonder if such texts contributed to the rise of the Arab population against the Ottomans or if they were merely rhetorical”.

The panel also featured the Israeli army’s leaflets from 1982 and 2006 to instruct the Lebanese population of the upcoming bombardment in their wars respectively against the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization that had its headquarters in Beirut until 1982) and against Hezbollah (2006). Here Joreige wrote: “I can hardly imagine that inhabitants would side with a foreign enemy against a local force. Indeed, it would come at great cost, the cost of being considered a traitor, imprisoned or even killed”. Joreige brought together episodes distant in time but easily superimposable. She scanned the leaflets and presented in their original form, as all the documents in the installation. The leaflets were scattered all over the panel’s surface. I argue that the disposition that visually represented the non-chronological view on history and its repetitive cursus that the artist aimed to highlight. Next to them, two more elements stood out on the white background. First, old photographs of houses destroyed by bombardments, and of Turkish trenches on the shores of the Dead Sea during first world war. Second, enlarged and printed drawings by the artist, representing old planes flying in different directions, leaving behind an indefinite horizon. Similar to the drawings in the other panels, Joreige originally created them using watercolors, with various shades of black, brown, gray, and white to form distinct shapes. Overall, they replicated the sepia effect of old photographs, both in the colors and in the blurriness.

The second panel was utterly different, as it concentrated mainly on the figure of a singular person: Ihsan Turjman, a Jerusalemite soldier in the Ottoman army (fig. 18). Joreige discovered his story through a publication by the Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari, titled *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past*.²⁸⁰ The artist drew inspiration from the young man’s personal diary, where he talks about his personal life and the historical period he witnessed. I argue that the use of Turjman’s viewpoint to narrate the destiny of Palestine at the fall of the Ottoman empire resumes Joreige’s anti-hegemonic way of looking

²⁸⁰ Tamari, Salim: *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past*. University of California Press, Los Angeles 2015.

at history. The artist looks at this critical moment through the eyes of a simple soldier and ordinary man, through the questions on the future of the region which emerge from his diary. She looks at a turning point of history (النقطة الفاصلة من التاريخ) through an unheard and silenced voice, lost in the chaos of events bigger than it.

Turjman ponders in his writing whether Palestine will achieve independence or be annexed to Egypt. He also describes his platonic love for a neighbor, a woman he has only met a few times. He died at the young age of 26, killed by an army officer who loved him, before he could find answers to his questions. His personal experiences intertwine with the historical context, providing a unique perspective on the events. Joreige complemented Turjman's words with documents related to the famine that was beginning to affect the region at the time. Visually, this second panel differs significantly from the first. The background consists in an enlarged light-blue page from Turjman's diary, featuring his original Arabic writing. In the middle, a large black and white photograph captures a glimpse of the old city of Jerusalem. On the right, outside of the frame, the artist includes a drawing of a soldier in military rest pose, dressed in uniform with a rifle at his side. Despite the soldier's seemingly rigorous pose, Joreige's drawing captures a sense of immaturity and clumsiness in his stance. The soldier seems unsteady on his feet, revealing his lack of experience. The panel features two additional portraits. The first one shows a woman, seemingly Turjman's loved one, while the other is probably the man responsible for his death. Joreige illustrated both as busts, floating on the paper's white background. They stood as enigmatic and ethereal figures: ghostly presences emerging from the soldier's diary.

The third panel portrayed a small yet pivotal event in Lebanese history that foreshadowed the region's transformation before the outbreak of World War I: the visit of the French navy to Beirut and what back then was the Syrian coast. Part of the local population welcomed the French as potential allies in their quest for independence from the Ottoman empire. This brief episode highlighted the increasing independentist sentiment in the Arab region and the Ottomans' inability to quell it. The panel gathered articles from Lebanese newspapers of the time recounting the events, along with official communications from the Office of Public Correspondence addressed to the Ottoman authorities. The latter read for example that "any person who attempts to annex a part of the Ottoman lands or one of the state's autonomous provinces entirely or partially to another autonomous province or to remove any part of the

Ottoman territory from the Ottoman administration shall be executed” and that “pursuant the penal code, the newspapers published in Beirut, Syria, and Mount Lebanon must be punished as soon as possible”. In her comments, the artist recurred again to the first person. She shared with the readers/viewers the details of the events that have most “triggered [her] attention”. As with the rest of the installation, the artist did not conceal herself, as if attempting to establish direct contact with the audience. This was particularly evident when she posed open-ended questions, as I showed in the panel “Letters from Planes”. In the third panel she wrote: “The allegiance of the population to France expressed in the speeches acclaiming the French navy appears to me like a foreword to the collapse of the empire and a new era of colonization”. The panel’s design was once again different. In the background, it displayed a black and white photograph of two boats departing from the coast. The artist added a drawing of a third boat on a white sheet, superimposing it onto the print. The drawing was precise in capturing the details of the boat and the sea ripples with different shades of black and white. In the upper part, the panel showed old newspapers, Ottoman letters, the portrait of an Ottoman officer, and an old photograph of the Lebanese coastal city of Batroun.

The fourth panel was the most personal one in the installation and was entitled “The Deadly Fall of My Great Grandfather” (fig. 19). Here Joreige took the opportunity to explore the little-known story of a family member as part of her investigation into collective history. I argue that individual memory here becomes a reflection of the collective fate of Lebanese people. Joreige’s family possesses limited information about their great grandfather, Assad Daou. The artist never met him in person and obtained all information about him second-hand. He came from a well-off family of Batroun: “a small and picturesque town and district of Northern Lebanon, on the shore of the Mediterranean, today a summer destination, highly frequented for its beaches and nightlife”. The artist’s description of Batroun on the panel is likely intended for an international audience. Indeed, it is improbable that Lebanese would be unfamiliar with the location.

Assad Daou died from injuries sustained after falling from a rock, the cause of which remains a mystery. He had apparently climbed the rock to observe the swarm of locusts that were invading the area in 1916, destroying agriculture and contributing to the great famine that the area suffered. Joreige tells that her family believes that he did not receive proper medical treatment. In the artist’s words, the accidental death of her great-grandfather was a “collateral

damage”²⁸¹ of the events unfolding in the yet-to-be Lebanon. Beside the mystery of his death, Joreige wanted the panel to be a homage to what Daou had accomplished in his life. He had founded a law school in Batroun, and a newspaper called *Mashhad Al Ahwal*, which existed for a couple of years before WWI. The artist asserted in the interview I had with her: “Through him, I wanted to pay homage to the intellectuals, to the newspapers, to the cultural richness of the time that marked the beginning of a new Arab identity, in opposition to the Ottoman Empire”.²⁸² Joreige could not find complete copies of the newspapers, only partial reproductions featuring its logo. She replicated one of these reproductions multiple times and used it as a background for the panel. This complete coverage of the panel’s surface seemed like a metaphor for the circulation of the newspapers during that époque. As Joreige noted in her written comment, Daou’s newspaper was just one example of the cultural Renaissance occurring in the region, known as *Nahda*.²⁸³ Joreige includes two additional key figures of the *Nahda* in her panel. She portrayed them as half-bust figures on a white background, staring at the viewer. The first was an editorialist executed by the Ottoman authorities for his independentist ideas, and the second was his fiancée, one of the first feminist Lebanese activist. Finally, the artist included a document conveying an important announcement made by a society called the “Lebanese-Beirut Association”. The significance of this document lies in its proposal to unite the areas of Mount Lebanon and Beirut, which were still divided at the time. The artist was drawn to the document’s depiction of Lebanon’s struggle with confessionalism (“Lebanon suffers from the disease of sectarianism”) and its proposed solution of creating a federalist state composed of independent regions or *Mutasarrifiyat*. This speculation mirrors present-day discussions, highlighting that the same issues continue to impact the country even after a century and its attainment of independence.

The fifth and sixth panels of *Mapping a Transformation* examined key aspects of the last years of the Ottoman empire (fig. 20). The fifth referred to the Armenian genocide, and the

²⁸¹ Lamia Joreige, Intervention at Sursock Museum, “Uncertain Times – On Artistic Forms of Historical Research Conversation with Lamia Joreige, Pelin Tan, and Salim Tamari”, Beirut, Lebanon, 7th February, 2023.

²⁸² Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, 14th January, 2023.

²⁸³ Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi writes that *Nahda* “was a movement for the national revival of the Arabs”. In his book *A History of Modern Lebanon* he mentions many intellectuals that made its history, between the territory of Mount Lebanon and Beirut. Among them, he talks for example about Ibrahim al-Yaziji’s poem ‘Arabs, arise and awake!’, which “became the rallying call for the early generation of Arab nationalists”, or of Butrus Bustani, “who elaborated the notion of homeland (*watan*), although the national space was Syria (present-day Lebanon, Syria and Palestine) whose people was bound by the bonds of a common language, culture and history”. Traboulsi 2007, previously quoted. P. 67.

change it brought to the Lebanese region. Once again, it looked at history through the experience of an individual person, in an intertwinement of singular and collective memory. The protagonist of the panel was Halide Edib, a Turkish feminist writer who had been commissioned a report on the creation of new schools in Syria and Lebanon. During her visit to the Antoura orphanage in Lebanon, she observed the Armenian orphans who had survived the deportations, but failed to recognize the gravity of the events unfolding (ethnic cleansing and genocide). The panel showed anonymous photos of children, Armenian soldiers, and shacks, hinting at the creation of the Armenian community in Lebanon, which is still one of the most active in the country.

The sixth panel was titled “The last days of an empire”, and it focused on the final efforts made by the Ottomans to maintain control over territories that were seeking independence. Joreige collected documents shared by the authorities regarding the repression of protests and revolts, and the attempt to impose the Turkish language all over the empire. She commented: “I try to imagine the effects of a sudden measure imposing the change of the names of villages, shops and street signs, from Arabic to Turkish. The outrage must have reinforced the emerging sentiment of an Arab identity opposing the regime, instead of reviving Turkish language as expected”.

The following panel, “The fate of Palestine”, was the most complex of the installation. It was significantly larger, comprising multiple stories simultaneously. Some may have been well-known to the public, while others were discovered by Joreige herself in the archives. For this panel, the artist conducted extensive research in the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques in Nantes, France, where she was overwhelmed by the vast quantity of documents to consult, and was finally able to catalogue “*3 sur 14 classeurs que je voulais consulter*” (“3 on 14 folders that I wanted to consult”) – as she stated in the interview I had with her.²⁸⁴

In its first part, the panel brought together two opposing views of the changes in Palestine after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. On the one hand, Joreige collected documents and letters from the Zionist community. For example, she included a letter from the Zionist commission in Jerusalem willing to react to the Balfour declaration,²⁸⁵ expressing their “most profound gratitude to Great Britain”. Or again, she showed a letter of an agency called “Agence Wolff”

²⁸⁴ Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, 14th January, 2023.

²⁸⁵ The Balfour Declaration was a letter from the then British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild (as a representative of the Zionist movement), in which the British government expressed its support for the creation of a “national home for the Jews” in Palestine.

which talks about the meeting of a Zionist delegation with the Ottoman Grand Vizier Talat Pasha “on his invitation to take part in the negotiations regarding the creation of a Jewish center in Palestine by means of well-organised immigration and colonization”. On the other hand, the panel displayed letters of protest against such initiatives and projects. One example was from the “Comité Islamo-Chrétien de Jerusalem”, which asked for “full independence of Syria” with “interior autonomy of Palestine (Southern Syria) which must be considered as an indivisible part of Syria”. Moreover, it “categorically proteste[d] against the idea of making Palestine a Jewish National Home”, while considering “the local Jews who have been residing for a long time in the country” as “Palestinian nationals, like the other inhabitants”. A second document was the “request presented by the delegates of the cities and districts of Southern Syria [Palestine] at the great Peace conference in Paris” (1919). Once again, it advocated for the Arab unity and for an independent Syria, free from any foreign influence and protectorate.

This first section of the panel had as its background a large map of the Sykes-Picot Agreement drawn by Joreige (the secret 1916 treaty between France and the United Kingdom to share control of the territories of the Ottoman Empire after its fall). Once again, I contend that the work adopts a didactic and pedagogical approach, providing the essential elements to educate viewers about the region’s history. This allows the audience, particularly the international, to gain a basic understanding of the topic, regardless of their prior knowledge. At the same time, this shows Joreige’s ability of mediating local stories on an international level. Joreige arranged the various documents horizontally, placing them side by side to facilitate consultation and comparison. The artist surrounded them with various photographs of views of Jerusalem, along with her drawings that reproduced those images, as well as old photographs and portraits of significant figures from that era, such as Lord Balfour. This section was slightly different in the version of *Mapping a Transformation* that Joreige presented in Beirut a few months after the Istanbul Biennial. What differed was the way she handled the documents. In Istanbul, she photocopied and arranged them on the wall. Here they were faithful to the original form and arranged in a dutiful, almost archival order. In Beirut, she individually framed and painted over them, probably to give them a form more suitable to a commercial art gallery. For example, she covered the letter from the Zionist Commission in Jerusalem with a sketched portrait of Lord Balfour. The letter from the ‘Comité Islamo-Chrétien’ had a similarly sketched view of Jerusalem on top of it: the sanctuary of the Dome of the Rock and the small colonnade

that frames it, with a woman walking towards it. As I already mentioned, for political reasons Joreige could not draw such a scene from real life.

The second section of the panel was titled “The Dream of Faisal”. The king Faisal is best known in the West for his portrayal by actor Alec Guinness in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, but in reality, he almost became one of the most important figures in the history of the region. For just a few months he was king of the Kingdom of Syria. This was the state that many in the region dreamed about (as Joreige had showed in the previous panel), but eventually France and England dismantled it to establish the protectorates, their new colonies. In the panel, Joreige superimposed old black and white photographs and a few watercolors of episodes from Faisal’s life. As background, she enlarged a scan of a private diary of a man who lived in the Ottoman Empire until 1914 and who fled to the United States at the outbreak of war to avoid conscription (*sefer berlek* in Arabic). On his return, the man found the region deeply changed. Once again, Joreige integrated the voice of an ordinary man into a complex geopolitical context. She took a particular interest in Faisal, and after examining his story, she asked one of the most powerful questions of the entire installation. She asked whether he was just a “ceremonial figure”, “invented by the British” to unite the Arabs in their fight against the Ottomans, or whether his reign had been an actual historical possibility. She wrote: “how was he to represent and unify people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds? (...) Had Faisal not been betrayed by the English, defeated by the French, fought by the Maronite Christians in Lebanon and Syrians who refused any compromise with the allies, would his Arab independent kingdom (...) have existed and would it have lasted? Would minorities in place have coexisted in peace or would they have waged many wars?”.

Such questions have preoccupied several historians over the years. I contend that this demonstrates how Joreige’s project aligns with a significant body of academic research. Scholar Gudrun Krämer, for example, acknowledges that many see Faisal’s reign as a “missed opportunity” for peace and coexistence, although she doubts how it could have further evolved.²⁸⁶ Joreige’s questions in the panel similarly asked the viewers/readers whether this

²⁸⁶ She writes: “Whether it represented, as is often claimed, a missed opportunity for peaceful agreement between Jews and Arabs is highly questionable: Faisal represented dynastic interests [...]; he was in no way authorized by the inhabitants of Palestine to speak for them; and he had not asked them how they imagined their future.” Translation from German: Giacomo Paci. Krämer, Gudrun: *Geschichte Palästinas: Von Der Osmanischen Eroberung Bis Zur Gründung Des Staates Israel*. München 2002. P. 191.

reign was a “missed opportunity”, leaving the questions unanswered. The public received the only answer in the subsequent two panels, which were the final ones of the installation. The first was titled “Creation of a nation”, and looked at the birth of Lebanon, which broke Faisal’s dream and marked the beginning of a new phase of colonization in the region. The second one was “the Famine”, which explored the deadly famine that haunted the region in those years. On this panel, Joreige drew a couple of locusts and a man disinfecting in large format. She also included an old photograph of the corpse of a person who died of hunger and a watercolor of a railway, which recalled an unrealized engineering project to solve the food supply problem. One final significant photograph in the panel concerned the silk industry, which France primarily exploited at the time. This photograph underlined how French interests poisoned the Lebanese economy during a time of great difficulty. The artist aimed to demonstrate that the famine was a man-made event. Indeed, she showed how the famine resulted from both colonialism and the economic speculation by wealthy families. These families were stopping their sales of wheat and other goods and waiting for opportune moments to sell and increase their profits, disregarding the impelling needs of the Lebanese population. In her written comments on the panel, Joreige compared the famine to Lebanon’s current economic issues, highlighting how similar speculations continue to play a significant role. Therefore, I contend that her work draws parallels between the past and present, reflecting what Achille Mbembe refers to as an ‘entanglement’ of temporalities. Finally, Joreige aims to provide a new reading of the present and suggest that the unrealized potentialities of the past may contain the seeds of a better future. As she stated in the work she presented only in Beirut: “by looking back at that turning point in our history, we could try, amidst the collapse [GP: metaphorical or concrete in the case of the port of Beirut next to which Joreige showed her work], to imagine a future”.

7.5. An Analysis of the Research behind *Mapping a Transformation*

7.5.1. Joreige’s Research in the Archives

Joreige’s archival research was constantly on the move, often benefiting from the network she built from her situation of ‘betweenness’. One of the most fundamental aspect of her research is time, i.e. the years she spent searching, studying, re-elaborating, organizing, and combining documents to tell multiple stories. Since the stories concerned different countries,

exploring the diverse sources available in multiple locations was essential. This is a common practice in colonial history research. Colonial countries have historically aimed to control knowledge and the documents related to their colonial history, often resulting in the limited presence of these records in the colonized countries themselves. Thus, reconstructing colonial histories and experiences necessitates traveling and exploring a variety of sources across multiple countries. As an example, I want to consider an Italian case. In his contribution to the growing field of Italian colonialism studies, historian Matteo Dominioni notes that “memory is guarded by the former colonizers”:²⁸⁷ to rewrite the history of little-known episodes of the Italian colonial experience in Ethiopia, it was essential for him to cross-reference both Ethiopian and Italian archival sources.

I argue that in the research leading up to her artistic reinterpretation, Joreige employed a cross-referential approach to archival sources similar to Dominioni’s. Hence, I argue that her practice mirrors that of a trained historian. Indeed, like a trained historian, Joreige through her project united fragments of history and knowledge that colonialism had displaced. She cross-referenced Ottoman and Lebanese sources to examine the moment when the regions of Mount Lebanon and Beirut merged. Concerning the Palestinian fate, she consulted the archives available to her, hence not the ones that Israeli institutions control. Therefore, her work also highlighted the lack of access many historians have lamented over the years. Nur Masalha brilliantly demonstrated in his essay “Appropriating History - Looting of Palestinian Records, Archives and Library Collections, 1948-2011” how historically “research institutions and archival and documentation centres there are have been regularly raided and their documents confiscated by Israeli forces”,²⁸⁸ making it challenging for researchers to write historical accounts of colonialism in Palestine.

Collaboration was key for Joreige’s research, as a group of co-researchers helped her to translate the documents in Ottoman Turkish and to handle the huge quantity of materials. Indeed, the most challenging part of the work was to let the documents – photographs, bureaucratic correspondences, private diaries – speak. Michel Foucault has written that archival documents are not inherently memory aids, and that history is a way for a society to give sense to a “*masse documentaire*”.²⁸⁹ I argue that Joreige as artist-historian aims to accomplish this task. Unlike in

²⁸⁷ Dominioni, Matteo: *Lo sfascio dell’Impero; gli Italiani in Etiopia, 1939-1941*. Milano 2019. P. XIV.

²⁸⁸ Masalha 2012, previously quoted. P. 137.

²⁸⁹ Foucault, Michel: *L’archéologie du savoir*. Paris 2008. P. 14.

other works of hers, the artist does not refer to oral sources but instead relies on written sources. Although interacting with written documents lacks the immediacy of oral sources in an interview, Joreige engages with them in her installation through her written comments. In these comments, she confronts the violent language present in colonial archives, which describe the brutal repression of anti-colonial revolts and the strategies for colonizing and dividing the land. Joreige seeks to understand the mindset of that era through her commentary, and from what I argue is a decolonial perspective, she challenges how this mindset became dominant.

I also contend that the artist's method of extracting documents from the archive, scanning them, and reorganizing them within her panels exemplifies the montage technique. I derive this term from the language of cinema, and it indicates the operation of selecting and combining the film segments that together will form the movie. In particular, I argue that Joreige's work echoes scholar Jacob Lund's interpretation of *montage*, as he discusses it to describe Jean-Luc Godard's documentary *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.²⁹⁰ The documentary is a complex reflection on Godard's own filmmaking and the social role of cinema. Lund explains that Godard's use of *montage* involves weaving together diverse sources and materials, bringing together "elements that are not otherwise predisposed to be linked in the first place." I argue that Joreige similarly employs *montage* to connect disparate archival documents, creating unexpected and meaningful associations. Lund in his writing continues saying that such *montage* "creates singular images, connecting well-known but previously unconnected elements and images" and that in Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* "*montage* is productive of historical knowledge".²⁹¹ Similarly, I argue that Joreige's installation aims to overlay images from different eras but similar in content. For example, in the panel titled "Letters from planes" she aims to show how "images are temporally impure and overdetermined with a potential to activate and connect a number of different temporalities and times",²⁹² to use the words by Jacob Lund on the nature of images from his book I referred to.

Overall, Joreige's goal is to highlight overlooked events that can provide a new perspective on macro-events of the region's history. For her too, just like Godard and his documentary *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, *montage* becomes a way to produce new knowledge. Therefore, I argue that the installation has a pedagogical character. *Montage* is for Joreige a "method of alternative

²⁹⁰ Godard, Jean-Luc: *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988, France/Switzerland, 266 min, 35 mm.

²⁹¹ Lund, Jacob: *Anachrony, Contemporaneity, and Historical Imagination*. Berlin 2019. P. 65.

²⁹² Ivi. P. 119.

archiving in order to share and multiply the knowledge and experience we inherit from the past”, to go back to the slogan of the Istanbul biennial. It is important to note that *montage* is not a neutral operation, as it reveals the presence of the artist behind the work. Joreige creates a new order in the documents, she mixes them to make them interact visually. She creates games of references, contrasts and associations between the letters, the telegrams, the photographs, her drawings and her written comments. She also takes the freedom to arrange disorderly the various research sources on the surface of the panels, leaving the viewer to reorganize them mentally. Hence, I argue that in *Mapping a Transformation* art production intersects with knowledge production. Joreige’s engagement with historical documents is dual in nature: she operates both as an artist and a historian. The final result of her research is an artwork, but she also engages in historical research. During her presentation at the Sursock Museum in Beirut, she discussed this point with historian Salim Tamari. She stated that she was not there “to replace a historian”, but to integrate something to the work of historians like Tamari. Either way, her research reflects a specific methodology of history writing that now I will analyze, and the assumption of a specific role as both an artist and producer of knowledge.

7.5.2. Re-writing history in *Mapping a Transformation*

I argue that Joreige’s history writing has an anti-hegemonic nature. The artist includes both minor and major events in her installation, but she always examines the latter ‘from below’. Her artistic research examines macro-events through historically less-considered figures, including even members of her family. I also argue that *Mapping a Transformation* develops as a work of colonial studies. Indeed, it gives voice to both the colonizers and the colonized, but from a decolonial viewpoint. Thus, I compare Joreige’s methodology to what scholar Walter Mignolo has defined as the ‘subalternization of knowledge’, or ‘border thinking’. Mignolo defines ‘border thinking’ as a way of “absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern”.²⁹³ In Joreige’s case, the ‘subaltern’ are people like Ihsan Turjman (the Jerusalemite soldier), her grandfather, and even king Faisal. Joreige amplifies these voices and stories to “displace hegemonic” historical narratives that prioritize macro-events, which often silence the aspirations and perspectives of ordinary individuals like

²⁹³ Mignolo 2000, previously quoted. P. 12.

Turjman, as well as alternative scenarios such as King Faisal's vision of a greater Syria. Her work challenges these dominant narratives, bringing to light those marginalized by colonial history and contributing to a 'subalternization' of historical knowledge.

Beyond Mignolo, I also argue that Joreige's work echoes scholar Ariella Azoulay's theorization of a new methodology for colonial studies. First, it echoes her concept of 'unlearning imperialism', which translates to "unlearning the processes of destruction that became possible: the knowledge, norms, procedures, and routines through which worlds are destroyed in order for people to become citizens of a differentially ruled body politic".²⁹⁴ Indeed, Joreige examines the Ottoman Empire's last attempts to suppress independence revolts, and the "processes of destruction" aimed at subjugating citizens of different communities, from the Armenian to the Arab. She explores the origins of the imperialist apparatus also in the moment when European colonialism took over, highlighting the French first attempts to infiltrate the territory through episodes such as the visit of the French navy to Beirut.

'Potential history' is the second concept by Azoulay that I claim resonates with *Mapping a Transformation*. Azoulay describes it as the "deliberate attempt [...] to disavow what was historicized by making repressed potentialities present again within the fabricated phenomenological field of imperial history, present to be continued".²⁹⁵ Joreige looks indeed for documents resting in the archives in a state of latency. She is interested in their 'repressed potentialities', and tries to re-activate them in the present time ("make them present again"), to examine their effects on both the present and the future, as she writes explicitly in her installation. Some of the unrealized possibilities from the past that Joreige presents in her installation are now highly improbable ever to materialize. For example, it is highly improbable that there will be soon a new country bringing together Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, after one century of separation and the creation of Israel. This is why I argue that she aims to explore the history of fragmentation while encouraging belief in a different future. Through her work, she emphasizes that the present is merely one of many potential outcomes that could have emerged from the past. With *Mapping a Transformation*, Joreige aims to move beyond the linear concept of history. This type of operation is not new to her, as she has carried it out in previous projects, such as *Objects of War*. Such projects often emphasized a plural and complex idea of truth, with

²⁹⁴ Azoulay, Ariella: *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London 2019. P. 29.

²⁹⁵ *Ivi*. P. 286.

multiple levels of interpretation. Unlike a historian, Joreige does not aim to create a completely coherent narrative developed in a linear and precise manner. I argue that through the means of visual arts, she seeks instead to suggest a unique perspective on history by giving voice and visual representation to lesser-known figures from the past.

7.5.3. Final Reflections on Joreige's Artistic Reinterpretation

The work of a historian involves collecting documents and sources, which the historian later reworks. While Joreige carries out the first operation in her research, it is precisely in the moment of re-elaboration that her work as an artist stands out. In addition to *montage*, there are two activities with which she processes the mass of collected material (the '*masse documentaire*' as Foucault would put it) and shapes it: drawing and writing. In my interview with her, Joreige has stated that she used drawing (or better: watercolor painting) as a way to *s'ancrer*²⁹⁶ (to anchor herself) to the document. Indeed, to draw is a slow activity, which includes planning and reflecting. In the case of *Mapping a Transformation*, the drawings are the medium through which the artist establishes a conversation with people from the past with whom she cannot directly interact. Through the drawings Joreige spent time with their stories, with their words, she found for them a visual translation. She also reproduced old photographs found in the archives, equally finding a way to connect with them in the process. Temporality is a key part of this practice. In his book about drawings in fieldwork notebooks, scholar Michael Taussig writes that "photography is a *taking*, the drawing a *making*".²⁹⁷ He then analyses artist and critic John Berger's words about the act of writing: his "enigmatic notion that a photograph stops time, while a drawing encompasses it", and his idea "that drawing is like a conversation with the thing drawn, likely to involve prolonged and total immersion".²⁹⁸ This idea that drawing "is like a conversation with the thing drawn" echoes indeed Joreige's concept of *s'ancrer* in the documents.

Hence, I argue that Joreige interprets the drawing process in a very traditional way. I argue that it echoes, with due distances, the approach of Leonardo da Vinci and his way of relying on

²⁹⁶ Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, 14th January, 2023.

²⁹⁷ Taussig, Michael T.: *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*. Chicago 2011. P. 21.

²⁹⁸ Ivi. P. 22.

drawing as an aid for his scientific research. Joreige's drawings stand in the installation as stripped pages of a research journal. The same goes for her written comments, which constitute another important visual element of *Mapping a Transformation*. Indeed, some of them have a functional aesthetics, while a few of them experiment with handwriting. For example, some of the Arabic parts (for example the one about conscription) are written using a font that comes from the poster of a movie with Lebanese singer and actress Fairuz. As I have outlined, Joreige's written comments could be pretty long, requiring quite some time for the viewers-readers to read. However, they were not covering everything that the panels presented. The artist placed many photographs and drawings on the panels without an explanatory written caption. Without specific knowledge of the period or assistance from paratextual elements, interpreting photos such as the one of the silk factories in the famine panel may have been difficult for the visitor. Thus, Joreige does not adhere to the rules of absolute clarity required for typical historical research work. The installation encourages spectators to interpret and to answer the open questions it poses. Viewers are also invited to create their own personal navigation path through the large quantity of documents that *Mapping a Transformation* presents.

7.6. Conclusions

I argue that the fourth case study confirms the answer to the key research question I found in the other case studies. Indeed, through my analysis of Lamia Joreige's *Mapping a Transformation*, I have also demonstrated a dual role of researcher and mediator that the artist interprets from her situation of 'betweenness' and that emerges from her work. One of my initial questions in the introduction to this chapter was: are there research methods, such as the ethnographic and auto-ethnographic that I discussed in the previous chapters, that can bring out and illuminate the artist's situation of 'betweenness'? My answer was positive, and it concerned the method of archival research for history writing, that characterized most of Joreige's research for *Mapping a Transformation*. Archival research was already present in the previous case studies, but in this case, it was the predominant aspect of the artistic research. Joreige has conducted it by relying on various artistic institutions in Istanbul, Beirut, and Paris. I argue that these represent the network, the "patterns of connection and exchange" (as Caroline Levine

would put it) that she has created over the years from her position of ‘betweenness’. This is similar to what I have showed previously with other artists.

In order to interpret Joreige’s way of conducting archival research, I referred to the ways in which various scholars have interpreted such practice. I demonstrated how her work fits into a history of archival strategy by Lebanese artists, traced by scholars such as Katarzyna Puzon. Within theories of the archive, I referred to studies by Nur Masalha and Michel Foucault, concerning the attempt of Joreige to handle the ‘*masse documentaire*’ (the enormous mass of documents that she collected from numerous archives). Finally, I made a comparison between Joreige’s research and the one by Italian historian Matteo Dominioni’s research in colonial archives. Specifically, I highlighted a similitude in their strategy of ‘cross-referencing’ different archival sources. Moreover, to verify the reliability of the artist’s historical account, I have consistently referred to the work of historians who have dealt with the same events, such as Salim Tamari or Gudrun Krämer.

Afterwards, I examined Joreige’s historiographical strategies. I argued that her methodology is comparable to what the scholar Walter Mignolo has defined as the ‘subalternization of knowledge’ or ‘border thinking’ because she illustrates the macro-events of history through ‘subaltern’ figures. I contend that such methodology resembles the ‘microhistory’ concept that I used to analyze the work of Hadjithomas and Joreige in the previous chapter. Finally, I argued that *Mapping a Transformation* resonates with Ariella Azoulay’s concepts of ‘unlearning imperialism’ and ‘potential history’ since it seeks to reveal unheard voices and potential alternative futures that remain as unrealized possibilities from the past. My analysis of the work also answered another question I posed in the introduction. Namely, whether there are points of continuity with previous case studies in terms of narrative strategies, despite Joreige’s choice of a different medium (which does not include elements of video). I outlined continuity in Joreige’s use of documentary techniques, that I also discussed in the previous case studies. Specifically, I argued that Joreige’s work presents a *montage* strategy, and I followed its interpretation by Jacob Lund from his study of the work of filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard.

Finally, in the introduction I also wondered what Joreige’s mediation strategies of the collected stories would be, and whether they would reflect her situation of ‘betweenness’. Once again, I pointed out a production of ‘parergon’ ‘between’ France and Lebanon by the artist. Overall, I argued that Joreige assumes a public role both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Lebanon as a

mediator of her own narratives, since she discusses her findings and works in the context of guided tours and public debates. I also emphasized that translating the work into multiple languages was essential to making the installation accessible to a broader audience. I pointed out the artist's ability to convey local stories on an international level, since she provides all the elements necessary to understand the history of the region. In doing so, I argued that her work could potentially appeal to an audience that is not too familiar with it. At the same time, I noticed how the artist 'negotiated' (to use again a term by Umberto Eco) the meaning of her work in different ways on different occasions, adapting it to different contexts.

In the next chapter, I will examine a work by a Palestinian artist. The work similarly offers a historical reinterpretation, focusing on current situations rather than consistently addressing the past. My goal is to examine the various methodologies the artist employs in this specific context and to determine whether this new case study aligns with the themes and concepts that I have previously highlighted.

8. Inas Halabi's *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (2023): Rewriting the Present of a Community from an Inside/Outside Perspective

So far, I have examined four case studies to answer the key research question: How does an artist's 'between' position influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? The answer I found so far has revealed a common thread. I argued that all the artists embrace a dual role as both researcher and mediator, which actively influences their work and emerges in their creations. I demonstrated that the artists employ ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, and historiographic methodologies, each with distinct nuances yet sharing several similarities. I have also argued that these shared methodologies enable artists to craft counter-narratives – anti-hegemonic stories told 'from below'. In the previous chapter, I analyzed a work by Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige that explored uncharted perspectives on a specific moment in the history of the Arab region. With this new case study, I will examine a work that looks at the present. This work is the film *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* by Palestinian artist Inas Halabi. The film presents a counter-narrative to traditional historical accounts of the Druze community's living conditions since 1948, when the state of Israel was established. I hypothesize that the artist finds a particular methodology to address this historiographical challenge, and that this also illuminates her situation of 'betweenness'. How does the artist create the work from her position? Are there specific cinematic techniques she uses that convey her sense of 'betweenness' while remaining deeply rooted in a narrative connected to the local context? What are her strategies for communicating the story on an international level? To address this question, I will examine the exhibition trajectory of the work, which spans from an art space in England to one in the Netherlands – both places where Halabi has lived.

8.1. An Overview of the First Exhibitions of the Work

Halabi's film took three years to complete due to the artist's deep immersion in the Druze community and the need to thoroughly explore its stories and the landscape. The first two exhibition venues for the work were in Europe, which I argue that once again illustrates the artist's established network of 'betweenness'. The venues were The Showroom Gallery in

London and De Appel Art Foundation in Amsterdam: two cities where Halabi has lived. The two exhibitions were very different in content. The first presented only *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*, while the second was a solo retrospective.²⁹⁹ The film was showed in two different versions. In London, the artist presented a rough cut, while in Amsterdam a longer version was showed.

The gallery could only showcase one work in London due to limited available space. The Showroom is a well-established art institution in the British capital. It was founded in 1983 as an artist-run space and is located on Penfold Street, near Edgware Road, since 2000. This area is known for its multicultural population. The gallery's director, Seema Manchanda, said in an interview I had with her that "within a few hundred square meters you can find at least 16 different types of coffee from as many nations",³⁰⁰ a sign of the different communities living side by side. According to her, the area surrounding the gallery is home to a substantial number of Palestinians and other Arabs, a community well-versed in the history and struggles of the region. Shops, restaurants and cafes in the area reflect the many nationalities and cultures represented. Over the years, the gallery has served as a site for diverse research initiatives and explorations across a wide range of media. It has also frequently exhibited Arab artists, including Lebanese Haig Aivazian and Rana Hamadeh, Palestinian Ayreen Anastas, and British-Lebanese Lawrence Abu Hamdan.

However, I want to point out that political positioning has not kept pace with this interest in broadening its geographic references, particularly in recent years. For example, the gallery never issued a statement, participated in a cultural strike, or signed a letter in the case of the 2023/2024 war on Gaza. This aspect should not be overlooked. By exhibiting art with a political value (like Halabi's work), Palestinian artists (but not only) implicitly take a risk. I argue that if a venue aims to position itself as an alternative and meeting space but remains silent on the issues addressed by the artists it showcases, it may be seen as failing to take responsibility for their support. The risk is that artists who assert their positions may no longer see the space as supportive or safe, leading them to choose not to collaborate. This contradicts the image of a place open to intercultural dialogue that the venue is trying to establish.

²⁹⁹ Halabi, Inas: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*, 2023, Canada/Palestine/Netherlands/Belgium/United Kingdom, 95 min, HD video.

³⁰⁰ Manchanda, Seema: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in London, December 13th 2022.

In contrast, de Appel, the second venue showing Halabi's film whose current curator is Palestinian Lara Khaldi, actively demonstrates continued support for the Palestinian struggle. In March 2023, for example, together with the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, the gallery Framer Framed, and the Kunsthal Gent, it organized four meetings under the title *Stressing Solidarity*. The aim was to show solidarity with the Palestinian people at a time when "the genocide against the people of Palestine has been going on for more than 150 days" (as they wrote in the letter).³⁰¹ Subsequently, de Appel even organized an online lecture series, *Why Germany*, to discuss the suppression of free speech and pro-Palestinian protests in Europe, the US, and especially Germany. Another space in London that functioned similarly to de Appel and differently from The Showroom was The Mosaic Rooms. I will explore its history in the next chapter, dedicated to the work of Marwa Arsanios.

However, Halabi's exhibition at the Showroom concluded months before the 2023/2024 war outbreak in Gaza. Public and institutional debate had yet to intensify, and the show proceeded without any issues. The gallery retains the look of a repurposed warehouse, transformed into an artistic space. During Halabi's exhibition, a mural by English artist Adam Shield, featuring a grid of colorful lines and various references to urban and street culture, adorned the white façade with its large windows. Inside the gallery, however, in stark contrast to the exterior display, the focus shifted to the world of Halabi's film. The exhibition space is relatively modest on the building's ground floor. During the summer months, Seema Manchanda notes that visitors often access the space through the windows on one side which are left open, creating a connection with the local community. In contrast, while offering within the gallery a space for interaction and discussion, Halabi's exhibition during the winter months fostered a more isolated environment.

After the entrance, a small corridor led to the place where the movie was projected in a loop. A wooden staircase, several meters wide and protected by a temporary wooden fence, welcomed the audience to sit and watch the two-hour movie projected on a big screen. Three rows of high steps formed the space for the audience, with large cushions for their seats. The surrounding space was dimmed, leaving only the light from the screen to illuminate the creamy wavy drapes covering the wall behind it, which slightly matched the film's color palette. Overall, the seats

³⁰¹ Last visited: 06.10.2024 <https://framerframed.nl/projecten/stressing-solidarity-witnessing-palestine-through-art-and-architecture/>

resembled amphitheater design principles, featuring multiple seats on different steps rather than individual, separate seats. It is no coincidence that the space was occasionally used as a place for discussion. Different groups, such as school classes, could attend the screening and then engage in discussions in the gallery to activate the space in an alternative way. A visitor's experience could thus be either individual and intimate, watching the lengthy film alone, or collective, participating – perhaps even casually – in one of the shared screenings followed by a discussion (what happened to me). I argue that, for this reason, the film's intrinsic pedagogical aspect – specifically, its role in teaching the history (or rather, a counter-narrative) of the Druze community – extended beyond a passive exhibition approach. In fact, The Showroom Gallery offered the possibility of active participation and discussion, thanks to the particular conformation of the space of the video installation.

As I mentioned, de Appel in Amsterdam was the second space exhibiting Halabi's work. This space is another example of a growing European art scene that embraces new realities and that develops new and alternative dialogues. Indeed, it has become a showcase for many artists from the Arab region in recent years. In March 2024, for example, it hosted an exhibition featuring Jumana Abboud (whose works in documenta 15 constituted a case study in this thesis) alongside Argentine artist Mercedes Azpilicueta. I also argue that this commitment connects to the decision to adopt a clear political position, which stands in stark contrast to that of the Showroom. Overall, Halabi was able to create a larger show in Amsterdam than in London. The exhibition ran from March to June 2023 and was titled *After the Last Sky* (inspired by an eponymous work by Edward Said). The venue was much larger, allowing the artist to create a solo exhibition that chronicled her career to date. She presented several artistic projects simultaneously. The exhibition space's windows, covered with red plastic sheets, created colorful reflections on the floor. *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* found a larger projection screen here. It stood further away from a bench that was simpler than the small amphitheater in London. Despite the larger space that could potentially accommodate more people, the welcoming and inviting atmosphere was lost compared to the layout in England.

Once again, I point out that the film's financing is a crucial element to consider. Once again, as seen in the previous case studies, these funding sources reflect the artist's biographical and positional context. Two of the funding sources are Dutch, highlighting her ability to cultivate a network within her country of residence: AFK (Amsterdam Fund for the Arts) and Mondriaan

Fonds. Finally, a third source of funding was Mophradat, a non-profit organization based in Belgium that supports Arab artists and showcases their work (some of the other artists in this dissertation, such as Jumana Abboud, have also received support from it over the years). Both de Appel and Showroom have collaborated with Mophradat over the years. The organization's name translates to 'vocabulary' in Arabic, reflecting its focus on a broad and fluid geography within the Arab world. As its official website describes, one of its goals is "reaching regional and international audiences".³⁰² Mophradat offers art residencies in Athens and has an office in Brussels. By supporting artists from the Arab region and those navigating a 'between' situation, I argue that it embodies a further example of a venue that reflects the evolving European artistic landscape.

Inas Halabi was born in Jerusalem in 1988 and lived there for most of her life until she moved to London to study. Her career in the art world began with her studies at Bezalel (like Manna and Abboud), the Israeli art academy founded in Jerusalem in 1906. As I noted in the State of the Art, Bezalel often represents a compromise for many Palestinian artists, who choose to study at institutions that may pose challenges to the Palestinian cause. This has become evident with the creation at the academy of a sewing center for Israeli army uniforms during the 2023/2024 Gaza war. Her experience at Bezalel inspired Halabi to pursue further studies elsewhere, ultimately leading her to London, where she completed a second degree at Goldsmiths University. From there, she relocated to Amsterdam for a residency at the de Appel Art Foundation, continuing her artistic practice by alternating 'between' Holland and Palestine, while participating in exhibitions in both locations. These places include the AM Qattan Foundation in Ramallah and its sponsored gallery in London, The Mosaic Rooms, where Marwa Arsanios will also exhibit, as I will show in the next chapter. In an interview I had with her, Halabi claimed that the distance provided by her vantage point has enabled her to develop a more nuanced understanding of the reality in Palestine. This in turn has led her to a form of political activism that is evident in her projects. In the interview she explained: "no matter the place, when you remove yourself from it, you distance yourself. Then, you are able to see things, and see connections that were already there. For me, only when I lived somewhere else, I felt

³⁰² Last visited: 06.10.2024 <https://mophradat.org/en/what-we-are-doing/>

more physically, how heavy Jerusalem as a place is. When you have distance, you are able to see things in a different way”.³⁰³

The attempt to see and show “things in a different way” was precisely the stimulus that led the artist to make *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*. In fact, the film explicitly reveals a form of political activism. Moreover, the artist’s other activities correlate with this. In addition to her practice as a visual artist working in various media, Halabi runs a ceramic studio in the Dutch capital called *Turabi*, which means ‘my soil’ in Arabic. Here she creates ceramic pieces with decorations inspired by traditional Palestinian embroidery patterns (*tatreez*). Each creation tells a story about a place or a historical fact, which Halabi shares on social media through the shop’s official page. I argue that this activity effectively already demonstrates the role as an educator and storyteller that she takes in her position of ‘betweenness’, combining stories about Palestine with a material culture. In addition, Halabi combines this online activity with other dissemination actions that I define as ‘parergons’. I contend that they demonstrate her engagement as ‘arts interlocutor’ ‘between’ different places, to use again the expression by Jessica Winegar that I used in the chapter about Abboud’s work. These ‘parergons’ include both interviews and podcasts (such as a podcast for Film Ireland Podcast about *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* from July 2024), or occasional writings, such as an essay for the catalogue of an exhibition of hers at the Al-Ma’mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem (*Letters to Fritz and Paul*, Fall 2017).

8.2. Introduction to *We No Longer Prefer Mountain*. The Film’s Research Value

We No Longer Prefer Mountain (2023) aims to provide an alternative perspective on the history of the Druze community living in what today is Israeli territory. It seeks to challenge a dominant narrative about the community that has developed over time by giving voice to its members and presenting an anti-hegemonic viewpoint. I argue that to do so the artist has worked as a researcher, i.e. as a historian. Indeed, Halabi has gathered data and conducted her work similarly to other scholars who have explored the same subject. Specifically, I argue that she relied on two methods: oral history, which allows Halabi to give voice to Druze stories, and *fukeiron*, which enables the artist to explore the territory and highlights connections with those

³⁰³ Halabi, Inas: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, May 6th 2024.

stories. This is not the first time the artist has experimented with these methods. She has previously used similar methods to shed light on lesser-known stories about Palestine. She has used oral history as a storytelling technique in other projects. One such project is the video work *Mnemosyne* (2016).³⁰⁴ The short film features interviews with 17 members of a Palestinian family, each sharing their version of a family story, particularly focusing on how their grandfather received a scar on his forehead. This project emphasizes the significance of voice in preserving both individual and collective memory through storytelling. Additionally, in *Mnemosyne* Halabi experiments with the role of artist-historian, exploring how to handle and convey stories that extend beyond her own. She discovers the potential of rewriting history ‘from below’ and the responsibility of being an artist-researcher, collecting and reorganizing data to present a counter-narrative.

Halabi’s exploration of alternative narratives has consistently involved exploring Palestinian landscape. In her projects, landscape representations develop alongside storytelling, providing further evidence of the insights found in oral narratives. This approach is evident in the film *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* as well as in her earlier works. In *We Have Always Known the Wind’s Direction* (2020), for example, she collaborates with specialized scientists to investigate the possible burial of nuclear waste and its lingering radiation effects in the West Bank, thus combining an oral aspect with a visual one.³⁰⁵ *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* explores the current living conditions of the Druze community after 1948, examining both its past and present. The Druze are a small minority in what today is Israeli territory. They have played an ambivalent role in the country’s history, reflecting Israel’s colonial enterprise. Halabi’s film explores the dilemmas that continue to plague them, including issues of identity, the writing of history, mandatory conscription into the Israeli army, the relationship to their land, and the ongoing confiscation and occupation of their territory.

It is necessary to look at the historical development in order to understand the current situation of the Druze in Israel. The scholar Lisa Hajjar writes that since the beginning of the colonization of Palestine, Zionist forces believed that the Druzes, whom they considered a “non-Muslim” community, would make “a good ally” and from early on they attempted to “alienate

³⁰⁴ Halabi, Inas: *Mnemosyne*, 2016, Palestine, 13 min, Video HD.

³⁰⁵ Halabi, Inas: *We Have Always Known the Wind’s Direction*, 2020, Palestine, 12 min, Video HD.

Druze (and Christian) Palestinians from (Sunni) Muslims”.³⁰⁶ Historically, this strategy has been largely, but not entirely, successful. Already during the 1936-1939 Palestinian uprising³⁰⁷ and during the 1948 war³⁰⁸ the Druze community split. Some opted for neutrality, some showed solidarity with the fellow Palestinians and fought alongside them, and others supported the Zionist forces. Many studies, including the oral histories conducted by scholars Diana Allan and Rosemary Sayigh, clearly illustrate these different behaviors.³⁰⁹

Lisa Hajjar writes that “after 1948, state building in Israel included the construction of a distinct Israeli Druze identity”.³¹⁰ This meant adopting policies that would supposedly integrate the Druze into Israeli society. The army played here a pivotal role. Since 1956, Druze men must enlist in the army upon reaching the age of majority.³¹¹ Their participation in the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) has influenced the entire community throughout the decades. Moreover, many studies show how their participation symbolizes the Israeli strategy of *divide et impera* (“divide and rule”). Haim Bresheeth-Žabner, a scholar who served in the IDF as a youth, writes: “The Druze and Circassians serve in the most vicious IDF units such as the Border Guard and treat Palestinians in the West Bank brutally, reflecting Israel’s divide and rule policy”.³¹²

Bresheeth-Žabner further notes that after the passage of the nation-state law by the Knesset (Israeli parliament) in July 2018, significant controversy and protest arose within the segment of the Druze community loyal to the IDF and Israel. The law consolidated the so-called Basic Laws of Israel, quasi-constitutional laws of the state, which define Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Such a definition explicitly excludes all other communities living in the territory, making them *de facto* second-class citizens. Many Druze soldiers felt betrayed, while many observers ironically referred to them in their new situation as ‘honorary Jews’.

³⁰⁶ Hajjar, Lisa: “Speaking the Conflict, or How the Druze Became Bilingual: A Study Druze Translators in the Israeli Military Courts in the West Bank and Gaza”. In: *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (2) 2000. P. 299.

³⁰⁷ The 1936 Arab Revolt was a popular uprising against the British administration, that asked independence and protested against the promise of the British to the Zionist organization to grant it the land and a state, contradicting previous promises of a future independent Arab country.

³⁰⁸ In 1948, after the failure of the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, a war broke out, opposing a military coalition of Arab states and the Zionist forces, which were finally victorious.

³⁰⁹ Rosemary Sayigh writes: “In some cases, Druze villagers were generous and hospitable to the refugees, but more often it was their cool reception that gave fleeing villagers their first taste of what it would mean to be homeless and stateless”. Sayigh 2007, previously quoted. P. 91.

³¹⁰ Hajjar 2000, previously quoted. P. 307.

³¹¹ They are the only non-Jews in Israel to do so, together with the Circassian minoritarian community. Only Druze males join the army, while conscription for Jewish Israelis apply regardless the gender.

³¹² Bresheeth-Zabner, Haim: *An Army like No Other: How the Israeli Defense Force Made a Nation*. London, New York 2020. P. 71.

strategically used and weaponized. This definition marked a parallel to ‘honorary whites’, an unofficial status in South Africa’s apartheid regime to designate non-whites who were granted some of the privileges of whites.³¹³

On the whole, the Druze community living in Israeli territory today lives a constant debate and search for identity. This search is directly expressed in the world of visual arts. Artists such as Fatma Shanan and Jafra Abu Zoulouf use their work as an expression of contemporary issues related to the Druze culture. The first is a painter who employs rapid brushstrokes to produce works of strong realism, creating an almost blurred effect while faithfully depicting reality. She incorporates a Persian carpet into various landscapes, including Druze villages on Mount Carmel and cultivated fields in Israeli territory, across several series of works. Occasionally, I contend that the carpet becomes almost a flag, an expression of identity, as it is dragged or arranged by one or more figures. Jafra Abu Zoulouf, on the other hand, primarily engages with photography and digital media. She was born in Daliat El Carmel, which features prominently in Halabi’s cinematic work. Her artistic practice reflects upon the challenges of identifying as a Palestinian Druze within the Israeli context. Her work *Grandma’s Tales*, for example, is a 6:33 minute long film.³¹⁴ It combines still landscape shots, including pictures of some remains of Palestinian villages that were depopulated and destroyed during the *Nakba*, with a voice-over story by the artist. In the narrative, the artist recounts the stories her paternal grandmother, Halimah, shared about her experience of being deported from Tirah to Akko. She speaks in Arabic, while the English subtitles on the screen provide a translation. This work closely resembles Halabi’s, as it also intertwines an oral component with a visual one, primarily composed of landscape portraits. I argue that these two components correspond to distinct research methodologies. In Halabi’s case, they aim to shed light on the actual conditions of the Druze in Israeli territory and to debunk the myth of a privileged minority. To achieve this, the film gives the Druze a direct voice, demonstrating their quest for self-determination and identity, and their use of history as a liberating tool.

³¹³ Levy, Gideon: “The South African Model: Make Israel’s Druze ‘Honorary Jews’”. In: *Haaretz*. Last visited: 06.10.2024.

<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2018-07-29/ty-article-opinion/.premium/the-south-african-model-make-israels-druze-honorary-jews/0000017f-dc8c-d3a5-af7f-feae3b290000>

³¹⁴ Abu Zoulouf, Jafra: *Grandma’s Tales*, 2020, 6:33 min, HD Video, Collection of the artist.

8.3. The Use of Oral History in Halabi's Film

I contend that Halabi's film aims to create a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse often associated with the Druze community, under the guise of a social and pedagogical objective. Indeed, mainstream media often portrays the community as simply loyal to the Israeli army. They poorly represent critical voices within the community, even though Druze protests against wind farms in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights have been visible in recent years, or even more, in cases like the Majdal Shams' massacre during the 2023/2024 war on Gaza.³¹⁵ I argue that Halabi's 'fieldwork' research seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the Druze community's daily reality, while documenting and amplifying their history and challenges. It seeks to present a narrative that is more rooted in reality and free from stereotypes. The film aims to bridge the gap, the distance, 'between' the stereotypical portrayal of the community and its actual reality. This is also the origin of the film's title: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*. It reflects the Druze perspective, challenging the image of isolation and neglect often associated with the mountains that house most of their villages. To create this counter-narrative, I argue that the film relies on the research method of oral history. Historian Lynn Abrams defines it as "a practical method for obtaining information about the past employing conducting an interview".³¹⁶ Indeed, Halabi's film evolves through interviews with several members of the Druze community, who tell their individual stories, reflect on collective history, or illustrate specific struggles of their land.

Halabi's historiography challenges 'from below' dominant Israeli narratives about the Druze community. I contend that this approach is reminiscent of Walter Mignolo's concept of

³¹⁵ The wind farm project atop Mount Bnei Rasan, built in 1992, has faced significant opposition, particularly from Druze communities (many of them Syrian citizens) residing on the Golan Heights, who view it as an appropriation and exploitation of their land. Williams, Dan: "Druze opposing Golan wind farm clash with Israeli police". In: *Reuters*. Last visited 06.10.2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/druze-opposing-golan-wind-farm-scuffle-with-israeli-police-2023-06-21/>

Since the 1967 War, Israel has occupied the Golan Heights—a territory contested by Syria and Lebanon. The international community does not recognize this annexation. Majdal Shams, a Druze town in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, was struck by tragedy during the 2023/2024 war on Gaza. On July 26, 2024, a rocket hit a football field, killing 12 children who were playing there. The circumstances of the attack are still under investigation as of October 2024. The local Druze community protested when Israeli authorities visited the town, promising revenge against Hezbollah for the massacre.

Hearst, Katherine: "Golan Heights attack: Residents reject Israeli calls for retaliation". In: *Middle East Eye*. Last visited 06.10.2024. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/golan-heights-attack-residents-reject-israeli-retaliation-against-lebanon>

³¹⁶ As in: Thompson, Paul: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. New York 2017. P. 132.

‘subalternization of knowledge’ or ‘border thinking’. I already discussed such concept in the previous chapter: it involves “absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern group”,³¹⁷ in this case, the Druze. Halabi’s interviews uncover silenced voices, ‘subaltern’ or from a ‘border’ minority, thus ‘displacing hegemonic’ views on them. The interviews highlight difficult family stories that complicate the narrative of the idyllic relationship between the Druze and the Israeli state. Finally, they also reclaim the right to self-determination and liberation from colonial power. The interviews are set in daily-life surroundings, typically in domestic environments. As with Hadjithomas and Joreige’s *Ismyrna*, this aligns with historian Alessandro Portelli’s definition of oral history’s task: “to search out the memories in the private, enclosed spaces of houses and kitchens – to connect them to history and in turn force history to listen to them”.³¹⁸ The film portrays the interviews as spontaneous events, capturing the routine aspects of everyday life within the interviewees’ homes and private spaces, thereby avoiding a pre-designed televisual framework.

Although rooted in the visual arts, I argue that Halabi’s work aligns with a growing trend among academics who adopt a similar approach to reinterpreting Druze history. This alignment reflects what I have highlighted in the previous case studies. Concerning Halabi’s film, one such example of alignment is the work of historian Makram Rabah, who has also extensively used oral history. His publication titled *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory* focuses on the historical conflict between the Druze and Maronite communities in the Mount Lebanon area. It also provides a general history of the Druze community as a contextual background. Rabah discusses the birth of the Druze faith as a “heterodox offshoot of Isma‘ili Islam”.³¹⁹ This origin has historically posed a problem for members of the Druze community, who may or may not identify as Muslim,³²⁰ a theme which also Halabi’s film presents. Rabah analyses how over the centuries “the Druze, as a community,

³¹⁷ Mignolo 2000, previously quoted. P. 12.

³¹⁸ As quoted in: Rabah 2020, previously quoted. P. 21.

³¹⁹ Ivi. P. 36.

³²⁰ Druze community was born around XI century in Egypt, during the Fatimid caliphate of al-Ḥākim bi-amri llāh. He was a much controversial figure, full of peculiar religious beliefs, and thought he was a new Messiah. Among the theologians who refused this idea, there was Al-Darazi (from whom comes the term “Druze”). Around him and other preachers of Ismaili muslim origins, the Druze faith was born. They call themselves Ahl al-Tawḥīd (People of Unitarianism) or al-Muwa‘idūn (Unitarians), and have ever since struggled to identify as Muslim or not. Through the centuries, Druzes spread around the Levant region, and in the countries born after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the consequences of European colonialism (mainly Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel/Palestine). This has brought to the emergence of autonomous and sometimes disconnected communities in the different nations. Campanini, Massimo: *Storia dell’Egitto. Dalla conquista araba a oggi*. Bologna 2017. P. 38-42.

do not rely on written sources to learn about their past or to propagate their group identity. They primarily employ communal structures and socioreligious elements to facilitate their group's memory formation process".³²¹ He quotes the few ancient historians that provide a partial view of the group's history (Salih bin Yahya's *Tārīkh Bayrūt* and Ibn Sabat's *Ṣīdq al-Akhbār*).

Moreover, Rabah emphasizes how oral history has played a crucial role in transmitting information: "The lack of written sources has forced the Druze to rely heavily on oral tradition to preserve the socio-political legacy of their ancestors. Much of the stories of Druze lineage, valour and supposed religious persecution are perpetuated through oral traditions which, at least for the Druze, carry equal or greater weight than written sources".³²² Rabah decided to continue this tradition, using oral history as a methodology for historiographical research.

I argue that Inas Halabi aligned with this approach. Her film equally provides evidence through oral history to clarify some previously unclear historical aspects. Through this approach, I argue that Halabi embodies the role of artist-researcher, taking on the responsibility of telling the story of a specific community and mediating it to a broader audience. This is a role she plays from her 'between' position. Indeed, her film has a significant pedagogical aspect, providing viewers with ample insights through the interviews to understand the history of the Druze community and its current challenges. However, if Halabi, an artist, and Rabah, a historian, share similar approaches in producing research data, their final products differ significantly. Halabi's output is an artistic essay-film, a video artwork that does not conform to the conventions of academic writing. Strict storytelling rules are not essential for conveying its message, unlike in university publications. By working visually and more freely, the artist can shape the viewer's experience as desired. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, oral history methodology mixes with *fukeiron* methodology, which portrays the landscape.

According to scholar Aline Caillet, a film that is based on a collection of interviews goes as long as to create a 'living archive',³²³ capable of recording stories that have no other archival record. I argue that this is the case in *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*. However, Halabi's interviews do not only present stories; the complex visual aspect is also a fundamental component of the artist's work. I contend that the artist showcases the interviewees as a series of portraits, effectively forming a gallery where the representation of their private and public

³²¹ Rabah 2020, previously quoted. P. 96.

³²² Ivi. P. 97.

³²³ Caillet, Aline: *Dispositifs critiques: le documentaire, du cinéma aux arts visuels*. Rennes 2014. P. 94.

spaces significantly enhances each portrait. Through her film, Halabi explores the context in which the interviewees live, and examines the truthfulness of their words by linking them to visual representations of the landscape and of Druze traditions. Contrary to the conventions of standard television documentaries, the interviews in the film present individuals without explicatory written notes – except for the subtitles providing the English translation of the Arabic. This means that Halabi did not want to reveal the interviewees’ names, ages, and professions: all information comes directly from their words. The artist is present on the screen only once. In all other instances, the interviewees are alone in front of the camera. I argue that this visual choice creates a metaphorical dialogue between the interviewees and the viewers of the film, who observe the scenes as if the questions arise from their perspective, much like in Jumana Manna’s *Foragers*. Through her film, Halabi fosters a participatory and emotional dimension that reaches the audience. The movie positions viewers in front of the interviewees as they share poignant or difficult stories. Their sharing of personal views, anecdotes, and the display of objects imbued with difficult memories reflect a pact of trust between the members of the Druze community and the artist, who then passes on what she collects to the audience. I argue that Halabi acts as a mediator ‘between’ the reality of the interviewees and that of the audience. This type of role is particularly evident in her experience as a Palestinian abroad, hence in her position of ‘betweenness’.

8.4. An Analysis of *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*

We No Longer Prefer Mountains evolves through interviews that gradually allow the viewer to enter more and more into the universe of the Druze community. It presents the interviews in a fragmented manner, resulting in a disjointed narrative. The interviews exclusively feature Druzes, with no input from Israeli. Israeli only make brief and random background appearances in scenes of everyday activities, such as walking a dog. Although they appear infrequently, they remain an omnipresent yet ghostly entity, recurring only in the oral accounts. Thus, contrapositions and contradictions are unique to the Druze community, with the film offering a platform to explore them. In this way, the movie amplifies the voices of an often-marginalized group, with a particular focus on critical perspectives within it. However, it does not strive for

the neutrality of a typical television production. While it emphasizes historical facts through its research methods, it implicitly advocates Halabi's militant and well-positioned point of view.

The first interviewee is an elderly man who provides the viewer with valuable insights into Druze history (fig. 21). Halabi interviews him in his home, primarily in the living room. A soft light illuminates the setting, which features photographs and small art pieces that offer glimpses into the man's personal history. The camera zooms in on an old photograph of the man's maternal grandfather surrounded by flowers. While showing it, the man shares the story of his family, originally from Southern Lebanon, from which they retain their accent in Arabic. He maintains that the true origins of the Druze religion are rooted in Islam: "We celebrate exactly as Muslims do because we belong to Islam" (00:02:50). From the outset of his story, he aims to clarify the identity of the Druze community, as if he wants to assert a specific origin and bridge the gap between common stereotypes and the actual reality. He goes on to describe how the Druze began living in the mountains to escape persecution in Egypt. He also describes how their villages resemble typical Arab villages. In addition, he introduces a discussion of the identity issues faced by the Druze community in Israel: "What is very unfortunate is that today since around 50 years the Druze in Palestine are no longer (considered) to be Arab. They were separated via the educational system. A distinct circle was created for them. [...] They monitor us more than they monitor the Christians and Muslims" (00:55:00). Finally, he comments on the Ethnicity Law (the Nation-State bill), which he believes could perpetuate the second-class status of non-Jewish citizens. His intervention emphasizes an assertion of Arab and Palestinian identity that challenges the classification imposed by the State of Israel, which seeks to make the Druze forget their origins. He thus implicitly contrasts a dominant narrative with a counter-narrative.

The scene with this first interviewee showed some discrepancies between the versions exhibited in London and Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, a significant statement was omitted, which only the London's version included. The interviewee notes that "the Halabis" are from Aleppo, Syria, while his family hails from southern Lebanon. The film does not explore the artist's background further, but it leaves viewers with the impression that she is part of the Druze community since her surname's origin is explicitly mentioned. The film does not reveal this information, and the final cut presented in Amsterdam further obscures it. The artist's identity is indeed half Druze, as her father is Druze and comes from one of the places that the film

depicts. However, this does not mean she is fully integrated into the Druze community of the villages on Mount Carmel, even though she shares the most common surname in the area. In our interview, Halabi revealed that her accent comes from Jerusalem, placing her in a position of both insider and outsider (a further case of ‘betweenness’). Her film does not explicitly reflect this position. This could have been a direction taken by the artist, who, in contrast to all of the case studies I discussed so far, has chosen to exclude family issues from her work. However, this does not mean that she maintains a neutral position behind the camera, but quite the opposite.

During the tour of a hill on Mount Carmel that the film shows, Halabi interviews a second man while he accompanies her. Halabi is not visible on the screen: she holds the camera from her point of view, which allows the viewer to immerse in the scene (fig. 22). The artist often uses this type of shooting as a strategy throughout the movie. I argue that it aligns with scholar Paul Rodaway’s description of landscape filming from a point-of-view perspective. Rodaway writes: “The spectator’s experience of the film landscape is not participatory in the sense of everyday geographical experience, for it is directed by the camera and the producer’s intention. The spectator, or viewer, takes up a relatively passive stance for the images are presented in a continuous series as part of a drama or story”.³²⁴ I argue that in Halabi’s film, the artist herself “directs” the camera, as Rodaway would say, which results in a “passive stance” for the spectators. At the same time, the choice to wander around the Mount Carmel territory with the camera in hand, capturing her personal point of view and presenting it to spectators through the screen, immerses them in the landscape and fosters a sense of ‘participation’ (another word by Rodaway) even if only passive. Halabi’s initial exploration of the natural landscape presents a series of images that alternate between two key actions. She sometimes appears to hold the camera while walking along a path leading to a hilltop. In other moments, she pauses to rotate the camera, allowing viewers to fully appreciate the surrounding scenery.

Afterwards the film transitions to a second interview (00:06:20). The second interviewed man explains that the trees around, mostly pines, are not indigenous to the land like oaks or cedars, but were brought there by European Jewish settlers. After visiting a cemetery, the man discusses how the Israeli army controls the burial of former Druze militaries regardless of the circumstances of their death. Later on, in the film, he and Halabi proceed to his house, where he

³²⁴ Rodaway, Paul: *Sensuous Geographies Body, Sense and Place*. Hoboken 2002. P. 161.

searches his personal archives for documents to support his story (00:35:00). Before focusing on him, the artist's camera follows the movements of the man's wife, recording her small domestic rituals, from watering the plants to cooking. The film gradually enters the private sphere of these individuals, building a foundation of trust rather than intruding abruptly. Thus, it penetrates the domestic spaces of the apartment, including the outside balcony, the kitchen, and the outside corridor where the man keeps his personal documents in a bookshelf. It then returns to portraying the man and recording him talking. The man recounts his experience of refusing military conscription in his youth and being imprisoned for two years as a result. Finally, he reflects on the Israeli state's control over Druze education and its monitoring through recurring visits and presentations organized by the IDF.

The man then recounts some mechanisms relating to the relations between the Israeli army and the Druze community through his personal story (00:57:00). This is a clear example of history 'from below', and the very principle of oral history, which looks at the collective through individual experience. Halabi chooses interlocutors in her film who are experts on Druze history. The first man interviewed shares general insights about Druze identity and customs. The second man provides personal anecdotes that help illuminate their recent history and current conditions. I argue that through such 'from below' narratives Halabi mirrors some of the words of film studies expert Aline Caillet. Scholar Aline Caillet describes Ari Folman's film *Valse avec Bachir*, which focuses on the Lebanese Civil War and the Sabra and Shatila massacre, stating that "*incarner l'histoire de la sorte, depuis l'expérience d'une position, c'est lutter contre l'abstraction systémique de ses discours, c'est enfin engager la question de la responsabilité individuelle au sein d'un processus que l'on pense toujours collectif et global*" ("to embody the history of fate, following the experience of one's position, means to fight against the systemic abstraction of these discourses, it is ultimately to engage the question of individual responsibility in the context of a process that we consider always collective and global").³²⁵ I argue that Halabi's interviews correspond to what Caillet describes as a strategy "to embody" history "following the experience of one's position". Likewise, these interviews also fight against the "*abstraction systemique*" of history. They look at individual stories, dealing with "individual

³²⁵ Caillet 2014, previously quoted. P. 64.

Folman, Ari: *Valse avec Bachir*, 2008, Israel/France/Germany, 90 min, Animation.

responsibilities” (Caillet’s words again), such as that of the second interviewee who faced prison rather than doing military service.

Here I point out a similarity with the previous case study. I argue that individual experiences, in contrast to any form of abstraction, highlight a strategy of writing history ‘from below’. This anti-hegemonic approach reflects the concept of ‘border thinking’ as theorized by Walter Mignolo. In the previous chapter, I also identified this concept as an analytical tool for examining the specific form of historiography evident in Lamia Joreige’s work. Overall, the blend of general historical interviews and personal narratives presents a multifaceted and nuanced perspective for an international audience, many of whom may approach the topic without prior knowledge. In this way, the film’s counter-narrative not only highlights its pedagogical value but also positions the artist as a mediator, which starts from her position of ‘betweenness’.

Further on in the film, a third man is interviewed in the area near the water spring ‘ein am Asshufaq (عين ام الشقف), which is a key resource for the Druze villages on Mount Carmel (00:16:10). The man positions himself in front of a sanctuary (Sarah’s sanctuary on Mount Carmel), a cubic structure near the water spring that opens onto four pointed arches, which ends with a small pointed dome. He explains the history of Druze land confiscation by the Israeli state as follows: “I can share a detail with you: the state of Israel has confiscated more land from the Druze than all the Arabs living here. Look at the absurd contradiction here: Druzes who serve in the Israeli army and are loyal to the State, have their land confiscated the most”. Moreover, he describes the strategy of converting land into national parks to prevent its use by the indigenous population. This procedure has been extensively studied in the field of Palestinian studies. In her research on landscape art in Palestinian art history, art historian Tina Sherwell analyzes it and writes: “The ruins of many destroyed Palestinian villages have consequently been covered over with new buildings or have been planted over with trees and transformed into public parks”.³²⁶ Halabi’s shots of the hills seek out these ghosts of the past, without finding them, leaving room for the spectators’ imagination. Later on, I will argue that her landscape representation is in continuity with a certain tradition of Palestinian art.

After presenting such viewpoints, Halabi’s film also gives space to a contradictory perspective. The artist visits a Druze/Israeli courthouse to meet with a judge who has a very

³²⁶ Sherwell 2003, previously quoted. P. 25.

different political view (01:05:20). Indeed, he defends Druze participation in the IDF as the most effective strategy for self-defense for the Druze, considering their status as a minority. Before he speaks, he sits in the courtroom. On the outside of the building, the Israeli flag is displayed next to the colorful flag of the Druze. Elements that refer to the control of the Israeli state are also present in the wooden courtroom. Halabi films him from below. I argue that the frame and its angle visually convey the authoritarian stance the man in the courtroom seeks to assert and integrate into his message. The man states that the Druze, as a minority wherever they live, must abide by the rules of their host country to survive. In Israel, he believes, they must join the IDF to protect their community and even fight against their Druze brethren from other nations in the event of war. He states: “Druze living under Israel will be loyal to the State and serve its army” (01:06:15).

The viewpoint in this interview differs significantly from those expressed in other interviews. It also contrasts with the stance of the *Urfud* activists depicted by Halabi, which feature subsequent scenes (fig. 23). *Urfud* is an organization that supports Druze youth who choose not to join the IDF when they reach the age of enlistment, even at the risk of imprisonment. The artist documents one of their meetings, during which they discuss recent events in Palestine, especially those related to Sheikh Jerrah. (01:39:00).³²⁷ They consider the possibility of focusing their discussions with young people on this topic and informing them that if they enlist, they may be asked to evict Palestinians.

Halabi especially focuses on one of the activists, Maysan. She follows her and interviews her mother to learn more about her the group’s activity (01:14:00). This interview stands out from the others because Halabi is present on screen. Maysan’s mother and Halabi are seated across from each other at the kitchen table in the family’s home. An arch-like opening in the wall frames them, contributing to the shot’s almost perfect symmetry. The composition shows the two individuals in a horizontal, non-hierarchical relationship. This contrasts sharply with the courtroom setting of the previous scene, where the judge conducts a monologue rather than fostering a dialogue. The viewer observes a discussion in an intimate setting, sensing the atmosphere of trust and care that encourages sharing sensitive information. Halabi puts the woman at ease while stating that she wants to listen to a ‘mother’s’ perspective, which is often

³²⁷ Sheikh Jarrah is a neighborhood in East Jerusalem which has gained much visibility both locally and internationally in recent years for the violent evictions of Palestinian families from their homes made by the Israeli government and army.

ignored. The visual disposition of the scene here plays a key role, with the artist positioning herself on the same level as her interlocutor. She cancels any type of hierarchy, even visual, and creates through the symmetrical framing a sort of diptych of portraits, of herself and of the interviewee. Halabi again steps into a private space, choosing to include herself in the frame. This decision highlights her approach to working and emphasizes that the dialogue begins with an empathetic understanding of the situation. Once again, as illustrated in *Ismyrna*'s analysis of Hadjithomas and Joreige through Jill Bennett's theory of 'affect contagion', the language of emotions serves as a vehicle for the artist's visual choices, and it creates a connection with viewers thus facilitating the mediation of their stories.

The woman tells Halabi about the challenges Maysan faces because she identifies as a Druze Palestinian, as opposed to the many Druze who identify as Israelis. She describes the threats they have received through anonymous phone calls, and how these have failed to deter her daughter's activism. Additionally, she expresses her relief that her other son has refused mandatory conscription. In a second part of the interview, the woman is preparing *mh'ammar* (a traditional stuffed bread) for a meeting of *Urfud*'s activists (01:16:30). She talks about it and explains the emotional bond that connects her to this recipe, that was passed down from generation to generation in her family (fig. 24). She says: "You asked me how I learned to make *mh'ammar* and what this food means to me. When I see *mh'ammar*, I remember my mother. This food really lives within me. It's such a big part of who I am". Throughout the interview, the film captures not only her words but also her habits, which reflect the traditions and customs of the Druze community. In scenes like these, I contend that Halabi takes on the role of artist-ethnographer, much like Jumana Manna and Jumana Abboud, as discussed in the chapters dedicated to their works. In their cases I claimed that they reproduced a 'native point of view', a concept coined by the scholar Edward Said. Halabi's position is that of an insider-outsider within the Druze community, which gives her also a 'native point of view'. Beyond the issue of identity, what matters more is how the artist positions herself and how her film conveys its narrative. In the scene with Maysan's mother, Halabi positions herself visually and metaphorically as an ally and participant in the struggle to preserve Druze traditions and identity. In the scene, the struggle emerges through the act of sharing food, specifically the communal

experience of eating together, which transforms into an act of resistance, or *sumud*, to use the Palestinian term.³²⁸

One additional important aspect in Halabi's oral history research is a radio program that is occasionally broadcast during the movie. The program is an open mic show aimed at discussing a possible strike in Israel by the Palestinian community to protest against the daily discrimination it suffers. Like the music accompanying it, it serves as a tool to amplify silenced stories. It provides a platform for the Palestinian community to express themselves and discuss ways to communicate against oppression. This is another example of how the artist created a safe space in the film where people felt comfortable sharing their ideas, perspectives, and difficult stories with the audience. Hosting this form of resistance on a radio show serves as a metaphorical gesture. In several landscape scenes filmed by the camera, the background features the sounds of zapping between radio channels. This shows how a program with a critical vision is part of a general control of the media that has long been criticized in the Israeli context.³²⁹ One particularly illustrative scene in Halabi's film depicts a radio broadcasting tower situated on a hillside (01:07:28). This tower is a visual representation of Israeli control and a symbol of power (fig. 25). The radio program thus serves as a metaphorical opposition to this power. This reflection introduces the second key methodology in Halabi's film: a distinctive approach to capturing the landscape that emphasizes symbols revealing control mechanisms at play.

8.5. *Fukeiron*: Research Practices in the Landscape

The second research methodology that lies behind Halabi's film concerns the landscape and its representation. The oral history methodology and landscape portrayal enhance each other, with recorded stories gaining visual representation and validation through the accompanying images. The artist drew inspiration from a specific methodology for her landscape shots: the *fukeiron*. *Fukeiron*, translatable as 'theory of landscape' or 'landscape theory', is "a film

³²⁸ Scholar Hoda El Shakry describes *sumud* as follows: "generally understood as a mode of non-violent protest or resistance, *sumud* often carries the connotation of everyday survival, endurance, and resilience". El Shakry, Hoda: "Palestine and the Aesthetics of the Future Impossible". In: *Interventions* 23 (5) 2021 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2021.1885471>.

³²⁹ During the 2023/2024 war on Gaza, this has included the censorship and the ban on *Al Jazeera* from working in Israeli territory.

discourse that emerged at the end of the 1960s in Japan”.³³⁰ There is a 60-year gap between the original contest and the Palestinian artist's use of some of its dictates. Despite this, there are some intriguing similarities between Halabi's film and the *fukeiron* originals.

Matsuda Masao, Masao Adachi, Hara Masataka, and photographer Nakahira Takuma are among the main theorists of the *fukeiron* discourse. Their practice is situated within a specific period of transformation in post-war Japan, when the economy and society underwent significant changes, such as the “economic shift from industrial to postindustrial consumer capitalism”.³³¹ Additionally, it is connected to the transformations in the Japanese left and new considerations of “political resistance and subjectivity”.³³² In this context, scholar Yuriko Furuhashi notes that filmmakers who followed the precepts of *fukeiron* opted to depict state repression not through scenes of violence, such as police brutality, but by focusing on the landscape as an “embodiment of the governing power of the state”. In his words: “these *fukeiron* critics turned their focus away from the spectacle of violence to the underlying conditions of such violence”, opting for a new imagery that would “radically reimagine state power at a time when images of police violence and militant protests were saturating the mass media and limiting the political imagination of the public”.³³³ Commenting on films like *A.K.A. Serial Killer* (Masao Adachi)³³⁴ or *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (Nagisa Ōshima),³³⁵ Furuhashi writes that “by focusing on eventless landscapes”, these movies “reorient our attention, directing it away from spectacular sights of physical conflict and dramatic action toward nonspectacular elements of the urban environment”.³³⁶

Fukeiron has influenced numerous artists around the world over the decades, extending far beyond Japan. One of the most striking examples is the French-American artist Eric Baudelaire. After completing a residency in Japan, he developed an interest in the *fukeiron* tradition and even collaborated with Masao Adachi. Halabi's film also fits into a completely different context than the original *fukeiron*'s. Beyond some differences, such as a stark human presence in her

³³⁰ Furuhashi, Yuriko: “Returning to Actuality: Fukeiron and the Landscape Film”. In: *Screen 48* (September) 2007. P. 345.

³³¹ Ivi. P. 347.

³³² Ibidem.

³³³ Furuhashi, Yuriko: *Cinema of actuality: Japanese avant-garde filmmaking in the season of image politics*. Durham 2013. P. 139.

³³⁴ Adachi, Masao: *A.K.A. Serial Killer*, 1975, Japan, 86 min, 35 mm.

³³⁵ Ōshima, Nagisa: *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*, 1970, Japan, 94 min, 35 mm.

³³⁶ Furuhashi 2013, previously quoted. P. 139.

film that differs from the Japanese *fukeiron* tradition, there are still many similarities and continuities to highlight. Halabi's study of the landscape is situated within a political context of oppression and occupation, which is intensified by the Israeli law of ethnicity. These changes and intensification of the oppression also affect the left, similarly to the Japanese context. This is evident in the activities of the *Urfud* group, an explicitly leftist group, which seeks to respond to the escalation of Israeli occupation policies. However, like the original *fukeiron* films, Halabi refrains from depicting violence on her screen, even though it would be easy to accompany the stories, such as those about what happens in Sheikh Jarrah, with graphic images that are constantly prevalent throughout Palestine. Finally, while she emphasizes historical facts through the methodology of oral history, her film advocates for a militant and well-positioned viewpoint. This is consistent with what artist and professor at the American University of Beirut Octavian Eșanu writes about *fukeiron*, describing it as "a symbiosis of militant and political practice".³³⁷

Similar to the Japanese films, Halabi's camera turns towards seemingly "eventless landscapes". However, these landscapes are not truly without events, as they conceal signs of political power and continuous control. I argue that these signs correspond to the 'semiotic features of landscape' as art historian W.J.T. Mitchell described in his exploration of the relationship between landscape art and imperialism.³³⁸ Halabi brings these features to light while transitioning between natural and urban landscapes. Regarding the former, the artist focuses on the landscape surrounding Mount Carmel, where the majority of the Druze villages is located. The artist captures footage of unpaved roads, trails, trees, and hills. In the background, the interviewees tell in voice-over stories of Palestinian villages destroyed and covered with vegetation. The movie provides visual evidence to these stories by showing the same vegetation. Additionally, it depicts a mountain frequently identified as a historical refuge by the interviewees. The landscape in the film prominently displays clear signs of Israeli occupation, such as markers designating a military zone or a national park, both of which represent land confiscation (01:03:15). Halabi's film documents these markers alongside various fences and barriers.

The artist's camera also seeks out signs of political power that are explicitly present in the urban landscape. The streets of Druze villages feature various posters advertising careers in the

³³⁷ Eșanu, Octavian: "Escape the Landscape." *ARTMargins* 10 (1) 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1162/artm.e.00280>.

³³⁸ Mitchell, William John Thomas: *Landscape and Power*. Chicago 2002. P. 17.

Israeli army and prominently display Israeli flags. The flags can be seen near houses, shops, and in the middle of roundabouts. They are often placed next to the colorful Druze flag. They stand as the most powerful symbol of the on-going colonizing process, which entails the expropriation of the land and the *divide et impera* strategy. They even penetrate religious sites. The movie shows one such example with the shrine of *Nabi Shueyb* (“prophet Shueyb”), an important pilgrimage place for Druze people (01:01:30). The movie depicts flags and banners in Israeli colors surrounding the temple, symbolizing the challenging and controversial situation of the Druze community in the country. According to an interviewee, the Druze military once used it for their oath ritual towards the IDF and the Israeli state. Additionally, he adds that before 1948, when the borders with neighboring countries were open, Druzes from the region used to go there during religious holidays, which they cannot do anymore.

Halabi employs various strategies in the film to create such representations of the landscape. On the one hand, she often walks through the land holding the camera with her hand, which occasionally results in shaky shots. The lens acts as both the artist’s and the spectators’ eye, enabling the audience to experience the artist’s journey. Halabi walks and captures panoramic shots, with long sequences, sometimes slow, in both day and night light, aiming to include as many details as possible. On the other hand, the camera frames some scenes from a car window, providing an alternative speed to the exploration. This film’s mixed use of landscape framing is reminiscent of classic *fukeiron* films, such as Masao Adachi’s 1969 film *AKA Serial Killer*. Like Halabi’s movie, *AKA Serial Killer* interweaves static scenes with panoramic shots taken from a car, giving a unique perspective on urban landscapes, roads, and the signs that populate them.

8.6. *We No Longer Prefer Mountains: Continuity in Palestinian Landscape Art*

Besides *fukeiron*’s tradition, I argue that Halabi’s film is part of a tradition of Palestinian landscape art. When exploring landscape representation in the Palestinian context, the writings of scholar Tina Sherwell stand out as one of the most authoritative sources. Sherwell writes that starting from 1948 “landscape came to dominate Palestinian art, as it was conceived as the locus of Palestinian identity”³³⁹. In her studies, Sherwell has extensively explored the representation

³³⁹ Sherwell, Tina: “Palestinian art: imaging the motherland”. In: Lloyd, Fran: *Displacement & Difference Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora*. London 2001. P. 164.

of villages, which is also a prominent element in Halabi's film. She delves into the origins of this subject by examining the work of some pioneers of modern Palestinian Art and the history of the "representations of the village found in popular images" that also influence them.³⁴⁰ Here, she explains, the villages "are generalized and are not usually depictions of any specific locale".³⁴¹ She goes on to write that "the generalized images come to stand for every village and, by analogy, Palestine", thus providing "a way of imaging the nation - Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community'". Therefore, she finds and describes these characteristics in the work of artists such as Nabil Anani, Taleb Dweik, or Sliman Mansour. I argue that Halabi's film marks a difference with this tradition of the representation of urban landscapes. With the use of the camera, Halabi immerses herself in the reality of the Druze villages, not reproducing that representation "from a distance" and "free from the influence of the modern landscape of Israel", as Sherwell writes when describing the work of artists Khalil Rayan and Ibrahim Hijazi.³⁴² Halabi explores the current reality in the Druze villages, highlighting both the Druze-Palestinian identity and the effects of Israeli occupation. I argue that this aligns with Ariella Azoulay's concept of *différend*, which she explores in her study of the *Nakba* and the transformation of Palestinian villages post-1948. Azoulay employs the term, borrowed from philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, to illustrate the rift and coexistence between Palestinian and Israeli signs within the villages.³⁴³ Similarly, Halabi's film presents both signs, effectively exemplifying the concept of *différend*. For this reason, I also contend that Halabi's representations closely align with the recent series of paintings by Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani, titled *Unnatural Landscape* (2020-). In this series, traditional Palestinian natural landscapes are disrupted by elements such as separation walls and watchtowers.³⁴⁴

Halabi's representation does not have a nostalgic character, lost in time. It fits into the present and looks at traditions and the territory as something alive. The landscape becomes a "practiced space", to use an expression of the philosopher Michel de Certeau,³⁴⁵ or a "site activated by movements, actions, narratives and signs", to use philosopher W.J.T. Mitchell's

³⁴⁰ Sherwell 2003, previously quoted. P. 148.

³⁴¹ Ivi. P. 149.

³⁴² Sherwell 2003, previously quoted. P. 152.

³⁴³ Azoulay, Ariella: *From Palestine to Israel - A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-50*. Tel Aviv 2011. P. 15.

³⁴⁴ Hourani, Khaled: *Unnatural Landscape*, 2020, Acrylic on cardboard, 25x35cm, Zawyeh Gallery, Ramallah.

³⁴⁵ Certeau, Michel de: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley 1984. P. 124.

words.³⁴⁶ The daily rituals that Halabi films, from a walk to taking care of the pomegranate fields, become ways for the Druzes to ‘practice’ an identity that does not give up, that resists the authority of the Israeli occupation “who expect them to dance at Independence Day celebrations in the forests that had been planted on the ruins of their villages”, to use Azoulay’s words again.³⁴⁷ The artist herself participates in these strategies of being in the landscape. She hikes, travels around both by foot and by cars, recording her actions in long sequences. She actively reclaims the territory and invites viewers to participate in this process through point-of-view shooting.

8.7. Conclusions

This fifth case study reinforces my argument and answer to the key research question: that the artists play a dual role as both researchers and mediators. This dynamic arises from their position of ‘betweenness’. In fact, this double role influences the works and emerges from the works. I also pointed this out in the analysis of the film *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* by Inas Halabi. One of the questions I started with was: how does the artist create the work from her position? Similar to what I highlighted in the previous case studies, I noted how the artist relied on a network that she created from her position of ‘betweenness’ to create her work. My hypothesis that she employed a specific research methodology to address her historiographical challenge has been confirmed through her use of oral history. In fact, I argued that this is the methodology that emerges from the film and that allows the artist to create a counter-narrative to the conventional historical accounts of the Druze community. To define Halabi’s use of oral history, I referred to definitions by scholars such as Alessandro Portelli or Aline Caillet (and her concept of ‘living archive’). I compared Halabi’s work to Caillet’s analysis of the film *Waltz with Bashir* to demonstrate how it challenges a ‘systemic abstraction’ of history, instead rewriting it from below with an anti-hegemonic perspective. I also returned to the concept of ‘border thinking’ as theorized by Walter Mignolo.

On the one hand, I pointed out how the artist conducted her research within the Druze community from an insider/outsider position. On the other hand, I argued that how she organizes

³⁴⁶ Mitchell 2002, previously quoted. P. 265.

³⁴⁷ Azoulay 2011, previously quoted. P. 17.

her interviews and constructs the film's narrative considers a mixed audience and a mediation that takes place from a position of 'betweenness'. I argued that the film's blend of interviews – some providing historical context, others sharing personal stories – offers a multifaceted and nuanced perspective for an international audience unfamiliar with the subject. To verify the reliability of the narrative created by the artist, I referred to the texts of various scholars who have dealt with similar issues, such as Lisa Hajjar, Haim Bresheeth-Žabner, and Makram Rabah.

In the introduction, I also raised the question of whether the artist's use of film reflects her international trajectory, while still engaging with a narrative deeply rooted in the local context. I found an answer in another particular methodology of film that concerns the representation of landscape: *fukeiron*. Drawing on studies by scholars such as Yuriko Furuhashi or Octavio Esanu, I traced a brief history of how this concept was born and developed in Japan in the 1960s, and further developed internationally with the work of artists such as Eric Baudelaire. I then examined how Halabi's work engages with the historical development of this technique, 'between' local and international contexts, and illustrating the artist's unique positioning. Finally, I argued that Halabi's film also fits into a particular history of landscape art within Palestinian art history, drawing parallels with studies by scholars such as Tina Sherwell and Ariella Azoulay.

The final question I posed at the beginning of the chapter concerned the artist's mediation of local histories on an international scale. The answer was severalfold. I first observed how Halabi constructs the film's narrative to resonate with a diverse audience, particularly through her use of oral history interviews. I also stressed out how it is precisely through the interviews that Halabi acts as a mediator 'between' the reality of the interviewees and that of the audience. Second, I re-emphasized the artist's use of 'parergons' to accompany the film's narrative. I concluded by examining how the work was showcased in various exhibitions, revealing the diverse approaches of European art venues. The comparison between the Showroom in London and de Appel in Amsterdam revealed that slogans intended to engage with a multicultural community do not always succeed in creating a platform for discussion and cannot be regarded as an effective political stance on their own. I argued that this could potentially lead to a contradiction between the announced and the actual results.

The next chapter presents the final case study in this research. The case studies I considered so far have showed similar methodologies that the artists use in their work as artist-researchers.

Collaboration is one common aspect that has emerged, but I have not yet thoroughly analyzed. Collaboration has been a key aspect of all of the artists' research seen so far. For this reason, in the final chapter I will examine an artwork in which the research methods are similar to those previously discussed, but in which the collaborative aspect is even more pronounced and decisive. This will be the final case in which I will examine whether the common thread identified so far continues to hold, revealing how the position of 'betweenness' emerges from the narrative nature of the works considered.

9. Marwa Arsanios' *Reverse Shot* (2022): Betweenness as a Framework for Cooperative Research

The five previous case studies have revealed a common thread that I argue addresses the key research question: How does an artist's 'between' position influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? I hypothesize that this last case study will also confirm this thread. One of the aspects of this thread that I have often mentioned but never specifically explored is collaboration, a key element of all the artists' research. I emphasized that the artists' research was never the result of an individual effort, but rather a collective one. In fact, I constantly referred to the artists' collaborators. They helped the artists to develop their works: sometimes they are present in the works themselves (as in the case of Abboud and the Water Diviners), sometimes their contribution emerges from what I called the 'parergons' (as in the case of Lamia Joreige). I demonstrated how the artists, starting from their situation of 'betweenness', create an international network. Following Caroline Levine's words, I defined such network as the "patterns of connection and exchange" that unite the places where they live and work and that allow them to create their works.³⁴⁸ As a final case study, I have selected the work of a Lebanese artist whose experience of 'betweenness' is central to her practice, with collaboration serving as a key component. This work is *Reverse Shot* by Marwa Arsanios, which deals with particular narratives and practices of the landscape in Lebanon. Its analysis will address the final questions that conclude this study. First, what is the role that art institutions can play in the network and in the collaborative aspect of artistic research? I have already showed how art institutions can behave differently. Here I will take a final look at their possible role within a collaborative perspective, by comparing different venues. Second, is there a way in which collaboration illuminates the artist's situation of 'betweenness'? Finally, how does the artist create and mediate an anti-hegemonic narrative based on a different view of the natural landscape?

9.1. *Reverse Shot* shows in London and in Heidelberg

³⁴⁸ Levine 2017, previously quoted. P. 132.

Reverse Shot (35 minutes) is the fourth film in the series *Who is Afraid of Ideology* by Marwa Arsanios.³⁴⁹ The film tells the story of a social experiment that the artist led in Lebanon. In the experiment, a group of experts from various fields and different contributors aim to transform a piece of land into a community space for common use. This change would interrupt a cycle of exploitation of the natural land, redefining the human-nature relationship and the state of the place. *Reverse Shot* interweaves the discussions of the group, the different contributions, with representations of the landscape. The film combines oral reflections with visual parts of various kinds, seamlessly layering spoken narratives over imagery.

As noted in the other case studies, I argue that the financial support network that enabled the project's development also exemplifies the international connections the artist has cultivated over time. As with Jumana Manna's *Foragers*, AFAC, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, based in Beirut, stands out among the organizations that co-funded *Reverse Shot*. Additionally, the remaining funding highlights the artist's establishment in Germany, where she currently resides. The Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt, which financed the work as part of the festival *This is not Lebanon - Festival für Bildende Kunst, Performende Kunst, Musik und Gespräche*, in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut Lebanon, is prominent here. I argue that this contribution from Frankfurt enhances the investigation of my research into the diversification and formation of new relationships within the European artistic landscape. In fact, Arsanios originally created the *Reverse Shot* project for an exhibition in Germany, documenta 15, in which Jumana Abboud also participated. The Indonesian artistic collective ruangrupa invited Arsanios to join the exhibition they curated. The collaborative research aspect I will analyze in Arsanios' film aligns with the concepts of collective creation that inspired ruangrupa for their exhibition (*lumbung*).

After its premiere in Kassel, the work traveled to other venues, including The Mosaic Rooms in London and the Kunstverein in Heidelberg. The Mosaic Rooms, where Arsanios had a solo exhibition in the fall of 2022, is a distinctive space. Its slogan describes it as "London's free space for contemporary culture from the Arab world and beyond". Founded in 2008, the gallery showcases the work of artists from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region and those working on related themes (Inas Halabi, from the previous chapter, exhibited there in June

³⁴⁹ Arsanios, Marwa: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot*, 2022, Germany/Lebanon, 35 min, Video HD.

2024). The organization typically hosts three exhibitions a year and offers a well-developed public program with the aim of creating a community space.

The special character of the gallery is its origin as a project of the AM Qattan Foundation in Ramallah. The AM Qattan Foundation is a particularly noteworthy institution in the Palestinian context. It was established in 1993 and has since organized a variety of cultural and research activities. The building in Ramallah, which I visited in 2022, is located in a spot that provides a stunning view of the surrounding hills. However, the organization's arts funding program is split 'between' Palestine and the United Kingdom. In 2009, the foundation established The Mosaic Rooms exhibition space in London. In an interview I conducted with The Mosaic Rooms' curator, Angelina Radakovic, she explained that the venue looks at the AM Qattan Foundations "as a kind of mother ship".³⁵⁰ While the gallery receives funding from AM Qattan and shares some of its research goals, it has distinct visions and missions due to the different political situation in which it operates. Throughout the gallery in London, posters of past events held at AM Qattan in Palestine, such as the Art Biennial Qalandiya International and the Young Artist of the Year prize, hang on the walls, showcasing the transnational connections 'between' these spaces. The Mosaic Rooms have become a significant reference point for the Palestinian community in London. Radakovic told me that Palestinians are today an "established audience" with a relationship of "established trust",³⁵¹ along with a wider diasporic Arab community. Additionally, all the staff working there have had experiences in Palestine, to reinforce the original connection. The distinctive feature of this space is that it did not originate from an English initiative that was interested in artists from the Arab world, with a sort of "curatorial safari",³⁵² to use an expression by art historian Tina Sherwell which I outlined in the chapter on the State of the Art. Instead, a Palestinian project directly established it expanding into the United Kingdom, where it grew its network and built its audience.

³⁵⁰ Radakovic, Angela: Interview by the author, conducted at The Mosaic Rooms, December 7th 2022.

³⁵¹ Ibidem.

³⁵² Tina Sherwell has defined as "curatorial safari", a phenomenon she says she saw many times in Ramallah during her tenure as director of the International Academy of Art. There she saw a lot of curators coming to Ramallah for short stays, even for a day. She writes: "What they are researching is ambiguous, and often they are just coming to "view" works, as though they will intuitively and innately know the work of art when they "discover" it and the artist. A certain exoticism and neo-orientalism prevail in this approach; the curator is on a curatorial expedition in "unknown" and "dangerous" terrain and "discovers" the artist, thereafter bringing them forth onto the international art stage". Sherwell 2014, previously quoted.

I argue that in The Mosaic Rooms, Arsanios found a very different context than in the two German venues. In Kassel, ruangrupa invited her to contribute to their goal of giving voice to the Global South in the heart of Europe. However, this project clashed with local institutional conservatism, which I highlighted in the chapter on Jumana Abboud's work. In Heidelberg, the artist had the opportunity to present the results of years of artistic activity. However, the context of the small German city, especially its historic center with its very traditional architecture, created a greater contrast with the exhibition's themes than that of London.

Even in London, the issues raised in the film may seem far removed from the typical concerns of the city. However, they fit into a specific context already inclined towards the discussions Arsanios' projects provoke. This is because the gallery has always sought to act as a mediator 'between' different cultures and geographical contexts. I argue that this stance aligns with the artist's unique position of 'betweenness' and reflects the goals frequently evident in her practice. Additionally, the gallery's environment already hinted at the references to the Arab world that have characterized Arsanios' work. For example, the artist displayed her solo exhibition in London alongside a project by The Mosaic Rooms Young Collective on the top floor. The project was titled *Anatomy of a World*; it was a two-part installation (consisting of a "Tea Station" and a "Sleep Station") in response to a series of collaborative storytelling and speculative exercise workshops led by the group's artists. Thus, Arsanios' work, particularly the film *Reverse Shot*, reflects its foundational collaborative spirit in the installation *Anatomy of a World*, paralleling a project similarly executed by artists from the MENA diaspora.

Reverse Shot made its second appearance in London after featuring documenta 15 in Kassel. A public installation accompanied the film, featuring white panels adorned with slogans in both English and Arabic, expanding on some of the themes explored in the movie. The film explores an experiment in communalizing a piece of land in Lebanon, and the charts summarized some of the ideals behind the project. For example, the panels read: "the surplus produce can be sold and the benefits divided between the users", "the land shall be tended by the cooperative of people who live around it in agreement with each other", "the land shall not be built", "the land shall only be used for agricultural purposes", "the land shall not be inherited", "the land shall only be used by people who do not own a land", or "the land shall be transformed into a social *Waqf* or a *Masha'a*".

The panels were already present in Kassel, as part of the video-installation of *Reverse Shot*. In London they were displayed as part of a public art intervention in Peckham, for two weeks from October 10th to October 23rd, 2022. Nancy Naser Al Deen, a Lebanese designer based in Berlin, designed the posters. This choice highlights once more the connections that Arsanios has cultivated over the years in her ‘betweenness’. The installation placed the panels into billboards that framed them like paintings, showcasing them in various contexts: next to a beer advertisement, on walls covered with murals, in symbolic buildings of the neighborhood. Their design was simple: a white background with alternating Arabic and English writing and wavy, thin, and horizontal black lines to decorate. Over the days, street artists occasionally targeted the white and empty space, leaving their own graffiti marks on it. This was arguably the most tangible manifestation of the interaction between the temporary public works and the neighborhood. The public installation was of relatively short duration, making it impossible to assess its actual impact on the neighborhood. Although it was a public intervention, it was an impromptu intervention rather than community-based public art, as it did not (and did not want to) create the typical “integration between the community and the work of art”, to use the words of scholar Miwon Kwon in describing public art.³⁵³

Yet the most profound social impact Arsanios sought occurred within the gallery. In Peckham, the artist thoughtfully integrated key elements of her artistic exploration with the fabric of London’s urban landscape. Conceivably, given that the area is one of the most ethnically diverse places in the United Kingdom, some of the neighborhood’s residents might have been more receptive to the slogan, which were partly written in Arabic. They could be able to read it, and reflect on their messages. It is also possible that some of them questioned the value of certain slogans in England and its capital. This could potentially lead to temporal and geographical overlaps ‘between’ distant places united by similar issues. However, this remains to be seen, and it was not my research interest to conduct such an evaluation. However, a community-making contribute was significantly visible in a specific section of the exhibition at The Mosaic Rooms: The Reading Room. Here, I argue that the artist best demonstrates the role of mediator that she assumes from her position of ‘betweenness’.

The Reading Room was the first room that the visitors encountered in the gallery in London. The windows bathed the room in natural light, connecting it to the outside world and avoiding

³⁵³ Kwon, Miwon: *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge 2002. P. 95.

the isolation often felt in windowless spaces. The artist arranged a blue-painted wooden structure featuring a multi-stepped bench for seating in the white room with a wooden parquet floor. On it, the visitors could find several books, printed articles, and flyers, to deepen some of the theoretical themes that have inspired the artist in her work: from Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* to Frederick Engels *Dialectics of Nature* (which will be quoted directly in the film *Reverse Shot*), from Catherine Malabou *Au voleur! Anarchisme et philosophie* to *Dispossession: the performative in the political* by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. Finally, the Reading Room featured a display of plants, all native to the UK. This choice highlighted a contrast with the popular plants that have come to symbolize the country over the centuries, yet mask their colonial origins.

The Reading Room gave the public the background that inspired Arsanios' project. I argue that it also sought to foster discussions stemming from the works in the exhibition, emphasizing that they are not isolated, finished pieces but rather part of an ongoing collaborative dialogue that invites participation. Indeed, the Reading Room needed to be activated in order to function correctly. There were two possible ways of doing this. On the one hand, visitors could activate the space on their own, at moments when the reading room might be more or less crowded. On the other hand, they could collectively participate in the events organized to activate the Reading Room. In an interview I had with her, Arsanios stated indeed: "the reading room becomes like a structure within the institution. So, it needs to be activated. In London we often invited many groups, not only university students and so on, but also young adults, from schools".³⁵⁴

In my analysis of other case studies presented in this dissertation, I frequently highlighted the implicit pedagogical value embedded in the works or activities of the artists. In this case, Arsanios' practice of mediation is indisputable. In the exhibition space, the artist created a space for aggregation, learning, and collective discussion for different groups of visitors. This anticipated the collective dimension presented in *Reverse Shot*. The artist embraces a social role stemming from her position of 'betweenness', fostering discussions among a diverse audience. These discussions address issues originating in Lebanon and extend beyond the country's borders. Arsanios also recreated the Reading Room in Heidelberg, adapting its colors and shape to fit the new space. The different selection of books displayed further reflected the adaptation. In this second exhibition in Germany, however, the Reading Room did not occupy a prominent

³⁵⁴ Arsanios, Marwa: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, May 6th 2023.

position at the beginning. Instead, it became decentralized and was placed in the basement of the venue, losing part of its original spirit.

Nevertheless, the Heidelberg show brought together the four chapters of the series *Who is Afraid of Ideology* for the first time: The first three of them were projected in small closed-up wooden structures. At the same time, *Reverse Shot* had a room dedicated to it. A similar path led to the fourth chapter of the series in the exhibition in London. In London, the second out of three rooms, following the reading room, featured the works *Falling is not Collapsing*, *Falling is Extending*, *Resilient Weeds*, and *Amateurs, Stars and Extras* or *The Labor of Love*, which reflect on systems of capitalism in both environmental and socio-political contexts. Some of these are video works, some include other media. Among them, for example, there was a series of tapestries, with bluish figures on white cloth, created in collaboration with Syrian women and activists in northern Syria. They represented skeletons of fish and mammals, medicinal herbs, sections of topographical maps, and buildings: all symbols and visualizations of the ways in which the community finds protective systems directly in the land.³⁵⁵

Reverse Shot had a dedicated room in London. The screening room was dimly lit, and the film was projected onto an entire wall by a single-channel projector hanging from the ceiling, while reproductions of the posters displayed in Peckham hung to the side. Here they were smaller in size and less visible due to the darkness than similar ones displayed in Heidelberg. On the opposite wall was a wooden bench. The rest of the room was furnished with large cushions to sit on. The different levels of comfort provided to visitors was one of the differences between the three screening rooms. For example, Heidelberg had small seats, while Kassel provided a wooden seating structure. The welcoming atmosphere is a crucial aspect of any video installation, as it encourages viewers to engage with works that may be lengthy.

In London, a striking visual contrast was clearly evident between the *Reverse Shot*'s room and the rest of the gallery. The gallery spaces resemble the classic London galleries of Mayfair, featuring pristine white walls, wooden parquet flooring, and an elegant white cube design. However, during the final film screening, a black box was created within the white box. *Reverse Shot* created a separate and closed universe. While the other works displayed alongside each other invited comparison, the film stood alone, isolated from the rest. A similar use of video projections within the white spaces of art galleries has been a topic of much debate in recent

³⁵⁵ Arsanios, Marwa: *Untitled (Tapestry 3)*, 2019, Silkscreen on linen, 340cmx50cm, Mor Charpentier, Paris.

decades. Critic Andrew V. Uroskie writes: “These two cultural sites—art gallery and cinema theater—have long been conceptualized in diametric opposition. Within the gallery’s brightly illuminated container, the aesthetic spectator navigates a physical encounter with the space of the object-cum-installation in a temporality of her choosing. The cinema’s black box, by contrast, intentionally negates both bodily mobility and environmental perception so as to transport the viewer away from her present time and local space, into the narrative space of the cinematic world on screen. These two institutions, these two models of exhibition and spectatorship, would seem irreconcilable”.³⁵⁶

Uroskie concludes that the art world has resolved the ‘irreconcilability’ over the years. Nowadays, all galleries and museums have normalized the screening of films. What happens in Arsanios’ case, indeed, is an example of symbiosis between the white and the black cubes. On one side, there were clear differences between the various spaces within The Mosaic Rooms. The first part of the exhibition (the Reading Room and the second room), “the gallery’s brightly illuminated container” (as Uroskie would put it) displays works such as drawings and embroideries (even the books) that can be navigated and observed differently than the movie in the last room. I argue that the contrast between the different spaces is not only visual. It also relates to the experience that visitors can have. The film presents the findings of the artist’s research and reworking to the viewer, marking a passive experience. The rest of the exhibition, particularly the Reading Room, extends the discussion off-screen (as the posters in Peckham), giving the viewer a potentially active role. In this case, the white cube and the black box are not only in contrast (they are on a visual and experiential level) but also merge. One is the continuation of the other.

9.2. Introduction to *Reverse Shot* and to Arsanios’ Cooperative Research

I argue that the most crucial element in shaping the narrative of Arsanios’ film *Reverse Shot* lies in the collaborative and dialogical nature of the research driving it. This aspect is not new to the artist’s work, as collaboration featured the three previous films in the *Who is Afraid of Ideology* series, as well as previous experiments by other artists. The *98 Weeks* initiative is the

³⁵⁶ Uroskie, Andrew V.: *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*. Chicago, London 2014. P. 5.

most notable example of this. *98 Weeks* began in 2007 as a para-academic project, co-founded with Mirena Arsanios, aiming to “continue what an academic environment offers” while simultaneously creating an entirely different structure.³⁵⁷ At the time, the artist had just completed a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Arts in London. She aimed to establish an artist-run structure that promoted artistic practices and fostered a research community focused on specific areas of knowledge, which could then translate into political action. By setting a deadline every 98 weeks (i.e. almost every two years, minus two weeks of holidays), the project aimed to deepen specific research topics. The project achieved this through various formats, including conversations with visiting scholars, seminars, reading groups, and walks through the city of Beirut. Indeed, she closely tied it to Beirut, holding meetings in various locations throughout the city. This exemplifies the ‘inside’ commitment Arsanios has maintained throughout the years. It demonstrates how she grounds her activities in Lebanon as well, not solely focusing on the ‘outside’.

Research topics have included social and spatial practices in Beirut and the narratives they reveal, such as the history of publishing in the Arab world, or the modernization of the Arabic language. Each time, international artists and scholars were invited to contribute to the event, its discussions, and its outcome. Thus, the cooperative nature of the initiative linked a local project to an international network. In the interview I had with her, Arsanios stated that organizational difficulties, particularly related to funding, brought the project to a halt in 2017 after several editions.³⁵⁸ This highlights the practical challenges that artists face when trying to create a research environment ‘outside’ academia. They also lose access to the steady funding that comes with breaking free from the constraints and compromises of the academic environment. To continue her research, Arsanios returned to an academic context. This decision was not accidental. Her path was similar to that of Jumana Abboud.

Upon returning to academia after an extended period ‘outside’ it, she decided to pursue a PhD. As a result, she enrolled at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna. The artist recalled as follows this decision in the interview I had with her: “I had been trying to initiate a research project with other artists. But the structure was unsustainable, precarious. I needed a

³⁵⁷ “March Meeting 2018: ‘Active Forms’-Marwa Arsanios, Dale Harding, Naeem Mohaiemen & Tarek Abou El Fetouh”, YouTube, uploaded by Sharjah Art Foundation, February 8th 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EdxapjEKMM>

³⁵⁸ Arsanios, Marwa: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, May 6th 2023.

break from always having to sustain and support, and hold the structure together. I think the PhD was a way to be inside an institution, and at the same time have the support of the institution and continue to do my own research and going in-depth into that. And the PhD gives you the time”.³⁵⁹ Arsanios claims that this experience has enabled her to articulate issues such as research ethics and knowledge production in a more complex way. Reentering an academic environment involves joining a community that rigorously examines such issues. Likewise, it means bringing to an institutional level what was previously independent research. In addition, Arsanios has taught at several academic institutions, including the Netherlands Academy of Fine Arts. She participates to podcasts (‘parergons’) and to various workshops, often organized in Germany, where she resides, but also in Lebanon, for example, at the Beirut Art Center in 2017. In general, then, I argue that also as an artist-researcher, she occupies a ‘between’ position, seeking to engage with actors both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the academic field, as well as the professional art world.

This is evident in the series *Who is Afraid of Ideology*, begun in 2017, of which *Reverse Shot* is the fourth chapter. The title of the series is a provocation. It reflects the historical context of the 1990s, a period marked by the end of the Cold War and the apparent conclusion of the major political ideologies that had shaped the 20th century. Here, according to the artist a current of feminism that she labels as “middle-class privileged feminism” or “white corporate feminism”³⁶⁰ has established itself. Arsanios sought to challenge this “liberal feminism” due to its refusal to engage with intersectional discourses and its absence of a clear ideological framework. She aimed to counteract the de-ideologization of Western feminism by giving voice, for instance, to ecofeminist experiments that connect feminist and ecological struggles. The series *Who is Afraid of Ideology* thus studies forms of “self-organization by women resisting exploitation and repression within structures of patriarchy, state, capitalism”.³⁶¹ It aims to connect with grassroots organizations dealing with ecology, land distribution, agriculture, community building, and feminist politics worldwide.

Arsanios’ engagement with these realities hinges on trust, dialogue, and her own positioning. In fact, she positions herself as an interlocutor of different political realities. She engages with

³⁵⁹ Ibidem.

³⁶⁰ “Artist Talk Marwa Arsanios at Heidelberger Kunstverein”, YouTube, uploaded by Heidelberger Kunstverein HDKV, March 16th 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYVXkn_82lM

³⁶¹ Arsanios, Marwa / et. al.: *Marwa Arsanios: Matter of Alliances*. Heidelberg 2023. P. 15.

these realities, cultivating a dialogical dimension that forms the foundation of her films, which document her explorations and conversations with activists from diverse contexts. By translating conversations into films, she actively mediates local struggles, extracting them from their contexts and presenting them on an international stage. I argue that this highlights the unique role of mediator she assumes in her position of ‘betweenness’. Arsanios gets in contact with grassroots organizations. According to the definition of the scholar Atteqa Ali, grassroots organizations are “deeply ingrained in the local communities from which they emerge”.³⁶² Arsanios intervenes precisely on the “deeply ingrained” local character of the organizations she collaborates with, films, and meets. As a mediator, she introduces these grassroots organizations to the international network of global art. She showcases their stories in international festivals and art exhibitions. These exhibitions often include participatory initiatives that expand the organizations’ reach. I demonstrated this with the exhibition in London and its initiatives in Peckham and within The Mosaic Rooms, such as the Reading Room.

The first chapter of the series, *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 1* (2017)³⁶³ is set in the autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq. Here, Arsanios meets activists and fighters from the local Kurdish women’s movement. She engages in conversation with them and juxtaposes excerpts of their discussions about their fight for equal rights and political self-determination with shots of the snow-covered mountainous landscapes that serve as the backdrop to their struggle. The second chapter continues to explore an independent Kurdish community.³⁶⁴ It moves to the ecological women’s village *Jinwar*, which means “women’s place/land”, situated in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria (Rojava). Here, a group of women from the independent Kurdish women’s movement has created a place that welcomes all women in need from the region and offers a safe refuge for them and eventually their children, while men are not allowed. The village follows ideals of ecological self-sufficiency and collective usage of the land. During her prolonged stay in *Jinwar*, Arsanios filmed the everyday life of its inhabitants, their daily challenges, debates, and activities.

The third chapter began when Arsanios organized a three-day convention of women farmers and ecological feminists at the Warsaw Biennial in 2019.³⁶⁵ People from different regions,

³⁶² Ali 2020, previously quoted. P. 100.

³⁶³ Arsanios, Marwa: *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 1*, 2017, Iraq, 18 min, Video HD.

³⁶⁴ Arsanios, Marwa: *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 2*, 2019, Syria, 38 min, Video HD.

³⁶⁵ Arsanios, Marwa: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 3: Micro Resistencias*, 2020, Colombia, 31 min, Video HD.

involved in different struggles or social and agricultural experiments came together. Among them were women from the Pijao community, an indigenous community in the Tolima region of Colombia. They invited her to Colombia, where the third film takes place. In Colombia, Arsanios encounters practices of saving seeds, replanting endangered crops, and strategies to resist the harmful policies of capitalist land exploitation. The film shows how *Who's Afraid of Ideology* has evolved over the years as an international network of solidarity and knowledge exchange, with the artist acting as its spokesperson and initiator. The three-day convention that Arsanios organized in Warsaw served as a forum for activists and the artist herself, coming from different geographical locations, to expand their network of knowledge. I argue that this activity, along with other events such as workshops and discussions held in conjunction with the exhibitions, exemplifies the working mechanism of Arsanios' works. The films are the final product that bears the artist's signature. However, both during the production process and afterwards, Arsanios' works initiate a dimension of cooperation, activity, and collective speculation that transcends mere artistic products.

I argue that one of the most striking features of Arsanios' projects is their highly developed speculative aspect. On the one hand, their aim is to make a tangible contribution to social impact. On the other hand, as the case of *Reverse Shot* shows, their development often takes the form of thought experiments. The Reading Room in London exemplifies the importance of such a speculative process by offering a laboratory for both individual and collective reflection, underpinning the various projects. This does not mean that visual representation is ultimately secondary in her art, but that the theoretical background always intertwines with the aesthetic components. Indeed, *Reverse Shot*, the fourth chapter of the series *Who is Afraid of Ideology* was created in this perspective. The spirit of cooperative knowledge production that drives the project builds on a methodology that Arsanios has previously explored. This time, however, it takes place in Lebanon.

The film's personal character stems not only from its setting in the artist's homeland. More precisely, the village where the artist's father was born is located in the area that the film explores. In previous films, Arsanios assumed the role of a guest in areas where she was not a native. She presented herself as a potential ally but found herself in a community that was not her own, where she had to establish a relationship of trust. *Reverse Shot* is different. The narrative does not explicitly reveal the personal character of the project, but it remains a

fundamental element in constructing the work. Nevertheless, the artist serves as a mediator ‘between’ the local and the international. She provides a platform for local voices, and in the process of conducting research, she has probably experienced a process of reconnection, similar to the previous case studies. Arsanios was born in Washington DC to Lebanese parents, studied between London and Maastricht, and currently lives in Berlin, although she has lived, worked in Lebanon, and still maintains an essential connection to the country. In Lebanon she has been involved in long-term projects such as *98 weeks*. In the context of *Reverse Shot*, she maintains this ‘between’ position that arises from her biography, acting as a mediator. She translates the messages and discussions from the film into an international language, enabling local issues to transcend their specific context and establish connections with similar situations elsewhere, ‘outside’.

The film’s central theme explores the feasibility of transforming a piece of land in Lebanon into a communal space, shifting it away from capitalist exploitation to serve the community's needs. The film acts as a platform to foster debate about this possibility. It presents a summary of the possible procedure and a research logbook that includes all the different actors involved. It brings together the discussions and conversations of the participants. Through her film and related projects, such as the billboards and the Reading Room in London, Arsanios serves as a mediator and spokesperson for a collaborative initiative and experiment that engages various experts and participants.

9.3. Analysis of *Reverse Shot*

The film opens with digital animation and seamlessly transitions into a blend of filmed and digitally animated scenes. Nadim Choufi created all the animated scenes in the movie, maintaining a consistent style throughout. Choufi is a visual artist from Beirut, which already shows the local network that Arsanios could rely on for the movie. The graphics are computer generated and 3D. The first animated scene depicts a plot of land that Arsanios’ team is trying to turn into a *Waqf*. Someone from the group later on describes the *Waqf* as the freezing of the ownership of a land (estate) for the benefit of a social cause.³⁶⁶ The camera zooms quickly

³⁶⁶ The concept of *Waqf* is historically linked to Islamic civilizations. Scholars Shadiya Mohamed S. Baqutayan, Aini Suzana Ariffin, Magda Ismail A. Mohsin, and Akbariah Mohd Mahdzir have devoted an article about it. Here they write that the *Waqf* “is a financial charitable act established by withholding immovable and movable properties

through a small forest under a white sky, past some trees and bushes, and ends up at a pile of stones left over from mining (00:00:30). Indeed, the land used to be a heavily exploited quarry. The animation transforms the real landscape into a floating environment, resembling graphics found in video games or animated renderings. Certain frames feature intricate details, showcasing oak trees in a spectrum of hues and rocks occasionally adorned with vibrant green moss. Others appear more abstract, like the numerous ground depressions that repeat throughout the animation. This first scene ends abruptly, transitioning to a shot of the actual landscape.

A voice in the background introduces some reflections the movie will explore. “Let’s imagine a landscape that wishes to separate from the private property regime. It flies off demanding to be in a non-ownership status or beyond ownership. It is a separatist land. It has been quarried for 50 years. Its soil is compacted and full of small pebbles and rubble. Now it demands separation from a property regime that has imprisoned it for more than one hundred years” (00:01:20). This introduction establishes from the outset that its reflections encompass not only a human interlocutor but also nonhuman elements and the landscape itself, which the film presents as a living, sentient entity. Most importantly, it introduces one of the most important elements of the film: the voice-over. It will be a constant element throughout the movie, accompanying the various images and linking the themes that emerge from the discussions and the contributions of the participants in the collective research to the natural landscape. What is remarkable about these comments is that they are all in English, except for some subtitles. This is not a trivial choice. Indeed, the film addresses an international audience and adapts local issues by translating them into a *lingua franca*. The use of English makes the work more accessible to a mixed audience. I argue that it also highlights the artist’s ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ positioning - her ‘betweenness’ - which persists even as she engages with issues that pertain to Lebanon. Along with the introductory voice-over, the film shows an aerial view of the landscape, showing the quarry’s open and dry space, where rock extraction once took place (00:01:30). Above the quarry, there is a green area full of trees. The following scene shows a

to perpetually spend its revenue to fulfill public or family needs, based on the preferences and conditions set by the founder”. They state that the *Waqf* “contributed to the building of Islamic civilization; through which many mosques, schools, and educational centers were built along with private and public libraries, scientific and research centers and other fields in different walks of life”. Finally, they tell how “The process of *Waqf* continued until the Ottoman era, when the Sultans and governors of the Ottoman state expanded the scope of *Waqf*, who introduce administrative formations for its supervision it, they issued multiple instructions to organize its affairs”. Arsanios’ work will explore the Ottoman period, and how the *Waqf* was realized then. Baqutayan, Shadiya Mohamed Sale/ et. al.: “Waqf Between the Past and Present”. In: *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 9(4) 2018. P. 149-150.

man digging while another person examines the ground. They are studying the porosity of the earth, the passage of water, and collect samples in plastic bags to later analyze in the laboratory (00:02:30). The film features the artist's voice, but she never appears on screen, unlike previous films from the series.

Then the movie shows three people sitting near the abandoned boulders (fig. 26). Their discussion focuses on the desire to transform the land from private property into a commune, a *Masha'a*. Their dialogue soon becomes complex. Sitting on the rocks, holding papers that appear to be scripts and references, they discuss the concept of the earth as a living entity and the danger of fetishizing it (00:03:40). Later, the film presents images of the landscape and the ongoing studies of the scientists while their discussion plays in voice-over. These studies include continuous sampling of the terrain and aerial footage taken by a drone. One speaker suggests examining the Ottoman code to secure the land's status and ensure that only those without ownership can use it. For this reason, *Reverse Shot* seeks latent potential in the past and explores the Ottoman past in a similar way to *Mapping a Transformation* by Lamia Joreige, and *Ismyrna* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. This passage reveals one of the functions of the collective research and discussion that Arsanios' film presents. Rather than looking exclusively to the future, the *Waqf* experiment looks to the past for possible solutions to alternative land management. This approach would also legitimize the group's experiment by creating a connection between the past and a potential future. It is noteworthy that this historical research focuses on the Ottoman colonial past, during which the management of the land was still influenced by the presence of an occupying power. Moreover, historian Fawwaz Traboulsi highlights that this historical period was marked by ongoing disputes over land ownership. He writes, for example, that late 19th century was a moment in which "conflicts over landed property broke out everywhere and dominated the period".³⁶⁷ Hence, this search into the past then materializes with a series of scenes.

The first one consists in an oral history passage. An older man sits on a chair in the shade of a row of trees and begins to tell his story (00:06:25). The shot remains fixed, showing him in the peaceful setting (fig. 27). The man talks about the land registrar of the past and answers the artist's questions about how the land was once divided. He explains that it was under the French Mandate that a paper register began to be kept. He states that before that time, "even though

³⁶⁷ Traboulsi 2007, previously quoted. P. 13

there was no land registry, the villagers knew where their land was. If you were using a piece of land and had your hand on it, that was the most important sign of ownership”. I contend that his contribution thus has a substantial pedagogical value. It serves to contextualize a specific historical period for those unfamiliar with the history of the region, while at the same time supporting the research of the group led by Arsanios. In the chapter on Hadjithomas and Joreige’s *Ismyrna*, I explored the concept of ‘microhistory’ as defined by historian Mostafa Minaqwi: a way of writing history that does not dwell on macro-events, but gives importance to individual memories that are usually considered insignificant to tell certain historical periods. I argue that also the passage of oral history in Arsanios’ film represents this concept, since it tells about macro-events (the Ottoman handling of the land in Lebanon) through individual memories (of the interviewed man). I argue that it also aligns with what historian Fawwaz Traboulsi attempted to do in his work. Traboulsi writes that “writings on Lebanon, and perception of Lebanon, have often sacrificed economic and social history in favor of an exclusively political perspective”. He then adds that “in order to avoid this political fixation and bring out the underlying economic and social factors that have also shaped Lebanon’s development, a political-economy approach is likely to contribute to a more comprehensive historiography”.³⁶⁸ Indeed, Arsanios’ oral history passage offers a contribution of a “political-economic approach” ‘from below’ through the words of the interviewee, who tells a part of the country’s economic history from his personal perspective and individual knowledge.

To maintain visual continuity with the concept expressed by the interviewee, Arsanios then includes scenes of people working in the area. The film captures a scene of olive harvesting, focusing on the process of climbing the trees and collecting and selecting the fruit (00:08:00). Meanwhile, the conversation with the old man continues in the background. This piece of oral history is juxtaposed with subsequent scenes that show research into ancient ways of dividing and using land, conducted in Ottoman archives. The interview thus gives voice to a memory that remains alive. It shows how a particular way of relating to the land, based on equal sharing and agreements between inhabitants rather than exploitation, still exists in people’s minds. If the aim of Arsanios’ project of exploring the past is to uncover hidden potential, the memories of those who lived through it show that this reactivation is indeed possible.

³⁶⁸ Traboulsi 2007, previously quoted. P. viii.

Arsanios chooses to legitimize human memory over that of the archive. The film's construction, particularly the sequence selection, implies that the Ottoman archive simply reinforces what the man articulates in the interview. Hence, I argue that the film compares two different types of memory. The first memory refers to the archives, which hold the bureaucratic records of the Ottoman Empire, particularly concerning land use regulations. It is important to note that the archives are a product of the "synergetic machine of imperial violence",³⁶⁹ in this case the Ottoman one, as described by scholar Ariella Azoulay. On the other side, the interviewee provides evidence of a second memory: the collective memory existing within a community. Scholar Maurice Halbwachs has showed in his study on the localization of memories that when it comes to collective memory "there is no difference between older memories and more recent ones".³⁷⁰ No matter how much time has passed, memories that express a community's identity tend to stay with its members. I argue that this is the case with the old man in Arsanios' interview. In her film, the artist positions the collective memory – though distant in time, yet vibrant in the old man's words – right alongside the imperial memory held within the Ottoman archives. However, the memory of the empire serves the memory of the people, not the other way around. This legitimates the people's attachment to the land, just like the scenes of work in the fields, which show a real sense of community through collective work.

A second scene that materializes the research group's search for the past occurs in an old archive of Ottoman documents (00:09:35). The camera inspects the rooms, the shelves hosting the old, yellowed registers, and explores them closely. Meanwhile, a man's voice in the background talks about the ideals that guided land use in the Ottoman era. He explains: "Everything was *Masha'a* in the Ottoman Empire. In absolute terms, everything was *Masha'a*. Everything belonged to God, because in Islamic theology the agricultural land belongs only to God". The man then continues by telling the theory of *Istikhlaf* to which this mentality is linked, an Islamic concept that looks at the way in which God entrusted Adam with the earth. On the other hand, it also explains how some families "who exercised a certain role within the framework of the Ottoman tax renting system, claimed their appropriation rights as farmers". Another woman responds saying that "the peasant revolution rearranged this reality, and the

³⁶⁹ Azoulay 2019, previously quoted. P. 60.

³⁷⁰ Halbwachs, Maurice / Coser, Lewis A.: *On Collective Memory*. Chicago 1992. P. 52

peasants claimed that they were the ones who established an intimate relationship with this land. An intimacy of proximity, of cultivation, and therefore this land was part of their identity, their experience, their life in common” (00:11:25).

Thus, the film presents the history of land use on Lebanese territory to the viewer through a dialogue. The movie shows the process of collecting data, which includes exploring archives, direct study of the territory, and oral history. However, it emphasizes as the most important aspect the discussions between the various project participants, and the exchange of knowledge and opinions. Arsanios underlines visually and conceptually the collective dimension of the experience of group research. Then, the film presents a new animation after a scene in which some people return to the quarry to study its dimensions and plan possible works (00:13:18). In the background, the following statement is hearable: “If we think of social formations in geological terms, like sediments, for example, we can start to think of inheritance and the accumulation of property as something that can only be changed by tectonic plate movement – or an earthquake”. Thus, the film portrays the land as a living entity that actively participates in decisions about its use and the transfer of ownership between generations. The 3D animation depicts rocks on a meadow trembling and touching each other, as if they were sentient beings. The graphic style developed by Nadim Choufi remains consistent. It showcases almost photographic precision in rendering details like the varying shades of the rocks while adopting a more abstract approach to elements like the terrain.

Arsanios consulted with researchers at the Geological Museum of the American University of Beirut to provide a scientific basis for the geological arguments. She films the meeting, which features the film. This allows the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the subject along with the artist (00:14:00). The museum has existed since 1868, just two years after the university was founded. The camera captures footage of it, adding more data to the artist’s research. Meanwhile, a woman explains the geological origins of the quarry selected for the *Waqf* experiment. She details Lebanon’s geological history, explaining how the abundance of fossils highlights its submersion beneath the sea for millions of years. The camera focuses on some of these fossils in the museum’s collection preserved in boxes among which it wanders (fig. 28).

In another scene, one researcher microscopically examines soil and various samples from the quarry (00:15:30). Arsanios films his meticulous work up close, capturing glimpses of the microbes seen through the machine. The video then shifts its focus to the landscape surrounding

the quarry, as the project participants discuss concepts of ownership and inheritance, considering their implications for all inhabitants of the soil, including microbes (00:19:30). This moment represents one of several instances in the film that reveals a more-than-human dimension, both visually and through the off-screen dialogue. Other scenes, for example, depict the undergrowth of green spaces in detail, with close-ups of mushrooms and moss providing a comprehensive view of the ground's ecosystem (00:24:00, fig. 29). The digitally animated sequences then reproduce similar detail. I argue that such scenes extend to a more-than-human part the collective dimension and the discussion about alternative ways to manage the land. Indeed, the research project portrayed in *Reverse Shot* aims to establish a new relationship with the territory and all its inhabitants, including plants and other living beings. This approach seeks to move away from the capitalist mentality of exploiting the land previously featuring the quarry. Arsanios' previous art projects had already explored the relationship between the environment and both human and non-human elements. One such project, *Resilient Weeds*,³⁷¹ showcases the artist's technical skill through realistic pen drawings of plants that have thrived in the hostile environments created by Beirut's waste crisis since 2015.

Reverse Shot proposes a new contract with nature, or to use an expression coined by the scholar Michel Serres, a new 'natural contract'. Serres suggests that "nature behaves as a subject", and it can be engaged in dialogue to establish a relationship and reach an agreement.³⁷² I argue that this is the type of approach that characterizes the action of the research group active in Arsanios' film. Indeed, the scenes that closely examine even the smallest inhabitants of the quarry visually convey that the quarry is not empty. These beings "behave as subjects" (as Serres would write) and thus serve as legitimate participants in the dialogue. Hence, the researchers contemplate extensively how to establish a relationship with the territory, treating it as a living and sentient entity composed of its inhabitants, claiming not to fetishize it, and assessing to try to establish a level of equality and exchange.

Visually, I argue that Arsanios' inclusion of the more-than-human universe of the territory through close-ups and long shots transforms the film into an experiment in 'multispecies cinema'. Scholar Isabelle Carbonell defines 'multispecies cinema' as a way of showing the environment as a "pluriverse" that "acknowledges that multiple ontologies coexist, and that they

³⁷¹ Arsanios, Marwa: *Resilient Weeds*, 2016, Pen on paper, 21x29.7cm, Private collection.

³⁷² Serres, Michel / MacArthur, Elizabeth / Paulson, William: *The Natural Contract*. Ann Arbor 2008. P. 36.

are negotiating ongoingness in heterogeneity”. She continues writing that “in this pluriverse, multispecies cinema addresses complex systems and lifeworlds that contain historical junctures and multiple entanglements between humans [...] and more-than-humans”.³⁷³ Arsanios’ film explores the “pluriverse” that lives in the quarry, for examples in the scenes in the laboratory with the images from the microscopes and in the close-up scenes in the undergrowth. Here the film shows the “multiple ontologies” (as Carbonell would put it) that coexist in the small territory. The film utilizes 3D animations to depict changes in the quarry’s animal and plant life. These animations illustrate how these entities are integral to the area’s history and highlight their contributions to the evolving landscape. Moreover, they reveal how these beings inhabit the “junctures” and “entanglements” ‘between’ humans and more-than-human entities, emphasizing the complex relationships that shape the environment.

In her film, Arsanios observes the more-than-human inhabitants of the quarry and the soil they inhabit. I argue that the research participants practice a land care that aligns with the suggestions of philosopher María Puig de la Bellacasa. de la Bellacasa proposes studying new possibilities for ecological practices that consider the affective relationship between the human and non-human dimensions, with particular attention given to soil care practice. The philosopher proposes a human-soil relationship based on “care”, which she defines as the act of “fostering of the endurance of objects through time (maintenance over breakdown)”, such as the preservation of life in the quarry that comes after the destructive effects of excavating activities. According to the philosopher, “care time entails ‘making time’ to get involved with a diversity of timelines (such as the ones involved in the living soil) that make the web of more than human agencies”.³⁷⁴ Indeed, *Reverse Shot* engages with different timelines, particularly by examining the geological history of the potential *Waqf*’s territory. Arsanios’ project focuses on considering parallel histories and temporalities and finding ways to bring them together. *Reverse Shot* aims to integrate, to return to de la Bellacasa’s words, into a “lively soil that can only exist through a multispecies community of biota that contributes to its creation”.³⁷⁵ Shifting away from a mindset of capitalist exploitation requires individuals to become active, to become contributing

³⁷³ Demos, T. J. / Scott, Emily Eliza / Banerjee, Subhankar: *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*. London, New York 2021. P. 139.

³⁷⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, previously quoted. P. 171.

³⁷⁵ Ivi. P. 189.

members of this “multispecies community of biota.” This movement reflects a core aspect of Arsanios’ practice.

The use of technology makes possible the study of the more-than-human. The film openly displays the tools that enhance human visual perception; they are readily apparent. In one particular scene, a camera mounted on a rock autonomously pans and focuses on various points in its surroundings, visibly facilitating the analysis of the landscape (00:24:15). On more than one occasion, the project participants question how to avoid turning the representation of territory into a means of control. However, scenes like this one featuring the autonomously operating camera, along with the drone shots at the film’s outset, illustrate how technology aids in mapping and subsequently controlling the territory.

I argue that these scenes constitute an example of ‘operational images’. ‘Operational image’ is a term that first appeared with the artist Harun Farocki. In the first part of his three-part installation *Eye/Machine* he defines them as “images without a social goal, not for edification, not for reflection”.³⁷⁶ Scholar Volker Pantenburg describes the term as follows: “What the operational image does it that it performs work. It is [...] etymologically and literally speaking a ‘working image’”.³⁷⁷ They are images created by machines to perform a certain action: “they produce and destroy, they guide military and non-military vehicles, perform an ever-growing number of multiple tasks”. Finally, “subsequent to the increasing replacement of hands by robots and machines in industrial production, the operational image is a key player in today’s replacement of the eye”.³⁷⁸ Indeed, in Arsanios’ film, some of the representations of the territory are entrusted to technological tools. The scene which frames the camera left in the green area shows how the eye of the machine works autonomously. The ‘operational image’ in this case take on a metaphorical meaning. The discussion of the participants in the project often focuses on methods of representing the territory that do not express domination, and the difficulty to emancipate from a dimension of supremacy and exploitation by humans over the territory. The intervention of the machines, which at times recall the images of the “investigation of operational images located in the context of warfare and military operations”³⁷⁹ by Harun

³⁷⁶ Eder, Jens / Klonk, Charlotte: *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict*. Manchester 2017. P. 49. Farocki, Harun: *Eye/Machine*, 2000, Germany, 23 min, video-BetaSp.

³⁷⁷ Ivi. P. 55.

³⁷⁸ Ibidem.

³⁷⁹ Ivi. P. 49.

Farocki, show almost ironically the difficulty of getting out of this type of perspective. They show a compromise that the project's participant must do to pursue their objective.

Overall, the film's collaborative research branches into various directions, providing the project with a foundation rooted in multiple disciplines. The geological, archaeological, agricultural, and legal studies ultimately spark a discussion among the group on how to effectively plan and implement the project within the quarry. When returning to the Ottoman archives, the film delves into the question of the *Waqf*, examining its characteristics and the potential for reinstating past laws (00:25:30) would entail. For this reason, the film once again features local residents who, like the previously interviewed elder, share their knowledge of how the land was once managed. This explains the film's title. Indeed, *Reverse Shot* is a metaphor for the possibility of rewinding history. The movie portrays this backward movement as a plea from all inhabitants – both human and non-human – who have left their mark on the territory. They call for a reversal of events, seeking a return to a time before the capitalist exploitation of the land. Among the various envisaged strategies to reach this goal, the participants plan to increase organic matter in the territory. As one of them says: “We want to increase organic matter inside it to enhance the chances for usership. I chose a place where we can create an ecosystem that will take the form of an oasis” (00:26:15). The film shows his work with an excavator in this spot of the quarry. Then, a discussion on the process of derivatization and communalization of the land continues.

The film ends with a final 3D animation sequence. Starting from a white background, the images on the screen move through a graphic representation of the quarry (00:32:00). This time, the entire area is framed from a distance, but removed from its surrounding context (fig. 30). The film presents an abstract landscape immersed in emptiness, featuring the ground where quarry rocks and some trees stand, along with the various soil layers examined during the research. Finally, the camera moves away, leaving behind the small piece of land, which becomes smaller and smaller against the white background until it disappears. I argue that these final images represent the metaphorical and symbolic value of the entire research project. The territory remains an abstraction. In reality, insufficient funding hindered the realization of the *Waqf* project. documenta 15 funded the film, but there were not enough funds to purchase the land and carry out the plans. Hence, it remains a thought experiment, almost a legal case, documented and motivated, but ultimately abstract and suspended in the void, as the final

animation shows. The film primarily serves as a testament to the research process. It highlights the methods of collective discussion and collaboration, showcasing the dialogue established with experts from various fields to develop the case study.

I contend that this quality of serving as a testimony also defines the essence of the film. The movie has an ambiguous form: it is a documentary insofar as it traces the political and geological history of the place and the lives of its inhabitants over time. It also includes animated sequences that show the artist's re-elaboration of the data collected during personal and collective research. I argue that the film's ambiguity follows scholar Gilberto Perez definition from his work *The Material Ghost - Films and Their Medium*, where he states that "every film has an aspect of documentary and an aspect of fiction".³⁸⁰

Additionally, the film features meta-scenes that depict its production process, which I have previously termed 'operational images'. Overall, I argue that Arsanios' work aligns most closely with the concept of a '*dispositif critique*', as defined by documentary studies expert Aline Caillet. Caillet borrows the concept of *dispositif* from the philosopher Michel Foucault, and defines it as a type of artistic project which contains within itself the processes of its own creation while generating creative experiences. She explains that "what it [GP: the artistic project] produces cannot be dissociated from how it produces it, and on the other hand, what it produces would not exist without it". Finally, she adds that the device "is in essence something which acts and produces action. It incites, directs".³⁸¹ As I demonstrated in my analysis, Arsanios' film presents precisely the process of its creation and could not "be dissociated from the way in which it produces it". It steers towards a specific 'action' with social significance, promotes critical reflection on land use, and functions as both a testament to the research process and a call to action. Overall, I argue that Arsanios' film-*dispositif* serves three functions: documenting (collecting data), re-elaborating (sequencing and reordering the data), and imagining (presenting a certain vision through digital processing and dialogues between participants). Finally, this chapter of the series *Who is Afraid of Ideology* distinguishes itself from the previous ones by showcasing the artist's active participation and initiation of the social project. However, beyond the artist's individual contribution, the collaborative dimension of the artistic research behind *Reverse Shot* is its most important feature.

³⁸⁰ Perez, Gilberto: *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium*. Baltimore 1998. P. 43.

³⁸¹ Caillet 2014, previously quoted. P. 18.

9.4. The Role of Cooperative Research in Shaping the Film's Between Character

My analysis showed how the fundamental aspect of the research behind Arsanios' film is collaboration, with numerous individuals collectively forming a group. This aligns with the ideals that inspired documenta 15, for which *Reverse Shot* was originally created. It aligns in particular with the concept of *lumbung*, as seen in the chapter dedicated to the work of Jumana Abboud.³⁸² *Reverse Shot* is a project that involves a vast network of individuals. This encompasses not only the participants who contribute to the research, but also those featuring the discussions presented, including those who do not directly appear in the film. The credits at the end of the film show the list of collaborators. It includes Maya Dghaidi, who helped with the legal research, Wissam Saade, who helped with historical research and co-writing, and Amami Dagher and Wael Yammine from Soils Permaculture Association Lebanon,³⁸³ who both appear in the movie. It goes on with further contributors: Joanna Dammour from the AUB (American University of Beirut) Geological Museum, Magda Nammour from the Bibliothèque Orientale in Beirut, Marie Nour Hechaime, and the artists who co-created the music, the 3D animation (Nadim Choufi), the color grading, the sound mix, the music and so on, up until the readers of the scripts.

Almost every film is a collaborative effort. What distinguishes Arsanios' film is that each participant actively contributes to both the research and the development of the case study: the *Waqf* experiment. I argue that this case study demonstrates that, as Michel Serres writes about contemporary scientific research, "the site of knowledge production is never a relation between an individual and his object, but rather one between a growing body of researchers checking on one another and a carved-out specialty, defined and accepted by them".³⁸⁴ Indeed, in the film

³⁸² As seen in that chapter, ruangrupa organized documenta 15 around the concept of *lumbung*: "the Indonesian word for a communal rice-barn, where the surplus harvest is stored for the benefit of the community". The inspiring concept was derived from a localized phenomenon in Indonesia, yet it was proposed as a potential framework for an international discourse on themes such as collaboration, cooperation, and an art form that emerges from collective action rather than individual expression.

³⁸³ To quote directly from the association's website: "SOILS Permaculture Association Lebanon is a facilitator for the teaching, training and sharing of skills and resources related to sustainable and environment-friendly practices. SOILS is dedicated to applying Permaculture ethics and principles in design systems that work with nature - not against it - to provide food, energy and shelter in both rural and urban communities".

Last visited: 06.10.2024: <https://www.soils-permaculture-lebanon.com/about-soils.html>

³⁸⁴ Serres, MacArthur, and Paulson 2008, previously quoted. P. 20.

Reverse Shot, professionals from diverse fields pool their expertise, each contributing their unique “carved-out specialty” (as Serres would put it), and work together toward a shared objective. Together they give a scientific basis to the social and ecological project started by Arsanios, the *Waqf*. The “site of knowledge production” therefore occurs through a collective and cooperative process.

Arsanios’ work develops as a thought experiment, but also seeks a concrete social impact (although it never fully materializes itself). I argue that, for this reason, it can be considered a ‘community-based project’. The scholar Atteqa Ali, in her study of social and ‘community-based art projects’ in the Mena region, defines these types of works as those that introduce “elements of participation, storytelling, community activation, duration, and dialecticism”.³⁸⁵ These are actually all elements that *Reverse Shot* displays. The film tells of a project that saw the ‘participation’ of various people, ‘storytelling’ (especially through oral history passages), ‘community activation’ (in the various discussions that take place in the quarry). Thus, The film serves as a document of this process and a reinterpretation of it. It is not merely a documentation of the work of researchers, experts, and knowledge bearers. The film is what actually remains from the experiment, regardless of whether the *Waqf* is realized or not.

In this context, Arsanios plays a particular role. First and foremost, she becomes the spokesperson for a group. Through the film she conveys the collective message, giving it a form. I argue that, even in terms of research, she positions herself as a collaborator with these experts, as she does not possess the same level of scientific expertise herself. Scholar Lucy R. Lippard writes in an essay on artists working on ecological issues (just like Arsanios with *Reverse Shot*) that “working with scientists, artists can even provide innovative models for new approaches”.³⁸⁶ This reflection suggests that the *Waqf* project is not solely the artist’s responsibility. Rather, the artist plays a role in bringing together different forms of knowledge. She mediates ‘between’ different experts, and contributes to the project by making the film. In her artistic re-elaboration, I argue that emerges the ‘model for a new approach’ that Lippard refers to, which Arsanios advocates for in the movie’s message.

Overall, Arsanios serves as a mediator in two ways. First, she mediates within the *Waqf* project’s research community, working at a local level. Second, she acts as a spokesperson for

³⁸⁵ Ali 2020, previously quoted. P. 57.

³⁸⁶ Demos, Scott, and Banerjee 2021, previously quoted. P. 47.

the story of the project at an international level, in the ‘outside’. I had already pointed this out in my analysis of her parallel projects, such as the posters and Reading Rooms she organizes alongside her exhibitions. These initiatives add to the mediation already in action in the movie. The scholar Tom Holert writes that artists-researchers “become mediators or transmitters of knowledge to a nonscience, nonacademic public”.³⁸⁷ In the case of Arsanios, she mediates indeed ‘between’ the scientific community behind *Reverse Shot* and the general public who views its final result. Arsanios takes on the responsibility of transmitting the knowledge created through dialogue ‘between’ the different communities.

Thus, the artist’s capacity to mediate is a defining feature of her ‘between’ positioning. Arsanios originally conceived *Reverse Shot* as a project aimed at addressing local issues within the context of Lebanon. The project examines the potential of a local landscape, investigating its history and exploring strategies that are based on its characteristics. However, it is also capable of transcending those boundaries. The fact that it was first presented abroad demonstrates the project’s ambition to create a case study that can also be applied in other geographical contexts. I argue that the parallel projects, including the posters and, most notably, the Reading Room and workshops organized by the artist, clearly demonstrate this ambition. Another defining characteristic of the work’s international character is the English language’s prevalence during the film. This makes it a product that a diverse audience can understand. The overarching narrative is straightforward and provides historical and scientific elements that are essential for those who are unfamiliar with the history of the Lebanese territory. At times, the film encourages viewers to engage with elements that may seem speculative, requiring reflection to grasp the full meaning of the work. In conclusion, the work exemplifies Arsanios’ positioning as an artist-researcher, from her position of ‘betweenness’, open to transnational dialogues while maintaining a strong connection to Lebanon.

9.5. Conclusions

This last case study further confirmed the common thread I identified throughout this research. Through my analysis of Marwa Arsanios’ *Reverse Shot*, I observed that the artist assumes a dual role as both researcher and mediator, a dynamic that arises from her own

³⁸⁷ Holert, Tom: *Knowledge beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics*. Berlin 2020. P. 187.

situation of ‘betweenness’ and is evident in the work itself. One of the questions I started with in the introduction to this chapter was: What is the role that art institutions can play in fostering an artist’s network and the mediation strategies that emerge from her position of ‘betweenness’? Throughout this research, I presented an overview of various art institutions across different countries, both in Europe and beyond, highlighting their distinct approaches. In the case of Arsanios, I examined a very peculiar art space: The Mosaic Rooms. It arises from a state of ‘betweenness’, developing its projects in parallel while fostering synergy ‘between’ Ramallah and London. I have pointed out how it has different audiences and different goals in each location, but how the London venue sees the Palestinian one as a ‘mother ship’ (Radakovic). However, the two venues enable artists to move ‘between’ locations (as I noted in the chapter on Inas Halabi, who exhibited in both spaces) and support their role in mediation. This became evident in the case of Arsanios and the mediation strategies that she developed in England. This ranged from the posters in Peckham to the Reading Room, which served as a community meeting space activated in various ways. I then highlighted a difference with the Heidelberg site, which is more closely linked to the German art scene.

A second question I started with was how the collective research methodology could eventually illuminate the artist’s situation of ‘betweenness’. *Reverse Shot* tells the story of a project that remains a thought experiment, but also seeks a concrete social impact, both in Lebanon and beyond. The film displays the participation of different people, experts from different fields, bearers of different knowledge. I argued that it promoted a ‘community activation’ in Lebanon (using Atteqa Ali’s words from her studies on social and community-based art projects). When the work travels ‘outside’ Lebanon, the artist finds ways to translate the message in different contexts (with parallel strategies and projects such as the Reading Room), creating connections with different situations. She plays the role of spokesperson for the research group, mediating local narratives in an international context. Once again, I have emphasized how she accomplishes this through a series of ‘parergons,’ akin to the approaches of other artists I discussed in previous chapters. In this way, the experiment that *Reverse Shot* represents travels and lives ‘between’ the local and the international art scene. Even the linguistic choices allow the work to make these journeys and translate its own anti-hegemonic narrative.

The final question I posed in the introduction focused on the potential for constructing an anti-hegemonic narrative through an alternative perspective on the natural landscape. On one hand, I answered by arguing that the film achieves this by employing methodologies previously seen in other case studies, such as oral history. This approach enables the creation of narratives ‘from below’ and expands the scope of historiographical research, aligning with the ideas advocated by Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi in his work on Lebanese history. On the other hand, I have highlighted how an anti-hegemonic narrative also involves the inclusion of a more-than-human universe, with a form of ‘multispecies cinema’ (borrowing the definition from scholar Isabelle Carbonell).

The second section of this dissertation, devoted to case studies, concludes with this analysis of *Reverse Shot* by Marwa Arsanios. The six case studies have revealed a common thread in the answer to the central research question. Beyond the specifics of each case, I have showed how the artists, starting from their position of ‘betweenness’, interpret a double role of researcher and mediator that emerges from their works. In interpreting these roles, I argued that the artists also act in similar ways, which leads to several parallels in their works. The final section of this dissertation will provide a comparative analysis and draw conclusions. In this final section, I will consider the different aspects of the answers to the research question that emerged from the analyses. I will compare and integrate these aspects, while further exploring some theoretical considerations in light of the findings.

Third Section

Final Comparative Analysis

10. Comparative and Conclusive chapter

10.1. Overview on the answers to the key research question

The starting point of my dissertation was a specific key research question: How does the ‘between’ position of an artist influence their visual narrative work about their countries of origin, Lebanon or Palestine? In the introductory section, I discussed the various urgencies that prompted this question and the different issues it encompasses. Throughout my research, I sought to understand what it means for artists to live and work ‘between’ different places, navigating an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. I sought to define the artists’ experience of being ‘between’ and to understand how this affects their artistic practices. To achieve this, I analyzed the artworks themselves, the methods the artists employ to create them, and their unique approaches to various artistic media. Additionally, I explored the role of different art venues in the development and exhibition of these works.

To find the answers to my research question, I considered the work of six artists, three Lebanese and three Palestinians, who live and work in a position of ‘betweenness’. For each artist, I focused on a specific visual narrative artwork they created between the second and third decades of the 21st century. The artworks explore certain historical and cultural aspects of Lebanon and/or Palestine, often presenting perspectives that connect these issues to the broader regional context. To analyze them, I focused on how the works have traveled ‘outside’ Lebanon or Palestine. I examined how the works were presented in exhibitions across various European countries. This allowed me to analyze the artworks in depth, considering their specific presentations in different contexts and the dynamics of the art venues. In examining the concept of ‘betweenness’, I had the option to explore two perspectives: the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’. Ultimately, I decided to focus on the ‘outside’ perspective, as it resonates more with my position as the researcher.

Through the analysis of the case studies, I was able to highlight a common thread that links the works together. I argue that this common thread is the answer to the research question. Also, I contend that it suggests a particular direction within the contemporary art landscape. However, I do not assert that this finding is universally applicable to all contemporary Palestinian or Lebanese contexts, nor do I suggest that it can be easily transferred to other situations of

‘betweenness’ or storytelling artworks. Nevertheless, looking at the works of both Lebanese and Palestinian artists has proven how this direction or common thread can be found in different contexts (even though the histories of Lebanon and Palestine in the modern era are inextricably linked)—the comparison on a methodological level aimed to avoid any exceptionalization. However, my research leaves open the challenge of finding similarities in other contemporary circumstances.

The common thread that my dissertation has highlighted concerns particular roles that the artists cover from their position of ‘betweenness’. My argument responds to the initial hypothesis of the research: that artists find strategies to position themselves and their works in the situation of ‘betweenness’, maintaining a double inscription. These roles are, in fact, the positioning and working strategies I hypothesized and, as hypothesized, I discovered them directly from the analysis of the artworks. I contend that these roles significantly impact how artists create their works. In particular, I observed these influences in how the artists address specific themes and how they present their visual narratives. The word ‘role’, as I shall reiterate, is a key concept. It implies a particular position of responsibility and initiative on the part of the artists. The first role I identified is that of the artist-researcher. I contended that the artists adopt this role based on my examination of the similar methodologies underpinning their works, which are fundamentally research-oriented. I discussed how these methodologies reflect their position of ‘betweenness’ and how they shape the artists’ development of their works. For instance, they illustrate the artists’ efforts to reconnect with specific aspects of Lebanese and Palestinian history and culture, drawing from their experiences both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ these countries. Conversely, I pointed out how these methodologies help them in their practice of producing knowledge that addresses both an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ Lebanon or Palestine. Moreover, I also emphasized how the artists’ research relies on particular networks they have created over the years from their situation of ‘betweenness’.

Next, I posited that the second role is that of the artist-mediator. I asserted that the research methods enabled the artists to develop specific counter-narratives. However, I emphasized that their work extends beyond this initial creation, continuing through the mediation of their visual narratives. This responds to a hypothesis I formulated in the State of the Art: that the artists would fit into a history of ‘dual activity’ present in both Lebanese and Palestinian art history. I identified several strategies of mediation from the artists. The first strategy involves the artists’

creation of various types of what I refer to as ‘parergons’ – external elements that accompany their works and facilitate their mediation. As a second strategy I highlighted instead the specific languages that the works adopt in order to translate (transport) their stories into an international context. Overall, I contended that the artists’ mediation role reflects their specific positioning within their situation of ‘betweenness’ and in an international context, a perspective that emerges directly from their works. I have described this positioning through concepts such as ‘art interlocutors’ or ‘speaking artists’ by scholars Sarah Rogers and Lorand Hegyi.

10.2. Defining Betweenness: Insights Gained from the Analysis of the Case Studies

In the State of the Art, I introduced the concept of ‘betweenness’. I explained how it corresponds to a situation of living and working ‘between’ different places, between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. I clarified that with the categories of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ I do not suggest a hierarchical system or a binary opposition. Instead, they simply indicate the actual movement that the works play out, which also mirrors the movement of the artists themselves. First, I briefly traced the history of the concept of ‘betweenness’ in the Lebanese and Palestinian contexts. In doing so, I referred to the writings of various scholars. For example, I considered Edward Said, and his reflections on his ‘double perspective’ (“I am a Palestinian Arab, and I am also an American”),³⁸⁸ Amin Maalouf and his experience of ‘double inscription’ (“What makes me myself and not someone else is that I am thus on the edge of two countries, two or three languages, several cultural traditions”),³⁸⁹ or Andrew Arsan and his description of the history of the relations between the *al-muqimin* (Lebanese resident in Lebanon) and *al-muhajirin* (the migrants).³⁹⁰ Then, I traced a history of different effects that ‘inside/outside’ experiences have had on the work of Lebanese and Palestinian artists. For this reason, I considered several examples from the Palestinian art field (like Kamal Boullata, the Palestinian artists living in Beirut between the 1960s and the 1970s, Aissa Deebi, Jawad Ibrahim, or Sama Alshaibi), and from the Lebanese art field (like Shafic Abboud, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Huguette Caland, Helen El-Khal, Walid Sadek, or Akram Zaatari). In these cases, I registered different possibilities. I demonstrated how the artists either created hybrid artistic languages that merge

³⁸⁸ Said 2012, previously quoted. P. 375.

³⁸⁹ Maalouf 1998, previously quoted. P. 9.

³⁹⁰ Arsan 2014, previously quoted. P. 249.

various inspirations from their ‘inside/outside’ experiences or pursued parallel projects that explore different themes and styles. Then, without intending to establish an evolutionary line, I inquired how the case studies in my dissertation might fit into this broader historical context.

The six artists I examined all share an experience of living and working in a state of ‘betweenness’, which includes various ‘inside/outside’ experiences. After several transfers, I considered how Jumana Manna now lives in Berlin and works in Germany and Palestine. She created the project I examined, *Foragers* (2022), through a long process of research and fieldwork in Palestine. The other two Palestinian artists, Jumana Abboud and Inas Halabi, have followed a similar path. Halabi lives and works ‘between’ the Netherlands and Palestine. Abboud frequently explores her journey ‘in’ and ‘out’ of Palestine in her works, reflecting on her disconnections and subsequent reconnections with the country. All three Palestinian artists have access to both Israeli and Palestinian territories. Hence, they are part of the Palestinian community that has the vastest possibilities to travel and move across the territories. In the State of the Art, I had an in-depth look at this type of situation. To explore this, I drew on the research of scholars like Adel Manna, Sharri Plonski, and Shira Robinson, who study Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and their experience of being simultaneously “inside and outside, absent and present, included and excluded”.³⁹¹ Jumana Manna, Jumana Abboud, and Inas Halabi take advantage of their situation to explore different territories, to explore a position of ‘betweenness’, even in Israel/Palestine. Indeed, their works often examine Palestinian life in different areas where they can conduct their research.

The Lebanese artistic duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige live in their own particular situation of ‘betweenness’. I have showed how this depends on a lifestyle choice to live and work ‘between’ Beirut and Paris, which allows them to be active both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Lebanon. Lamia Joreige follows a similar life and work trajectory, ‘between’ France and Lebanon. She remains very active in the Beirut art scene: for instance, she was one of the founders of the still-existing Beirut Art Center in 2009. Marwa Arsanios currently lives between Berlin and Beirut, as she has lived, worked and still maintains significant ties to Lebanon. Here she also developed works and projects such as *98 Weeks*. In each of these instances, the concept of ‘betweenness’ – as the shared time spent between different locations – aligns with an artistic practice that unfolds ‘between’ different places.

³⁹¹ Plonski 2018, previously quoted. P. 6.

To illustrate this double inscription in the artists' work, I highlighted the networks that they all create from their 'betweenness'. It is through these networks that the artists maintain their presence 'between' different locations and have produced the works examined in my research. In the State of the Art, I stated that I would examine the artists' 'betweenness' "as something in-process", focusing on the "cultural interactions and exchanges" at play, inspired by the studies of scholars Papastergiadis and Trimboli.³⁹² Indeed, I interpreted the artists' ability to establish 'inside/outside' networks as an ongoing process that unfolds over the years, driven by their continuous movements 'in' and 'out' of Lebanon or Palestine. I followed the definition of 'network' by scholar Caroline Levine, who describes it as the "defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience".³⁹³ Indeed, the networks the artists have created consist of systems of contacts and collaborations of various kinds, characterized by "interconnection and exchange", enabling them to pursue their artistic research.

In the case of Jumana Manna, for example, I stressed how the network of art foundations that financially supported her project represents the connections 'between' different countries that she has established over time (from Fritt Ord and Kulturrådet in Norway to Dar Jacir Art Center in Bethlehem, Palestine). In the cases of Abboud and Halabi, I noted the network of art spaces and foundations 'inside' and 'outside' Palestine that help the artists create their works by providing financial and organizational support: from the local experimental academy Sakiya in Ein Qiniya to the Slade School of Fine Art in London (Abboud), from the De Appel Art Foundation in Amsterdam to Mophradat. This non-profit organization supports Arab artists (Halabi). I have noticed similar trajectories concerning the Lebanese artists. I demonstrated how both Marwa Arsanios, beginning with her project *98 Weeks*, and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige are active both 'inside' and 'outside' Lebanon. Additionally, I have mapped the network behind Lamia Joreige's analyzed project, tracing connections from the Institute for Ideas and Imagination at Columbia University in Paris to the gallery Marfa' Projects in Beirut.

In summary, I argue that one of the most relevant aspects of these networks is the initiative of the artists behind them. The work *Reverse Shot* by Marwa Arsanios, the sixth case study I examined, is based precisely on collaborative research and a network of different professionals.

³⁹² Papastergiadis, Trimboli 2019, previously quoted. P. 44.

³⁹³ Levine 2017, previously quoted. P. 132.

In this case, I spoke of the artist as the ‘initiator’ and ‘spokesperson’ of such network. I argue that this applies to all the artists. The concept of initiative implies decision-making, taking responsibility, and indicates a role that the artists play from their position of ‘betweenness’. I will now focus on summarizing what I have highlighted about the artists’ roles from their ‘betweenness’, and the ways I claim these roles influenced their artistic projects.

10.3. The Role of the Artist-Researcher: The Similar Research Methodologies

The first role I identified through the case studies is that of the artist-researcher. Throughout my dissertation, I referenced the long history of research on the connection between research practices and artistic practices. I interpreted the artists’ work through the words of scholars such as Tom Holert, Aline Caillet, Esra Oskay Malicki, Anthony Downey or Erika Balsom. The term ‘role’ had several connotations. I used it to indicate how the artists take an initiative in collecting material (data). To define this practice, I referred to the work of G. James Daichendt on the figure of the ‘artist-scholar’. Indeed, while studying the practice of artists-researchers, Daichendt defines research as “a process involving the collection of information and eventual discovery of new or revised knowledge”.³⁹⁴ I argued that the artists under study elaborate their visual narratives, and their counter-narratives, from such ‘process’ of collecting. This process illustrates how they seek different perspectives and explore alternative ways to tell the stories of Lebanon and/or Palestine, highlighting often-silenced aspects of their culture and traditions. Thus, the storytelling aspect of their works emerges from a sense of responsibility, reflecting the artists’ role in narrating these stories.

I argued that this role of artist-researcher illustrates certain aspects of their situation of ‘betweenness’. This is evident in the particular methodologies on which the artists have relied. In my analysis of the case studies, I argued that the methodologies used by the artists are the first step of their artistic practice. Afterwards, I argued that a second step follows it: the artistic re-elaboration of what the artists collected. Thus, I argued that all the works are the result of a long process with many stages of development. Here, I will summarize the various methodologies and how the artists have used them, highlighting both similarities and differences. Before that, however, I will gather some general insights on what the artists’

³⁹⁴ Daichendt 2012, previously quoted. P. 11.

research processes reveal about their ‘betweenness’ and on the concept of artistic research that emerged from the analysis of the case studies.

First, I observed that the artists’ research was part of a path of reconnection. I showed how the artists themselves address this path through their works or their mediation strategies. In the movement ‘in’ and ‘out’ of Lebanon or Palestine the artists often develop a distance, and thus an external perspective. I highlighted how Inas Halabi describes distance as a vantage point (“When you have distance, you are able to see things in a different way”).³⁹⁵ Manna claims that when she took more distance from Palestine (especially in Los Angeles) she began to reflect “about being Palestinian”, about her “positionality as a Palestinian living abroad”,³⁹⁶ and that of her generation. Jumana Abboud described her move to Canada with her family as the first “cut-off” she experienced during her childhood. She talks about a feeling of “non-connectedness to the place that is meant to be [her] home”, and describes how art accompanied her in a movement of reconnection.³⁹⁷ All the works I analyzed contain such elements of reconnection, which express the artists’ movements ‘in’ and ‘out’ of Lebanon or Palestine. This highlights the artists’ personal connections to the stories they tell.

I want to explore this path of reconnection further using insights from the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury. In a text for a catalogue edited by Kamal Boullata for the 7th Sharjah Biennial, Khoury writes how “the prerequisite for telling stories is a departure followed by a return”. He further adds: “Leaving and exile stand as the conditions of knowledge and discovery. Return is the condition of writing or gathering that makes the strange familiar. The word ‘writing’ in Arabic derives from ‘gathering’; the writer gathers what has been dispersed and reshapes it”.³⁹⁸ I argue that what Khoury writes about writers applies to the artists from my study. Their movement of ‘betweenness’ is a “departure followed by a return”. Their constant motion enables the “collecting” (of data), the first step of the research process I explained earlier. Conversely, the artistic re-elaboration – the second step – is the act of “reshaping” of what has been “gathered”. The state of ‘betweenness’ – the movement ‘between’ different places – drives this process through multiple steps. All the methodologies I have analyzed, which I will summarize

³⁹⁵ Halabi, Inas: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, May 6th 2024.

³⁹⁶ Manna, Jumana: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, April 21st 2022.

³⁹⁷ Abboud and Khaldi 2018, previously quoted. P. 2.

³⁹⁸ Khoury in: Boullata, Kamal: *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture*. London 2008. P. 76.

here, imply a continuous movement. This movement is thus reflected in the artists' works, which become a testament to the research process. The stories that the works tell are linked to "local" issues of Lebanon and/or Palestine, but they often "gather" constituent elements that had been "dispersed" (to use again Khoury's words). For example, this applies to the documents Lamia Joreige gathers from archives in various countries to tell the history of the region.

I have often spoken of 'knowledge production' to describe the artists' practice of artistic research. For example, in Joreige's *Mapping a Transformation*, I wrote, "art production intersects knowledge production". For Arsanios' work, I spoke of a "site of knowledge production," borrowing a concept by scholar Michel Serres.³⁹⁹ Framing the works in this way situates them within a longstanding art historical debate regarding the legitimacy of the term 'knowledge production'. Scholar Tom Holert has traced the history of how over the years the concept of 'production' has sparked debate within the art-historical field, contending that for many "it raises the specter of the subjection of knowledge to economic criteria and its commodification". At the same time, he cites many participants to the art world, such as the co-curator of documenta 11 Sarat Maharaj, who have claimed a "semantic appropriation and repurposing of the concept of production" that goes beyond a simple "commodification".⁴⁰⁰ In my research, I also pursued a kind of repurposing of the concept of 'knowledge production'. I view 'knowledge production' as a concept that captures the significant contribution artists make to various fields of research – both academic and non-academic – that engage with the issues their works explore.

Thus, I examined the aim of the artworks to create alternative narratives. Through my analysis, I challenged the perspective of scholars who dismiss research originating from the art world as unreliable. Anthony Downey, for example, writes in his essay "Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art": "We need to note that art does not produce verifiable knowledge as such, rather it engages in a series of ruminative gestures that give rise to non-definitive narratives and tentative forms of suppositional knowledge".⁴⁰¹ Throughout my research, I argued that the artworks considered are the opposite of "ruminative gestures", of "non-definitive narratives" and "tentative forms of suppositional knowledge". I demonstrated

³⁹⁹ Serres, MacArthur, and Paulson 2008, previously quoted. P. 20.

⁴⁰⁰ Holert 2020, previously quoted. P. 178.

⁴⁰¹ Downey, Anthony: *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*. London 2015. P. 15.

the works' reliability by comparing them to specific research conducted by academic scholars on the same topics. In this way, I have also showed that the narratives they create are indeed "verifiable" (to use again Downey's word). For example, for Jumana Manna's work I considered the writings of Rabea Eghbariah; for Abboud texts on the Palestinian folktales' tradition by scholars such as Ibrahim Muhawi, Sharif Kanaana and Farah Aboubakr; for Hadjithomas those by historians such as Leyla Neyzi or Sibel Zandi-Sayek; for Joreige by historians such as Gudrun Krämer, for Arsanios by Fawwaz Traboulsi.

Overall, I noted that references to these writings helped confirm the reliability of the artists' narratives. Recognizing the works and their narratives as reliable and valuable contributions to a broader body of knowledge does not diminish their artistic worth. I mentioned how I considered the works to result from a two-stage process: data collection and artistic reworking. Similarly, I argue that the knowledge value of the works coexists with their artistic value, and that the one does not exclude the other. I contend that reworking the collected data through artistic languages with visual aims does not reduce the entire research process to a "mere game," as noted by curator and theorist Chus Martínez, as cited by Tom Holert. Indeed, Martínez comments on the actual efforts of many artist-researchers by writing: "it would be dismissive to describe all this as mere play".⁴⁰² The fact that artists' narratives are reliable demonstrates the role they can play as contributions to a broad research world. When developed as counter-narratives, these alternative stories created 'from below' can effectively challenge hegemonic and dominant narratives. Thus, the role I attribute to the artists is directly reflected in their works. Additionally, I examined how all the artists employ mediation strategies to make their works resonate, enhance their visibility, and activate their narratives.

While comparing with academic studies helped verify the reliability of the narratives, it also revealed the artists' connections to the international academic community. This represents another network branch that the artists build from their 'betweenness'. All artists develop their role as artist-researchers 'inside' and 'outside' academic settings. I have illustrated how the three Palestinian artists commenced their studies at Bezalel, the Israeli art academy established in Jerusalem in 1906. I emphasized that this represents one of the compromises many Palestinian artists have historically faced in their pursuit of artistic education – attending an institution with deep Zionist roots and political commitments, such as the establishment of a sewing center for

⁴⁰² Holert 2020, previously quoted. P. 179.

Israeli army uniforms during the Gaza war of 2023/2024. I showed that after spending different amounts of time at Bezalel, the three artists continued their studies elsewhere: Manna in Oslo and Los Angeles, and Halabi at Goldsmiths College in London. This path provided them with both a practical and theoretical artistic background, which then led them to continue to engage with the academic world. For example, I have mentioned Manna's teaching activities and Abboud's PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art in London.

The situation is similar for the Lebanese artists. I noted that Lamia Joreige's research for *Mapping a Transformation* is comparable to academic work. Although she does not hold an academic position, the support of academic institutions like the Institute for Ideas and Imagination (Columbia University in Paris) was crucial to her project. In contrast, I showcased Arsanios as an artist who develops her research both 'inside' and 'outside' the academic world, from grassroots projects like *98 Weeks* to her PhD at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna. Overall, I reflected on how the role of artist-researcher does not depend exclusively on affiliations with the academic world. I noted that academic institutions can offer artists a framework and opportunities to advance their research. I compared the methodologies employed by artists to those used by university researchers, highlighting similarities in their approaches. My analysis revealed a range of interactions 'between' the art and academic worlds, often leading to collaborations and dialogues 'between' artists and academic researchers. An example was the conference featuring Lamia Joreige in Beirut, featuring discussions with art historian Pelin Tan and historian Salim Tamari.

I specifically argued that the artists, through their works, contribute to the efforts of scholars aiming to create counter-narratives, develop a historiography 'from below', and present alternative visions of the history and culture of Lebanon and/or Palestine. I attributed a narrative value to all the works. By narrative, I meant the works' ability to tell stories related to the history, culture, and traditions of Lebanon and Palestine. However, the narrative nature I attributed to the works extends beyond mere storytelling; it encompasses the works' ability to convey specific interpretations and perspectives on reality. At times, I referred to the artists' narratives as alternative visions that highlight silenced or frequently overlooked historical and cultural aspects, thereby complicating certain viewpoints on reality. At other times, I referred to them as actual counter-narratives. It is a concept I introduced in the State of the Art. There, I defined a counter-narrative as an alternative (counter-hegemonic) narrative that opposes a dominant

(hegemonic) one. I referred to the concept of counter-narrative in the history of visual art criticism related to Lebanon and Palestine. I considered texts by scholars such as Sune Haugbolle, Lina Khatib, Tina Sherwell, Hania A.M. Nashef, or Hana Toukan. I noted, for instance, how Toukan draws from Antonio Gramsci's vision of counter-hegemonic as "critical counter-discourses to challenge hegemonic assumptions and beliefs about what cultural production can and should do in society".⁴⁰³

Thus, I argue that all the artworks under study complicate a specific vision of reality or present counter-narratives that challenge hegemonic assumptions and beliefs. By giving voice to members of the oppressed Palestinian community, Jumana Manna's *Foragers* challenges the dominant and hegemonic narrative of Israeli authority about the traditional practice of foraging for wild weeds. Inas Halabi's *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* contests conventional historical views of the Druze community after 1948 and the establishment of Israel. Lamia Joreige's work narrates the story of the Levantine region by juxtaposing the original desires and aspirations of the Arab populations with the external interference and colonization experienced in the 20th century. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Ismyrna* explores the region's ancient yet enduring cosmopolitan identities. Marwa Arsanios' *Reverse Shot* delves into the present and the past in search of alternative visions and approaches to the natural environment in Lebanon. Jumana Abboud's works celebrate popular knowledge, often marginalized by ongoing processes of colonization, which serve in her works as a tool for anti-colonial resistance. Overall, I argued that these narratives all have an intrinsic pedagogical value. This is also realized through the mediation the artists make of them, as I will reiterate later. This underscores the role that the artists and their works play in their situation of 'betweenness', as they share stories that engage with both the 'inside' and the 'outside' of Lebanon or Palestine.

The artists entrust their counter-narratives to the different languages of the visual arts, relying on different media. I will now return to the different research methods that allowed them to realize the works. Throughout my analysis of the case studies, I have identified several: ethnography (often through what Edward Said defines as the 'native point of view'), auto-ethnography, archival research, oral history, landscape exploration, and collaborative research. These methods underpin all the works, though their importance varies for each case. Despite

⁴⁰³ Toukan 2021, previously quoted. P. 6.

their differences, the research methods are connected and help the artists gather data to create their own narratives.

10.3.1. The Ethnographic Research of the Artists

Ethnography is the first research method I identified, starting with the analysis of the initial case study, *Foragers* by Jumana Manna. I referenced the so-called ‘ethnographic turn’ that many scholars have discussed in art history, beginning with a key text by Hal Foster from 1996. To define Manna’s ethnographic practice, I followed anthropologist Tim Ingold’s definition of it. He defines the ‘fieldwork’ as the main methodology of ethnography, writing that “fieldworkers are committed to documenting the lives and times of their host communities”, and that “this work of documentation is known as ethnography”.⁴⁰⁴ I also connected Manna’s practice to what Ingold calls ‘participant observation’ because of her particular way of gathering information from within the community and in a participatory way. Finally, I also argued that she reproduces what Said would describe as a ‘native point of view’, a concept that Said conceived in his critique of the discipline of anthropology as a “direct agent of political dominance”.⁴⁰⁵ Indeed, I have written about how the artist in the film is a member of the community she portrays. Manna’s ethnographic documentation practice, therefore, does not come from the perspective of the oppressor, the “agent of political dominance” as Said would write. Instead, she becomes an accomplice to the oppressed, giving a voice to the silenced. Overall, ethnography allows all the artists to immerse themselves in a community to which they belong. To go back to the words of scholar Aline Caillet, who has long studied the overlaps between ethnographic and artistic practices, I argue that ethnography is for artists the set of “gestures and ways of being and acting in the real”.⁴⁰⁶ Ethnography becomes a way for the artists to uncover the stories of these communities and highlight their traditions and daily lives. Finally, it is a way to collect and document all these findings through their works. In fact, as I noted through Ingold’s formulation, “ethnography is a study of and learning about, its enduring products are recollective accounts which serve a documentary purpose”.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁴ Ingold 2013, previously quoted. P. 2.

⁴⁰⁵ Said 2012, previously quoted. P. 288.

⁴⁰⁶ Caillet 2019, previously quoted. P. 16.

⁴⁰⁷ Ingold 2013, previously quoted. P. 3.

In the works of the Palestinian artists, I pointed out the most striking examples of ethnography. Jumana Manna's *Foragers* documents the daily life of several Palestinians who forage for wild plants such as *za'atar* and *'akkoub*. The film also serves as a testament to the artist's fieldwork and her interactions with these people. I argued that *Foragers*' staged police interrogation qualifies as ethnographic interviewing. I examined how these interactions reveal the historical and cultural significance of foraging as a tradition passed down through generations, shaping the Palestinian people's connection to their land. I demonstrated how Jumana Abboud's work also reveals an extended ethnographic research that documents other aspects of life in the Palestinian Territories. Inspired by the early twentieth-century Palestinian scholar and ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan, Abboud's work explores the ways in which Palestinians have traditionally humanized and enlivened the natural landscape: how they have charged it with different stories, interpretations, and symbols over the centuries. I noted how as a true ethnographer, she also compiled a research diary ("journal of journeying"). Finally, I emphasized how Abboud reflected on her own efforts to avoid extractivist practices by seeking to build a relationship of exchange with the community in the village of Ein Qiniya over time. Similarly, Inas Halabi also immerses herself in the Druze community. Her film documents its history and current living conditions in today's Israeli territory. I argued that the film serves as a testament to Halabi's extensive fieldwork, showcasing a slow and thoughtful engagement with various members of the community. I also identified similar procedures in the works of the Lebanese artists. In Marwa Arsanios' work, for example, I noted a similar immersion in local communities in Lebanon, where she documents ways of life and relationships with the natural landscape, such as the scenes of olive harvesting.

One of the key aspects of the ethnographic research in these works is its ability to present a view of everyday life. Indeed, the artists use the camera to capture moments from everyday life of the communities, their routine, their small daily rituals. For example, the films often feature cooking scenes that reveal the history of specific ingredients and the cultural and personal connections the interviewees have to certain recipes (e.g.: *Mjadara*, *Khubeizeh* and *Kubbeh* in Manna's film, *Mh'ammam* in Halabi's). I argue that these scenes hold ethnographic documentary value, while also connecting to a specific approach to writing history, which I will again address later. The artists incorporate not only the macro-events of history into their narratives but also the everyday lives of the individuals who experience these events. I argue that this is part of a

way of writing history ‘from below’, of creating alternative narratives. The ethnography practice fosters this form of storytelling. Finally, the ethnographic research often reveals the personal involvement of the artists in the issues that their works address. This, in turn, reveals the reconnection that the artists seek to achieve through their works. However, I argued that in some instances, the personal involvement of the artists transforms their research into an auto-ethnographic practice. I explored this theme particularly in my analysis of *Ismyrna*, though it also appears in the other works.

10.3.2. Insights into the Artists’ Auto-Ethnographic Research

The personal involvement of the artists often surfaces in the works examined. As a result, the stories they tell become autobiographical, blending collective and individual interests. In my analysis, however, I argued that this personal aspect goes beyond an autobiographical value. I noted that it becomes part of the artists’ research and takes on an auto-ethnographic quality. I claimed that this is particularly evident in the work of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Ismyrna*. For a definition of auto-ethnography, I referred to scholars Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, who describe this practice as composed of ‘auto’ (the artist’s personal experience and reflection), ‘ethno’ (reflection on cultural aspects), and ‘graphy’ (that I interpreted as the translation into an artistic project).⁴⁰⁸ I have showed how an auto-ethnographic practice in *Ismyrna* allows Hadjithomas to reflect on the functioning of her own family: its dynamics, its traditions, its rites, and these rites’ personal and cultural value. In particular, Hadjithomas explores (together with Etel Adnan) the practice of storytelling that she experienced in her family, and how this practice created a connection between her family and the city of Izmir. Moreover, she reflects on how this practice has been handed down through generations, creating what I described as ‘postmemory’ (following Mariane Hirsch’s definition: “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before”).⁴⁰⁹ For Hadjithomas, auto-ethnography serves as a way to reflect on her family’s position in a cosmopolitan Beirut. She expresses the experience of living ‘between’ the local community and her family’s connection to an external place. I linked this feeling to

⁴⁰⁸ Adams / Holman Jones / Ellis 2022, previously quoted. P. 3.

⁴⁰⁹ Hirsch 2012, previously quoted. P. 5.

Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of in-between realities. I argued that through an auto-ethnographic practice, Hadjithomas metabolizes the 'postmemory'. Finally, I noted that *Ismyrna* reflects this process and represents all of Hadjithomas' research. I noted that auto-ethnography, like Manna's ethnography, is connected to a specific historiographical practice. *Ismyrna* becomes an example of history 'from below', since it tells macro-events through the experiences of her family (*tajruba* in Arabic, a term I borrowed from the historian Mostafa Minaqwi).⁴¹⁰

What I demonstrated in the analysis of *Ismyrna* echoes throughout all the other works I examined. Abboud and Manna, for example, also include reflections on the functioning of their families in their research. Manna's film suggests it to the viewer in the scenes portraying her family, though such reflections are especially evident in the article she wrote about the work, which I have classified as 'parergon'. Indeed, her article elaborates on the relationship of her family with the practice of foraging. In the chapter on Abboud's work, I discussed how the final piece in documenta 15 exemplifies a process of auto-ethnography. Here, the artist talks about the traditional olive harvest in Palestine. She explains how her family has always accompanied this with small storytelling rituals, which sparked her passion for this practice. Lamia Joreige's work also links the investigation of certain family stories with some macro-events of history. I highlighted that Halabi and Arsanios are less explicit in their personal involvement in their works, although one can infer it from certain details in their films and some 'parergons'. The artists who explicitly address personal involvement frame their works also as narratives of a healing process. In this sense, *Ismyrna* is once again emblematic, especially in the scene where the artist tells about the skin rash she suffered upon landing in Izmir and how she perceived it as an emotional relief of several generations that she experienced on her body.

However, the process of personal healing that the artists address and narrate is never self-referential. The artists consistently connect their own and their families' individual stories and experiences (*tajruba* as Minaqwi would write) with those of other Lebanese and Palestinians who may have similar ones. For example, I have noted that Abboud ends one of her stories by saying she is "sure that she is not the only one" to share such a family story. In this case, I emphasized how this reflects the Palestinian saying "my story is the story of my people", a phrase echoed by many scholars who have studied Palestinian oral history, as demonstrated

⁴¹⁰ Minaqwi 2023, previously quoted. p. xii.

through my reference to Diana Allan's work.⁴¹¹ The artists thus give their work a collective value. This does not mean, however, that their stories only address Lebanese or Palestinians (the 'inside'). Although the artists are deeply rooted in local contexts, they often seek to expand their stories by connecting them to other distant realities. I will discuss this aspect when I revisit the mediating role that the artists play. This ability to create connections and bring local narratives into dialogue with external contexts stems precisely from the introspective perspective that I have categorized as auto-ethnographic. Through their works, the artists invite viewers into their introspective research, allowing them to connect it to their own experiences. I argue that the artworks serve as mediators 'between' the artists' personal journeys and those of the viewers. This highlights the dual role artists assume as researchers and mediators from their position of 'betweenness'. The ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research also incorporates the historiographical aspect of the works, which I initially explored through Lamia Joreige's *Mapping a Transformation*, but is evident in all the projects.

10.3.3. Archival Research: The First Historiographical Method

I noted that the concept of counter-narrative in the case studies involves the artists illuminating the silenced cultural and traditional practices and knowledge of Lebanon or Palestine. However, the historical character is one of the most essential values of their counter-narratives. In fact, I argue that all the works lead to a particular rewriting of aspects of Lebanese and Palestinian history, 'from below'. I have identified two historiographical methodologies in particular that the artists rely on: archival research and oral history. Overall, I argued that their efforts to rewrite history align with what Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata described as a "duty to respond to the call of history" in the Palestinian context (quoted in the State of the Art),⁴¹² as well as with the tradition of Lebanese artists who have directly faced the challenges of documenting their country's history. In the case of Lamia Joreige, I have showed how archival research shows an assumption of responsibility by the artist in front of the "*masse documentaire*" (a term I borrowed from Michel Foucault). Joreige navigates the vast array of historical sources, carefully selecting documents to construct her own historical narrative. I

⁴¹¹ Allan 2014, previously quoted. P. 53.

⁴¹² Boullata 2019, previously quoted. P. 152.

argued that in *Mapping Transformation*, she acts halfway ‘between’ a historian and an artist. The archival documents she uses in the installation have both a historical and a visual-artistic value (although she claims that they do not take on a decorative character). The scholar Aline Caillet wonders in her writings whether artists who research archives have an “*attrait plastique pour la forme du matériau historique*” (“a plastic attraction to the shape of historical material”) or “*une volonté plus structurelle et profondément historique en ce sens, de réengager dans le présent des enjeux propres au processus historique*” (“a more structural and deeply historical desire in this sense, to re-engage in the present issues specific to the historical process”).⁴¹³ In Joreige’s case, as with the other artists in this research, I argue that both aspects mentioned by Caillet drive their work: both the ‘plastic attraction’ to the archival documents, and the ‘deeply historical desire’ to rewrite history. This again illustrates the dual steps of the artists’ practice that I have described: gathering material (data) and artistically reinterpreting it. From a historical point of view, the documents that Joreige collects give voice to previously unheard, silenced, or forgotten narratives. They promote a rewriting of certain historical chapters ‘from below’, as the case of the diary of the soldier Turjman evidenced.

I also found this two-step process (collection and re-elaboration) in the other artists’ archival research. Jumana Abboud’s works at documenta 15 relied mainly on archival arrangements. I claimed that it mimicked the museographical disposition of Tawfiq Canaan’s collection of amulets and talismans. Abboud’s installation consisted of showcases, presented in several locations, containing small artifacts and small sculptures made of beeswax, which reproduced natural objects that can be found near Palestinian water sources. I highlighted a dual character in such an archival practice. On the one hand, a playful dimension emerges from the tones of the showcases’ captions. On the other hand, I pointed out a serious pedagogical intention, aimed at illuminating aspects of Palestinian popular knowledge and culture. The sometimes-playful dimension of Abboud’s art is thus linked to the serious/educational dimension of her research. This also happens in Marwa Arsanios’ film, in her explorations of the Ottoman archives and the Geological Museum of the American University of Beirut, and in Jumana Manna’s film. In *Foragers*, archival footage mixes with Manna’s original material. The archival footage serves both a visual function, contrasting with the rest of the film, and a pedagogical role by representing differing narratives. The works of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige and of

⁴¹³ Caillet 2019, previously quoted. P. 122. Translation from French by Giacomo Paci.

Inas Halabi also follow a similar trajectory, though they show research in personal and private archives rather than in public ones. These artists document their encounters with historical sources that might be considered of minor importance: letters, seals, and personal documents. Hadjithomas and Halabi use film to enhance the visual significance of these sources. They focus on their visual properties, experimenting with superimpositions – like Etel Adnan’s letters overlapping with other images in *Ismyrna* – while also emphasizing their historical-narrative value by demonstrating how these sources can testify to more significant historical events.

In general, I argue that all the works attempt to reactivate archival documents of various kinds. Through their research, the artists explore the latent value of often ignored or unknown sources, and build their personal visual narratives from them. I argued that this characteristic brings the artists’ practice close to the concept of ‘potential history’ by the scholar Ariella Azoulay. Azoulay describes it as the “deliberate attempt [...] to disavow what was historicized by making repressed potentialities present again within the fabricated phenomenological field of imperial history, present to be continued”.⁴¹⁴ For instance, Joreige’s research aims to uncover the ‘repressed potentials’ within archives, exploring their meaning and the contributions they can make to both the present and the future.

It is essential to highlight how all three Lebanese artists examine the history of the Ottoman Empire, particularly its decline, as a crucial period to uncover ‘repressed potentials’ that can still have significance today. The artists focused on this period of radical changes which shook the region forever. They discovered innovative ideas and perspectives that emerged during that time, which were later ‘repressed’, and questioned whether these could still be relevant today. In her film, Arsanios shows a research in the bureaucratic records of the Ottoman Empire, especially regarding land use regulations. Her findings are a source of inspiration and discussion for the members of the artist’s group, who wants to transform the quarry into a “social *Waqf* or *Masha’a*”. In *Ismyrna*, on the other hand, Hadjithomas conducts her research in Etel Adnan’s personal archives, which helps to bring to light aspects of the cosmopolitanism of the Ottoman era and the tragedies that occurred at its dissolution. Through this research, the film contributes to an understanding of the region’s historical development, of its past and its present. Overall, the three Lebanese artists turn their attention and their archival research to the same past. Here, they search for the keys to understand the present, address unresolved issues (as seen in

⁴¹⁴ Azoulay 2019, previously quoted. P. 29.

Hadjithomas' work), and envision potential solutions for the future. The very title of Arsanios' work suggests this search for latent potential in the past: *Reverse Shot*. I argue that the works of the Palestinian artists follow a similar trajectory. For Abboud, Manna, and Halabi, examining the past opens up possibilities for envisioning a different present and future, often by exploring the pre-colonial era. This still means challenging the "fabricated phenomenological field of imperial history", to go back to Azoulay's words. Manna's research reveals a past without bans on foraging; Abboud's a relationship of the Palestinians to their now partially lost territory; Halabi's the changes in the perception of their identity within the Druze community.

I argued that the artists' archival research consistently seeks a historical narrative marked by an 'entanglement' of temporalities, a concept I borrowed from scholar Achille Mbembe. The past helps to understand the present, but it also shows unresolved latencies that can be reactivated to influence the future. In fact, I have emphasized how the dimension of the future is particularly relevant in the artists' archival work. This is why I described Abboud's archives, for example, with the words of the philosopher Jacques Derrida on archives: "a promise and responsibility for tomorrow".⁴¹⁵ Finally, I showed how a programmatic phrase from the work of Lamia Joreige sums up this vision: "we could try, amidst the collapse, to imagine a future". My research aligns with other scholars who view artists' archival work as pursuing such a 'promise for tomorrow' (as Derrida would write). For example, Anthony Downey, who in a work on the use of archives by Middle Eastern contemporary artists studies how they are "projected onto future rather than historical probabilities",⁴¹⁶ or Gil Z. Hochberg, who has dedicated a book to the use of archives by contemporary Palestinian artists, and how they contain the "potential futures" which are "the mark of collective aspirations to live otherwise".⁴¹⁷

The archival research in the works I analyzed unites not only different temporalities but also various places. I demonstrated how the artists' research remains in constant motion, reflecting their situation of betweenness. Through their research, the artists bring together documents that tell the same story, but are physically distant from each other for historical reasons. I have described an action of 'cross-referencing' by the artists. I borrowed this term from historian Matteo Dominioni, when I compared his research on colonial archives to that of Lamia Joreige. The movement 'between' different places to collect different data and carry out an operation of

⁴¹⁵ Derrida 2015, previously quoted. P. 51.

⁴¹⁶ Downey 2015, previously quoted. P. 15.

⁴¹⁷ Hochberg, Gil Z.: *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future*. Durham 2021. P. 14.

‘cross-referencing’ and cross-checking concerns many of the methodologies used by the artists, and clearly emerges from their archival practice. Once again, I argue that the artists’ goal is not simply to collect knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but to create alternative narratives (or counter-narratives) that can play a social role.

10.3.4. Oral History: The Second Historiographical Method

One of the artists’ research strengths is their ability to diversify the historical sources that inform their narratives. They accomplish this by employing various methodologies, which allows their contribution to historiography to extend beyond archival research. I have already noted that through ethnographic or auto-ethnographic research the artists immerse themselves in certain communities, exploring their history and traditions. In my analysis of the case studies, I argued that some of the interviews the artists conduct and include in their works can be considered oral history. Once again, I drew parallels between the artists’ research practice and that of historians using the same methodology in the field of Lebanese and Palestinian history. I defined oral history through the words of historian Lynn Abrams, as “a practical method for obtaining information about the past by means of conducting an interview”.⁴¹⁸ Moreover, I noticed how many of the interviews conducted by the artists correspond to the historian Alessandro Portelli’s definition of the task of oral history: “to search out the memories in the private, enclosed spaces of houses and kitchens – to connect them to history and in turn force history to listen to them”.⁴¹⁹ Indeed, it is in these domestic spaces that many of the artists’ interviews take place: for example, in the kitchen of Jumana Manna’s relatives in *Foragers*; in the kitchen of activist Maysan’s mother in *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*; or in the rooms of Etel Adnan’s apartment in *Ismyrna*. Other scenes of oral history in the works feature natural or urban landscapes as backdrops: for example, the scene featuring the old man who shares past agricultural practices while standing in the fields in Arsanios’ film; or the various interviews near the villages on Mount Carmel in Inas Halabi’s movie.

In the chapter on Halabi’s work, I argued that the assemblage of multiple interviews, classifiable as oral history, constitutes what scholar Aline Caillet describes in her writings as a

⁴¹⁸ As in: Thompson 2017, previously quoted. P. 132.

⁴¹⁹ As in: Rabah 2020, previously quoted. P. 21.

‘living archive’. Caillet coined this term by analyzing documentaries based on a collection of interviews. She used it, for instance, to describe the film *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, a historical documentary that tells the story of the Paris Commune.⁴²⁰ This movie collects a series of interviews with people of the time (actors), thus inventing a voice for the people, a “*histoire orale pour laquelle nous ne disposons pas d’archives et qu’il a fallu reconstituer*”⁴²¹ (“oral history for which we do not have archives and which had to be reconstructed”). Like the others I analyzed, Halabi’s film presents authentic oral histories. The people featured are real people who have lived through the events, allowing them to connect their personal experiences to the broader collective history. The interviewees often show objects and documents to prove the reliability of their words (from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro’). As a researcher, I recognize that every oral history carries a certain level of non-verifiability, even though I assigned reliability to the works I analyzed. This concern has long been a challenge for historians working with oral history. Among the many examples I could mention, I want to cite one that stands out beyond the Lebanese or Palestinian context: the work of historian Alison Baker. In her book *Voices of Resistance - Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*, Baker gathers the testimonies of women who participated in the anti-colonial resistance. Here she writes that many warned her about her historiographical methodology: “they warned me that women would embellish their stories and exaggerate their accomplishments”. She addresses these criticisms by referencing the oral historian Alessandro Portelli, whom I have also previously cited in my research. Through Portelli, Baker states that the “unreliability of oral testimony is not its weakness but rather its strength, insofar as errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning”.⁴²² Therefore, it is reasonable to approach it with some skepticism when engaging with oral history, such as the one present in the works of the artists from my research. However, this same caution should apply to any historical source of human origin, as none can claim absolute infallibility.

To return to Caillet’s concept of ‘living archive’, it is worth focusing on the adjective ‘living’. I argue that this term suits particularly Jumana Abboud’s performance at documenta 15. The collective *Water Diviners* helps the artist craft a collective history, weaving together multiple voices and stories into a rich, multifaceted narrative. Since it is a live performance, I

⁴²⁰ Watkins, Peter: *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, 2000, France, 345 min, HD Video.

⁴²¹ Caillet 2014, previously quoted. P. 92. Translation from French by Giacomo Paci.

⁴²² Baker, Alison: *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*. Albany 1998. P. 18.

argue that it represents a truly ‘living’ oral archive. The scholar Caillet, however, created this expression for the analysis of a film, and especially to show a strategy by a filmmaker to bring back to life the history of the past. This is why I use the expression ‘living archive’ to describe a specific historiographical method employed by the artists in my research, not only in their performances but also in their films. Indeed, I argued that the films’ collections of interviews display ‘living archives’, which are aimed to interpret the macro-events of history (collective history), through the ‘lived’ experiences of ordinary people. In the analysis of *Ismyrna*, I used the concept of experience as conceived by the historian Mostafa Minaqwi. Minaqwi uses the Arabic term *tajruba* (تجربة), which indicates experience in both an active and passive sense. Indeed, in the artists’ works, I argued that the interviewees transpose this double valence of experience into their stories. They narrate history as something where they took an active stance, or that conversely, they passively suffered. Overall, however, they transmit history as something ‘living’, alive. This is why I classify the collections of interviews in the films as ‘living archives’, following Caillet’s example. Moreover, I argue that the interviewees’ personal stories qualify to what Minaqwi defines as ‘microhistory’, since they give alternative views on macro-events from the perspective of ordinary people’s lives.

I have defined the artists’ historiographical method not only as an intertwinement of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ history, as a history animated by individual experience, but also as a narrative ‘from below’. I argued that many of the perspectives the artists incorporate into their narratives come from individuals who have been silenced or oppressed by history. Manna’s film gives voice to oppressed foragers, Halabi’s to oppressed Druze, Hadjithomas’ to those who have been forcibly displaced, Arsanios’ to those whose relationship to the land has been altered by the geopolitical upheavals of the region. Joreige’s installation, like Abboud’s, brings forgotten voices to light. Overall, I argued that this kind of practice by the artists corresponds to what scholar Walter Dignolo has defined as ‘border thinking’: a way of “absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern”.⁴²³ I argue that all of these voices represent subaltern perspectives that resist dominant forms of knowledge, reclaiming the writing of their own histories. They “displace” hegemonic narratives, reshaping them through their own viewpoints.

⁴²³ Dignolo 2000, previously quoted. P. 12.

I also argued that this kind of practice once again places artists in continuity with a series of historians who have pursued the same goal in the Lebanese and Palestinian fields. For example, I considered the perspective of Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi, who emphasizes how “writings on Lebanon, and perception of Lebanon, have often sacrificed economic and social history in favor of an exclusively political perspective”.⁴²⁴ Indeed, recovering subaltern voices, forgotten or ignored voices, becomes a way for the artists to shed new light on a “social history” made up of lived experiences (*tajriba*) at the expense of an “exclusively political perspective”. However, during my analysis of the case studies, I highlighted how this opening to alternative visions also passes through visual choices. This emerges particularly through their representation of the landscape, both natural and urban, which the artists portray as active subjects for exchange and reliance.

10.3.5. Researching Landscape and Its Representations in the Artists’ Works

So far, I returned to how I attributed to the works different research methods, that allow artists to create specific narratives and counter-narratives. I argued that ethnography, auto-ethnography, archival research, and oral history have let them delve into collective and individual histories, and into the traditions of specific communities. I have also highlighted how through this research process the artists address a personal reconnection to Lebanon or Palestine that they seek through their works. In analyzing the projects, however, I noted that they do not only reconnect to the human world. Indeed, all the works blend the exploration of human events with the study and representation of the landscapes in which these events take place. On the one hand, this has meant that the artists frame the landscape, both urban and natural, as another witness to human history. On the other hand, it has meant the inclusion of more-than-human perspectives that accompany human history. Indeed, I argued that artists often point to the more-than-human elements as an essential component of writing history from alternative viewpoints. Hence, I argue that the representation of the landscape in the works is in line with the rest of the research of the artists. I claim that it is part of their “*manières d’être et d’agir dans le réel*”, to use Aline Caillet’s words again. I argue that their exploration of the landscape is a key element of the diversification of sources that underpins their narratives. Additionally, the representation

⁴²⁴ Traboulsi 2007, previously quoted. P. viii.

of the landscape contributes to the artistic reworking of the data they have collected. This illustrates once more that the works arise from a two-step process: first, the collection of data, and second, its transformation – what I also referred to as ‘translation’ – into the language of visual arts.

All the works I examined feature representations of the landscape. In Jumana Manna’s film, the natural landscape serves as a central subject alongside the foragers and their narratives. I argued that this portrayal, particularly from an aerial perspective, symbolizes the colonial and police control exerted over the territory. Jumana Abboud’s video also evolves as an exploration of the Palestinian landscape, with the artist wandering around different water sources and exploring the hilly territory. I have noted how the representation of landscape in Inas Halabi’s work instead follows the principles of *fukeiron*, a ‘theory of landscape’ that emerged in Japan at the end of the 1960s. I have highlighted how the artist’s camera seeks out signs of political power, of colonial control, present in both urban and natural landscapes. In this way, also Halabi’s representation of the landscape becomes a metaphor for colonial control and oppression. Indeed, I argued that Halabi’s film searches for the ‘semiotic features of the landscape’ (a concept I borrowed from art historian W.J.T. Mitchell),⁴²⁵ the representational signs of political power that manifest themselves in the landscape. Marwa Arsanios employs a similar strategy in her film, where the landscape of the quarry takes center stage in the narrated experiment of research and speculation. Arsanios’ camera intricately examines and captures the quarry in all its facets, including its most concealed aspects. I argued that in this way *Reverse Shot* becomes a representation of a ‘pluriverse’ (a concept coined by the scholar Isabelle Carbonell), which represents the “complex systems and lifeworlds” that inhabit the natural environment, and the “entanglements between humans and more-than-humans”.⁴²⁶ Hadjithomas’ film also intertwines the representation of Izmir’s urban and natural landscapes, focusing on the marine and mountainous landscapes that surround the city. Finally, Lamia Joreige’s installation integrates elements of both the natural and urban landscapes, highlighting the interaction between human and non-human components, such as the locusts featured in the panel dedicated to famine.

⁴²⁵ Mitchell 2002, previously quoted. P. 17.

⁴²⁶ Demos / Scott / Banerjee 2021, previously quoted. P. 139.

One element in particular unites the works I have analyzed from a formal point of view. All the films feature the artists exploring the landscape on foot, walking through the environments they depict. Sometimes the artists explore the landscape by car, as seen in the films of Arsanios, Manna, Hadjithomas, and Halabi. However, for the most part, the camera captures a walk through the territory from the artists' perspective. In the chapter on Halabi's work, I argued that the artist, holding the camera and walking on the hills, reproduces her own personal point of view and proposes it to the viewers, who can then immerse themselves in the landscape as if they were there. I argued that the viewers of the film take up a relatively passive role, perceiving the artists' perspective without actually traversing the territory themselves. My observation aligned with the theory of cinematic landscape art proposed by scholar Paul Rodaway. I observe that this viewer experience, shaped by the artists' visual choices, is consistent across all the films. Jumana Manna follows the activity of the foragers as she walks with the camera in her hands. Jumana Abboud explores the Palestinian hills in the same way (the scene entitled "Walking in the Field of Anemones" from her video *I feel everything* is emblematic). Marwa Arsanios explores the quarry walking. Joana Hadjithomas alternates walking scenes that reproduce her point of view, with others that shows her walking around Izmir, probably filmed by Khalil Joreige.

I argue that the action of walking, which is a constant feature of the works, is a representation not only of the landscape, but also of the research process: the process of collecting material by the artists-researchers. The landscape, with its 'semiotic features', further represents the diversification of the sources of the artists' research. In the landscape, the artists discover additional evidence of the stories and validate the reliability of the various documents they have gathered. The plants in Manna's film, the mountains of Izmir in Hadjithomas' film, the soil in Arsanios' film, the hills in Halabi's film, the water sources in Abboud's film bear witness of the stories. Once again, the films are testimonies and representations of the artists' process of data collection. I argue that walking also displays the creation of a relationship between the artists' bodies and the landscape: it activates what I have called, in Gaston Bachelard's words, 'muscular consciousness'.⁴²⁷ The films present the landscape as a 'practiced space' (a term I borrowed from the philosopher Michel de Certeau).⁴²⁸ Walking functions as a journey of

⁴²⁷ As in: Ingold 2011, previously quoted. P. 47.

⁴²⁸ Certeau 1984, previously quoted. P. 124.

discovery and reconnection, embodying not just a speculative but also a physical activity. The scholar Rebecca Solnit has dedicated a book to the activity of walking, writing, among other things, that “walking [...] is how the body measures itself against the earth”.⁴²⁹ I argue that the artists’ films I analyzed reproduce this very process of ‘measuring’ the body ‘against the earth’ – as evident in particular in the scene in which Abboud immerses herself in the natural pool. The medium of film allows the viewers to participate in the artists’ journey and ‘measuring against the earth’, although they remain in a passive stance. The viewers’ experience is rooted in observation rather than in actual retracing the artists’ footsteps. The viewing reveals the slow process through which the artists engage with the environment. The camera captures the artists’ slow journey, encompassing the surroundings while mirroring the artists’ movements.

I argue that the decision to depict the landscape in this manner reflects the artists’ ongoing artistic reworking and reinterpretation of their research. Notably, the artists all made the same visual choice, even though their works could have embraced more static scenes, capturing the landscape’s elements from a different perspective. Instead, the scenes of landscape exploration mostly have a dynamic character. Once again, I argue that this dynamic character becomes an effective representation of the artists’ path of research, discovery, and reconnection. Moreover, I argued that a significant aspect of the artists’ re-elaboration of their research involves a process of ‘symbol-making’. I emphasized this starting with the analysis of *Foragers*, but it also applies to the other works. The camera’s slow exploration of the landscape enables the artists to focus on various natural elements, imbuing them with symbolic significance as they serve as visual representations of the narratives found in oral stories. I contend that the artists’ engagement with the medium of film goes beyond mere reproduction; it involves a transformation of the filmed elements into symbols. The artists link certain visual elements of the landscape (the plants, the hills, the sea) to the stories that their research illustrates. I argue that in this way their artistic practice consists precisely in the creation of symbolic forms. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer has long studied symbolic forms, claiming that “myth, art, language and science appear as symbols [...] in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own”. Cassirer writes that “the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is

⁴²⁹ Solnit, Rebecca: *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York 2001. P. 44.

made visible to us”.⁴³⁰ I argue that Manna’s plants, Abboud’s water sources, Hadjithomas’ sea, Halabi’s hills, Arsanios’ quarry rocks, Joreige’s landscapes are indeed such ‘organs of reality’ (as Cassirer would put it). These elements take on an ‘agency’ that transforms them into “objects of intellectual apprehension”. They become symbols and vectors of stories. They embody the stories, they become their visual evidence: they make the stories “visible to us”. They serve as evidence of what emerges from the stories, which is shared in the interviews, and it is through these narratives that the artists imbue these elements with symbolic significance, transforming them into ‘symbolic forms’.

While the exploration and representation of the landscape reflect the individual actions of the artists – specifically their walking – a crucial element I have highlighted in their research is the collective dimension. I have examined this aspect particularly in Arsanios’ work, though I have noted its presence across all the artists’ creations.

10.3.6. The Role of Cooperative Research in the Artists’ Projects

All the works I analyzed document a research that develops as a collective effort. Arsanios’ film is particularly based on this principle, since it tells the story of the development of a research project with a collective social purpose. Lamia Joreige realized her work thanks to a team of collaborators who helped her manage the various archival documents and their translations. Jumana Manna and Inas Halabi carried out their field research in a context of dialogue, discussion and collaboration. This also applies to Jumana Abboud and her network of cooperation in the Palestinian village of Ein Qiniya. In its own way, *Ismyrna* also unfolds through a dialogue between Joana Hadjithomas and Etel Adnan, illustrating that research and reflection in the film are not individual activities, while Khalil Joreige remains a silent contributor behind the camera. Overall, I argue that the collaborative aspect from all the works once again reveals something about the artists’ ability of networking, and also about the kind of knowledge production that their works generate.

The artworks document a process of knowledge production and convey insights that develop through dialogues and encounters. Indeed, the interviews in the various films, along with the scenes exploring the landscape, represent moments of encounter. The artists draw upon the

⁴³⁰ Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth*. New York 1953. P. 8.

knowledge of others to construct their personal narratives. At times, they do this silently, allowing the stories of others or the dialogues between people to unfold without interruption, simply recording these interactions. This was evident, for example, in the scene in *Foragers* in which Jumana Manna films her family members cooking and discussing traditional cuisine with ingredients gathered through foraging. Or it was evident in the scenes in Inas Halabi's film, in which the artist films the meetings of the *Urfud* group. Here *Urfud*'s activists discuss current events and possible actions of the group, providing the viewers with further elements to understand the context in which they work. At other times, the artists intervene directly, recording dialogues they personally have with various collaborators. Overall, the production of knowledge consistently has a dialogical dimension. I argue that this dialogical dimension enhances the collective significance of the issues and stories addressed in the works, demonstrating how they impact the entire community.

Finally, I assert that it is no coincidence that these works are frequently exhibited in contexts that focus on the theme of collective production, as seen in documenta 15 and the 17th Istanbul Biennial. I highlighted how in these situations they related to the inspiring concepts of the exhibitions, *lumbung* and *composting*. Moreover, I contended that they contribute to the development of this tendency, more and more present in the international contemporary art world. I argued that the artists also extend this collective dimension to the audience through various mediation strategies. I will return to this theme later, when I trace the second role they play from their position of 'betweenness'. Before that, however, I will offer some final reflections on the artistic re-elaboration of artists' research findings.

10.3.7. Final Considerations on the Process of Artistic Re-Elaboration

I argued how the works are the final synthesis of a two-steps process: the data collection of the artists' research and the re-elaboration of the data in the languages of the visual arts. The artists do not only collect material and stories, but visually rework and reorganize them according to an order they establish, as creators of their own narratives. Hence, the work of artists is not limited to a transposition of collected material, but to a wise reorganization that gives meaning and direction to the whole. I have defined this operation of re-elaboration as '*montage*' – a term derived from cinematic terminology, which I argue also applies to non-

cinematic works, such as those of Lamia Joreige. It is through the analysis of Joreige's work that I delved into the concept of '*montage*', drawing on the conceptualization provided by scholar Jacob Lund.⁴³¹ I wrote that '*montage*' is not a neutral operation. Rather, it shows how artists organize data as they wish and take responsibility for creating their own historical narrative. Beyond the collective dimension that lies behind all research, I argued that the artists ultimately hold the final say.

Here, I argue that the particular role that the artists play emerges once again. The '*montage*' is not neutral; it demonstrates that the artists do not simply transpose collected material but actively organize it according to their own vision. For this reason, I contend that their works align with the words that art historian Augusto Gentili uses for the 'painters who paint stories' of the Venetian Renaissance – that I quoted already in the chapter on research methodology. Certainly, centuries separate the artists I examined in my research from those discussed by Augusto Gentili. However, I argue that this comparison is valid, as Gentili's words aptly captures the role of the artists I am focusing on. Gentili writes that the art historian, when approaching 'painters who paint stories' must be able to exalt, "instead of reducing it to the modes of transcription/execution, the role of the artist as a wise organizer of the text, of the discourse, of the language of figurative stories, precisely as a conscious organizer and participant in their meaning".⁴³² In my research, I sought to remain aligned with this approach. I have not "reduced" the artists' work to a simple 'transcription/execution' of the collected material, but I argued and underlined how the artists are 'wise organizers' of the "language of figurative stories" (as Gentili would put it). In fact, I argue that the artists act as 'conscious organizers' of the stories they tell through their artworks, precisely because they are "participants in their meaning": they are personally involved in them.

Thus, the artists 'produce' knowledge by organizing the collected material to create narratives and counter-narratives, as well as by translating it into the language of visual arts. Through the analysis of Jumana Abboud, I have introduced the concept of 'intersemiotic translation' to explain this second passage. I borrowed the concept from scholars Madelaine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal, who describe it as a kind of 'translation' that "carries a source text (or artefact) across sign systems and typically creates connections between different cultures

⁴³¹ Lund 2019, previously quoted. P. 65.

⁴³² Gentili 1996, previously quoted. P. 14.

and media”.⁴³³ According to Campbell and Vidal, this process involves “a creative step in which the translator (artist or performer) offers its embodiment in a different medium”. I argued that Abboud’s ‘creative step’ lies in transforming traditional Palestinian folktales – long preserved through oral transmission or written transcription – into visual representations, elevating them to a new artistic dimension. She ‘embodies’ (as Campbell and Vidal would put it) them in different artistic media: the other artists do the same with their works. In fact, they ‘translate’ (i.e. transport) oral stories from the level of words to the visual level of films (or other media, as with the panels of Joreige’s installation). In this way, the artists’ works skillfully intertwine images and words.

The ‘creative step’, the visual translation of the artists, consists in giving an innovative visual form to the collected material (“carried across sign systems”). In her installation, Lamia Joreige intervenes graphically on the documents she collects in the various archives. She draws and paints on them, writes on them, and I have showed how she explains her drawing as a way of anchoring herself to them (“*s’ancrer*”).⁴³⁴ For Joreige, drawing and painting are a way to connect with the stories embedded in the documents, bringing them to life through visual expression. Through this practice, she gives visibility to written sources: she creates images for the documents (personal diaries, newspaper articles, telegrams) that often have none. She ‘translates’ (i.e. transports) on the visual level what previously existed on the level of words. The final result is an ingenious interweaving of images and words. Joreige is the ‘wise organizer’ (as Gentili would write) of such intertwinement: through it, she creates her own narrative. Something similar happens with the medium of film in the works of Arsanios, Halabi, Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Manna. Through the film medium, these works gather the various sources, written and oral, and unite them on the visual level. This is evident, for example, in the way the artists film the public and private archives, lingering with the camera on the documents. These include the Ottoman archives in Arsanios’ film, Adnan’s personal archives in Hadjithomas and Joreige’s film, the private archives of various members of the Druze community in Halabi’s film.

Sometimes the artists do not just record with the camera: they do a visual reworking of the sources. They play with images, and I argue that this is also part of their ‘creative step’. This

⁴³³ Campbell / Vidal 2018, previously quoted. P. xxvi.

⁴³⁴ Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, 14th January, 2023.

reworking is evident in *Ismyrna*, for example, in the scene where the movie superimposes Etel Adnan's paintings on real images of the mountains around Izmir, blurring them together. I pointed it out in *Reverse Shot*, where real images from the quarry (which I sometimes claimed to be 'operational images') are followed by 3D graphic reworkings. I noted this in *Foragers*, where Manna employs images of varying qualities – some original, created by her, and others drawn from archival material – to create contrasts that highlight the opposing narratives within the film. All of these examples demonstrate how the artists use contrasts and juxtapositions to explore how images tell stories and how those stories can take on diverse visual forms.

In my analysis of the case studies, I emphasized that artistic practice extends beyond the creation of works; it also evolves through their mediation. By mediation, I also meant the works' presentation in art exhibitions. I have often spoken of a fundamental ambiguity inherent in the works. With the exception of Joreige's and Abboud's, the works are primarily filmic and adaptable to various contexts. I demonstrated how the artists showcase them not only in art spaces – such as museums, galleries, and foundations – but also in diverse venues like film festivals. I have addressed this ambiguity in the nature of these works and considered how it also extends into art spaces. I have emphasized how the works become part of video installations that exist at the intersection of the black box aesthetic – associated with traditional commercial cinema – and the white cube aesthetic, which is characteristic of modern art spaces. I argued that their ambiguity aligns with concepts developed by scholars such as Juliane Rebentisch, who has studied in depth the “hybrid forms between visual art and cinema” of works that are “neither one nor the other, but both at the same time”,⁴³⁵ or as Andrew V. Uroskie, who has written extensively about the clash between the “two cultural sites - the art gallery and the cinema theater”.⁴³⁶ My aim was not to resolve an ambiguity, but to argue that there is nothing to resolve. My research sought not to frame ambiguity as a puzzle to be solved or a problem to be clarified to an extreme degree. I aimed to highlight ambiguity as an intrinsic characteristic of both the works and the artists' practice, emphasizing that it should be analyzed and understood as it is. This ambiguity also connects to my earlier discussion regarding the reliability of the works. I highlighted how comparing the artists' historical narratives with academic writings can demonstrate their reliability. In my analysis of the case studies, I then talked about the 'promise

⁴³⁵ Rebentisch 2012, previously quoted. P. 183.

⁴³⁶ Uroskie 2013, previously quoted. P. 5.

of access to reality' that ensues from documentary works (a very common expression in film studies, as I have showed through the words of scholars such as Stella Bruzzi or Erika Balsom, building on their analysis of the 'documentary turn' within visual arts). However, as I noted, the verifiability of the works is intertwined with the non-verifiability of certain sources, such as oral history. These sources just invite the viewer to trust the authenticity of the stories being told.

The works retain their inherent ambiguity, allowing them to adapt in various ways to different spaces. I argue that this also highlights a unique state of 'betweenness', as the works can adapt in distinct ways to various contexts. My analysis of the artists' works aimed not to confine them but to demonstrate their ability to navigate and engage 'between' various spaces, forging connections 'between' artistic, non-artistic and academic realms. Ultimately, I contended that this ability arises because the artists' practice extends beyond the mere creation of artworks; it also encompasses their mediation. I argued that mediation encompasses more than just the presentation of works in art exhibitions; it also involves a specific activity undertaken by the artists themselves. The artists do not limit themselves to creating stories and counter-narratives: part of their work is also to tell and accompany them. I argued that this reveals another role the artists play precisely from their position of 'betweenness': making their visual narratives travel 'between' different places, mediating them. I will now return to this second role of the artist-mediator that I highlighted through my analysis of the case studies, which relates to the other role of the artist-researcher.

10.4. The Second Role of the Artists: Artists-Mediators

So far, I considered how my analysis of the case studies has revealed how the artists play a role of artist-researcher in their situation of 'betweenness'. I argued that this reveals something about their positioning and how they interpret it. I demonstrated how the research methodologies employed by the artists enable them to reconnect with the histories and cultures of Lebanon and/or Palestine. These methodologies facilitate the creation of 'networks' between different places, which ultimately enhance the works. I argued that the research methods also shape how the artists craft their visual narratives. Ethnographic research, auto-ethnographic research, archival research, oral history, landscape exploration, and collective research are all "*manières d'être et d'agir dans le réel*" (as Aline Caillet would put it). I contend that they determine the

similarities in their visual narratives. These range from the presence of interview collections or ‘living archives’ in their works, to similar representations of the landscape, to the inclusion of introspective or general reflections on the histories and traditions of Lebanon and/or Palestine. In my analysis of the case studies, however, I argued that the artists’ practice is not limited to the creation of these works with a visual narrative character. I argued that one interpretation of their situation of ‘betweenness’ is the adoption of the role of mediator for these narratives and counter-narratives. Moreover, this role confirms one initial hypothesis that I had, that the artists find different strategies to address their works to both an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’.

10.4.1. Parergon and Other Mediation Strategies

The first strategy that I identified are what I called the ‘parergons’. I emphasized that all the artists engage in a parallel dissemination activity alongside their works, which often aids in mediating the pieces and adds depth to their narrative and understanding. I have also noted how this dissemination activity develops both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Lebanon or Palestine. I demonstrated how this once again reveals a role that the artists play from their situation of ‘betweenness’, which finally influences their works. To define the ‘parergon’, I have followed the conceptualization of the scholar Anne Ring Petersen, who describes it as “outer supplement that nevertheless contributes significantly to shaping the ‘interiority of the work’”.⁴³⁷ I have interpreted the ‘parergon’ in two ways. On the one hand, I have faithfully followed Petersen’s definition and showed how the ‘parergons’ add additional elements to the works that shape the “interiority of the work”. On the other hand, I considered the ‘parergon’ as the equivalent for works of art of the ‘paratexts’ for literary texts. Gérard Genette has theorized the concept of ‘paratext’, defining it as “all the liminal devices that mediate the relations between text and the reader”.⁴³⁸ Indeed, I argued that the ‘parergons’ I identified also perform this function. They mediate the relations ‘between’ artwork and viewer: they are a mediating tool for the artists. They accompany the narrative contained in the works. I referred to the public interventions, podcasts, and writings in which the artists discuss their works and enrich them as ‘parergons.’

⁴³⁷ Petersen 2015, previously quoted. P. 33.

⁴³⁸ Genette 1997, previously quoted. P. xi.

As ‘parergons’ used by Jumana Manna, I mentioned her participation in BAK’s public program, in several podcasts, and the article she wrote on *Foragers*, in which she explores some aspects of foraging and how she and her family have a personal connection to it. For Jumana Abboud, I mentioned her participation in the public program of documenta 15, in several podcasts, and the publication related to her works, which includes the “journal of journeying” about her research activity in the Palestinian landscape. For Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, I also referred to the various public interventions, such as podcasts, that they make both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Lebanon. I did the same for Marwa Arsanios and Lamia Joreige, citing the public meetings Joreige held in Lebanon at the Sursock Museum and in France at Le Bal. Furthermore, I could have referenced a text written by Joreige herself on *Mapping a Transformation*, but I chose not to include it in my analysis. Finally, regarding Inas Halabi, I discussed her various activities, including her podcasts and writings, as well as her ceramic workshop in the Netherlands, *Turabi*. As a final ‘parergon’, I will mention the artists’ activities on social networks. Although I have not often cited them as sources, I point out here that such activities are particularly useful to follow the artists’ practice and the mediation of their works. In fact, they often talk about their projects, indicate the exhibitions that they will feature, and address a mixed audience. As I mentioned in the methodological chapter, I want to reiterate that my research aims to highlight social networks as a crucial tool for understanding the evolution of the contemporary art world.

To define this role of the artist as mediator, I used two concepts from two different scholars. The first was that of the ‘speaking artist’ by art historian and curator Lorand Hegyi. I have showed how Hegyi defines as ‘speaking artists’ those artists who feel that their mission is to “concretize and communicate”. He ascribes to them “a radical and unlimited urge to become active beyond purposeful objectives”.⁴³⁹ On the one hand, I have noticed how the artists’ works I analyzed in my research show this urge to “concretize and communicate”. On the other hand, however, I have pointed out that they also address “purposeful objectives” (Hegyi’s words) that are practical, political, didactic, and moral. Here I want to emphasize Hegyi’s double expression: to concretize and to communicate. I contend that the dual role of those Hegyi terms ‘speaking artists’ aligns perfectly with the dual action I have outlined regarding the artists in this research: the creation of visual narratives (‘to concretize’) and their mediation (‘to communicate’).

⁴³⁹ Hegyi 2018, previously quoted. P. 26.

This discussion contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of the artist, which has occupied the field of art history intensely in recent decades. As the scholar Miwon Kwon wrote in her 2002 text on public art: “The artist as an overspecialized aesthetic object maker has been anachronistic for a long time already. What they *provide* now, rather than *produce*, are aesthetic, often “critical-artistic,” services”.⁴⁴⁰ Kwon associates such considerations with artists who engage in public art or performance interventions, such as the American artist Andrea Fraser. On the one hand, I argue that Kwon’s words apply to the artists of my research, who through their mediating activity offer indeed ‘critical-artistic services’. On the other hand, however, they also ‘produce’. I have already used the term ‘produce’ in relation to their activity of ‘knowledge production’, but it also applies to their actual production of the artworks. The artworks are mostly videos, but in the context of exhibitions they also include other elements (especially in the cases of Jumana Abboud, Marwa Arsanios, Jumana Manna). My aim is not to confine the artists’ work to a particular category, but to emphasize the multifaceted nature of their practice. This underscores an ambiguity that is not a puzzle to be resolved; it is, in fact, the core of the artists’ work. Even in their practice, the artists reproduce a form of ‘betweenness’, constantly moving ‘between’ different activities: ‘between’ production and mediation (‘providing critical-artistic services’ as Kwon would write). I also mentioned how they often promote cultural and artistic initiatives parallel to their projects (see, for example, the cases of Lamia Joreige and Marwa Arsanios and their projects Beirut Art Center and *98 Weeks* in the Lebanese capital). This is also part of their complex (and ambiguous) artistic practice. It shows the role they play in the art world and in the public sphere, as both creators and initiators/mediators.

A second concept I used to describe the artists’ mediation activity is that of the ‘art interlocutor’, coined by scholar Jessica Winegar. Winegar coined this term for a series of modern Egyptian artists: “a term that emphasizes the importance of discussion and debate in their lives”.⁴⁴¹ In her writings on modern Egyptian art, she examines how these artists combined artistic production with discourse activities. Additionally, Winegar examines how these artists navigate trajectories that span from the local to the international, fostering artistic dialogues ‘between’ diverse realities. Thus, despite the temporal and geographical distance, I argue that the definition of ‘art interlocutor’ fits the artists featured in my research. It shows the union of

⁴⁴⁰ Kwon 2002, previously quoted. P. 50.

⁴⁴¹ Winegar 2006, previously quoted. P. 10.

two types of activity (once again: production or mediation) and how both activities lead the artists to position themselves and assume a certain role from their situation of ‘betweenness’.

While defining the ‘speaking artists’, Lorand Hegyi writes that they avoid “purposeful objectives”, which are “practical, political, didactic and moral”. Instead, I argue that the mediating activity (and the works themselves) of the artists I considered is directed towards these very goals. That is why I stated that I adopt Hegyi’s concept, but with a twist. Throughout the analysis of the case studies, I have often used the adjective ‘pedagogical’ (Hegyi would write ‘didactic’). I have described the nature of Manna’s film – and consequently the ‘parergons’ that accompanies it – as pedagogical. I did the same in the cases of Joreige, Halabi, Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Arsanios. In the case of Abboud, I defined a ‘pedagogical role’ that the artist assumes when she takes traditional Palestinian folktales and disseminates them internationally. By ‘pedagogical’ (or ‘didactic’), I refer specifically to the intrinsic intention of the works to educate about the historical and cultural aspects of Lebanon and Palestine that they explore. I argue that this represents another interpretation of the mediating role played by the artists.

I revisited here the concept of responsibility that I have ascribed to the artists on several occasions. I argue that this responsibility or initiative also takes on a ‘political’ character. Here, another of the ‘purposeful objectives’ (Hegyi’s words) of the works of the ‘speaking artists’ from my research emerges. The visual narratives I have examined carry a strong political connotation and sometimes evolve into counter-narratives that explicitly challenge hegemonic perspectives. In the case of Abboud, I spoke of a ‘decolonial practice’ in relation to her performance at documenta 15, concerning the way the artist opposes the ‘toponymicide’ in Palestine. I also discussed a decolonial perspective regarding Lamia Joreige’s installation, which deconstructs the colonial projects that have impacted the Arab region and amplifies the voices of alternative perspectives from local communities that have emerged over time. To describe Joreige’s choice, I referred to the scholar Ariella Azoulay’s term ‘unlearning imperialism’. Overall, I have emphasized how the artists charge their visual narratives with political value. I argue that their first-hand participation in the narratives, their personal involvement, shows that the initial goal was not only to tell stories, to teach them (the ‘didactic’ aspect), but also to take sides, to refuse a *super partes* point of view. In the case of Inas Halabi, I highlighted a militant and well-defined perspective that emerges in the film and its visual choices, particularly in the scene where the artist sits at the table with the mother of the activist Maysan. This militant stance

is also evident in other works; for instance, I described Jumana Manna's participatory observation as militant as well.

In general, then, I argue that one of the 'purposeful objectives', one of the aspects of the nature of the works, is political. In the history of art related to the Arab world, Zeina Maasri has been particularly concerned with "political commitment through art": in Arabic, *iltizam*. In her book *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* that I often quote in the State of the Art, she traces the history of this concept: from manifestos for a "politically engaged Arabic literature", to "Arab nationalist interpretations of a *littérature engagée*", "to her interpretation of the "Palestinian exile intellectual", and to many other contexts, such as the Egyptian anti-colonial context of the 1950s.⁴⁴² Concerning my research, I argue that the artists I considered and their works fit into this long and complex history traced by Maasri. Their works have an *iltizam* character in the way they present a political commitment through art. They engage politically with the histories of the Arab world while seeking new decolonial or anti-colonial perspectives that address both the present and a reimagining of the past. Most importantly, I demonstrated how this aligns with a situation of 'betweenness'. The artists create their visual narratives and counter-narratives not only for an 'inside', in Lebanon and Palestine, but also for an 'outside'. The didactic and political 'purposeful objectives' therefore address precisely this 'betweenness'. I have suggested that this can be inferred from the artists' mediating activity, but I argue it can also be discerned directly from the way the works are constructed. Specifically, it is evident in what I referred to as the international language of the works, a point I will now revisit.

10.4.2. An Overview of the Different Types of Translation

I have already emphasized the importance of the concept of translation in my analysis of the case studies. For example, I revisited how I applied the concept of 'intersemiotic translation' to explain how the artists 'translate' their research materials into the language of visual arts. However, I argued that the translation of the works is also tied to the process of mediation and the role of mediator that the artists assume. Through various forms of translation, the artists develop strategies for their visual narratives to engage a diverse audience, regardless of their

⁴⁴² Maasri 2020, previously quoted. P. 95.

familiarity with the themes presented. These strategies enable the stories to travel and to follow the artists in their movement of ‘betweenness’.

The first type of translation I identified is the linguistic one. In fact, all the works have a multilingual nature. This means that they include both different languages in the audio and in the subtitles, and in other tools – such as the QR codes in Lamia Joreige’s installation. Regarding linguistic translation as a means to reach a broader audience, I used the concept of ‘negotiation’, drawing from the work of scholar Umberto Eco. Indeed, Eco describes the process of translation as one of ‘negotiation’, in which something is inevitably lost, since we “always negotiate the meaning that the translation has to express, because in our daily life we constantly negotiate the meaning we confer to the expressions we use”.⁴⁴³ I noted how, from a linguistic point of view, certain expressions that feature the narrations can indeed get lost in the transition from one language to another. For example, this was evident in *Ismyrna*, where certain French expressions transitioned into their English equivalents in the subtitles. Similarly, I described the ‘negotiation’ within the narratives as a deliberate choice to frame the themes differently depending on the exhibition’s location. Here, too, there is a choice of ‘meaning’ that the artists ‘confer’ to the works, as Eco would write. In *Mapping a Transformation*, for instance, I demonstrated how Joreige made specific adjustments in the exhibitions in Istanbul and Beirut to better resonate with the local audience.

I argue that the concept of ‘negotiation’ that I used is in continuity with what I wrote in the State of the Art. There I mentioned it on two occasions. First, through Homi K. Bhabha, who speaks of ‘negotiation’ in relation to the concept of the space in-between as a third space. Indeed, I noted how Bhabha speaks of a constant ‘negotiation’ of those who live the “tensions peculiar to borderline existences”.⁴⁴⁴ Secondly, I referenced the term ‘negotiate’ through Edward Said, who discussed it in relation to his sense of belonging “to more than one world”.⁴⁴⁵ This perspective compelled him to navigate the various tensions and contradictions ‘implicit’ in his own biography. Both Bhabha and Said therefore speak of negotiation as the end result of dealing with the tensions of a ‘double inscription’, an inscription “to more than one world”. Bhabha also delves into the concept of hybridity, of hybrid languages. In my analysis, I did not ascribe a hybrid language to the works. I did not argue that they have a hybrid language which results

⁴⁴³ Eco 2012, previously quoted. P. 94.

⁴⁴⁴ Bhabha 2003, previously quoted. P. 13.

⁴⁴⁵ Said 2012, previously quoted. P. 375.

from a ‘negotiation’, taking elements from the different places where the artists live and work. I explained the works’ ‘negotiation’ as their adaptability: their ability to adapt to different contexts, which I argue stems from the clarity of their narratives, that the artists often tailor to specific settings – as demonstrated particularly in the cases of Lamia Joreige and Jumana Abboud. This, in turn, is part of the ‘didactic’ character (a “purposeful objective”) of the works and of the special role of mediator that the artists play from their ‘betweenness’.

Hence, I argue that translation as a mediation strategy is a way for the artists to transmit their stories and address different audiences (‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Lebanon or Palestine). I argue that the artists act as mediators ‘between’ different contexts, and address their works to different contexts. This became clear, for example, in the analysis of Jumana Abboud’s work. There, I highlighted how translation (especially in her performance) was a way to connect, to speak to a wider audience: an instrument of inclusion. I argued that translation is not merely a linguistic action; rather, it helps Abboud to transport the collected stories (the folktales) to different geographical contexts, allowing for connections with similar narratives in various regions. Similarly, in the case of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s film, I argued that translation becomes a way to connect, especially with those who have similar life experiences – in their case, I referred to the theories of ‘betweenness’ and translation by the scholar Yasir Suleiman.⁴⁴⁶

The artists’ translation activity complements another strategy I identified in their works: contextualization and explanation for an audience that may be unfamiliar with the topics. In each work, I identified specific elements that the artists selected to ensure the pieces were accessible to an international audience. In Lamia Joreige’s installation, I noted that some of the explanatory notes on the panels targeted viewers unfamiliar with the geographical area in question. For instance, I observed that the description of Batroun as a well-known seaside destination was unnecessary for those coming from Lebanon. In Jumana Manna’s *Foragers*, I stressed out that some segments (such as the archival material) serve to better explain the issue to those who are not familiar with it. Indeed, I mentioned that for Palestinians, the cultural appropriation of their cuisine by Israelis is a constant concern. In *Ismyrna*, I observed that the dialogue between Adnan and Hadjithomas unfolds from the outset in a way that helps viewers become familiar with historical events they may not know well. I emphasized the same thing for Inas Halabi’s work, concerning some of her oral history interventions. I made a similar

⁴⁴⁶ Suleiman 2006, previously quoted. P. 18.

observation regarding Marwa Arsanios' film, noting that it offers historical and scientific elements that are essential for viewers who may be unfamiliar with the history of Lebanese territory.

However, I argued that mediation goes also beyond translation, clarification, or contextualization. In fact, artists often mediate by forging connections 'between' different contexts. This was particularly evident in Jumana Abboud's work presented at the Brothers Grimm Museum in Kassel. I noted that, perhaps for the first time in history, elements of Palestinian folklore and popular knowledge were juxtaposed with their European counterparts, enabling viewers to draw comparisons and connections – an approach the artist actively seeks in her work. I similarly framed the posters designed by Nancy Naser Al Deen, which Marwa Arsanios used in a public art intervention in Peckham, London, to recontextualize the questions driving *Reverse Shot* within the English context. In such cases, I argued that the artists transform their works into bridges 'between' different contexts, seeking potential overlaps to foster dialogue. I argued that this is another facet of the role of mediator that they assume from their situation of 'betweenness', and that influences the way they construct their visual narratives.

Finally, I have emphasized that addressing different audiences, making the works accessible in different contexts, does not mean guaranteeing the same experience for everyone. In fact, viewers who engage with Lamia Joreige's installation without relying on the QR codes or the translations provided in the exhibition booklet will likely have a more seamless experience than those who need to constantly interrupt their viewing to translate the content. Similarly, viewers who understand Arabic will have a different experience watching the films compared to those who can only follow the subtitles, as the latter will miss elements that are lost in the process of translation and 'negotiation'. Those who cannot read Arabic are not able to understand the scene in Jumana Abboud's video where the artist moves some stones on the ground to create different words. Consequently, I argued that the artists employ specific mediation strategies to help viewers navigate potential obstacles without homogenizing their experiences.

Overall, I argued that translation as a mediation strategy in these works is not only a linguistic element but also involves narrative and visual choices that shape how the works unfold. I argue that this broader understanding of translation further reveals how the artists' position of 'betweenness' directly influences their works, arising from the various roles they assume within this position. A final visual strategy that I identified in relation to translation

involves the representation of emotions in the works. I addressed this issue in particular in my analysis of *Ismyrna*. I argued that the film finds a particular way to convey Hadjithomas' and Adnan's way of dealing with 'postmemory': focusing the camera on the faces of the two artists and realizing what I defined as a 'process of affect contagion'. I borrowed this expression from scholar Jill Bennet, who uses it to explain the function of medieval icons representing martyrdom and their ability to emotionally transport viewers and 'translate' the emotions depicted, which the viewers end up "feeling rather than just seeing".⁴⁴⁷ Such visual choices are evident in the other works as well – for instance, in Halabi's film during the scene where the artist confronts the activist Maysan's mother, or in Arsanios and Manna's films during various oral history scenes. This highlights how the artists consistently employ similar strategies to convey their stories visually.

10.5. Final Reflections on the Art Venues Examined

I have emphasized the initiatives and strategies that the artists themselves undertake to mediate their work, underscoring their role as artist-mediators. However, the artists do not mediate their projects alone. By mediation, I also referred to the exhibitions in which their works are presented. Indeed, I have identified the exhibition as the crucial moment of mediation of the works and of their stories. In the moment of the exhibition, the final result of the artist's research takes shape. It is here that the visual narratives meet their audience. The exhibition theorist Jérôme Glicenstein defines the art exhibition as a mediating event composed of all "*les opérations de mise en relation d'objets et de personnes en un contexte donné*" ("the operations of relating objects and people in a given context").⁴⁴⁸ In my research, I have analyzed precisely these 'operations of relating' the works and the public, and from there I have drawn certain conclusions. For this reason, the choice to focus on specific exhibitions was an important part of the methodology of my dissertation. In examining the case studies, I considered various contexts across different countries. While I do not suggest that these contexts are completely identical or overlapping, some general observations can still be made. This involves considering the scenarios these exhibitions have presented, which can be both similar and dissimilar. Some

⁴⁴⁷ Bennett 2005, previously quoted. P. 36.

⁴⁴⁸ Glicenstein, Jérôme: *L'art, une histoire d'expositions*. Paris 2009. P. 85.

of the questions I began with in this context were: how do these institutions behave when they present the artworks in their exhibitions? And, conversely, how do these artists' narratives operate on the European territory? Through my analysis of the case studies, I have outlined different answers to these questions.

Each case study allowed me to consider different places and art venues. I argued that these locations reflect the networks the artists create through their position of 'betweenness'. I examined the art and research venues in Lebanon and Palestine where artists have been active for their projects, such as Dar Jacir in Bethlehem, Sakiya in Ein Qiniya, or Marfa' Projects in Beirut. However, I mostly concentrated my analysis on venues in Europe. From the outset, I chose this perspective from among the possibilities for studying the artists' position of 'betweenness'. As I mentioned earlier, this choice also reflects my position as the researcher. Moreover, the venues I examined offered a valuable opportunity to analyze key developments within the European art scene. I argued that these venues contribute to the creation of new international networks within Europe and foster the development of innovative projects. This was the case of places like BAK in Utrecht, which I examined in the chapter on the work of Jumana Manna, or de Appel in Amsterdam, which I explored in the chapter on the work of Inas Halabi, or The Mosaic Rooms, which I studied in the chapter on the work of Marwa Arsanios. These spaces are open to a research-based contemporary art, and seek to develop art as a practice of knowledge production. I highlighted how these venues have long been open to artists from diverse international communities, particularly from the Arab world. In fact, I noted that they have hosted several of the artists featured in my research over the years. Finally, I analyzed how these places claim to build a relationship with diasporic communities, to address a mixed audience, or how they have long positioned themselves as meeting platforms for communities of different origins.

In my analysis, however, I also delved into the political positioning of the various venues. My goal was to determine whether there were corresponding positions for certain claims. I aimed to explore how institutions behave and how the artists' narratives function within the European context. I observed that the process of mediating certain stories can sometimes lead to failures or problematic situations, particularly when these stories address sensitive issues within specific social contexts. The most striking case in this sense was documenta 15. Here I showed how the presence of Palestinian artists, or artists in solidarity with the Palestinian cause,

brought to light the difficulty that exists in Germany in dealing with the ongoing colonial history of Palestine. I outlined how this presence led to months of controversy, public scandals, cases of censorship. I argued that the polarization in the art world mirrors the social divide that exists similarly in many Western countries, and which the 2023/2024 war on Gaza has further intensified. Concerning these issues, I have recorded different possible behaviors on the part of the art spaces. On the one hand, I observed venues with a precise and unambiguous positioning, such as BAK, de Appel, and The Mosaic Rooms; on the other hand, I examined the silence of venues such as The Showroom, or the inability to support their artists, as in the case of documenta. I argued that the risk in these cases is that artists no longer perceive the venues as supportive and therefore safe spaces. I contend that the further development of these spaces and the future relationships that they try to weave may therefore depend on this.

Nevertheless, I argued that the work of the venues I examined marks an evolution in the European artistic landscape. First, they reveal new international networks that they integrate into. Second, they display a particular role of art venues. The venues present the artists' works, mediate their narratives, and provide a physical space for them. They ensure that the artists' narratives engage with European contexts, which are often directly involved in the works themselves. Indeed, even though the stories that the artists tell are tied to local issues, they often involve the history of European countries as well. The 'entanglement' of the temporalities within the works addresses both the past and present of Europe and how these have influenced the recent history of the Arab world. I argue that exhibiting these works on European soil contributes to uncovering this past and introducing new perspectives on it. In this way, art spaces can aid in achieving these goals central to the artists' work. Their mediation aligns closely with that of the artists themselves. Their ability to create a meeting platform shows both the role that they and the artists' narratives play on the European territory. I have showed how artists' narrative works may address a mixed audience even in Europe. They can engage the evolving European community, which comprises communities from various backgrounds, while simultaneously facilitating meaningful encounters. Moreover, they may play a role in challenging or complicating dominant narratives about the Arab world, its histories, its cultures.

Finally, I associated a notion of role with the activities of both the artists and the art venues. I observed that while venues can support artists in their mediation role, this aid is not always guaranteed. Regarding the artists, I argued that their roles as artist-researchers and artist-

mediators reflect a specific approach to their work that stems from their position of 'betweenness'. I contend that these roles link their activity to a social positioning. They show an initiative on the part of the artists, an assumption of responsibility, sometimes a response to what Kamal Boullata would label the 'call of history'. This particular way of working influences their art projects. It influences the way the artists construct their visual narratives. Finally, I contend that the similarities in the visual characteristics of their works arise from this shared approach to artistic practice and their comparable positioning within their situation of 'betweenness'.

10.6. Final Reflections: An Ongoing Challenge Ahead

The conclusion of my research remains open-ended. I argue that my research indicates a particular direction that many artists are pursuing in the realm of international contemporary art. However, I emphasize that I do not assert that the conclusions I reached can universally interpret any situation of 'betweenness' or the visual narratives of all artists working from that position. Nevertheless, I argue that in addition to the examples I considered, it could have been possible to examine others that would have been in line with what I have highlighted. Indeed, I believe that the reflections that emerged from my study may extend to other similar situations of 'betweenness', that involve relationships 'between' different geographical contexts.

I leave this challenge open for further research. Future studies will reveal whether the insights from my research are unique or whether they point to a common and transversal direction worth exploring. I believe that in order to respond to this challenge, it will be necessary to observe how the encounters that arise from the situations of 'betweenness' take place. It will be necessary to observe the various exhibitions, to examine the positioning of the institutions and venues of the art world. It will be essential to investigate and try to understand the origins of certain interests of art spaces, and what situations and dialogues these venues seek to create. It will also be important to examine whether and how the mediating activity of art venues connects to a mediating activity of the artists. This will require examining art not only as an aesthetic phenomenon but also as a social one. It will involve viewing artists as facilitators of coexistence - as social actors who can drive public debate, influence narratives, and reshape perceptions of the world, ultimately becoming 'wise organizers' (as Gentili would say) of

counter-narratives. It will be necessary to study the roles that both the artists and their works can play.

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11.2. List of Interviews

- Abboud, Jumana Emil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, February 21st 2022.
- Anani, Yazid: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci, Ramallah, Palestine, March 17th 2022.
- Arsanios, Marwa: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, May 6th 2023.
- Avakian, Vartan: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, January 20th 2023.
- Buchakjian, Gregory: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, January 25th 2023.
- Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, March 12th, 2024.

Hajali, Ziad: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Birzeit, March 24th 2022.

Halabi, Inas: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, May 6th 2024.

Hussein, Yusef: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, April 12th 2022.

Joreige, Lamia: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in person, in Beirut, Lebanon, January 14th, 2023.

Joreige, Lamia: Intervention at Sursock Museum, “Uncertain Times – On Artistic Forms of Historical Research Conversation with Lamia Joreige, Pelin Tan, and Salim Tamari”, Beirut, Lebanon, February 7th, 2023.

Khoury, Aline: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Bethlehem, March 21st 2022.

Kyriakos, Lina: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, January 21st 2023.

Manchanda, Seema: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in London, December 13th 2022.

Manna, Jumana: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, April 21st 2022.

Mitwasi, Faten Nastas: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, June 16th 2022.

Radakovic, Angela: Interview by Giacomo Paci, conducted at The Mosaic Rooms, December 7th 2022.

Sherwell, Tina: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci via Zoom, June 23rd 2022.

Zaatari, Akram: Interview. Conducted by Giacomo Paci in Beirut, February 1st 2023.

11.3. Visual and Cinematic Works Cited

Abboud, Jumana Emil: *I feel everything*, 2022, Palestine, 9 min, HD video.

Abu Zoulouf, Jafra: *Grandma's Tales*, 2020, 6:33 min, HD video, Collection of the artist.

Adachi, Masao: *A.K.A. Serial Killer*, 1975, Japan, 86 min, 35 mm.

Adnan, Etel: *Arbres*, 2015, Wool tapestry, 220x165cm, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Arsanios, Marwa: *Resilient Weeds*, 2016, Pen on paper, 21x29.7cm, Private collection.

———: *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 1*, 2017, Iraq, 18 min, Video HD.

———: *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 2*, 2019, Syria, 38 min, Video HD.

———: *Untitled (Tapestry 3)*, 2019, Silkscreen on linen, 340cmx50cm, Mor Charpentier, Paris.

———: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 3: Micro Resistencias*, 2020, Colombia, 31 min, Video HD.

———: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot*, 2022, Germany/Lebanon, 35 min, Video HD.

Choucair, Saloua Raouda: *Interform*, 1960, Wood, 60x32x11.5 cm, Grey Art Gallery, New York.

Farocki, Harun: *Eye/Machine*, 2000, Germany, 23 min, video-BetaSp.

Folman, Ari: *Valse avec Bachir*, 2008, Israel/France/Germany, 90 min, Animation.

Godard, Jean-Luc: *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988, France/Switzerland, 266 min, 35 mm.

Hadjithomas, Joana / Joreige, Khalil: *Wonder Beirut*, 1997-2006, diasec, 47x58cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

———: *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2012, Lebanon/France, Qatar, 95 min, HDCam.

———: *Ismyrna*, 2016, Lebanon/UAE/France, 50 min, HDCam.

———: *Time Capsules*, 2017, Minerals, Resin, Plexiglas, 150x11cm, Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Vitry-sur-Seine.

Halabi, Inas: *Mnemosyne*, 2016, Palestine, 13 min, Video HD.

Halabi, Inas: *We Have Always Known the Wind's Direction*, 2020, Palestine, 12 min, Video HD.

Halabi, Inas: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains*, 2023, Canada / Palestine / Netherlands / Belgium / United Kingdom, 95 min, HD video.

Hourani, Khaled: *Unnatural Landscape*, 2020, Acrylic on cardboard, 25x35cm, Zawyeh Gallery, Ramallah.

Iliou, Maria: *Smyrna: The Destruction of a Cosmopolitan City - 1900-1922*, 2012, Greece/Turkey, 87 min, HD video.

Joreige Lamia: *Le Déplacement*, 2000, video-stills installation, 190 inkjet prints, 10x13,5cm, Frac Bretagne, Rennes.

———: *Objects of War*, Video, various objects, 68 min, Display dimensions variable, Tate Modern, London.

———: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2022, Installation, Mixed media on paper, dimensions variable, Pera Museum, Istanbul.

Manna, Jumana: *The Goodness Regime*, 2013, Palestine, 21 min, HD video.

———: *Old Bread International*, 2022, Ceramics, plastic bags, newsprint, concrete bricks, and metal grates, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.

———: *Foragers*, 2022, Palestine, 64 min, 2K video.

Mansour, Sliman: *Olive Harvest*, 1988, Oil on Canvas, 66x57cm, Private Collection

Marker, Chris: *Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957, Russia, 62 min, Eastmancolor.

Ōshima, Nagisa: *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*, 1970, Japan, 94 min, 35 mm.

Sadek, Walid: *Love Is Blind*, 2010, Text-based installation, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.

Shammout, Ismail: *We Shall Return*, 1954, Oil on Canvas, 79x94cm, Private Collection.

Taring Padi: *People's Justice*, 2002, Oil on Banner, 8x12m, Collection of Taring Padi.

Watkins, Peter: *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, 2000, France, 345 min, HD Video.

11.4. List of Figures

- Figure 1 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022, 00:21:45.
- Figure 2 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022, 00:10:40.
- Figure 3 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022, 00:18:10.
- Figure 4 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022, 00:25:45.
- Figure 5 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022, 00:16:50.
- Figure 6 – Jumana Emil Abboud and The Waters Diviners preparing for the performance.
- Figure 7 – A showcase by Jumana Emil Abboud at documenta 15.
- Figure 8 – A beeswax sculpture inside a showcase by Jumana Emil Abboud at documenta 15.
- Figure 9 – A watercolor inside a showcase by Jumana Emil Abboud at documenta 15.
- Figure 10 – Jumana Emil Abboud: *I feel everything* (still), 2022, 00:03:00.
- Figure 11 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016, 00:03:25.
- Figure 12 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016, 00:23:40.
- Figure 13 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016, 00:25:30.
- Figure 14 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016, 00:33:30.
- Figure 15 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016, 00:46:05.
- Figure 16 – Lamia Joreige: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2023, Beirut, Marfa' Project.
- Figure 17 – Lamia Joreige: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2022, 17th Istanbul Biennial.
- Figure 18 – Lamia Joreige: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2022, 17th Istanbul Biennial.
- Figure 19 - Lamia Joreige: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2023, Beirut, Marfa' Project.
- Figure 20 - Lamia Joreige: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2022, 17th Istanbul Biennial.
- Figure 21 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023, 00:02:50.
- Figure 22 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023, 00:05:30.
- Figure 23 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023, 01:39:00.
- Figure 24 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023, 01:16:30.
- Figure 25 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023, 01:07:28.
- Figure 26 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022, 00:03:40.
- Figure 27 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022, 00:06:25.

Figure 28 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022, 00:14:00.

Figure 29 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022, 00:24:00.

Figure 30 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022, 00:32:00.

12. Figures



Figure 1 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Jumana Manna, 00:21:45.



Figure 2 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Jumana Manna, 00:10:40.



Figure 3 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Jumana Manna, 00:18:10.



Figure 4 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Jumana Manna, 00:25:45.



Figure 5 – Jumana Manna: *Foragers* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Jumana Manna, 00:16:50.



Figure 6 – Jumana Emil Abboud and The Waters Diviners preparing for the performance.
Photo: Giacomo Paci. Courtesy: Jumana Emil Abboud.



Figure 7 – A showcase by Jumana Emil Abboud at documenta 15. Photo: Giacomo Paci.
Courtesy: Jumana Emil Abboud.

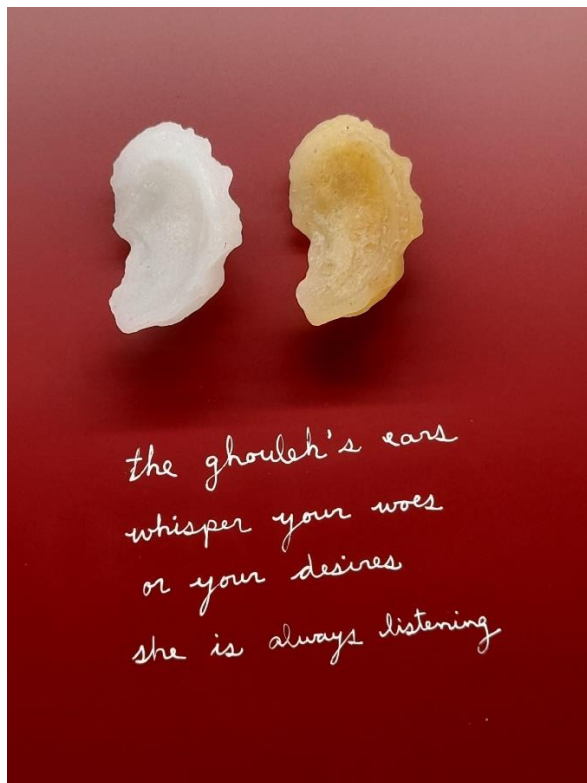


Figure 8 – A beeswax sculpture inside a showcase Figure 9 – A watercolor inside a showcase



Figure 10 – Jumana Emil Abboud: *I feel everything* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Jumana Emil Abboud, 00:03:00.



Figure 11 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016. Image courtesy of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 00:03:25.



Figure 12 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016. Image courtesy of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 00:23:40.



Figure 13 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016. Image courtesy of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 00:25:30.



Figure 14 – Joana Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016. Image courtesy of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 00:33:30.

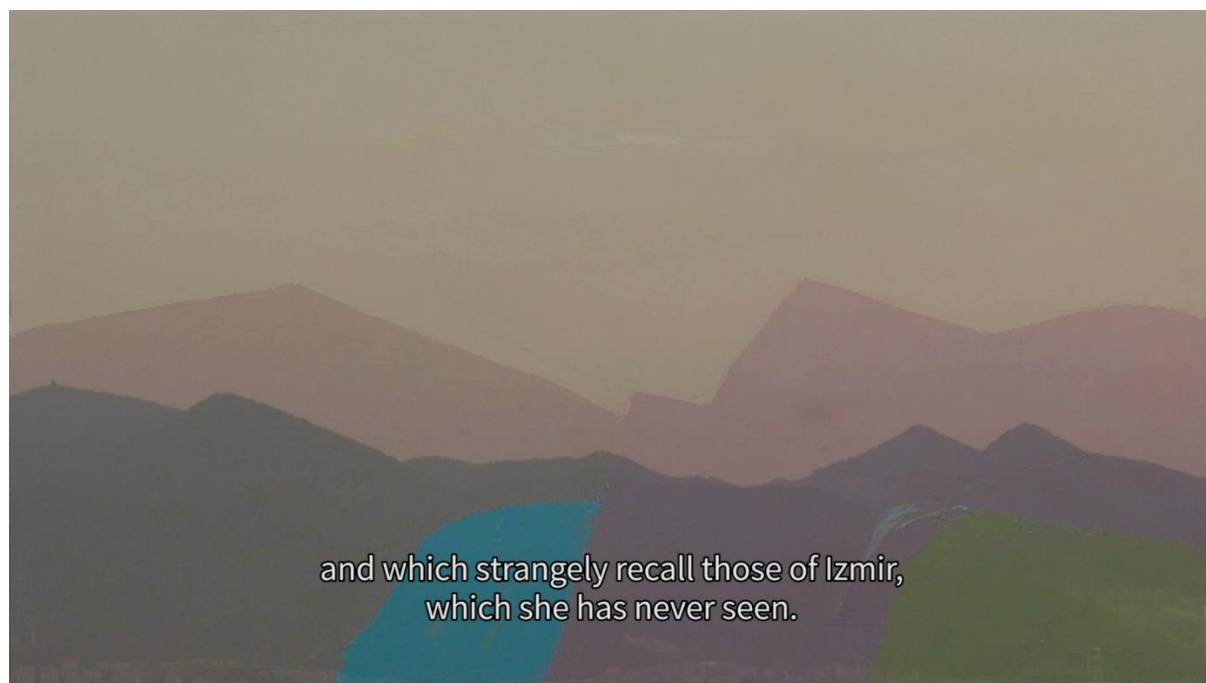


Figure 15 – Joana Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige: *Ismyrna* (still), 2016. Image courtesy of Joana Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige, 00:46:05.

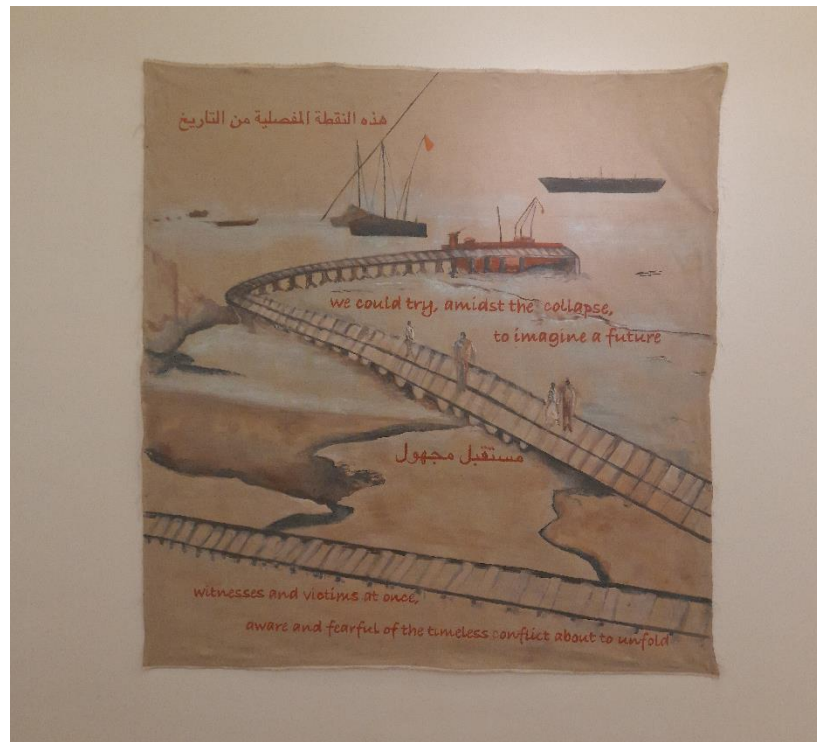


Figure 16 – Lamia Joreige: *Mapping a Transformation*, 2023, Beirut, Marfa' Project.
Photo: Giacomo Paci. Image Courtesy: Lamia Joreige.



Figure 17
Photos at the 17th Istanbul Biennial: Giacomo Paci. Image Courtesy: Lamia Joreige.

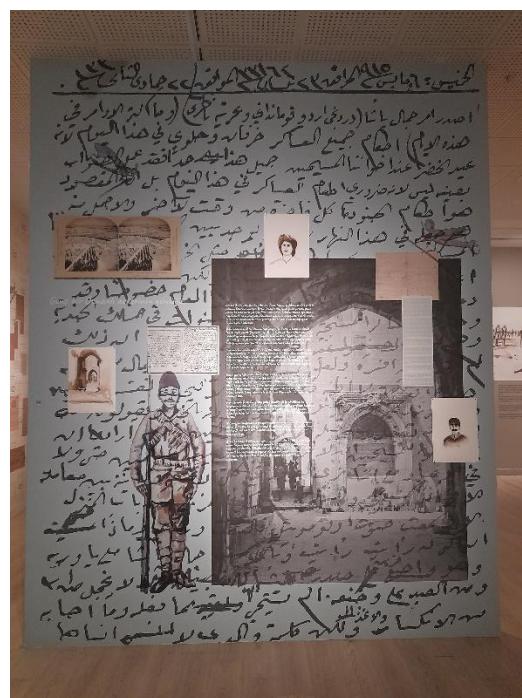


Figure 18



Figure 21 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023. Image courtesy of Inas Halabi, 00:02:50.



Figure 22 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023. Image courtesy of Inas Halabi, 00:05:30.

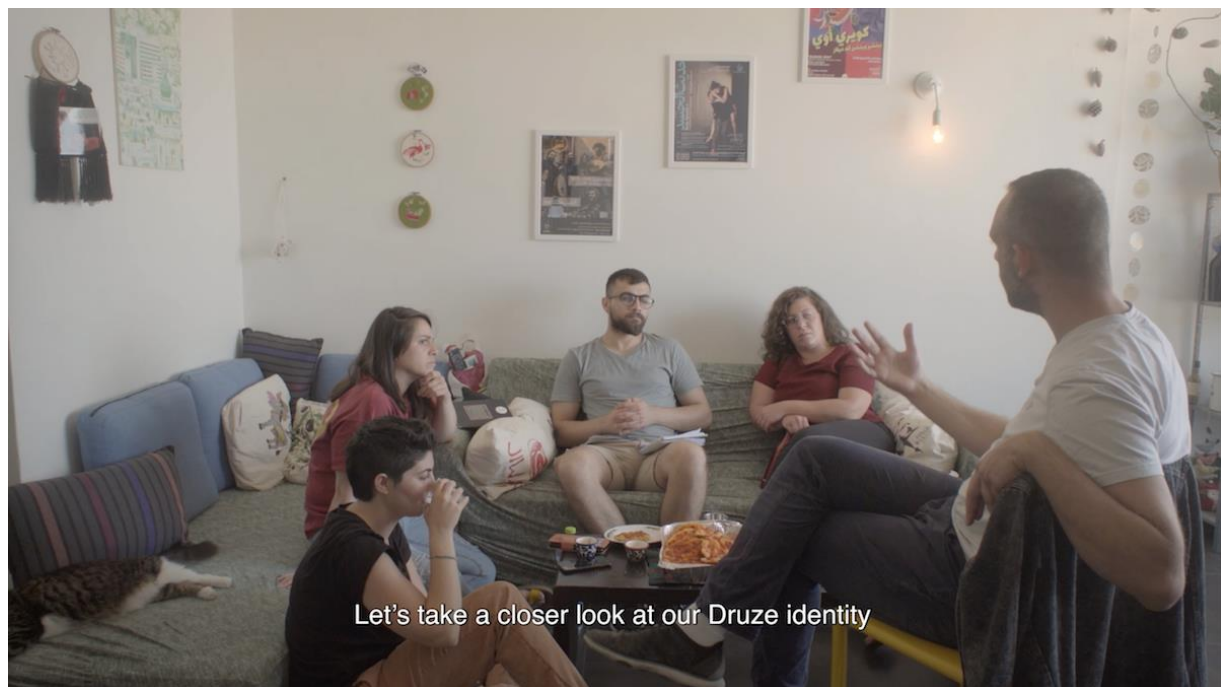


Figure 23 - Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023. Image courtesy of Inas Halabi, 01:39:00.



Figure 24 - Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023. Image courtesy of Inas Halabi, 01:16:30.



Figure 25 – Inas Halabi: *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (still), 2023. Image courtesy of Inas Halabi, 01:07:28.



Figure 26 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022. Image courtesy of Marwa Arsanios, 00:03:40.



Figure 27 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022.
Image courtesy of Marwa Arsanios, 00:06:25.



Figure 28 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022.
Image courtesy of Marwa Arsanios, 00:14:00.



Figure 29 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022.
Image courtesy of Marwa Arsanios, 00:24:00.



Figure 30 – Marwa Arsanios: *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot* (still), 2022.
Image courtesy of Marwa Arsanios, 00:32:00.

Education:

Universität zu Köln

PhD Candidate in Art History (October 2021 -)

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

MA in History of Arts and Conservation of Artistic Heritage (September 2018 – July 2020) 110/110 cum Laude

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

Erasmus Exchange Program (September 2019 – May 2020)

Università degli Studi di Milano

BA in Philosophy (September 2015 – July 2018) 110/110 cum Laude

University of Oslo

Erasmus Exchange Program (Fall 2017)

Université Clermont Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand, France)

Erasmus Exchange Program (Fall 2016)

Research Projects

PhD Thesis. Supervisors: Nina Möntmann, Peter Bexte

The Roles of Betweenness: Visual Narratives by Lebanese and Palestinian Contemporary Artists

MA Thesis, Supervisors: Pietro Conte, Cristina Baldacci

The Art of Mediation: Marcel Broodthaers and Harald Szeemann at the origins of modern curatorship

BA Thesis, Supervisor: Silvia Bignami

The Cremaster Cycle in Matthew Barney's artistic career

Professional Experiences

DFG-Graduiertenkollegs 2661: „anschießen-ausschließen“ (10.2021-09.2024)

Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter

Galleri Heike Arndt DK, Berlin (03-2021 – 07.2021)

Part of Art History and Cultural Management staff.

Lithuanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale (Summer 2019)

Part of the attendant staff during the exhibition Sun & Sea (Marina)

Narodni Galerie Praha at: Czech and Slovak Pavilion (Summer 2019)

Internship at the Czech and Slovak Pavilion at the Venice Biennale during the Stanislav Kolíbal's exhibition

PAC - Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milano (Summer 2018)

Internship at PAC (Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea) in Milan

Languages Italian (Native), English (Advanced), French (Advanced), German (Advanced).

Köln, den 15.10.2024